Treading a Rocky Path: The Ta'ang Army Expands in Myanmar's Shan State

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What's new? The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) has used Myanmar's post-2021 coup crisis to expand its territory in northern Shan State, recruit fighters and strengthen its parallel administration. Although it has quietly supported anti-coup resistance forces, it has clashed with the military only rarely and has met with regime representatives.

Why does it matter? The TNLA's expansion has created tensions with other ethnic armed groups and non-Ta'ang communities in northern Shan State. The group's ambiguous political positioning since the coup reflects the complex environment in which ethnic armed groups operate. It also helps explain why building a countrywide anti-regime alliance has proven so difficult.

What should be done? The TNLA, which seeks greater autonomy, should focus on caring for the people under its control through improved self-administration rather than expanding its territory further. It should also reform its recruitment practices. Foreign donors should increase funding for local civil society organisations delivering services in Shan State.

I. Overview

Since the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) – one of the country's most powerful ethnic armed groups – has strengthened its control of a swathe of territory in northern Shan State. In conjunction with Ta'ang civil society organisations, it is working to maintain the rule of law, deliver health and education services, and improve the local economy. Unlike some of Myanmar's other ethnic armed groups, it has mostly avoided confronting the military since the coup. Instead, it has provided only covert support to anti-junta forces and engaged indirectly with new opposition political institutions. The group's ambiguous post-coup positioning reflects its long-term ambition to achieve autonomy. As it assumes the role of a quasi-state, the TNLA should focus on supporting the population in its areas and avoiding military adventurism that might provoke conflict with other ethnic armed groups or the military; it should also cease coerced and underage recruitment for its armed forces. Outside actors should support the provision of services in Shan State, working through local civil society.

Since its inception in 2009, the TNLA has slowly acquired more strength and territory. It garnered popular support among the Ta'ang by pushing a strict anti-drug use policy and bringing together disparate communities under a common ethnic identity. Other ethnic armed groups in Myanmar – including the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and, more recently, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), which is the largest such group and controls an autonomous region in Shan State – provided the training and weapons the TNLA needed to build up its armed forces. Over the past decade, it gradually expanded its geographical footprint. For much of that time, it regularly clashed with the Myanmar military and its allied militias, as well as the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), a rival ethnic armed group.

The 2021 coup has further strengthened the TNLA's hand. Busy fighting on other fronts, the Myanmar military has largely withdrawn from the northern Shan State battlefield, enabling the group and its allies to gain territory and expel the RCSS from the area. The TNLA, which counts an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 personnel, can now project power into nearby towns. The military's withdrawal has also enabled the TNLA to assert authority in places it controls and govern in a way that advances its goal of building a robust, autonomous Ta'ang nation. Working in partnership with Ta'ang civil society organisations, it has followed the lead of larger armed groups and created an incipient "Ta'ang State", complete with courts, schools and health facilities. This quasi-state is very much a work in progress, but since the coup the group and its civil society partners, many of which are women-led, have moved well down the road toward creating a de facto autonomous governing body.

To focus on consolidating control, the TNLA has staked out a middle ground in Myanmar's post-coup conflict. It now tries to steer clear of clashes with the military. Although the Ta'ang group has been an important source of training and weapons for new forces resisting the junta, it has avoided publicising this support. It has also kept informal its engagement with the National Unity Government (NUG) – a parallel administration set up by lawmakers ousted by the coup – instead allowing Ta'ang civil society groups and politicians to lead the way in building these relationships. The TNLA has also maintained contact with the junta. Along with two other ethnic armed groups, it recently had a rare meeting with regime negotiators tasked with striking ceasefire deals.

It did so under pressure from Beijing. China has longstanding ties to Myanmar, with which it shares a 2,160km border, and since the late 1980s has invested heavily in its neighbour, in part through its Belt and Road Initiative. In order to protect its economic interests, China is particularly keen to keep the southern border it shares with Shan State stable.

The TNLA's positioning helps explain why building an anti-military coalition in Myanmar has proven so difficult. Most ethnic armed groups are hostile to the military regime, but they also see little prospect of it collapsing, making them reluctant to cement alliances with the NUG or armed resistance. Chinese pressures further push these groups away from overt confrontation. At the same time, the TNLA and other ethnic armed groups are influenced by their communities, civil society organisations, and the broader domestic and even international public. They thus have to balance various demands when determining the best pathway to achieving their objectives – in the TNLA's case, a de facto autonomous Ta'ang State.

The group's expansion in recent years also reflects a broader fragmentation within Myanmar's national borders that has accelerated since the 2021 coup. With the central

administration unable to operate normally, non-state armed groups such as the TNLA or civil society organisations working in the areas they control are the purveyors of public services to millions of people. Together, the TNLA and Ta'ang civil society organisations run schools, provide health care, collect taxes and administer justice systems.

The TNLA's rise is not without risk to it or the people under its control. Further expansion could provoke conflict with either other ethnic armed groups or the military. Even absent TNLA growth, the military may at some point seek to recapture some of the lost territory. Non-Ta'ang people in Shan State feel threatened by the TNLA's gathering might, fanning inter-communal tensions. The high costs associated with maintaining a large armed force and system of governance also mean that the TNLA runs the risk of overreach. The need to raise revenue already appears to be pushing it into competition with other ethnic armed groups and pro-military militias, which could lead to sharpening hostilities.

Given the reality of state fragmentation in Myanmar, the people of northern Shan State will be best served through a combined effort by the TNLA, civil society and donors to manage conflict risk, improve governance and deliver services. The TNLA should refrain from further expansion, which would risk renewed conflict, and take greater care to avoid provoking other ethnic minorities living in its territory. It should reform its recruitment policies, including by ending conscription – often enforced through violence or threats thereof – and cracking down on recruitment of child soldiers. Meanwhile, donors should expand support for civil society organisations in northern Shan State, including not only Ta'ang groups but also those run by other ethnic minorities. Strengthening civil society would not only allow these groups to provide more services to civilians, but it would also afford them a degree of moderating influence over the leadership of armed groups, particularly when it comes to maintaining peaceful inter-ethnic relations in this corner of war-torn Myanmar.

II. The Rise of the TNLA

A. *Death and Rebirth*

Although the TNLA is newer than many of Myanmar's other ethnic armed groups, its roots lie in a 60-year armed struggle for greater autonomy for the Ta'ang people.[1] Referred to as "Palaung" by the country's majority Burmans, the Ta'ang speak Mon-Khmer languages and live mainly in the mountains of northern Shan State, including some particularly remote areas. Smaller Ta'ang communities reside in southern Shan State, China's Yunnan province and northern Thailand.[2] At least three major Ta'ang sub-groups, speaking six Ta'ang languages, are dispersed throughout parts of Myanmar.[3] Historically, the community has had little interaction with the Myanmar state.

Geographical isolation, however, did not insulate the Ta'ang from the conflict that gradually engulfed Shan State following Myanmar's independence in 1948.[4] A year

[1] For an overview, see Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London, 1991).
[2] Estimates for the total Ta'ang population in all three countries range from 500,000 to 2 million.
[3] Takahiro Kojima, "Palaung Orthographies: Writing and the Politics of Ethnicity in Shan State", in *The Newsletter* (International Institute for Asian Studies), no. 75 (Autumn 2016).
[4] Smith, *Burma*, op. cit.

after General Ne Win's 1962 coup, Ta'ang political leaders formed the Palaung National Front to fight for autonomy from the military regime. In 1976, some members broke away to create a new armed group, the Palaung State Liberation Organisation (PSLO), and allied themselves with the KIO.[5] The PSLO kept up its struggle throughout Ne Win's rule, which ended in 1988 amid national protests. Another military regime quickly took over, however, launching a bloody crackdown on demonstrators.

Soon after the new junta seized power, it started cutting ceasefire deals with ethnic armed groups in Myanmar's borderlands. The PSLO resisted at first, but its leaders were forced to accept a ceasefire in 1991 after a devastating military operation targeting Ta'ang civilians.[6] The PSLO gradually lost influence and territory, until eventually the regime compelled it to disarm in 2005.[7] During the ceasefire period, illicit drugs began to flood into Ta'ang communities, and human rights groups reported high rates of addiction.[8] Like other minorities, the Ta'ang came to see the influx of narcotics as a military strategy aimed at "destroying" their identity and undermining their political goal of greater autonomy.

The Ta'ang struggle for autonomy went on, however. The drug addiction crisis, in parallel to the PSLO's weakening, strengthened the belief among the Ta'ang that they needed a new armed group to protect themselves, though the group took some time to come together. Just months after the PSLO reached a ceasefire in 1991, disgruntled members formed a new organisation, the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), based on the Thai-Myanmar border, which was primarily a political entity rather than a fighting force.[9] By the late 2000s, the military regime was pressuring many of the country's ethnic armed groups to become Border Guard Forces under its control, leading to a certain level of solidarity among them. In 2009, the PSLF formed an armed wing, the TNLA, with support from the KIO, which provided the new outfit with training and weapons.[10]

The TNLA is both an armed group and a nation-building project.[11] The PSLF's decision to use the term "Ta'ang" – which is how the Ta'ang people refer to themselves – as the name of its armed wing reflected a "reshaping of the ethnonational collective identity".[12] It was a way for the TNLA to assert leadership of peoples beyond the area traditionally considered the Ta'ang homeland, including Ta'ang sub-groups in other parts

[5] "Should TNLA/PSLF be considered as perpetual alliance?", Kachinland News, 20 August 2020.
[6] "Poisoned Flowers: The Impacts of Spiralling Drug Addiction on Palaung Women in Burma", Palaung Women's Organisation, 2006, p. 22.
[7] As part of its disarmament, the regime made the PSLO into a People's Militia Force, requiring it both to downsize and to provide operational support to the military. See "Brief introduction about Ta'ang People and the Current Conflict Situation in the Ta'ang Regions", Palaung State Liberation Front, 15 October 2012. For more discussion of People's Militia Forces, see "Militias in Myanmar", The Asia Foundation, July 2016.
[8] "Poisoned Flowers", op. cit.
[9] During this time, the PSLF leadership forged closed ties with Ta'ang civil society groups then based in northern Thailand – the same groups they now work with in northern Shan State.
[10] "Brothers torn apart: As TNLA grows stronger, tensions rise in northern Shan", *Frontier Myanmar*, 22 September 2020.
[11] The TNLA is made up mostly of men. It has introduced quotas to increase the proportion of women in its ranks in some areas, as discussed in Section IV.D below.
[12] Francesco Buscemi, "Weapons and Ethnonational Geographies in the Borderlands: The Case of the Ta'ang Rebel Movements in Myanmar", Torino World Affairs Institute, 1 December 2022.

of Shan State, as well as in China and Thailand.[13] Using the word Ta'ang was also a symbolic rejection of the Palaung Self-Administered Zone created under Myanmar's 2008 constitution, which encompasses only two townships (Namhsan and Mantong).[14] The TNLA instead fights for a larger "Ta'ang State" that would be carved out of present-day Shan State, within a genuinely federal system.[15] At the same time, retaining "Palaung" in the name of the political wing emphasised the continuity with earlier resistance movements.[16]

B. *Gathering Strength*

During Myanmar's decade of political liberalisation, from 2011 to 2021, the TNLA grew slowly but steadily into one of the country's most powerful ethnic armed groups. Particularly in the early years, its key strategy was to pursue a harsh anti-drug policy – drug users were forced into rehabilitation camps – that was highly popular among the Ta'ang.[17] After it had established a foothold in isolated areas of northern Shan State, its influence burgeoned. With a strictly enforced recruitment policy that required most Ta'ang households with more than one child to supply a soldier, the group expanded its forces.[18] It soon began to clash with the military and its allied militias.

Despite its growing clout, the TNLA was largely excluded from the peace process that Myanmar President Thein Sein initiated in 2011. It was one of the few ethnic armed groups that did not sign a bilateral ceasefire with the quasi-civilian government between 2011 and 2021. It participated in collective negotiations over the text of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), but the Thein Sein government, under pressure from the military, later blocked the TNLA from signing the accord. (While several reasons were given, it was primarily to stop "new" groups from joining the agreement.[19]) Heightened conflict and the exclusion of several groups from the peace process spurred non-signatories into closer political and military collaboration, including joint offensives.[20]

[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] "Brief Introduction about Ta'ang People", op. cit.
[16] Similarly, the TNLA celebrates Ta'ang National Revolution Day on 12 January – the date on which the PNF (1963), PSLO (1976) and PSLF (1992) were formed.
[17] "On a mission: Destruction of opium", *The Irrawaddy*, 24 March 2015.
[18] This policy included the forced recruitment of women in some circumstances. Families with only one son were not expected to send him to the TNLA, due to the belief that the household's earning potential would suffer without a young male breadwinner. For similar reasons, families with only a son and a daughter were exempt. If a family had two daughters and a son, one of the daughters would have to enlist instead; in practice, however, the son might volunteer to take her place. Similarly, families with no sons but more than one daughter might be expected to provide a woman recruit.
[19] Military officers have argued that granting political recognition to new armed groups will only encourage the formation of more armed groups. The TNLA was also later blocked from attending the first Union Peace Conference (dubbed "Twenty-first Century Panglong") convened by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy government in mid-2016. See "The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar: Promoting Ethnic Peace or Strengthening State Control?", Transnational Institute, April 2023, p.33.
[20] In 2016, the TNLA, along with the KIO's northern Shan State brigades and the Arakan Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, formed the Northern Alliance and launched a major joint offensive. The following year, the TNLA co-founded the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee, a UWSA-led political bloc. In 2019, the TNLA, Arakan Army and Myanmar National

In late 2015, amid a steady increase in clashes with the military, the TNLA found itself battling a new foe. Shortly after signing the NCA that October, the RCSS began to move its forces from the centre and south of Shan State into northern areas, allegedly with the Myanmar military's support. Fierce firefights erupted between the TNLA, on one side, and the RCSS and the army, on the other, taking a severe toll on the locals and exacerbating tensions between the Ta'ang and Shan peoples.[21]

For much of the liberalisation decade from 2011 to 2021, the TNLA was on a war footing, fighting either the military, military-backed militias or other ethnic armed groups. It had little time to focus on administration or service delivery.[22] That changed in about 2018, after the TNLA gained a firm foothold in parts of northern Shan State. Around the same time, the group began shifting away from the KIO, which had reached an informal ceasefire with the military, toward building closer relations with the UWSA. TNLA members were dispatched to UWSA territory for administrative training, which gradually led to improvements in TNLA governance and services.[23]

At the same time, Myanmar's imperfect but nevertheless marked political liberalisation created greater space for Ta'ang civil society and political groups to operate. The Ta'ang National Party was formed to contest the 2010 elections, and from 2012 civil society organisations that had been based in Thailand, such as the Ta'ang Women's Organisation and the Ta'ang Students and Youth Organisation, moved inside Myanmar, focusing on issues such as empowerment of youth and women, documentation of human rights violations and environmental protection. After the Thein Sein government lifted longstanding bans on the teaching of minority languages, Ta'ang literature and culture committees also emerged. Meanwhile, electricity, road and communications infrastructure – in particular, mobile internet – improved significantly. The TNLA was thus better able to speak to all Ta'ang people wherever they lived.[24] These developments helped the TNLA with its nation-building agenda. Ta'ang subgroups were, for example, able to cooperate in adopting a single Ta'ang language, which is now taught in TNLA-run schools.[25]

Democratic Alliance Army established the Brotherhood Alliance and again waged joint attacks. The Brotherhood Alliance has largely superseded the Northern Alliance, reflecting reduced cooperation with the KIO. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°287, *Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, 29 June 2017; and Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°158, *Myanmar: A Violent Push to Shake Up Ceasefire Negotiations*, 24 September 2019.

[21] "The Advance and Retreat of a Shan Army", Transnational Institute, 3 May 2022. See also "'We will not let the RCSS rule': Shan State clashes stoke inter-ethnic tension", *Frontier Myanmar*, 26 January 2021.

[22] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.

[23] Crisis Group interview, Tar Bhone Kyaw, May 2023. The UWSA administers a de facto autonomous enclave on the Myanmar-China border in north-eastern Shan State, as well as a pocket of territory in southern Shan State along the Thai border.

[24] Prior to February 2019, when Facebook banned the four members of the Northern Alliance from its platform, the TNLA was an active user of social media. Since the coup, it has largely rebuilt its presence, though it avoids using the words PSLF or TNLA in its page names due to the ban. Stein Tonneson, Min Zaw Oo and Ne Lynn Aung, "Pretending to Be States: The Use of Facebook by Armed Groups in Myanmar", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2022).

[25] Kojima, "Palaung Orthographies", op. cit.

III. Post-Coup Positioning

The February 2021 coup in Myanmar closed out the period of political liberalisation that helped propel the Ta'ang nation-building agenda. Since then, the TNLA has been walking a political tightrope. Although its leaders and supporters generally sympathise with the anti-military struggle that has engulfed much of Myanmar, seeing it as aligned with their own interests and values, the group's objectives and key external partners compel it to limit its public cooperation with resistance forces. The TNLA is thus engaged in a careful balancing act to maintain a diverse set of relationships: with the military, China and other ethnic armed groups, as well as with post-coup resistance forces, including the NUG. These competing imperatives also illustrate why it has proven so difficult for the NUG to build strong partnerships with many of Myanmar's ethnic armed groups.

A. *An Uneasy Truce*

Since the coup, both the military and the TNLA have sought to limit fighting with each other for highly pragmatic reasons. The regime's forces are stretched, and it wants to avoid having to face well-armed ethnic armed groups on the battlefield. The TNLA, meanwhile, has used the lull in combat not only to expel other ethnic armed groups from areas it considers part of its "Ta'ang State", but also to boost governance and service delivery in its expanded territory. As a result, clashes in northern Shan State – long one of the most conflict-affected parts of the country – have declined, despite violence at the national level reaching heights not seen since the 1950s.[26] Although TNLA leaders have said they will not move into major cities, they have expressed a desire to control "the regions where the majority of the people are Ta'ang", some of which – including parts of Mongkaing, Mongyai and Tangyan Townships – are outside the group's traditional area of influence in northern Shan State.[27]

In an effort to avoid fighting the TNLA, after seizing power the junta relocated many of its forces to bases in major towns, in effect ceding control of large parts of northern Shan State.[28] Early in 2023, it even pulled some units out of northern Shan and deployed them to theatres in south-eastern Myanmar.[29] In many areas, the boundaries of the TNLA's domain are now clearly defined on the ground: within minutes of passing military posts on the edge of large towns, travellers typically encounter a TNLA checkpoint.[30] Ta'ang flags and concrete markers bearing the TNLA logo have also become common, even on main roads. When, notwithstanding these efforts, some fighting did break out between the military and TNLA in northern Shan State in July and

[26] For details on the intensity of fighting in Shan State, see "Annual Peace & Security Review 2020-21", Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security, March 2022.
[27] "Rising dragon: TNLA declares 'victory' in northern Shan State", *Frontier Myanmar*, 4 February 2022.
[28] The military had already cut back its patrols in northern Shan State in late 2020, creating a "security vacuum", and the trend accelerated after the coup. Crisis Group interviews, April-June 2023. See also "Annual Peace & Security Review 2020-21", op. cit., p. 11.
[29] "Battle for Kayah is key for Myanmar junta and its opponents", International Institute of Strategic Studies, June 2023.
[30] Crisis Group interview, recent visitor to TNLA territory, May 2023.

August, the dozen or so clashes were all along or close to highways, highlighting the extent of the TNLA's sway; on 27 July, the military attacked a TNLA outpost less than 10km from the outskirts of Lashio, the largest town in the area and home to the military's North-Eastern Command.

While the regime continues to control urban areas in northern Shan State and the main highway to China, the Ta'ang group now has authority in many rural areas, particularly in the mountains north and west of the highway.[31] Regime soldiers rarely venture outside towns, except on major roads.[32] Although the TNLA generally does not aim to seize large towns by force of arms, which could well prompt a massive military counter-attack, it does seek to exert influence there through other means – eg, through taxation, recruitment and law enforcement (it can arrest people in urban areas). A source close to the group's leadership explained:

> It has been much easier to operate after the coup. In the past, the military forces tended to follow TNLA troops. … But they no longer do this. For example, the TNLA opened a base and administrative office on a strategic hill in Lashio Township a few months after the coup. The military know it is there, but they haven't reacted.[33]

In May, TNLA forces entered Lashio unopposed. The sortie was intended partly to help bolster the group's ranks – the TNLA signed up some recruits and promptly left town – but it nonetheless demonstrated a capacity to project power.[34]

Fighting has not entirely disappeared from the region during the post-coup period, however. The TNLA, either alone or together with allied armed groups, has staged attacks on military outposts and police stations. These shows of force are intended to signal the TNLA's opposition to the military regime, both to its Ta'ang supporters and other people in Myanmar. The raids are also a way of demonstrating the group's growing dominance in northern Shan State.[35]

The military, too, has occasionally gone on the attack. Its most serious such operation took place in December 2022, when it dropped commandos by helicopter in TNLA territory and raided one of the group's major bases in Namhsam Township.[36] The military later claimed that the fighting with the TNLA was a "misunderstanding", saying it had intended only to hit People's Defence Forces (PDFs) – resistance units formed after the coup – who were using TNLA territory to transport weapons to Sagaing. It said its troops merely retaliated when they came under fire from the Ta'ang group.[37] The raid was likely a shot across the TNLA's bow, warning it not to aid resis-

[31] Crisis Group interviews, April-June 2023.
[32] Crisis Group interviews, April-May 2023.
[33] Crisis Group interview, source close to TNLA leadership, May 2023.
[34] "လားရှိုးမြို့ပေါ်ထိ TNLA စစ်သားကောက်ယူနေ၊ သျှမ်းလူမျိုးများပါ ဖမ်းဆီးခေါ်သွား [TNLA soldiers recruiting in Lashio city, Shan people detained]", Shan Herald Agency for News, 15 May 2023. See also "TNLA advancement reaches urban areas: A new frontier", Shan Herald Agency for News, 13 June 2023.
[35] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023. See also "Ethnic army alliance kills 14 Myanmar police in dawn raid as death toll mounts in Bago", RFA, 10 April 2021.
[36] "Myanmar junta invasion force under siege: Ta'ang army", *The Irrawaddy*, 8 December 2022.
[37] "နမ့်ဆန်တွင် TNLA ကို ဦးတည်ခြင်း မဟုတ်ဘဲ PDF များကို တိုက်ခိုက်ခြင်း ဖြစ်ကြောင်း စစ်ကောင်စီ ပြောလာ [The military council said it was attacking PDFs and not targeting the TNLA in Namhsan]", *The Irrawaddy*, 18 December 2022. The PDFs are aligned with the NUG. They take a variety of forms: some are directly controlled by the NUG; others operate independently; and still others are in effect under

tance groups (see Section III.B), but the military has not again attempted such a bold strike. During clashes between the army and TNLA-backed PDFs on the boundary between Mandalay Region and Shan State in April and May, the PDFs withdrew into TNLA territory, but the military's troops did not follow – an apparent effort to avoid escalating the fighting.[38] As noted above, July and August have also seen clashes between the TNLA and the military.

Still, the broader trend is toward avoiding more conflict. The military and TNLA have maintained their uneasy truce through back-channel dialogue and regular contact between local commanders. When the military sends patrols into TNLA-controlled areas, it typically informs its TNLA counterparts, who then withdraw their forces from the vicinity, returning only after the troops return to base.[39]

But despite informal cooperation, there is little prospect at this juncture of a formal ceasefire or political settlement between the military and TNLA. The TNLA has resisted regime attempts to engage in negotiations. It has avoided public one-on-one meetings with junta representatives; the two it has attended, in December 2021 and June 2023, brought in other armed groups as well and took place under pressure from China (see Section III.D). Little of substance was discussed at either meeting.[40]

The military has offered the TNLA and other ethnic armed groups constitutional changes that would give them greater autonomy in exchange for supporting its planned election, which promises to be anti-democratic and rigged.[41] Such overtures hold little appeal for the TNLA, for both practical and political reasons. The military cannot amend the constitution until after handing over power to a nominally civilian government, and with the elections now delayed to an unspecified date, the prospects of altering the charter are doubly uncertain. More generally, TNLA leaders distrust the military and consider it extremely unlikely that the generals would be willing to accept the full sweep of their political demands. In the current circumstances, reaching any kind of political agreement with the military – or even a formal ceasefire – would also trigger blowback from TNLA supporters and the broader public.

Both sides may be willing, however, to take steps to bolster what is in effect an unofficial ceasefire, albeit for different reasons. The military is keen on reducing the number of fronts it needs to fight on. The TNLA, meanwhile, wants to maintain stability in its territory as it continues to strengthen its parallel administration. Although formal agreements with the military remain unlikely, TNLA leaders know they are in an advantageous bargaining position. They may be open to informal arrangements that protect the group's post-coup territorial gains.

the control of ethnic armed groups. There are also scores of other armed groups formed since the coup that are unaffiliated with the NUG and do not call themselves PDFs.

[38] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.

[39] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.

[40] Crisis Group interview, peace talks mediator, June 2023.

[41] Under the military's 2008 constitution, the junta was required to hold elections by August. In January, however, the regime announced an unconstitutional six-month extension of the state of emergency, prolonging it again in July. Elections are unlikely to take place before 2025 at the earliest. Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°175, *A Road to Nowhere: The Myanmar Regime's State-managed*, 28 March 2023.

B. *Covert Resistance Support*

Although it has refrained from directly confronting the military, the TNLA is an important player in the post-coup resistance movement. That said, to avoid conflict with either the regime or Beijing – which wields some leverage over the group, largely because Shan State borders China – the TNLA has sought to downplay or obfuscate its ties with the opposition movement.

The TNLA's political engagement with the post-coup resistance takes several forms. Notably, it does not interact publicly with the NUG. Instead, it works with the Ta'ang Political Consultative Committee (TPCC), a platform that Ta'ang politicians and civil society leaders formed after the coup to advance the goal of self-determination.[42] The TPCC is also part of the National Unity Consultative Council, a countrywide platform affiliated with the NUG.[43] Meanwhile, the younger brother of TNLA general secretary Tar Bhone Kyaw, Mai Win Htoo, is the NUG's deputy minister for federal union affairs.[44] The TNLA has also granted refuge to a significant number of activists – not only Ta'ang, but also Burmans and people of other ethnicities – who are involved with resistance institutions and had to flee military crackdowns.[45]

Most significantly, however, the TNLA has been training and equipping armed resistance groups formed since the coup. This support includes training NUG-backed PDFs, independent resistance groups and urban guerrilla cells; facilitating weapons purchases; and allowing TNLA territory to be used for the movement of people, weapons and supplies. Some of the groups that the TNLA has trained and armed have returned to other conflict theatres, while others have been deployed on the fringes of TNLA territory, notably along the boundary between Shan State and Mandalay Region.[46] In these latter areas, TNLA militants have fought alongside PDF units.[47]

The TNLA has provided this support for several reasons. First, it has benefited financially from training and arming resistance forces, which have raised significant amounts of money from the diaspora.[48] Secondly, the deployment of PDFs and other armed groups on its territory's periphery has buffered its lands from junta-controlled areas of the country. Thirdly, it has gained from the influx of activists and civil servants participating in the mass strike against military rule known as the Civil Disobedience Movement, some of whom provide welcome assistance to its expanding service delivery system.[49] The TNLA's alignment with the resistance is also a reflection of its relations with Ta'ang elites, particularly politicians and civil society figures, who have been more vocal in opposing the coup and constitute an important source of support.

[42] In March, the TPCC organised a public meeting of around 150 people to discuss the third draft of a Ta'ang State constitution. The attendees agreed to boycott regime-organised elections.
[43] A full list of the Council's members is available at its website.
[44] Mai Win Htoo is general secretary of the Ta'ang National Party and also a member of the TPCC. Crisis Group interview, source close to TNLA, May 2023.
[45] Crisis Group interviews, April-June 2023.
[46] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[47] Crisis Group interviews, April-June 2023.
[48] Crisis Group Asia Report N°328, *Crowdfunding a War: The Money Behind Myanmar's Resistance*, 20 December 2022.
[49] Born immediately after the coup, the Civil Disobedience Movement is a non-violent resistance movement aimed at undermining military rule. It comprises peaceful protests, strikes by public- and private-sector workers, and boycotts of military-linked goods and payments to the regime.

C. *Ethnic Rivals and Allies*

When the military seized power, the TNLA was already at war with the RCSS in northern Shan State. The two groups had resumed fighting in late 2020, and the conflict escalated rapidly over subsequent months. The Myanmar military's withdrawal allowed the warring parties to move more freely than before. While the military had previously helped the RCSS entrench itself in northern Shan State, regime leaders did not intervene to protect it.[50] As a result, the TNLA pushed the RCSS into a rapid retreat, driving back most of its remaining forces to bases near its headquarters on the Thai-Myanmar border. On 12 January 2022, the fifty-ninth anniversary of Ta'ang National Revolution Day, the TNLA declared "victory" over the RCSS.[51]

Alliances established over the past decade were crucial to this success. The Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) joined the TNLA on the battlefield. The UWSA, meanwhile, provided both the SSPP and TNLA with weapons.[52]

But despite these fruitful connections, over time these ethnic armed groups could find it challenging to maintain relations, particularly when they operate in close proximity. Multi-ethnic northern Shan State is home to at least eight major ethnic armed groups, as well as dozens of pro-military militias and Border Guard Forces organised along ethnic lines. Territorial claims often overlap, and ethnic communities tend to be distributed according to elevation – with some living on mountainsides and others in valleys – making it difficult to establish a contiguous territory without including other minorities. A further complication is that ethnic identities, once fluid, have hardened over decades of conflict and zero-sum politics.[53] The financial demands of maintaining large armies and administrative systems have also generated increased competition for economic resources.

Frictions have been increasing between the TNLA and two ostensible allies, the SSPP and KIO, both of which, despite their past support, are concerned by the Ta'ang group's growing power in their neighbourhood. The TNLA's tensions with the KIO came to a head in May, following a dispute over taxation of gold mines in Muse Township, during which the TNLA briefly detained a mine owner.[54] The two groups subsequently convened a meeting in the border town of Mai Ja Yang; they later issued a statement reaffirming their "perpetual alliance" and committing to work together to eradicate the military dictatorship.[55] But the underlying ill-will remains.[56] The TNLA

[50] "Annual Peace & Security Review 2020-21", op. cit., pp. 59-62.
[51] "Rising dragon", op. cit.
[52] The RCSS and SSPP have long competed to be the pre-eminent armed group representing the Shan. They have different backgrounds and political cultures; the RCSS is staunchly Shan nationalist, while the SSPP was previously aligned with the Communist Party of Burma and espouses a multi-ethnic vision for the state. In late 2015, when the SSPP came under attack by the Myanmar military, the RCSS took advantage of the fighting to claim territory from its Shan rival. These factors prompted the SSPP to cooperate with the TNLA against the RCSS. For the reasons behind the Wa's involvement, see "Wa an early winner of Myanmar's post-coup war", *Asia Times*, 22 February 2022.
[53] See, for example, Crisis Group Asia Report N°312, *Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar*, 28 August 2020.
[54] "မူဆယ်မြို့နယ် တီးမရွှေတွင်း TNLA ငွေလာကောက်သည့်အပေါ် KIA ကို စိန်ခေါ်နေသည်ဟုဆို [TNLA seen to be challenging Kachin Independence Army (KIA) over tax at Timashwe gold mine]", Shan Herald Agency for News, 15 May 2023.
[55] "KIA and TNLA join forces to eradicate the military dictatorship", *Than Lwin Times*, 30 May 2023.
[56] Crisis Group interview, Kutkai resident, May 2023.

and SSPP, meanwhile, have been at loggerheads over economic resources, including control of an informal border gate near the Chinese frontier.[57] In August, the SSPP accused the TNLA of damaging a historical site linked to a prominent Shan monarch, a charge the Ta'ang group denied.[58]

Other ethnic armed groups are also wary of the TNLA's territorial expansion into Kachin and Shan communities in northern Shan State. Although the TNLA normally only recruits from among the Ta'ang, there have been reports of men from other minorities being forcibly enlisted; the group has also detained drug users from other ethnic groups at its rehabilitation camps. The group levies taxes upon all individuals and businesses in the territory it controls – and, as mentioned above, in some areas under the state's sway – fuelling resentment among non-Ta'ang residents and business owners who find themselves having to pay. Ta'ang flags and markers, along with Buddhist pagodas, are visible signs of the armed group spreading its wings. The group has also been accused of resettling Ta'ang households in areas traditionally home to other minorities, in what some interpret as an attempt to alter demographics and justify the TNLA's presence.[59]

D. *China's Influence*

China wields significant influence over ethnic armed groups based in northern Myanmar – a legacy, in part, of the material aid it provided to the Communist Party of Burma from the 1960s to 1980s. In 1989, the Communist Party collapsed when the ethnic minority rank-and-file among its armed forces mutinied against the group's Burman leaders and formed new armies along ethnic lines, the largest of which was (and continues to be) the UWSA. Each of these groups agreed to ceasefires with the military under which they were allowed to retain their weapons and autonomous control of their territory, which became known as "special regions". Most of these ceasefires endured through more than two decades of military rule, and the groups benefited significantly from the regime's expanding economic and political ties with Beijing. Although the TNLA was not formed from the Communist Party's splinters, China has some sway over the group due to cross-border economic and cultural ties, as well as the TNLA's close relationships with other ethnic armed groups (particularly the UWSA).

During Myanmar's decade of liberalisation, China became a key international actor in the peace process between the government and the multitude of ethnic armed groups.[60] In 2013, Beijing helped broker an unofficial ceasefire between the KIO and the military, and later sent a representative to witness the signing of the NCA between Thein Sein's government and eight other ethnic armed groups.[61] China has maintained close relations with ethnic armed groups based along its border, all of which have

[57] Crisis Group interviews, May 2023.
[58] "သမိုင်းဝင် ရှေးဟောင်းမြို့ရိုး ဖြိုဖျက်သည့် လုပ်ရပ်အပေါ် ဆန့်ကျင်ရှုတ်ချကြောင်း ထုတ်ပြန်ကြေညာချက် [Statement of condemnation on the act of demolishing the historical ancient city wall]", Shan State Progress Party, 12 August 2023; and "Press release on land clearing in Sel Lant Village, Muse Township", Palaung State Liberation Front, 18 August 2023.
[59] Crisis Group interview, Shan State-based researcher, May 2023.
[60] Crisis Group Asia Report N°305, *Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship*, 30 March 2020.
[61] Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°140, *A Tentative Peace in Myanmar's Kachin Conflict*, 12 June 2013.

refused to sign the NCA.[62] In 2017, Beijing pressured seven of these groups – which had, by then, formed an alliance known as the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) – to attend a government peace conference, going so far as to fly the delegations from Kunming, China, to Naypyitaw on a chartered plane.[63]

Since the coup, China has encouraged the groups operating along its border to respond to Naypyitaw's offer for talks and to avoid engaging with the NUG or the armed resistance movement.[64] From late 2022, it has engaged more actively, driven in part by concern that conflict could escalate along the shared frontier. It has urged both the military and ethnic armed groups to maintain stability in these areas and steer clear of confrontations that could harm Chinese economic interests. A June meeting in the border enclave of Mongla between regime negotiators and three ethnic armed groups, including the TNLA, was the clearest evidence to date of Beijing's efforts to exercise influence over the latter: the groups told the media that China had brokered the talks and pressed them to attend.[65] But while the groups would clearly have had trouble snubbing the talks completely, it was also convenient for them to attribute the meetings to Chinese pressure, so as to alleviate any fallout among the Myanmar public, which is largely wary of China.[66]

China's influence over the northern ethnic armed groups has limits. Several FPNCC members – including the TNLA – have engaged indirectly with the NUG and provided support to PDFs and anti-military forces, even if mostly covertly.[67] The TNLA continues to arm, train and fight alongside PDFs on the fringes of Mandalay Region, while another group, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, representing the Kokang people, has openly recruited Burmans and other non-Kokang minorities into a new battalion, which it deployed (apparently for the first time) in an attack on police and military posts in Lashio in June.[68] The leader of a prominent post-coup resistance outfit in western Myanmar also told Crisis Group it had continued to receive significant support from the TNLA and other ethnic armed groups since China became more actively involved in late 2022.[69]

Even the UWSA, China's closest ally, maintains a degree of autonomy in the relationship. It has, for example, indirectly provided weapons to newly formed resistance forces in various parts of Myanmar since the coup, often via conduits such as the TNLA.[70]

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[62] The Arakan Army is now primarily based in Rakhine State, but it first emerged along the China border and maintains forces in that area.

[63] The FPNCC was formed in April 2017 and is led by the UWSA. See Richard Horsey, "Myanmar's peace conference leaves talks on uncertain path", *Nikkei Asia*, 31 May 2017. Similarly, China arranged travel for members of the Northern Alliance to attend the next peace conference, in 2018.

[64] The UWSA, SSPP and National Democratic Alliance Army – the three groups closest to China – have travelled to the capital several times for peace negotiations since the coup, while the TNLA, Arakan Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army have met with regime negotiators twice.

[65] "Peace talks in Myanmar highlight China's increasing influence", VOA, 4 June 2023.

[66] See Crisis Group Report, *Commerce and Conflict*, op. cit.

[67] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.

[68] "MNDAA စစ်သင်တန်းဆင်းပွဲ တော်လှန်ရေး ထူးခြားတိုးတက်မှုလို့ BPLA ခေါင်းဆောင်ပြော [Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA) leader says Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) training graduation is a remarkable moment for the revolution]", RFA Burmese, 4 January 2023.

[69] Crisis Group interview, leader of a prominent resistance group, June 2023.

[70] Usually, it is a Wa businessperson who sells the weapons, providing the UWSA with plausible deniability with both Naypyitaw and Beijing. Crisis Group interview, source close to TNLA, April 2023.

IV. Rebel Governance and Social Order: The TNLA Model

The TNLA has used the post-coup period not only to secure territory and expand its forces, but also to govern more effectively where it was already in control. To this end, it has strengthened partnerships with Ta'ang civil society organisations that are better placed to deliver services. Although the TNLA's self-administration is not yet as strong as that of more established groups like the KIO or the Karen National Union, an ethnic armed group founded in 1947 and based along the border with Thailand, its efforts to provide services, particularly education, have significantly improved its standing among the Ta'ang. A TNLA fighter, who has been serving for five years, said the group's relationship with the Ta'ang people had "never been better", a judgment that civil society groups and residents confirmed.[71]

A. *Administration and Rule of Law*

The TNLA's political counterpart, the PSLF, runs a bureaucracy of about 1,500 staff, most of whom have undergone two years of training. Its work force is spread across thirteen departments, covering everything from customs (namely, tax collection) and forestry to public relations.[72] As the organisation's armed wing, the TNLA is officially part of the PSLF's defence department. On paper, the military wing is thus subordinate to the PSLF's political and bureaucratic machinery. In practice, however, there is little separation between the two, and the TNLA is the dominant institution. Most PSLF officials are seconded from the armed wing. Except for those working in the health department, these men and women continue to wear the standard TNLA uniform.[73]

Nevertheless, as it expands and grows stronger, the TNLA bureaucracy is taking on a more civilian character. Standards have gradually improved as a result of better recruitment and training. Recruits with higher education levels are diverted into the bureaucracy after completing three months of military training, for example.[74] Over time, the group has also tried to make its administration more responsive to community needs. In some villages, high-ranking administrative officials make monthly visits, enabling residents to make requests and suggest priorities.[75]

The Ta'ang group has established a network of administrators that mimics the Myanmar state's General Administration Department, with a central office, five district-level offices, eighteen offices at the township level and many more at the village-tract level.[76] Many of the lower-ranking administrators were previously part of the state bureaucracy but were absorbed into the TNLA system as their villages came under the armed group's control.[77] The administrative system also features informal village leaders who typically work from home and are supported by the community. Their renumeration is generally non-monetary: they are compensated with goods such as rice and other staples.

[71] Crisis Group interviews, April-June 2023.
[72] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[73] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[74] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[75] Crisis Group interview, Namhsam village administrator, June 2023.
[76] The TNLA townships cover sections of about twelve government-recognised townships.
[77] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.

Although community development is an important focus for administrators, a key task is to ensure that families provide the TNLA with recruits. The strengthening of TNLA self-administration has made enforcement of compulsory military service in Ta'ang communities more systematic and harder to evade. "I have to list the young people in the village and report them to the TNLA administration. That's one of my main duties. Although I disagree with it, I have to follow the policy", confided one administrator.[78]

Like most other ethnic armed groups in Myanmar, the TNLA has devoted significant resources to establishing and maintaining a parallel justice system within its territory.[79] The group founded a police force in 2018, mainly made up of troops seconded from the TNLA.[80] Since the coup, it has sought to broaden its criminal justice system by opening more courts and prisons, as well as a law academy to train judicial officials. Some of the civil servants and lawyers who sought refuge in TNLA territory after joining the Civil Disobedience Movement have provided much-needed expertise. Although state-controlled courts still exist in the township centres, most Ta'ang now use the TNLA justice system.[81]

For now, however, the most formal aspects of the Ta'ang judicial system – which relies on a mix of Myanmar laws (such as the Penal Code and Code of Criminal Procedure), the TNLA's own statutes and orders, English common law and customary law – remain embryonic, handling barely a hundred cases in 2022, most of them drug-related.[82] The group has few trained judges, and most areas still lack courts. Instead, hearings usually take place at administrative offices and are often resolved informally – hence the low case numbers.[83] There are also reports of suspects escaping custody, suggesting a lack of resources and training in the security apparatus.[84] Some residents of TNLA-controlled areas also complain about a lack of transparency and consistency in how cases were settled.[85]

B. *Education*

The TNLA has made education a priority. At the time of the coup, state-run schools throughout Myanmar were closed due to COVID-19. Although the regime attempted a reopening in June 2021, in Ta'ang areas the schools remained shut because civil servants had fled or were on strike. In the vacuum, Ta'ang civil society groups working closely with both the TNLA and the NUG have since established the Ta'ang National

[78] Crisis Group interview, Namhsam village administrator, June 2023.
[79] On the expansion of ethnic armed group legal systems in northern Shan State, see "Law and order, or frontier justice? Shan's armed group judiciaries", *Frontier Myanmar*, 10 July 2023.
[80] Locals see the police force as little different from the armed wing, which is not surprising since its members continue to wear the TNLA uniform. Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[81] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[82] "Law and order, or frontier justice?", op. cit. Facebook post by Judicial Department of the Ta'ang State, 18 May 2022.
[83] Crisis Group interview, source close to TNLA leadership, May 2023.
[84] In late April, an accused child rapist escaped from TNLA custody in Kutkai Township ahead of a planned trial, following a similar incident in the same locale in 2022. "ကွတ်ခိုင်မှာ TNLA ဖမ်းဆီးထားတဲ့ အမှုပြုကျင့်သူတရားခံ ထွက်ပြေးလွတ်မြောက်နေ [Accused rapist escapes from TNLA custody in northern Shan State's Kutkai Township]", Shwe Phee Myay News Agency, 30 May 2023.
[85] Crisis Group interview, Ta'ang politician, May 2023.

Education Committee (TNEC), which works under an existing civil society organisation, the Ta'ang Education Institute. Employing a mix of local teachers – the majority of them women – and others who sought sanctuary in TNLA territory, the committee says it runs more than 420 schools providing education to 25,000-plus students.[86] These schools follow a modified state curriculum that features new components on Ta'ang language, culture and history; both Ta'ang and Burmese are used as languages of instruction.[87] Despite teething problems, the second year of TNEC-led schooling has seen significant improvement.[88]

More recently, the TNEC has expanded into higher education, in cooperation with the NUG. In June, it announced plans to open a Ta'ang Land University for students who had been deprived of higher education due to COVID-19 and the coup. It is open to applicants who finished high school prior to the coup or subsequently passed the NUG's Basic Education Completion Assessment. Courses will be administered in part through institutions such as the NUG's Myanmar Nway-Oo Online University.[89] Meanwhile, to support its school network, the TNEC is due to inaugurate a one-year course for 150 trainee teachers at its new Ta'ang Education Academy.[90]

Residents tend to identify education as an area of improvement under TNLA rule. Almost three quarters of TNEC schools are in villages where no state-run school was previously present.[91] Along with the crackdown on drug use, the expansion of the school network is particularly popular with women.[92] "Children are now able to learn our language", a woman from rural Namtu Township, where a school recently opened, said approvingly. "I'm also pleased there is going to be a university, so that our children can have a better future".[93]

C. *Civil Society Partnerships*

The coup created an atmosphere in which the TNLA could expand its administration without significant challenge; it has also enabled the group to strengthen formal cooperation with Ta'ang civil society in a way that was not possible prior to 2021. There are around a dozen large Ta'ang civil society groups, focusing on issues such as service delivery (particularly health and education), culture and religion, women and youth empowerment, and human rights monitoring and advocacy. Although informal links with the TNLA have always existed, before the military takeover most civil society activists were based in towns, rather than in the remote rural areas where the armed group was strongest. The activists stayed out of the countryside partly because it is impractical to operate in a conflict zone, but also because they would have run legal risks had

[86] Crisis Group interview, civil society leader, August 2023.
[87] Crisis Group interviews, May-August 2023.
[88] Crisis Group interview, Ta'ang politician, May 2023.
[89] Facebook post by Ta'ang National Education Committee, 20 June 2023. The NUG has established a parallel primary, secondary and tertiary education system, run mostly online, and drafted a Federal Democracy Education Policy that will decentralise education by allowing schools to set their own curriculum and language of instruction. See "'We are developing the ability to make changes and build the future'", *The Irrawaddy*, 23 February 2023.
[90] Facebook post by Ta'ang National Education Committee, 26 June 2023.
[91] Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, August 2023.
[92] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[93] Crisis Group interview, Namtu resident, May 2023.

they engaged openly with the TNLA.[94] That dynamic changed after the coup: many activists joined the anti-military protests in early 2021 and then fled to TNLA territory to avoid regime crackdowns, bringing them closer to the armed group.[95]

The TNLA's post-coup relationship with civil society differs from that of most other ethnic armed groups, whose leaders tend to exercise a level of control over civil society figures and organisations. In the TNLA's case, however, the relationship appears to be more of a partnership. One reason is that the elite heading up both the TNLA and Ta'ang civil society is small in number, with many members bound by family ties.[96] Some TNLA leaders come from a civil society background themselves or spent significant time with Ta'ang groups while based in northern Thailand in the 2000s. But the TNLA also recognises its own limitations: it acknowledges that it needs civil society's skills and knowledge to fulfil many of its ambitions, particularly when it comes to delivering services. "We rely on each other now", commented a TNLA fighter.[97] As a result, Ta'ang civil society organisations have a significant degree of influence over the armed group. "They can give suggestions to the leaders, who actually listen. … They act as a kind of check and balance", said a source close to the TNLA.[98]

D. *The Changing Role of Women*

One area in which Ta'ang civil society has been particularly influential is gender equality. Ta'ang society is highly patriarchal. Women have traditionally been excluded from community leadership roles. Social convention holds that they should remain at home to cook and care for their children. Intimate partner violence is also widespread. A sexist mindset is hardly unique to the Ta'ang in Myanmar, but the region's isolation into recent times has contributed to keeping traditional patriarchal attitudes in place. It has been left largely to Ta'ang civil society groups, such as the Ta'ang Women's Organisation (TWO), to push for change.

The TNLA's rise to power and the growing influence of civil society groups – including the TWO – within its territory has started to bring about incremental improvements. For one, the expansion of free education has improved opportunities for children of all genders. TNLA administrators, although mostly men, have also been instructed to encourage women's participation in community activities and to challenge misogynistic traditional beliefs.[99] Nevertheless, gender rights activists still express concern about longstanding practices, including how the TNLA's justice system handles sexual violence against women. The system lacks women judges and still uses customary law that blames and punishes women for the attacks upon them. There is also a history of light sentences for perpetrators of crimes such as rape.[100]

[94] The Myanmar government considered the TNLA an unlawful association. Under the colonial-era Unlawful Associations Act, anyone convicted of associating with the TNLA faces two to three years in prison. In 2017, three journalists were jailed for over two months after attending a TNLA event; the military eventually dropped the charges. Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[95] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023. See also "Military Council Detains One TSYU Executive Member and Five TEC Workers", Ta-ang Students and Youth Union, 27 September 2021.
[96] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[97] Crisis Group interview, TNLA fighter, May 2023.
[98] Crisis Group interview, source close to TNLA leadership, May 2023.
[99] Crisis Group interview, village administrator, Namhsam Township, June 2023.
[100] Crisis Group interview, Ta'ang women rights activist, May 2023.

Women are also starting to play a more prominent role within the TNLA itself, albeit at lower levels. As fighting with the military has decreased and the TNLA has expanded its bureaucracy, more women have started joining its ranks, and they are taking on a wider range of roles. A TNLA member recalled that the group's "women's department" used to be mockingly referred to as the "sewing department", because, in keeping with the traditional gendered allocation of tasks, its only job was sewing uniforms. In recent years, however, women's department members have engaged in monitoring human rights violations and intimate partner violence.[101] The TNLA has also formed a women's battalion in which women are permitted to fill combat roles but not allowed on the front lines of battle. The group is also assigning more women to its Central Executive Committee.[102]

Nevertheless, gender inequality in the organisation remains entrenched, with women holding few positions outside the finance, health, women's and information departments. Their absence is particularly notable in the administration department, which sits at the political centre of the TNLA bureaucracy.[103] "There are still few women in leadership roles, and we struggle with stereotypes and patriarchy", said a women's rights activist.[104]

E. *Future Challenges*

Although the TNLA has moved a significant distance in expanding its self-administration, it faces challenges maintaining the system and improving it further. In many areas under the group's control, the Myanmar state has barely existed, even in modern times, due to a combination of neglect, conflict and geography. Filling those gaps will be a tall order. There are also not many well-educated Ta'ang readily available to work in the TNLA's system, which means the group has to invest a great deal in education and training.

Moreover, despite strong support for the TNLA among the Ta'ang, there remains widespread resentment about its strict conscription policy.[105] To be sure, the stability of the post-coup period has made enlisting in the TNLA a more attractive prospect, because recruits are less likely to be deployed to the front lines and have more opportunities to work in administrative roles. Nevertheless, it is still not a career that most young Ta'ang people aspire to, and many continue to try to evade conscription.[106] If recruiters are unable to locate household members slated for military service, they frequently detain family members in their place. Multiple sources living in Ta'ang areas told Crisis Group that underage recruitment is also commonplace.[107] "Our policy prohibits underage recruitment and detaining family members [of those avoiding military

[101] Crisis Group interviews, May-August 2023.
[102] Crisis Group interviews, May-August 2023.
[103] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[104] Crisis Group interview, Ta'ang women's rights activist, June 2023.
[105] Over the past decade, tens of thousands of young adults and children have fled rural communities for major cities such as Yangon, Mandalay and Lashio to avoid recruitment. See, for example, "Children find sanctuary from conflict in the Sangha", *Frontier Myanmar*, 8 December 2019.
[106] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[107] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.

service], but the recruiting teams are still doing it", said a TNLA member. "There are sometimes punishments when the case is revealed, but many cases are covered up".[108]

As concerns resources, the TNLA's growing bureaucracy is likely to strain the group's finances. Although it collects taxes, the tax base is weak, because Ta'ang areas are generally poorer than other parts of Shan State. Agriculture, particularly tea cultivation, is the mainstay of the economy, but it has struggled in recent years due to low prices and lack of workers.[109] As a result, the TNLA can only raise a limited amount of revenue from Ta'ang people. Instead, it relies heavily upon taxes levied on local businesses and trucks on the Mandalay-Muse highway; in most cases, however, the businesses are not owned by Ta'ang, so taxes have become a source of grievance among other ethnic communities.[110]

Addressing these and other grievances – in addition to maintaining cordial relations with non-Ta'ang populations, especially those residing in areas under its control – will be a key challenge for the TNLA. The Ta'ang have long existed on the fringes of society. They have been marginalised not only by the majority Burmans but also by larger ethnic minorities, such as the Shan. The TNLA's expansion has thus upset traditional relations among ethnic groups in northern Shan State.

But the TNLA does not always manage the risks in this area as well as it might. Having now turned the tables to some extent, the group and its supporters have, in some cases, acted provocatively vis-à-vis other ethnic minorities. Interviewees cited a range of examples, including building Buddhist pagodas in areas with a high proportion of Kachin Christians, planting Ta'ang language markers and flying Ta'ang flags in mixed villages, and resettling Ta'ang people in lowlands. In recent years, Ta'ang social media users have also shared a map of a hypothetical "Ta'ang State" covering twelve townships, despite Ta'ang being a minority of the population in many of these (see Appendix B). It is unclear whether this map reflects an official TNLA position, but the group's Ta'ang State TV news webpage uses the map as the background, suggesting a level of endorsement. Such actions run the risk of provoking further violence in Shan State, either among armed groups or residents of different ethnicities.[111]

V. Conflict Risks and Recommendations

The 2021 coup enabled ethnic armed groups such as the TNLA to expand their territory, armed forces and bureaucratic capacity. It is far from alone: in western Myanmar, the Arakan Army has embarked on a similarly ambitious project, while in central Myanmar NUG-affiliated entities are also attempting to administer districts and provide services to the residents. Given that the military is stretched on numerous fronts, there is little prospect of it being able to reassert control in northern Shan State, particularly now that the TNLA has become a formidable opponent. It could well be decades before the central state returns to the area – if at all.

[108] Crisis Group interview, TNLA fighter, May 2023.
[109] "Bitter harvest: Shan State tea growers grapple with labour shortage", *Frontier Myanmar*, 13 June 2023.
[110] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.
[111] Crisis Group interviews, May-August 2023.

Despite both the TNLA and military seemingly wanting to avoid conflict, the risk of renewed fighting remains. Their forces are in close proximity on the ground, and the military could feel threatened if the TNLA continues to expand its territory. To forestall a scenario where an accidental confrontation escalates, it is essential that the two sides maintain the informal communication channels between local commanders they have put in place. To avoid triggering armed clashes with the military, the TNLA should also halt further territorial expansion and consider scaling back its efforts to exercise influence in urban areas. It should focus instead on improving administration and services on behalf of the population in the areas it already controls.

Limiting further expansion would also help mitigate the risk of conflict with neighbouring ethnic armed groups and communities. The TNLA's rise has clearly unsettled non-Ta'ang people in northern Shan State. The TNLA, moreover, is on track to become even more dominant in the region: to gain access to tax revenues and recruitment pools that will allow it to continue enlarging its army and administrative apparatus, it may well push further into territories where ostensible allies also stake claims. If it continues to pursue its present aggressive strategy, with the aim of securing control of all the Ta'ang-inhabited areas in the north of the state, the TNLA might come into conflict with other ethnic armed groups, who could be forced into action by those they represent.

The group should also take other steps to avoid triggering inter-communal tension, such as refraining from erecting Ta'ang-language signs and Buddhist pagodas in mixed-population areas, which serve as unofficial markers of territorial control but are antagonising to non-Ta'ang populations. Given the TNLA's aspirations to attain a Ta'ang State – which it would likely rule, together with civilian allies – the group will eventually need to find a way to work with and support other ethnicities living in its territory. That should involve treating them equally and providing them with the same services Ta'ang people receive. Ta'ang civil society has an important role to play in that regard, because it can not only provide these services but also engage civil society figures of other ethnicities to help avoid misunderstandings and resolve complaints. The TNLA should work closely with civil society organisations in part to facilitate the connecting role these groups can play.

As for the TNLA's relations with the ethnic Ta'ang, the challenges it faces there are somewhat different. The group's expansion may have generated unease among the region's other ethnic groups, but the Ta'ang have largely welcomed its growing influence. After a decade of deadly conflict, they are finally enjoying a degree of stability as a result of the TNLA avoiding direct confrontation with the military. They also have access to new services, particularly education – something that women interviewees saw as particularly important.

But while the Ta'ang strongly support the TNLA's vision of a self-administered Ta'ang State, there are steps the group could take to build greater support and improve its governance. For example, its recruitment policies remain unpopular. Both for the sake of its supporters and for humanitarian reasons, the group should, at a minimum, properly enforce its ban on underage recruitment. It should shift away from mandatory military service by making enlistment more appealing, such as by improving conditions (including wages) for its members. It should also place more women in leadership roles, particularly in its administration; given the wide-ranging duties of administrators, this step could help loosen traditional gender roles and combat everyday gender-based discrimination.

International donors and aid organisations also have a role to play in northern Shan State. An important first step is recognising that in post-coup Myanmar, ethnic armed groups and civil society, rather than the government, are providing public services in areas like those controlled by the TNLA. Donors should match their actions to this reality and increase their support for the robust civil society movement that has taken root in these places. More funding would not just improve the services the population receives; it would also augment civil society's influence over the TNLA, giving civilians a greater role in governance. To mitigate inter-communal tensions, donors should also continue aiding civil society organisations from other ethnic groups present in northern Shan State.

Whenever possible, donors should endeavour to work directly with local civil society rather than through international NGOs or the UN, in line with the 2016 Grand Bargain by which donors committed to funding more local organisations.[112] To achieve this goal, some will need to be more flexible in how they operate. Donors must consider that most of Myanmar's ethnic civil society groups are unable to register with Naypyitaw or use the formal banking system due to regime restrictions and security threats, and often struggle with the voluminous and detailed reporting many of these donors require. Requiring organisations to keep receipts or seek multiple quotations from suppliers can put them at risk of arrest; other forms of accounting may be necessary. As Crisis Group has argued before, given the shrinking humanitarian space in many parts of Myanmar, some flexibility may be essential for aid to reach those most in need of humanitarian support.[113]

VI. Conclusion

In barely a decade, the TNLA has gained control of a large section of northern Shan State, encompassing significant parts of at least eight townships. Taking advantage of a lull in fighting after the February 2021 coup, it has encouraged Ta'ang civil society to greatly expand services to Ta'ang people, which in turn has helped enhance the group's popularity. The TNLA now has a firm grip on the mountains of northern Shan State, and it is unlikely to be dislodged in the foreseeable future, given both the weakness of the military and the priority China puts on stability along the border. At the same time, its territorial expansion and continued cooperation with post-coup resistance forces carry a risk of renewed conflict with the military. In places, the group's expansion has also created tensions with other minorities and ethnic armed groups, which could spark clashes affecting civilians.

The TNLA's consolidation of power is symptomatic of the fragmentation in post-coup Myanmar. A multitude of armed actors are carving out territory for themselves. The TNLA's approach of avoiding direct confrontation with the military while qui-

[112] The Grand Bargain is a 2016 agreement between the world's biggest donors and aid organisations that aims to make global aid delivery more efficient. One of its major areas of work is localisation, and it includes a target – not yet met – for 25 percent of humanitarian funding to go to local and national responders as directly as possible. See "The Grand Bargain (Official Website)", Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

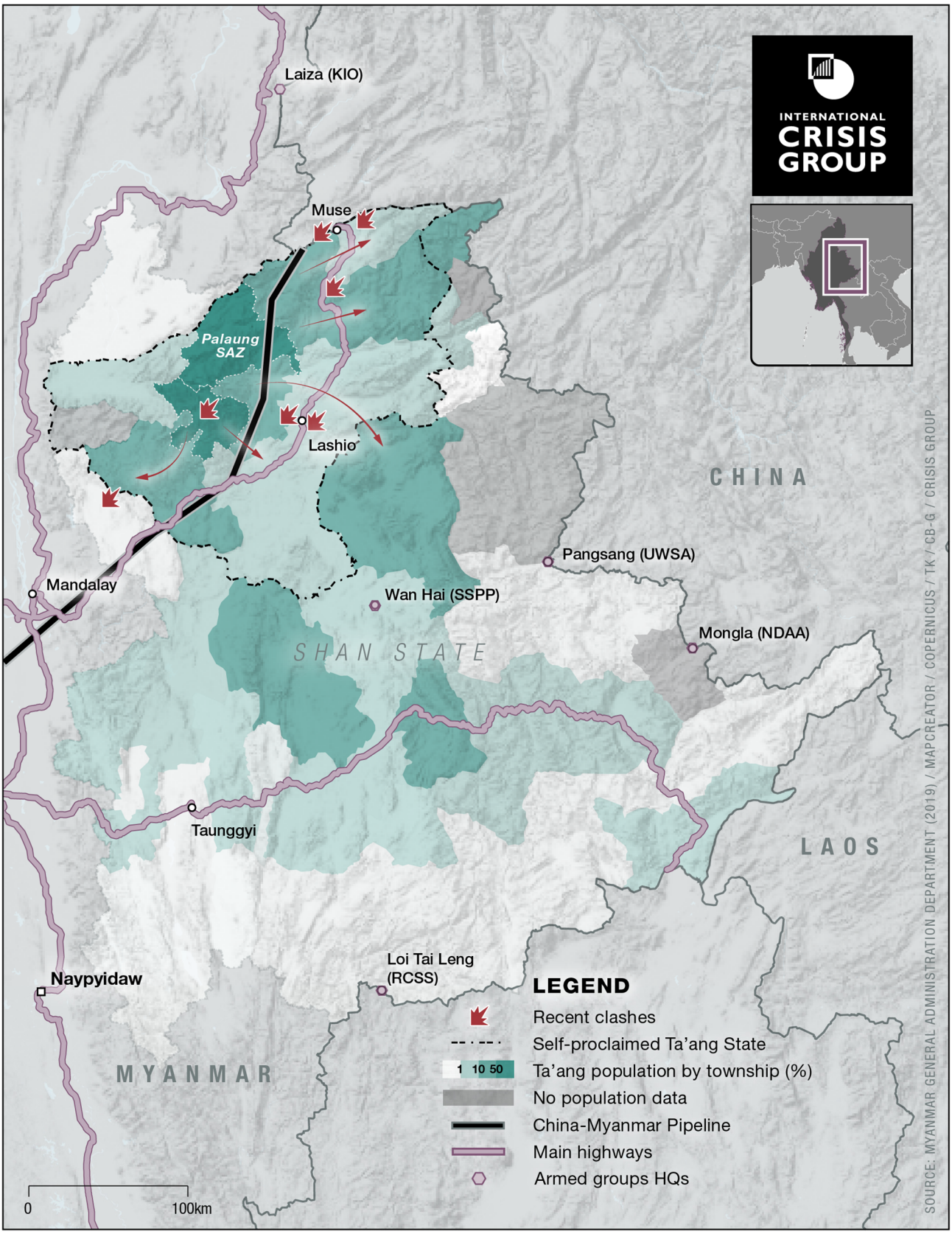
[113] See Crisis Group Report, *Crowdfunding a War*, op. cit.

etly supporting anti-military resistance forces reflects the complexity of the situation Myanmar's ethnic armed groups face. Reconciling their long-term objectives with pressure from their base to confront the regime makes for a rocky path to tread. Complicating matters further, Beijing is keen to reduce tensions along the border it shares with Myanmar. Although TNLA leaders are sympathetic to the anti-military resistance movement, they are unable or unwilling to formally participate. Instead, they play a behind-the-scenes role. That helps explain why it has proven so difficult for the NUG and its allies to build a broad alliance to topple the regime, as many hoped might be possible at first.

Against this backdrop, the best near-term hope for the Ta'ang people of northern Shan state is that TNLA and its civil society partners will provide them with governance, services and a level of security that in the absence of the state will otherwise likely be unavailable. Some of its actions to date are positive. Others – particularly those that involve underaged or forced recruitment of foot soldiers – should be stopped. To the extent that the TNLA is considering expanding its territorial control, it should shelve the idea, recognising that it could wind up provoking both competing armed groups and the military regime. More effective self-administration will be a better focus for its efforts, and international actors should do what they appropriately can to assist it in this endeavour.

Melbourne/Yangon/Brussels, 4 September 2023

Appendix A: Map of TNLA expansion in northern Shan State



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