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The impact of the February 2021 coup on China's strategic economic and security interests in Myanmar: Beijing's worst nightmare or a blessing in disguise?

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**Universiteit
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**THE IMPACT OF THE FEBRUARY 2021 COUP ON
CHINA'S STRATEGIC ECONOMIC AND SECURITY
INTERESTS IN MYANMAR:
*BEIJING'S WORST NIGHTMARE OR A BLESSING IN DISGUISE?***

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I. Abstract

Mainstream International Relations theories perceive the China-Myanmar bilateral relationship in terms of a zero-sum game, in which the close ties between the two countries either benefit China or not. Such theories are too simplistic. Often overlooked is not only the complex domestic situation in Myanmar, but also how China and Myanmar cultivated a strong bilateral relationship during the NLD era. In order to account for Myanmar’s complex domestic context, this thesis analyses the security impact of the coup on the ethnic rebel-controlled areas bordering China, and the economic impact on the Sino-Myanmar pipelines, one of China’s major Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. The research question of this study is: to what extent did China materially benefit from the February 1 coup in Myanmar? This thesis concludes that the coup increased the intensity of the conflict with EAOs, thus worsening the subsequent adverse conflict spill-over effect in the border areas. Furthermore, China’s BRI investments, including the pipelines, have historically been more secure under civilian NLD rule than under the military Tatmadaw rule. Thus, the February 2021 coup does not materially benefit China.

II. Introduction

On February 1st, 2021 the Myanmar military staged a coup, ending the 2016-2021 period of the civilian-led government by the National League for Democracy (NLD). The coup has been widely condemned by the international community, including major players like the USA and the EU. USA president Biden called the coup an “assault on Burma’s transition to democracy” (White House, 2021, para. 3) and in collaboration with the United Kingdom and Canada launched a series of economic sanctions on key Myanmar military individuals and entities (Reuters, 2021). The EU’s vice-president Josep Borrell expressed similar strong language and action: “I strongly condemn violence against peaceful civilian protesters by the military. I urge the military and all security forces in Myanmar to immediately stop violence against civilians”, which was followed by economic sanctions from the EU (Anadolu Agency, 2021, para. 1). Although China did not go as far as condemning the coup, it did support a joint UNSC Resolution which “stressed the need to uphold democratic institutions and processes, refrain from violence, and fully respect human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law”. A Chinese spokesperson for the UN mission further said about the statement: “As a friendly neighbour of Myanmar, China hopes that all parties in Myanmar will put the aspiration and interests of the people first, properly handle differences through dialogue within the constitutional and legal framework and safeguard political and social stability” (Reuters, 2021, para. 9).

Despite the Chinese reaction to the coup being ambiguous, some media have been stating that the coup is in China’s interest (Providence Magazine, 2021), (Time Magazine, 2021), (NY Times, 2021). On the other hand, some media sources suggest that the coup does not benefit China. They argue Myanmar’s increased security and economic stability during the country’s 2016-2021 civilian NLD rule consequently benefited China’s own interests (The Diplomat, 2021), (The Economist, 2021), (East Asia Forum, 2021), (The Atlantic, 2021). This thesis will research the bilateral relationship by taking into account Myanmar’s complex domestic context. The subsequent research question is: to what extent did China materially benefit from the February 1 coup in Myanmar?

This specific research angle is relevant for multiple reasons. First, the answer to this research question simultaneously contributes knowledge to the broader academic debate on the changing power dynamics between

the USA and China within the global order. In the last two decades Myanmar's economy grew increasingly dependent on China under Tatmadaw dictatorship (Global Asia, 2016), while the post-2011 civilian government reforms resulted in warming diplomatic, political and economic ties with the USA and broader international community (East Asia Forum, 2016). Therefore, an analysis of Myanmar's return to Tatmadaw dictatorship and its impact in relation to the USA-China global order rivalry is relevant to research. Secondly, this thesis critiques and aims to contribute to the academic debate of mainstream IR theories such as realism and liberalism by looking beyond the existing oversimplified explanations by which these theories portray the China-Myanmar relationship as a zero-sum game, in which China either comes out as a winner or a loser regarding Myanmar's coup. Thus, this thesis provides a methodological criticism of how mainstream IR theories understand the China-Myanmar bilateral relationship and how the coup's impact on China's economic and security interests can be more adequately assessed. Third, the research helps contribute to existing gaps in the academic literature. Unlike other sources analysing the impact of the coup, this thesis specifically looks at the coup's impact on China's relationship with the ethnic rebel armies operating in the northern areas of Myanmar bordering China. Furthermore, due to the fact that the coup happened quite recently, little research has generally been conducted on this topic. Therefore, this thesis provides an update to the existing literature by researching information for the post-February 1 time frame.

This thesis consists of the following structure: following the upcoming literature review, the subsequent methodological section will explain how the coup's impact on China's interests will be assessed. Chapter one focuses on an economic case study concerning the Sino-Myanmar pipelines, which is a vital part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), China's economic Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) corridor in Myanmar. Chapter two focuses on China's security interests in Myanmar regarding the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA).

III. Literature review

The literature review will discuss the development of the modern China-Myanmar bilateral relationship, how mainstream IR theorists like Mearsheimer and Ikenberry frame this relationship in zero-sum thinking terms and how the relationship can be better understood by taking into account Myanmar's complex domestic context.

3.1 China-Myanmar bilateral relationship since 1988

The literature review will first reflect on the relationship during 1988-2015 era of Tatmadaw rule, before comparing it with the 2016-January 31st 2021 period of civilian government under the leadership of the NLD. Although the China-Myanmar relationship was largely tumultuous and often cold in the post-independence 1948-1988 era, the relationship significantly improved from 1988 forward due to several domestic and international political events (Steinberg & Fan, 2012). At the end of the Cold War, both China and Myanmar were isolated and sanctioned because of the 8888 student uprising and the Tiananmen Square Massacre (Reuters, 2009), (Politico, 2011). China, through a difficult and internally contested process, further accelerated the liberalization of the Chinese economy following the adoption of Deng Xiaoping's reforms during the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1992 (Fewsmith, 2001). From an economic perspective, China's economic reforms in the early 1990s were a deciding factor for the China-Myanmar relationship, because it resulted in a massive increases of Chinese demand for Myanmar's natural resources. During this period, although Myanmar remained isolated and sanctioned by the West, the government officially ended its socialist policy and subsequently opened up its market for Chinese foreign investments and natural resources demands, which stimulated Chinese infrastructural investment in Myanmar and consequently increased economic interdependence (Aung Myoe, 2011). The normalization of trade in 1989 rapidly changed their relationship, with annual Chinese imports from Myanmar increasing 5-fold from 1988-2009, while exports to Myanmar increased 15-fold (Steinberg & Fan, 2012).

Oil security became one of China's main energy security and by extension national security priorities from 2001 forward, due to the massive increase in Chinese consumer and industry demand. China considered the capacity of the USA to be able to disrupt maritime oil supplies its main energy security threat. The risks of this scenario are predominantly tied to the so-called "Malacca Dilemma". Approximately 20% of global maritime trade and 60% of China's total trade value flows move through the Strait of Malacca, navigation through which is dominated by the USA and its allies (like Singapore), therefore leaving China's main economic supply line vulnerable of being cut-off in case of political upheaval (Warsaw Institute, 2021). In order to counter this threat, Chinese policy shifted towards initiating the construction of overseas energy infrastructure and diversifying its sources of energy imports. In line with this policy, China began including Myanmar in worldwide energy maps. Myanmar is an attractive market for China since it is rich in oil and has the tenth largest gas reserves in the world (Steinberg & Fan, 2012).

Consequently, all major Chinese oil corporations, CNPC, SINOPEC and CNOOC, became involved in Myanmar oil exploitation while other companies became involved in gas field exploitation. This caused Chinese industries closely related to the gas and oil production to flourish simultaneously. The largest of these projects are the Sino-Myanmar pipelines, which transfer gas and oil from Myanmar's deep-water port in the city of Kyaukpyu (Sittwe, Rakhine State) to Kunming, the capital of China's Yunnan province (Hong, 2013). Secondly, besides the oil and gas sector, China's energy infrastructure investments in Myanmar were also focused on hydropower plants and dams. China was involved in the construction of at least 25 dams in Myanmar, which cost more than 30 billion USD to construct and are estimated to have a generating capacity of up to 30.000 MW (Steinberg & Fan, 2012). Although many dam projects have been built over the last two decades, the largest project, the Myitsone dam, turned into a fiasco after the transitional Thein Sein government cancelled the project in 2011 due to fierce local opposition (East Asia Forum, 2018). Third, China is heavily involved in Myanmar's mineral resources industry. Beginning around 2000, China significantly increased its presence in Myanmar's mining industry, which corresponded with China's exploding demand for rare minerals and metals and new policy guidelines as stipulated in the 2001 "National Program on Mineral Resources", the "11th Five-year Plan for Land Resources (2006-2010)" and the "2008–2015 National Plan for Mineral Resources" (Steinberg & Fan, 2012). Major Chinese mineral resources projects and interests in Myanmar include the Tagaung Taung nickel project, the Letpadaung copper mine and the Hpakant jade mines (CNMC, 2020), (Chan, 2020).

Having discussed the development of the 1988-2015 economic relationship, the literature review will shortly reflect on the development of the security relationship during that period. The most important event during this period was the dissolution of the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) following a mutiny in 1989. This accelerated China's position from full-scale supporter of the BCP in the 1970s, towards a more pragmatic approach of economic cooperation with whoever controlled the border area. This pragmatism extended from existing EAOs, such as the KIA, to new EAOs that split and formed new rebel armies following the BCP collapse, like the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the MNDAA (Lintner, 1990). Although China shifted towards supporting the Tatmadaw, having financed approximately 3 billion USD military aid between 1988 and 2010, Myanmar's internal stability remained weak due to the government's ongoing armed struggle with various EAOs. (Steinberg & Fan, 2012). This also impacted China's security, for example regarding the 37.000 refugees fleeing to Yunnan province following the Kokang incident in 2009 (The Diplomat, 2021). Furthermore, China's infrastructural investments in Myanmar negatively impacted its relationship with EAOs, such as the construction of the

aforementioned Myitsone dam. In fact, local resentment about its construction significantly contributed to the resumed fighting between the Tatmadaw and KIA in 2011, ending a seventeen year ceasefire in the process. (Dossi, 2015), (The Irrawaddy, 2021).

The flourishing start of the China-Myanmar bilateral relationship under NLD leadership was symbolized by a historic June 2015 meeting between NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi and Chinese president Xi Jinping, signalling China's willingness to embrace Myanmar's democratization process. First, the economic partnership strengthened due to the expansion of the CMEC, such as the allocation of 70% of the newly build Kyaukpyu deep-sea port to China (East Asia Forum, 2018). Furthermore, new CMEC plans included the construction of other infrastructural development projects, such as highways, border trade zones, urban development and the 2018 revival of the Muse-Mandalay-Kyaukphyu Railway project, which had previously been cancelled in 2014 (The Diplomat, 2021). Finally, the NLD leadership did not prevent the continuation of Tatmadaw arms deals with China, such as the procurement of six JF-17M combat aircraft and the acquisition of SY-400 short-range precision surface-to-surface ballistic missile systems (OHCHR, 2019). Secondly, the NLD security agenda was also in China's security interests, because the NLD managed to sign, although fragile, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with some of the EAOs. The consequent relative stability therefore stimulated China's business interests in Myanmar (The Diplomat, 2020). Although the overall security situation in most areas of Myanmar did improve, violence in the Kokang region flared up again in 2017 (East Asia Forum, 2017). Furthermore, clashes between the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Tatmadaw in Myanmar's most western Rakhine province escalated to an all-out ethnic cleansing campaign by the junta in August 2017, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas fleeing to neighbouring Bangladesh (UNICEF, 2021). Ironically, the Rohingya crisis bolstered China-Myanmar relations after China refused to condemn Myanmar's internationally criticized handling of the crisis and instead proposed a 'three-phase' solution for dealing with the humanitarian crisis (East Asia Forum, 2018). Thus, for China the NLD was arguably a more reliable business partner than the Tatmadaw due to its more consistent cooperation on the development of the CMEC. Furthermore, with the distinct exception of Rakhine state and the Kokang, the overall internal security in Myanmar somewhat improved under NLD leadership due to its peacemaking efforts with some EAOs through the NCA.

3.2 Theoretical framework: the mainstream IR understanding of the China-Myanmar relationship

This section will discuss how the mainstream IR theorists Mearsheimer from the realist camp and Ikenberry from the liberalist camp misunderstand the China-Myanmar bilateral relationship and therefore misjudge the coup's impact on China's interests. First, realists like John Mearsheimer believe that states are primarily driven by maximizing their own power in comparison to other states. Therefore, great importance is attached to maintaining or achieving a favorable balance of power. States behave in this manner because in order to survive the anarchic international state system, they have no choice but to compete amongst themselves. Therefore, due to state's tendencies to seek power, one state's increased security decreases the security of other states, ending in a zero-sum game called the security dilemma (Dunne, Kurki & Smith, 2013). Furthermore, his position is that China's rise is significantly impacting the global balance of power at the expense of the USA. In the context of Myanmar's role within this zero-sum game, Mearsheimer believes Myanmar will probably be dominated by China in a Warsaw Pact-like bloc, along with other states like North Korea, Pakistan and Laos (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Thus, realists like Mearsheimer will argue that the coup enables China to strengthen its relationship with Myanmar. Second, IR liberals like Ikenberry argue that international norms and institutions are necessary for facilitating international cooperation. Although certainly not idealists, neoliberals have very different views than realists regarding their greater confidence in the ability of human kind to work towards universally desirable outcomes such as wealth, peace and equal justice, through international cooperation on a global level (Dunne et al, 2013). Therefore, the growing power struggle between China and the USA does not necessarily have to lead to a struggle over the liberal international order, although Ikenberry simultaneously warns that China, Russia, and a coalition of so-called middle states (like Turkey) may try to build an anti-Western and anti-liberal global order (Chatham House, 2014). Thus, neoliberalists like Ikenberry would argue that the coup is in China's interests, because they are concerned that the new military regime is moving Myanmar away from liberal norms and institutions, which increases China's opportunity for building an anti-liberal global order.

This theoretical overview clarified that mainstream IR theorists believe that the coup in Myanmar benefits China. Furthermore, they provide an oversimplified explanation in which the China-Myanmar bilateral relationship is framed either in terms of a zero-sum power game (Mearsheimer) or a zero-sum ideological battle between a liberal and anti-liberal global order (Ikenberry). In contrast, this thesis argues that in reality the China-Myanmar bilateral relationship is significantly more complex than these IR scholars would suggest, especially because they do not consider the complexity of Myanmar's domestic politics. Therefore, this thesis focuses on

assessing the impact of the coup on China's interests by explicitly taking into account the domestic context within Myanmar, for example by recognizing the fact that there is no singular sovereign state entity in Myanmar.

In fact, Myanmar is characterized by power competition between the Tatmadaw, National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG), Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and more than 20 EAOs (Asia Foundation, 2016). A good example of this power competition during the NLD era is that the Myanmar civilian government effectively co-existed alongside the parallel state formed by the Tatmadaw. For example, 25% of the parliament seats were reserved for the military, while constitutional changes required more than 75% of the vote, thus providing the junta the opportunity to block the passing of new laws. On top of that, the Tatmadaw remained in full control over three key ministries: Defence, border affairs and internal affairs (NRC, 2017). Additionally, the Tatmadaw itself is characterized by internal factions. For example, former general Shwe Mann later became speaker of the parliament, turning into a vocal critic of the transitional Thein Sein government (The Irrawaddy, 2016). Due to these internal power dynamics, the chosen case studies not only take into account China's relationship with the Tatmadaw, but also stakeholders like the previous NLD administration and the powerful EAOs KIA and MNDAA.

IV. Methodology

The methodology section will detail how the impact of the February 1 coup on China's security and economic interests in Myanmar can be assessed, taking into account Myanmar's aforementioned domestic complexities. The subsequent research question of this thesis is: to what extent did China materially benefit from the February 1 coup in Myanmar? Thus, "material benefits" is defined as the sum of China's economic and security interests.

4.1 Methodological approach

In order to determine whether or not the coup materially benefited China, the methodological approach of this thesis is built on qualitative research through the within-case study method of process tracing. Process tracing refers to attempts to empirically establish the intervening causal process, the causal chain and mechanism in a single case research design (George & Bennett, 2005). A within-case analysis involves using certain specific parts of data (factors) or information to make interpretations about the individual case (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). The challenge here is attributing the impact on China's economic and security interests specifically to the

coup, instead of other circumstances which may have played a deciding role. Therefore, the thesis will consider a broad scope of factors which may have impacted China's post-coup economic and security interests in Myanmar.

4.2 Operationalization

Through deductive reasoning, each of the individual case-studies will formulate and take into account specific factors which impact the extent to which the economic or security interests in that particular case contribute to answering the research question (Trachtenberg, 2006). Chapter I consists of one CMEC case-study relating to China's economic interests in Myanmar. The CMEC project in question is the Sino-Myanmar pipeline. Chapter II consists of a case-study concerning China's security interests in Myanmar in relation to two major EAOs, the KIA and the MNDA. The case study selection for the Chapter I is based on the fact that the Sino-Myanmar pipelines are China's most vital CMEC project, not only in terms of the amount of money that has been invested into the pipelines (4.3 billion USD) and related infrastructural refinery investments in Yunnan province (5 billion USD), but also due to its strategic significance regarding mitigation of the aforementioned Malacca Dilemma (Hong, 2013). Furthermore, the case study selection of Chapter II is based on the fact that both rebel groups are operational alongside the border with China and both EAOs frequently clash with the Tatmadaw, therefore causing a conflict spill-over effect into China.

Using the process-tracing method in conjunction with a historical analysis approach is considered a solid method to infer and construct a causal chain reconstruction of how certain factors interacted with each other over a certain timeline in order to produce the historical outcome (Trachtenberg, 2006). Therefore, a historical analysis will be applied to the case studies in a chronological order. Each case study is divided into three distinct historical periods: first the 1988-February 2016 period of Tatmadaw rule, which includes the State Law and Order Restoration Council / State Peace and Development Council (SLORC/SPDC) era and the quasi-civilian transitional government era under the leadership of Thein Sein's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) party (BBC, 2016). The second historical period concerns the era of NLD governance under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi from February 2016 until the coup of February 1, 2021. The third period concerns the post-coup Tatmadaw State Administration Council (SAC) leadership that has ruled Myanmar since February 2021.

4.3 Methodological challenges

Finally, this section will discuss the challenges and limitations of the chosen methodological approach. The first challenge is related to the categorization of the multiple Tatmadaw administrations. The choice to include the

SLORC/SPDC and Thein Sein administrations into the same Tatmadaw era category, despite the reformist agenda of the Thein Sein government, is justifiable for two reasons. First, because of the fact that many former SLORC/SPDC members have close ties to the USDP party (Htut, 2019). Secondly, the SAC also has close ties to both the former SLORC/SPDC and USDP Tatmadaw administration (Croissant & Kamerling, 2013).

Additionally, it is outside the scope of this thesis to research all case studies that might be relevant, thus limiting the ability to generalize the outcome. However, this limitation is mitigated by using a rigorous within-case study method in which each case takes into account a wide scope of different factors that may impact China's interests. On top of that, each case study explicitly discusses the relevance of each case to China's interests, thus making the process tracing transparent. Finally, the last challenge is the relative lack of reliable post-coup data on Myanmar, particularly in regards to fighting between the Tatmadaw and EAOs. The thesis aims to mitigate this challenge by maximizing source diversity with a mix of Western sources, combined with Chinese and independent Myanmar based English-language sources.

V. Chapter one: China's economic interests in Myanmar

This chapter will discuss a case study involving China's economic interests in Myanmar. This case study is part of the CMEC and analyses the coup's impact on the Sino-Myanmar pipelines.

5.1 China's interest regarding the Sino-Myanmar pipelines

China's economic interests in Myanmar and broader geopolitical strategic interests are significantly intertwined with the Sino-Myanmar pipelines. First the thesis will discuss key features of the pipelines after which China's interests will be analysed. The Sino-Myanmar pipelines comprise of two parts: the crude oil pipeline and the dual gas pipelines running from the deep-water port of Kyaukphu in Rakhine state straight through Myanmar's heartland to the border city of Muse in northern Shan state, before entering Ruili in China's Yunnan province. Thereafter, the pipelines continue their destination from Ruili to Yunnan's capital city of Kunming, and its final destination Nanning, the capital of Guanxi province (Hong, 2013). The approximate length of the crude oil pipeline is 2380km with a maximum capacity of carrying 22 million tonnes per year of oil originating from Africa and the Middle East. The crude oil pipeline section was co-financed and co-built by Myanmar's state-owned MOGE and China's largest hydrocarbon exploitation company, China National Petroleum Organization (CNPC).



Figure 1: This figure visualizes the overview of major BRI infrastructural projects and trading routes. The dark green lines represent (planned) oil pipelines and the yellow lines represent (planned) oil pipelines (MERICS, 2018).

CNPC is the project's majority stakeholder with 50.9% of shares held, while MOGE holds the other 49.1% of shares. The twin gas pipeline section pumps gas from the Shwe gas field in the Andaman sea, has a total length of 2806km and has a maximum carrying capacity of around 12 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas per year (Su, 2016), (China Research Center, 2020). The gas project has a more diversified investor background comprising of the following state-controlled investors: a CNPC majority stakeholdership of 50.9%, ONGC and GAIL (both Indian companies) with 12.52% of shares, the Korean state investor Kogas with 4.17% of shares and MOGE with 7.37%. Furthermore, the project is backed by a private investor: the Korean steel-making company POSCO with the remaining 25.04% of shares (Myanmar Now, 2021).

China's interests in the Sino-Myanmar pipelines can be divided into two sub-groups: strategic geopolitical interests and economic interests. First, China's most significant geopolitical interest in the Sino-Myanmar pipelines is arguably related to the aforementioned "Malacca Dilemma" (Hong, 2013). These strategic concerns partially contributed to the emergence of China's BRI, which includes the major oil and gas pipeline land corridors as shown in figure 1: the central Asia-China gas pipeline corridor (from Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan to China), the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline (from the China-Russia corridor) and the China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines (Zhang & Bai, 2020). Secondly, the overall strategic value of gas and oil

from Southeast Asia is increasing due to the combination of increased global demand and the simultaneous decrease of oil Southeast Asia's global oil exports since the mid 1990s. Whereas Southeast Asia's oil exports in 1996 averaged 2.9 million barrels per day (mb/d), it is expected to drop to 1.4 mb/d in 2030. Furthermore, although gas production in Southeast Asia is expected to increase from 203 billion cubic meters bcm in 2008 to 248 bcm in 2030, the surplus of gas reserves over gas demands is expected to shrink significantly from 63 bcm in 2008 to 10 bcm in 2030, which is primarily caused due to China's massive increase in gas demand (Hong, 2013), (Argus Media, 2021). Furthermore, from an economic interest perspective, the total costs associated with the pipelines, such as construction, maintenance, operational and security expenses are significant with an estimated 2.3 billion USD for the crude oil pipeline and 2 billion USD for the twin gas pipelines. And finally, the pipelines are of major economic interest to the Yunnan province authorities. Yunnan profited from the pipelines due to its oil shortages and the pipelines positive economic side effects. For example, the estimated infrastructural development costs for the Yunnan authorities relating to the pipelines, such as a refinery and ethylene plant in Anning, are estimated around 5 billion USD and help diversify Yunnan's economy (Hong, 2013).

5.2 Factors impacting Sino-Myanmar pipelines case study

In order to determine the impact of the coup on the Sino-Myanmar pipelines, this case study will consider both political and security risk related factors. The political risks assessed are related to contractual agreements, the relationship between both governments and the relationship between other relevant stakeholders, such as shareholders. The security risks related factors include protective measures implemented along pipelines infrastructure, blackmail/threats directed against pipelines infrastructure and actual attacks and/or damage inflicted upon pipelines infrastructure. Finally, the timeline of export data from the beginning of the pipelines operations until the present is considered, both in terms of the quantity sold and the total export value.

5.3.1 Sino-Myanmar pipelines in the SLORC/SPDC/USDP era

Following its rise to power, in 1988 the SLORC began liberalizing Myanmar's energy market and allowed foreign companies to operationalize oil and gas extraction. Due to this policy, Myanmar's gas production grew from 3.4 bcm in 1988 to 12.1 bcm in 2010. In 2004 three scholars from Yunnan province conducted a feasibility study of constructing gas and oil pipelines between Sittwe and Kunming, which they strategically published shortly before then Myanmar's Premier Khin Nyunt made an official state visit to China. In August 2004, then

CCP Party Chief of Yunnan province, Bai Enpei, strongly supported the pipelines proposal and following further consultation with the scholars sent a report to China's State Council on behalf of Yunnan authorities, which formally proposed the construction of the Sino-Myanmar pipelines as solution for combatting China's energy security challenges (Su, 2016). This formal proposal received strong enthusiasm both with the central authorities in Beijing and government circles in Myanmar, which ultimately resulted in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in July 2005 between China's National Development and Reform Commission (CNDRC) and Myanmar's Ministry of Energy.

In order to alleviate concerns about Myanmar's political and economic insecurity, Myanmar's new premier Soe Win visited China in 2006 in order to assure the Chinese government and China's biggest oil companies that the Myanmar government is committed to the pipeline projects. Following Win's visit, CNDRC finally approved the project in April 2006 (Su, 2016). After CNPC won the bidding process, it signed an agreement with Myanmar's Ministry of Energy in November 2008 to build the crude oil pipeline for 2.3 billion USD and the gas pipeline for 2.0 billion USD. Construction began on October 31 2009 and was scheduled for completion around May 2013, although this was delayed until October 2014 (Hong, 2013). Furthermore, the pipelines operationalization was delayed from January 2015 until April 2017 (Peng, 2018). Additionally, the Myanmar government signed a 30-year contract with PetroChina during which it can buy a total of 6.5 trillion cubic feet of gas. The gas pipeline was finished in June 2013 and operational by October that same year (Aung Myoe, 2018). Since the gas pipelines became operational, 80% of the produced gas has been exported to China whilst the other 20% is used for domestic consumption (Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2018).

The delay of the oil pipelines construction and operationalization was caused by public opposition, security issues and disagreements between the Chinese and Myanmar government. First, public opposition, including protests, were sparked due to environmental issues, safety issues and property issues, such as inadequate compensation for landowners alongside the pipelines transit route (Peng, 2018), (Aung, Shengji & Condon, 2018), (Earth Rights International, 2011). Secondly, the controversy surrounding the entire project convinced the SLORC leadership to protect the construction areas alongside the pipelines route with Tatmadaw soldiers (see figure 2). However, despite the presence of security forces, fighting has occurred alongside the pipelines in Rakhine and Shan state in addition to direct attacks against pipeline infrastructure. Between 2011 and 2013 the construction of the oil pipelines was temporarily halted due to clashes between the Tatmadaw and the two EAOs KIA and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) along the transit route in Kachin state (Steinberg & Fan,

2012), (Peng, 2018). Furthermore, in 2013 anti-Muslim violence targeting the Rohingya community broke out in Rakhine state near the southern pipelines terminal (Reuters, 2013). On top of that, in January 2014 disgruntled workers conducted an arson attack against Chinese workers on a construction site of the pipelines (Bloomberg Businessweek, 2014). And finally, the both the SLORC/SPDC and USDP administrations stalled negotiations on the pipelines. First, Than Shwe, former general and chairman of the SLORC/SPDC, was reluctant to accept the suggested starting point of the oil pipeline and postponed the construction start from early to late 2009, which was reportedly done in response to unwelcome private criticism of the Chinese government, who suggested that Myanmar's political process should become more inclusive (Haacke, 2011). Secondly, the negotiations of the oil pipelines contract were stalled during the USDP administration due to disagreements over oil taxes, transport tariffs and port fees (Global Times, 2017).

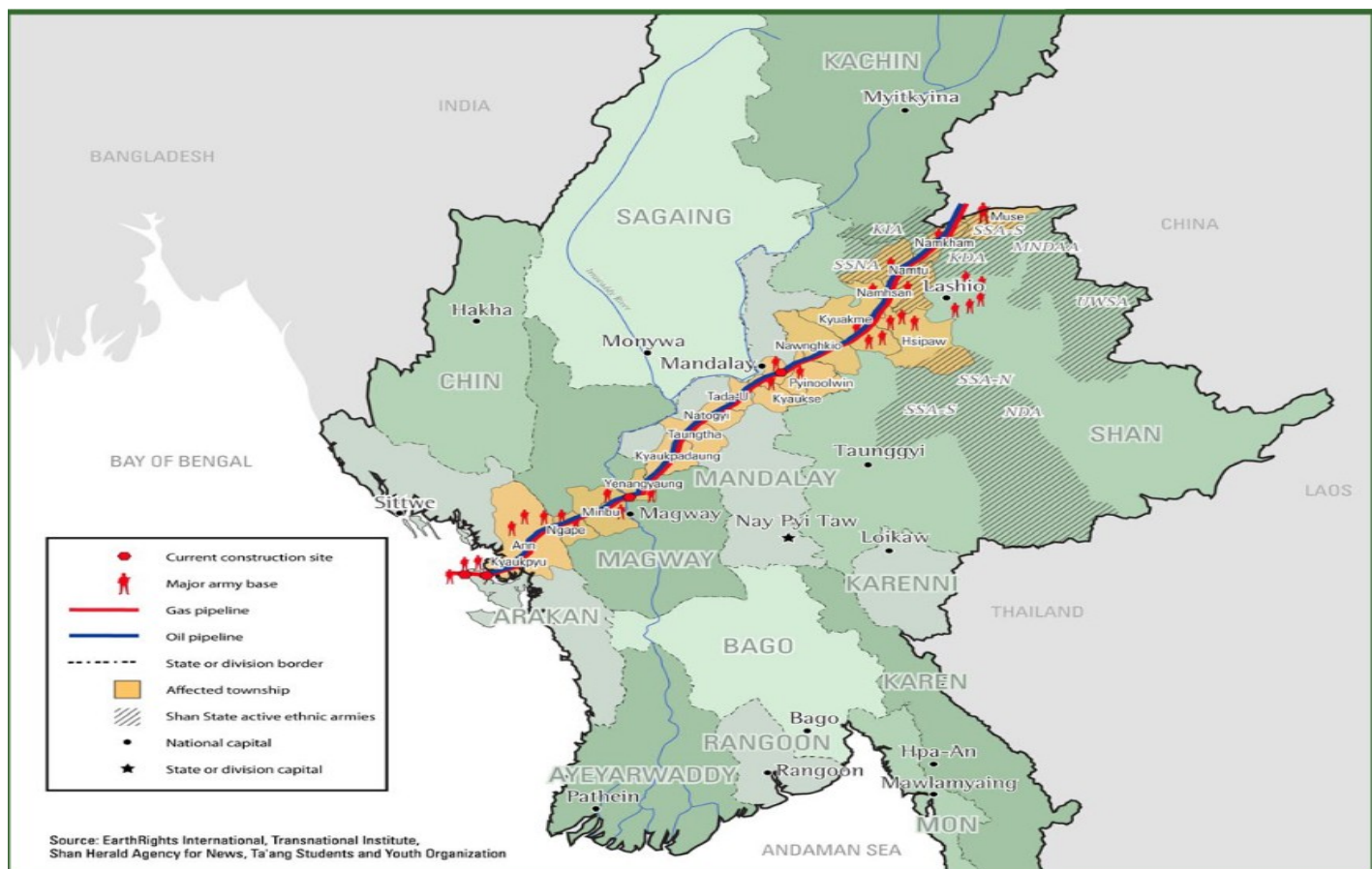


Figure 2: This figure visualizes transit route and stationing of Tatmadaw soldiers alongside the Sino-Myanmar pipelines (Earth Rights International, 2011).

5.3.2 Sino-Myanmar pipelines during NLD era

The last of these fee negotiations were not resolved until April 2017, after the installation of the new NLD administration. Arguably, this was a signal of good-will from the NLD to president Xi Jinping, who received a state visit from Myanmar president Htin Kyaw a few weeks later (Global Times, 2017). Since the gas pipelines became operational in 2013, total exports to China have remained stable between 2013 and 2018 with approximately 3.8 bcm exported annually, decreasing slightly to around 3.4 bcm in 2019 (Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2018), (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2020). However, this is still significantly below the gas pipelines maximum exporting capacity of 12 bcm per year (China Research Center, 2020). Still, these export figures have resulted in large profits for the stakeholders involved in the gas pipeline: the total profit paid to investors between 2017-2019 was 442 million USD (Myanmar Now, 2021). Furthermore, the total exports of the oil pipelines has increased steadily since operationalization in mid 2017 from 10.2 million ton in 2018 to 10.8 million ton in 2019, which is almost half of the maximum capacity of 22 billion tons annually (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2020), (Su, 2016). On top of that, NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi held meetings with top officials from China's CNDRRC in November 2018 to discuss the further development of CMEC, which includes the construction of more oil and gas pipelines (China Research Center, 2020).

However despite China's increasing import of gas and oil through the pipelines, the security situation remained precarious during the NLD years. The growing dissatisfaction of the local population, further aggravated by ignoring the demands of local representatives, caused tensions to reach new heights in 2017 when fighting between the Tatmadaw and several EAOs resulted in cross-border trade disruptions, followed by a joint KIA/TNLA armed attack on security outposts alongside the pipelines in Namkham township (SIPRI, 2017), (Myanmar Times, 2017). On top of that, the escalation of the Rohingya crisis in Rakhine state from August 2017 onwards further destabilized the security environment around the pipelines transit route during the NLD's rule (BBC, 2020).

5.3.3 Sino-Myanmar pipelines post-coup

Despite the political unrest following the post-coup takeover by the Tatmadaw's SAC, this has thus far not caused negative changes in China's import of gas and oil from Myanmar. According to sources from Yunnan's

PetroChina department, the delivery of oil through the Sino-Myanmar pipelines was not affected, with the total export in the first month following the coup numbering 7 million barrels of oil, approximately 1.1 million ton (S&P Global, 2021). China's prospects for Myanmar gas import are even better, as PetroChina officials expect imports to increase during the '21-'22 winter period and therefore signed a winter supply contract with the regional gas distribution company Yunnan Investment Qujing Gas (S&P Global, 2021).

Furthermore, the economic incentives for both the Chinese and Myanmar government to keep the oil and gas pipeline quantities high has arguably grown post-coup. First, China's demand for gas and oil is expected to keep growing substantially in the coming decade, to about 80% import reliance by 2030. Growing demand is accompanied by a trend of increasing dependence of oil (47%) and gas imports (20% from Qatar alone) from the Middle East, thus increasing the strategic value of alternatives that bypass the Malacca Strait, such as the Sino-Myanmar pipelines (Asia Times, 2021). Additionally, the Tatmadaw is increasingly depending on the export of oil and gas to China for generating state revenue, due to Western sanctions targeting SAC members and military owned conglomerates MEHL and MEC (Reuters, 2021), (Council of the European Union, 2021). Furthermore, certain large Western entities such as the energy companies Total and Chevron voluntarily left Myanmar in early 2022, citing concerns over worsening human rights (The Guardian, 2022). Therefore, Myanmar's total revenues earned over the pipelines gas export alone, which is almost 1 billion USD annually, a staggering 20% of the total estimated value of the country's foreign reserves, shows its essential role in financing the internationally sanctioned new regime (Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, 2020), (Myanmar Now, 2022).

However, despite the coup not having any disruptive effect on the quantity of China's oil and gas import, the security situation regarding the Sino-Myanmar pipeline infrastructure decreased further post-coup. First of all, the pipelines lack modern Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) monitoring and early warning mechanisms, which make direct attacks on the pipelines infrastructure more difficult to detect (Zhao, 2019). Secondly, anger from protestors in Myanmar over China's perceived support for the junta sparked unprecedented anti-Chinese sentiments expressed through a social media campaign against the pipelines. For example, some protestors tweeted that whether or not the pipelines will be blown up is an "internal affair" (The Irrawaddy, 2021, para. 1). China took these threats seriously and according to leaked documents, held emergency meetings with the Tatmadaw, urging them to increase the security for the pipelines and broadcast a more favourable view of China on tv-channels (The Irrawaddy, 2021). Finally, these worries were proven justified in May 2021 when armed attackers killed three security guards at an pipeline off-take station near Mandalay, which prompted the junta to

begin placing landmines along key pipeline infrastructure sites, in order to deter acts of sabotage by EAOs and organized civilian resistance groups such as PDFs (Myanmar Now, 2022).

5.4 Conclusion Sino-Myanmar pipelines

First, although there have been certain points of friction between China and the different Myanmar administrations, (delayed construction, fees) they have generally shown a willingness collaborate and when necessary accommodate China's pipeline interests (extra security deployment after sabotage threats). Furthermore, the Myanmar government is bound by a contractual agreement of 30-year gas delivery to PetroChina. China being a majority stakeholder in both the gas and oil shareholder structure, coupled with the fact that the stakeholder are from countries not imposing sanctions on Myanmar (India, South Korea) arguably result in the coup not increasing the pipelines political risks for China. It is even plausible to argue that the coup lessened the political risks, due to the new regime increasingly depending on the pipelines for generating revenue for foreign reserves.

The coup did clearly have a negative impact on the security of the pipelines. Although the project was controversial from the start, leading to security deployments during the construction phase and multiple security incidents happening throughout the different administrations (2011-2013, January 2014, December 2017), the May 2021 incident was the first deadly one directly targeting pipeline infrastructure. Furthermore, the coup sparked unprecedented levels of anti-Chinese sentiment, causing thousands of Myanmar twitter users to direct threats advocating for the pipelines sabotage, which did not happen prior to the coup. Although none of the attacks so far actually lead to pipeline sections being blown up, the coup arguably made the risk of such attacks occurring significantly higher. China's import through the gas (2013-present) and oil (2017-present) pipelines have steadily increased, including post-coup. Thus, the coup did not have a disruptive effect on the quantity of China's import.

The final conclusion of the Sino-Myanmar pipelines case study is that China's profits slightly increased post-coup due the continuation of increased oil and gas imports. However, the sustainability of that profit is questionable. Although the coup arguably decreased the political risks of the pipelines, it substantially increased the risks of security compromises through sabotage. This is shown by the Tatmadaw's decision to begin planting landmines alongside the Sino-Myanmar pipelines in early 2022 (SCMP, 2022). Thus, the coup was against China's interests to the extent that the sustainability of profits from the Sino-Myanmar pipelines decreased post-

coup due to the heightened risk of sabotage. However, the extent to which the post-coup increase of China's oil and gas imports through these pipelines can be attributed specifically to the coup is not exactly known. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted in order for a possible co-relation to be identified.

VIII. China's security interests in Myanmar

This chapter will discuss two EAOs regarding China's security interests in Myanmar. In short, this second chapter of the thesis will examine the impact of the coup on the conflict spillover effects of two major EAOs operating alongside the China-Myanmar border area: the KIA and the MNDA.

6.1 China's interests regarding EAOs operating alongside the Sino-Myanmar border

Ever since the first military takeover by the Tatmadaw in 1962, Myanmar's domestic security landscape has been characterized by the presence of dozens of EAOs, as well as countless local militias. These EAOs and militias often have conflicting business interests, as well as diverging allegiances with some being transformed into pro-government forces, whereas others are have been fighting the Tatmadaw for decades and have built independent autonomously governed institutions, traditions and systems (USIP, 2018), (Asia Foundation, 2016). The China-Myanmar border area is not exempt from the presence of EAOs as shown in figure 3, with the list including major rebel groups such as the KIA, MNDA, Shan State Progress Party / Shan State Army – North (SSPP/SSA-North), the UWSA and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) (USIP, 2022). China's security interests in Myanmar in relationship to the KIA and MNDA are related to four categories: first refugee streams, secondly missed tax revenues due to illegal smuggling, third health concerns due to drug addiction problems in Yunnan province caused by illegal drugs entering the country from Shan state, and fourth cross-border crime.

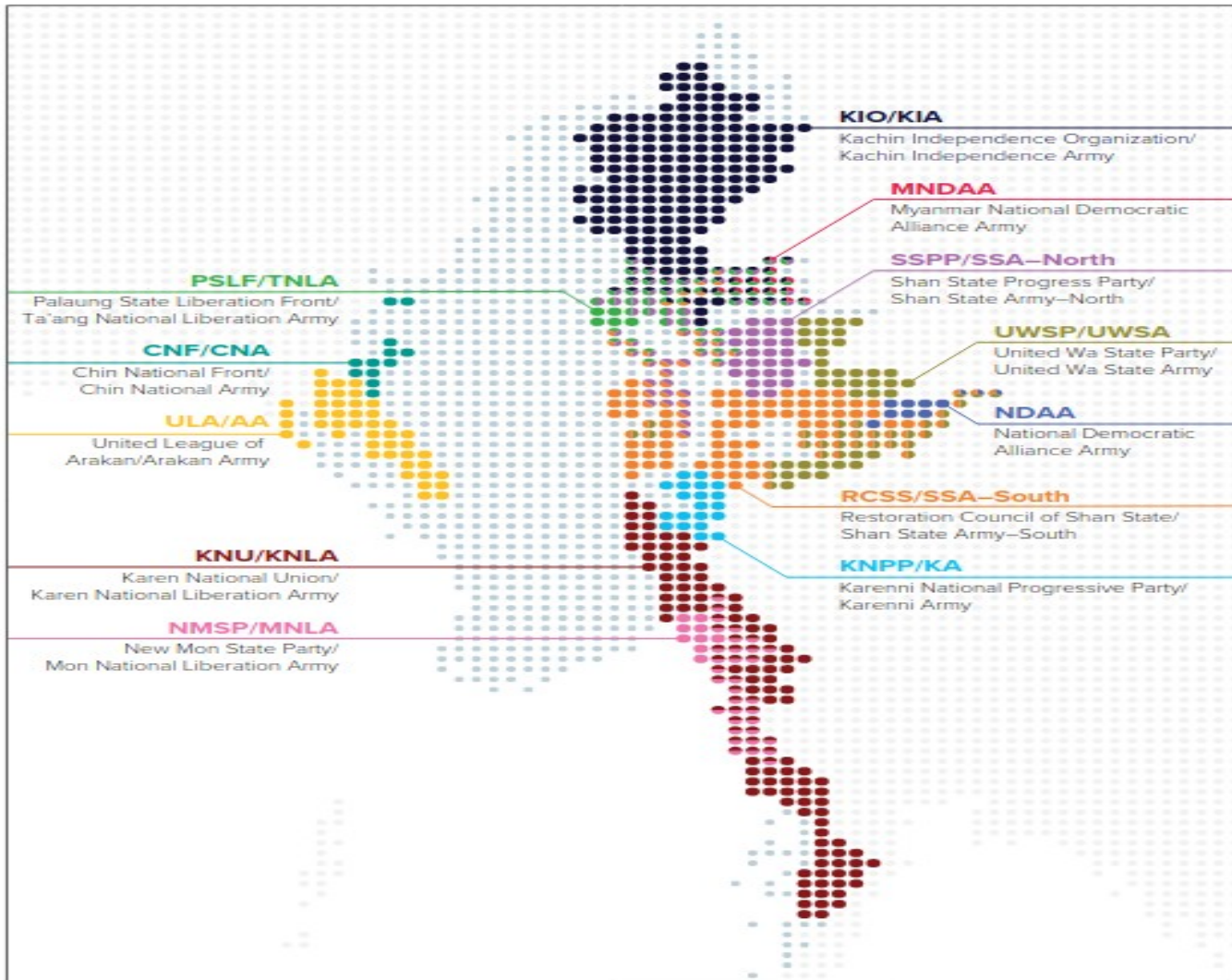
First, the Tatmadaw's conflict with both the KIA and the MNDA has led to refugee streams camping or crossing over the China-Myanmar border, and has even led to some casualties of Chinese citizens on both sides of the border. For example, it is estimated that since the ending of the 2011 ceasefire between the KIA and Tatmadaw, over 125.000 people have been internally displaced within Kachin state in addition to approximately 10.000 refugees fleeing to the Chinese side of the border. On top of that, the conflict between the Tatmadaw and MNDA has proven even more harmful of China's security interests in Myanmar. Two large scale conflicts in 2009 and 2015 fought in the Kokang region, from which the MNDA originates, sparked mass refugee streams

of more than 60,000 local Kokang ethnic people to China's Yunnan province, especially towards the town of Nansan (NY Times, 2015).

MAP 2.

Ethnic Armed Organizations

Through its history, Myanmar has lacked an inclusive national identity. Many of the country's ethnic armed organizations have fought the Myanmar military since the country's independence. EAOs now maintain control and influence across the country's borderlands.



Note: This map, based on analysis of various sources by USIP, shows the approximate areas of influence of Myanmar's major EAOs. The map was created by USIP, based on artwork by goleiro35/Shutterstock. Note that this includes areas that are controlled or administered by EAOs, areas where they operate, or where they have significant influence.

Figure 3: This figure visualizes the approximate areas of control and influence of Myanmar's major EAOs as of late 2021 (USIP, 2022).

Secondly, for decades large quantities of illegally smuggled goods have been passing through the Chinese border due to rampant corruption and the vital role that the revenue of these smuggled goods play in financing both EAOs as well as the Tatmadaw, corrupt Chinese businessmen and provincial Yunnan officials (USIP, 2017). Prominent examples of these smuggled goods include arms, jade and timber. The value of Myanmar's total jade production in 2014 was estimated at 31 billion, whilst approximately 70 to 90% of jade production is illegally smuggled into China (Global Witness, 2021). Therefore, even using conservative estimates such as the 70% figure and only accounting for jade smuggling, in 2014 China was unable to collect tax revenues on goods worth more than 21.7 billion USD. Considering the fact that this number will be substantially higher when also accounting for the illegal smuggling of all other goods, the extent of the corruption and subsequent missed tax revenues are a concern to China's national security interests.

Third, the smuggling of drugs into China is also an important factor in financing the conflict between EAOs, the Tatmadaw and various local militias operating alongside the China-Myanmar border area. EAOs such as the MNDAA are involved in the production and trafficking of drugs. Additionally, the Tatmadaw is indirectly involved in profiting from the drug trade, through various government affiliated companies (Meehan, 2011). China's drugs related security interests alongside the border area are related to the HIV health crisis it caused inside Yunnan province. Due to Myanmar's northeastern Shan state being part of the so-called 'Golden Triangle', one of the world's global hot spots for drugs trafficking, neighbouring Yunnan province has been flooded with heroin and methamphetamines since at least 1989. In 1989 Chinese authorities discovered up to 146 HIV infected drug users in the border town of Ruili. The number of HIV infected drug users increased exponentially to 57,325 confirmed cases in 2007, which resulted in more than 4500 deaths (Jia et al., 2010).

Finally, the sum of illegal smuggling, drug trade and corruption created an environment in which cross-border crime has flourished. For example, the pro-Tatmadaw Kokang Border Guard Force (BGF), which is a split off faction of the MNDAA, operates a vast network of illegal casino's inside the autonomous Kokang region. Due to gambling being illegal in mainland China, these casinos are often involved with Chinese criminal activities inside Myanmar, which includes hostage-taking and gang violence. Research into Chinese court records has shown hundreds of criminal convictions in relation to illegal gambling, fraud, kidnapping and drugs in relation to

the activities of the Kokang BGF (USIP, 2021).

6.2 Factors impacting EAOs case study

In order to determine the coup's impact on the spillover effects on the Sino-Myanmar border area regarding the conflict of the Tatmadaw with the KIA and the MNDA, various factors will be considered. The political risk factors assessed are the relationship developments between the Tatmadaw, China and the KIA. Furthermore, the relationship developments between the Tatmadaw, China and the MNDA, including the separatist pro-Tatmadaw Kokang BGF, will be considered. The security risk related factors that will be considered are the conflict spillover effects regarding refugee streams towards China, missed tax revenues due to illegal smuggling, cross-border crime, HIV related drug addiction challenges in Yunnan province.

6.3.1 KIA and MNDA in SLORC/SPDC/USDP era

The KIA was founded in February 1961 with the goal of establishing an independent Kachin state. Kachin's indigenous population are the ethnic Jingpo, a non-Han people who also form a small ethnic minority in China (Han, 2017). The group went into armed combat in 1962 following Myanmar's military takeover by general Ne Win (Dukalskis, 2015). After more than three decades of continued armed rebellion by the KIA, the military situation began deteriorating in 1992 and 1993, which decreased the group's political position, culminating in the 1994 ceasefire agreement.

Increasing Tatmadaw pressure on the KIA to transform its rebel army into a pro-government BGF, along with the aforementioned continuation of the highly unpopular Myitsone Dam project caused tensions to increase rapidly. The armed conflict resumed in June 2011. During the remainder of Thein Sein's USDP administration, the relationship between the Tatmadaw and KIA worsened further. Although the fighting remained limited to low-scale combat between 2011 and 2013, it escalated further from 2014 onwards despite small progress in political talks (Sadan, 2015). The 2011-2013 skirmishes had already resulted in more than 125,000 IDPs in Kachin state, in addition to 10,000 Kachin refugees fleeing to China (Ganesan, 2015). Furthermore, a November 2014 artillery strike on a KIA cadet training center near Laiza killed 23 cadets whilst wounding 15 others, thus becoming the deadliest Tatmadaw attack on the KIA since the fighting resumed in 2011. Although fighting continued, representatives from sixteen EAOs and the Tatmadaw managed to sign a preliminary NCA in Yangon in March 2015, which established a framework for a nationwide cease-fire of most conflicts (Kipgen, 2015). In October 2015 a definitive cease-fire was signed. However, the NCA only included eight of the sixteen EAOs that had signed the preliminary version. Notably, the NCA was not signed by the most powerful EAOs, such as the KIA,

MNDAA and the UWSA, excluding approximately 80% of the country’s total EAOs combatants (Ganesan, 2015).

The main source of income for the KIA is its involvement in the illegal smuggling of jade. Although China has benefited from the increase of official jade imports from Myanmar during the SLORC/SPDC/USDP era, growing from a total value of just 10 million USD in 2006 to over 12.1 billion USD in 2014, around 2015 approximately 50 to 80% of Myanmar’s jade was smuggled into China illegally, causing China to annually miss tax revenues worth tens of billions USD dollars in jade imports (USIP, 2020), (Global Witness, 2015). Another important source of KIA revenue is the illegal smuggling of timber towards China. Due to systemic corruption by the Tatmadaw, the KIA, local militias and Yunnan authorities, various legislative attempts at halting the illegal timber industry failed. Thus, illegal timber exports to China flourished under SLORC/SPDC and USDP leadership.

The MNDAA was founded in the aftermath of the BCP mutiny and dissolution in March 1989 (see figure 4), after which the BCP split into four sections: the UWSA, MNDAA, NDAK and the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K) (USIP, 2019). One of the main issues causing the BCP split concerned an internal division about anti-drug policy. Despite top BCP officials during the 1985 Third Congress deciding against allowing the taxation of the local population’s opium trade, corrupt lower ranking BCP officials continued the practice nevertheless (Lintner, 1990).

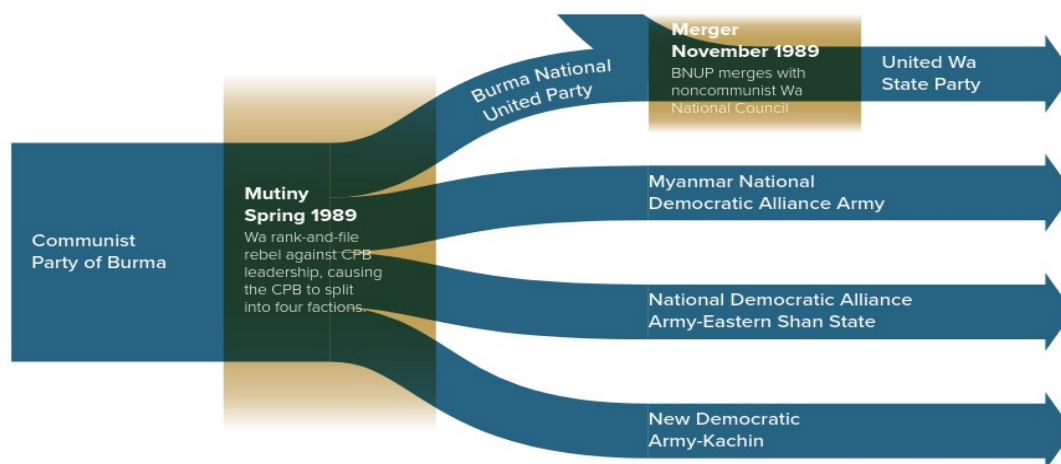
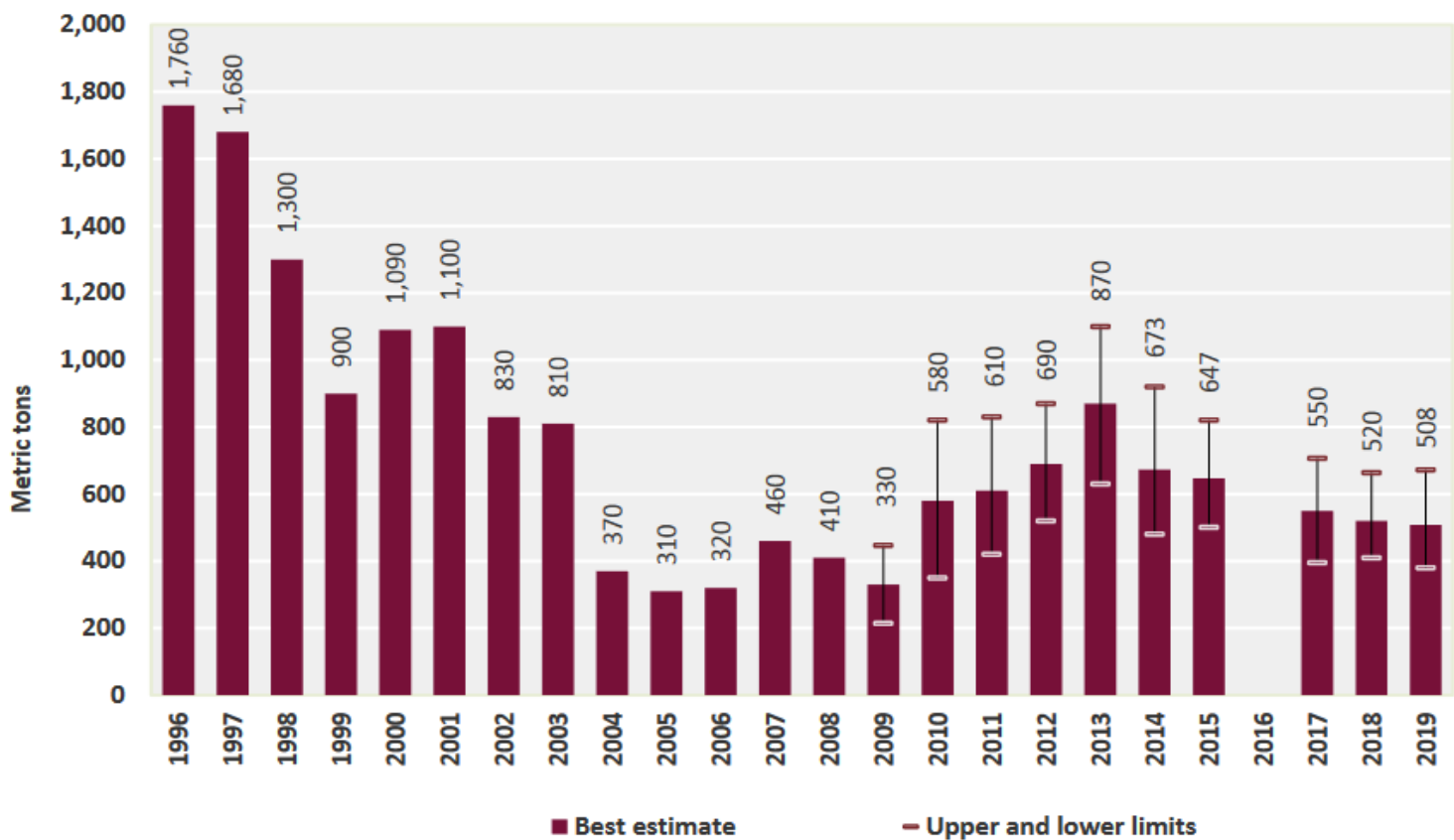


Figure 4: This figure visualizes the split of the BCP into four new groups following the 1989 mutiny.

Under the leadership of Peng Jiasheng, the MNDAA continued the BCP practice of heavy involvement in the local opium trading in areas it controlled. Following the formation of the MNDAA in 1989, Peng, his brother Pheung Kya-fu and Lo Hsing Han, an infamous drug trafficker, signed Myanmar's first-ever bilateral ceasefire agreement with the Tatmadaw, handing over all insurgents operating inside Kokang area's under their control, in exchange for the Tatmadaw's non-interference with their drug trafficking business (Lintner, 1990). Under this new policy, the Tatmadaw would tolerate or even encourage the MNDAA and other actors to establish lucrative drug trade within their territory, in exchange for allegiance to the Tatmadaw government (Meehan, 2015). Consequently, Myanmar became the world's largest producer of heroin, with annual production peaking at 1760 metric tonnes in 1996 (Tian et al., 2011). However, the 1996 surrender of the drug-trading Mong Tai Army, the introduction of Myanmar's 1999 anti-poppy crop policy and the growing emergence of the Afghanistan's heroin market significantly decreased heroin production to around 320 metric tonnes in 2006 (see figure 5). Between 2007 and 2013, heroin production increased again to 870 annual metric tonnes, before decreasing yet again to approximately 647 metric tonnes in 2015 (USIP, 2019), (UNODC, 2019).



Source: from 1996 to 2001 USG, from 2002 to 2019 GOUM-UNODC. In 2016 no survey was conducted.

Figure 5: This figure shows the annual poppy cultivation in Myanmar between 1996 and 2019, measured in metric tonnes (UNODC, 2019).

Between 1988 and the early 2000s, the MNDA was a significant stakeholder in Myanmar’s drug trafficking business, making billions of dollars profit annually. By 2002, the rebel army produced around 159 metric tonnes of opium, approximately 20% of Myanmar’s total estimated production of 830 metric tonnes that year (Frontier Myanmar, 2020), (UNODC, 2019). However, increasing international pressure on the Tatmadaw combined with the growing popularity and profitability of alternative drugs like amphetamine-type stimulants contributed to the MNDA’s new policy of opium eradication in 2002 (Meehan, 2011), (Frontier Myanmar, 2020).

Furthermore, there is a link between heroin production numbers in Myanmar and the amount of demand from Chinese heroin users. Whereas in 1989 only a few dozen cases of HIV infected drug users were identified in Yunnan province, by 2007 this figure had exponentially risen to more than 57.000 (Jia et al., 2010). On top of that, Myanmar produced methamphetamine has seen a significant increase in Yunnan users, doubling between 2011 and 2015 to approximately 75.000 users (Zhang et al., 2018).

The aforementioned arrangement between the Tatmadaw and MNDAAs remained in place until the collapse of the ceasefire agreement in August 2009. In April 2009, the Tatmadaw issued a controversial announcement ordering all ceasefire groups to transform into BGFs, thereby effectively demanding the concerning EAOs to breakup their armies into smaller brigades under Tatmadaw control without taking into account their political aspirations (Transnational Institute, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the stronger armed EAOs, including both the MNDAAs and KIA, refused this demand. However, the MNDAAs faction under the leadership of the sidestepped former police chief Bai Xuoqian was disillusioned with Peng's leadership and agreed to become a pro-Tatmadaw BGF. Bai's militia then aided the Tatmadaw when it attacked and occupied the Kokang region in August 2009. The ensuing violence ended the two decades old ceasefire, killed more than 200 people and caused more than 37.000 Kokang people to seek refuge in China.

Following six years of relative peace, a revanchist Peng launched his offensive in February 2015 with attacks on Tatmadaw army posts stationed in Laukkai. Although the offensive came as a surprise, Peng ultimately lost the battle in May 2015 and his MNDAAs again retreated towards Kokang's countryside. Subsequently, between 40.000 and 50.000 Kokang civilians fled towards China (Han, 2017).

The 2009 and 2015 Kokang conflicts marked a vast shift of Tatmadaw-MNDAAs relations, changing from a pragmatic business oriented ceasefire agreement towards a relationship of severe mutual distrust. In fact, the Tatmadaw now explicitly refused any dialogue with the MNDAAs regarding NCA talks, demanding a complete surrender before such talks could proceed. Therefore, the MNDAAs did not sign the October 2015 NCA, despite calls from the KIA-led peace negotiation bloc United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) to include them in the peace talks. Under Chinese pressure, the MNDAAs then unilaterally requested a ceasefire, which was also rejected by the Tatmadaw (Transnational Institute, 2015).

6.3.2 KIA and MNDAAs during NLD era

Following the transition of power to the civilian NLD government in early 2016, the relationship between the government and the KIA did not make any meaningful progress. Disillusioned by the non-inclusive character of the NCA and ongoing fighting with the Tatmadaw, the KIA and MNDAAs in collaboration with the SSPP/SSA-N and NDAA founded the Northern Alliance in 2016, a loose military coalition of EAOs fighting the Tatmadaw independently. Besides the formation of this Northern Alliance, the NLD era furthermore witnessed the formation of a new EAOs political negotiation platform. After the signing of the NCA, the UNFC bloc began crumbling down. Three powerful UNFC member EAOs, the KIA, TNLA and the Wa National Organisation

resigned from the UNFC (Frontier Myanmar, 2017). In April 2017 a powerful UWSA-led alternative peace negotiation bloc called the Federal Political Negotiating and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) was founded. Unlike the UNFC, the FPNCC membership included a significant portion of the country’s EAOs, comprising of the Arakan Army (AA), KIA, MNDAA, UWSA, TNLA, NDAA and the SSPP/SSA-N, representing approximately 80% of Myanmar’s total EAOs combatants.

Figure 2. Ethnic Armed Organizations



Note: Some English-language Myanmar media outlets use the name Northern Alliance as a shorthand for the FPNCC, but officially the two groups do not have the same member organizations: three FPNCC members are not members of the Northern Alliance.

Figure 6: This figure visualizes the list of NCA signatories and the list of FPNCC members, including those members part of the Northern Alliance (USIP, 2018).

During this period, several Union Peace Conferences (UPCs) between Myanmar’s government and various EAOs took place, none of which produced any meaningful political progress. In September 2016, the first UPC was held in Naypyidaw. Before the conference, China applied pressure on Aung San Suu Kyi to invite the KIA, MNDAA, AA, NDAA, TNLA and UWSA to the negotiating table, whilst simultaneously pressuring the EAOs to attend (USIP, 2016). Although the KIA attended, its fellow Northern Alliance members the MNDAA, TNLA and AA were barred from attending the peace conference (The Irrawaddy, 2016). These events clearly show that during this period, despite Chinese behind-the-scenes diplomacy and peace process donations contributions totaling around 3 million USD, China’s influence on the peace negotiation process was limited (USIP, 2016).

These stalled peace negotiations also reflected the ongoing violent conflict between the KIA and the Tatmadaw, which stayed persistent throughout the NLD era. Between 2016 and the first half of 2018, the Tatmadaw and KIA clashed on average 75 times per year, whereas between 2011 and 2015, the average was significantly lower at around 23 times annually (ACLED Data, 2018). Furthermore, the Tatmadaw launched a large-scale offensive

in April and May 2018, which drove KIA-held position in northern Shan state back into southern Kachin state, whilst clashes around the mining areas of Hpakant and Tanai township continued (The Irrawaddy, 2018). Following these offensives, small-scale skirmishes continued until the coup in early 2021 (The Irrawaddy, 2020), (BNI Multimedia Group, 2020).

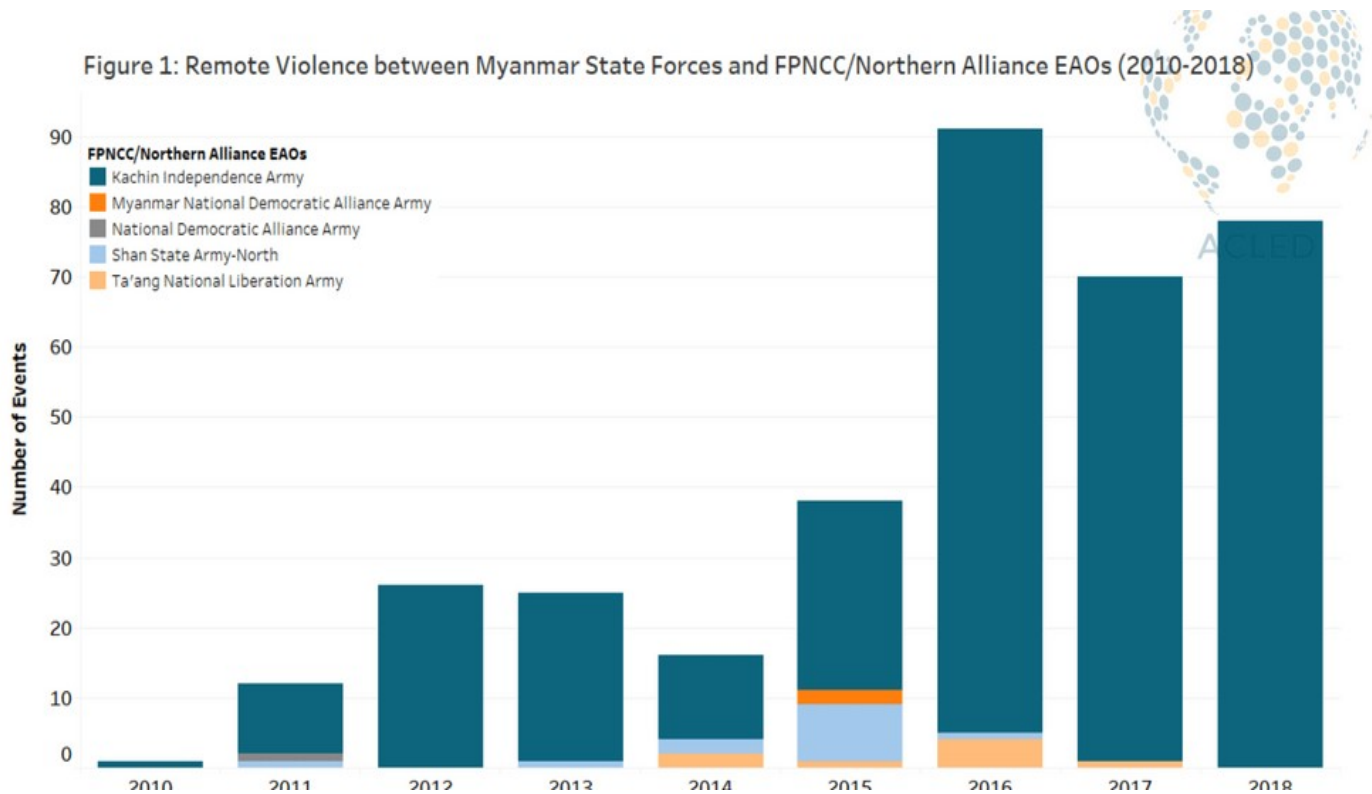


Figure 7: This figure shows the amount of annual incidents that took place between the Tatmadaw and FPNCC affiliated EAOs between 2010 and the first half of 2018.

Figure 1: Battles Between State Forces and the Arakan Army (AA) and Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA) (1 January 2018 - 30 April 2019)

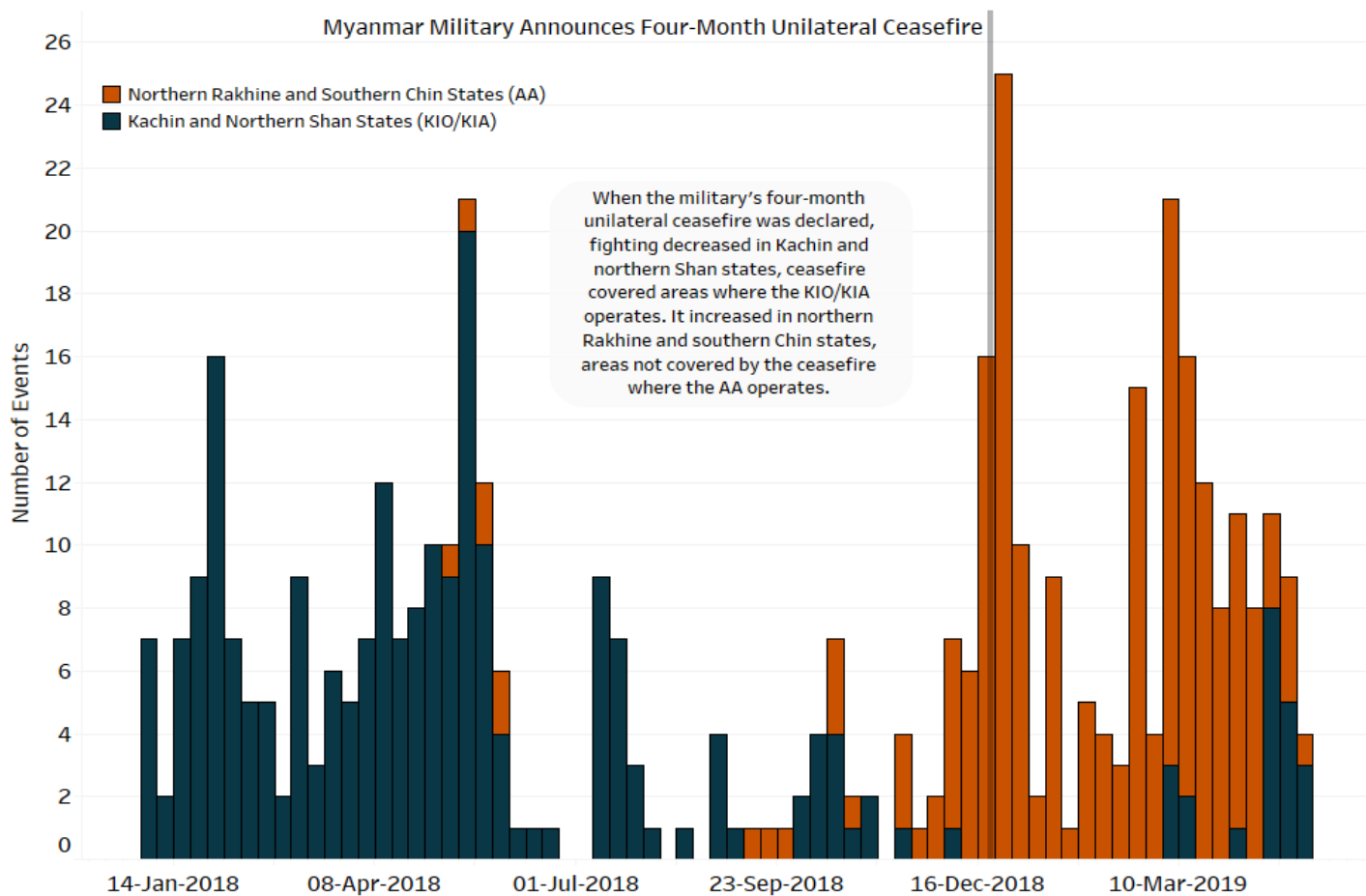


Figure 8: This figure shows the amount of monthly incidents between the Tatmadaw and KIA, from January 2018 until April 2019 (ACLED Data, 2019).

Following the transition of power to the NLD in 2016, the new civilian government launched a series of failed reforms targeting the jade sector. Although it remains unclear how the failed NLD reforms exactly impacted the quantity of Myanmar’s jade production, the impact is likely minimal. However, the impact of the failed reforms on the quantity of illegally smuggled jade is likely significant. This conclusion can be drawn from production statistics which show that while Myanmar’s official jade production skyrocketed from 2016-2017 onward, the amount of legally sold jade through Myanmar’s official annual jade emporium auction simultaneously fell drastically. The excess production is likely being illegally smuggled into China, with the total amount of

estimated jade production smuggling from Myanmar to China increasing from approximately 50-80% before 2016 to 70-90% following the failed reform attempts. Thus, during the NLD era China witnessed an increase of illegal jade smuggling from Myanmar, significantly decreasing the amount of taxable jade from approximately 1.67 billion USD in 2015 to less than 200 million USD in 2019 (Global Witness, 2021).

Furthermore, the NLD undertook serious attempts to reform Myanmar's illegal logging industry. However, systemic corruption severely limited the effectiveness of the reforms (Environmental Investigation Agency, 2021). Due to the increasing deforestation, it is likely that illegal timber smuggling to China has increased during the NLD era, although this has been partially off-set by China's stricter enforcement of overland timber imports. Ultimately though, the increased smuggling was against China's interests, due to an increase in missed tax revenues from timber imports.

Following the transition of power to the civilian NLD government in early 2016, the peace negotiation process between the government and the MNDAAs remained challenging. Initially the NLD held on to the position of the previous Thein Sein government, viewing the MNDAAs as government enemies. Therefore, the NLD government did not invite the MNDAAs to the first UPC in September 2016 (The Irrawaddy, 2016). However, following the breakdown of the UNFC bloc and the MNDAAs' participation in the UWSA-led FPNCC bloc in 2017, the government dropped its initial requirement that the MNDAAs disarm before being allowed a seat at the negotiating table. However, the decision by the government was not reflective of the situation on the battlefield. Hostilities between the MNDAAs and the Tatmadaw had resumed in March 2017, almost two years after the 2015 Kokang Offensive clashes (see figure 9). These latest clashes led to between 10,000 and 20,000 refugees fleeing to China and the temporary closure of the Muse-Ruili border area. Following the 2017 incident, fighting between the Tatmadaw and the MNDAAs was only sporadic for the remainder of the NLD administration era (The Irrawaddy, 2019).



Figure 2: Battles and Remote Violence between Myanmar State Forces and FPNCC/Northern Alliance EAOs (2010-2018)

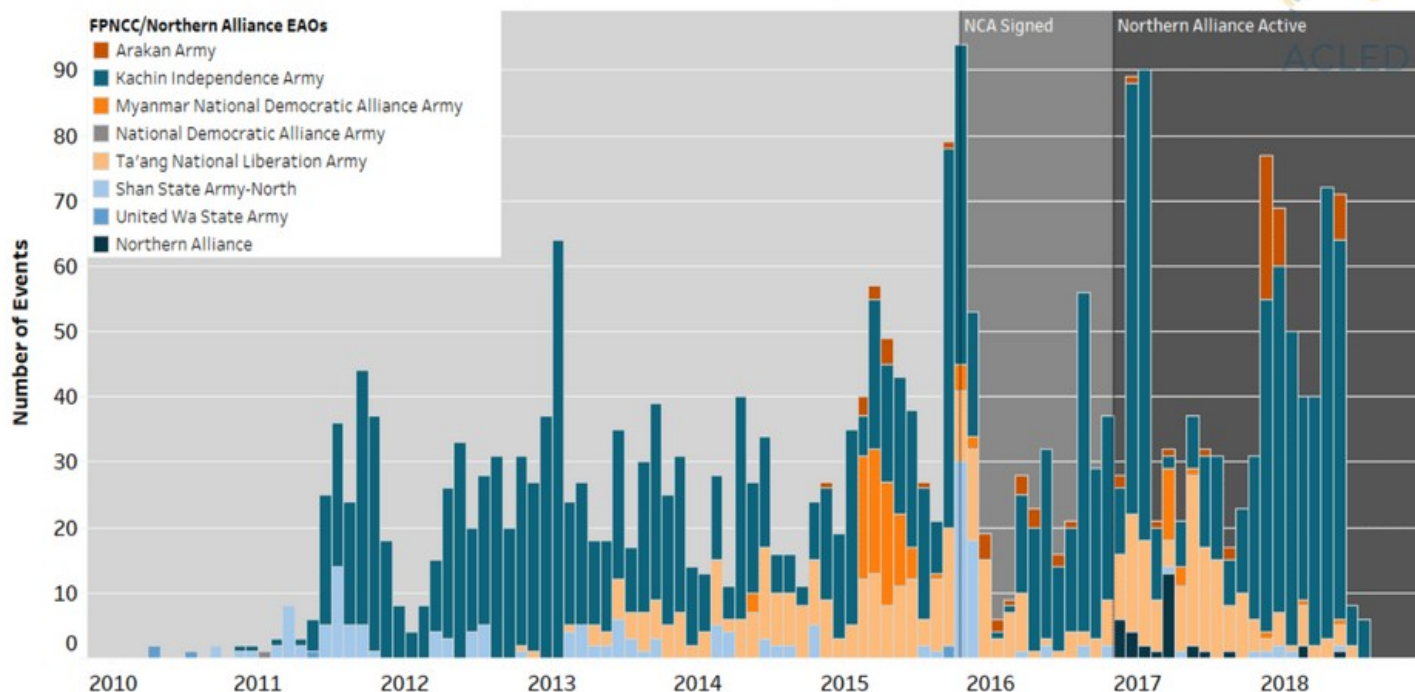


Figure 9: This figure represents the amount of battles between the Tatmadaw and Northern Alliance EAOs between 2010-2018. The orange colour represents clashes with the MNDA (ACLED Data, 2018).

Due to the UNODC being unable to conduct assessments within the Kokang region of Shan state, it is challenging to quantify exactly the extent to which the MNDA's 2002/2003 introduction of the opium ban was enforced during NLD era (UNODC, 2019). Although Myanmar's overall poppy cultivation decreased between 2015 and 2019 (see figure 5), the continuation of incidental opium production within the Kokang region is plausible and has been confirmed by widespread evidence from Chinese court cases (USIP, 2022). However, the decrease in opium production near China's border does not correspond with updated HIV statistics. HIV prevalence in Yunnan province grew considerably from 80.610 in 2014 to 111.700 cases by October 2019 (Xu et al., 2020).

6.3.3 KIA and MNDA post-coup

Following the overthrow of the democratically re-elected NLD government by the Tatmadaw's new SAC regime in February 2021, the ongoing peace negotiations, already stiffened by years of minimal progress and continuous

fighting, completely collapsed. Furthermore, the fighting between the Tatmadaw and EAOs in Shan state and Kachin state intensified immediately. The EAOs that signed the NCA in 2015 suspended the agreement whilst the KIA opted for openly supporting the anti-junta protesters and arming fighters. For example, the KIA began sheltering protesters and providing training and military support to PDFs (USIP, 2021). In all likelihood, the KIA has trained and setup at least four of such PDFs (USIP, 2022). Nevertheless, in the months following the coup, the KIA took advantage of the massive public unrest by expanding its territorial control south towards Saigang and Shan state, whilst simultaneously strengthening its grip within areas already under its control inside of Kachin state. On top of that, the KIA gained control over the main Sino-Myanmar trade routes by seizing several strategically located military outposts from the Tatmadaw (USIP, 2021). A colonel from the KIA ranks estimated the total amount of KIA-Tatmadaw clashes in the year following the coup at 400, which if correct would far surpass the annual number of incidents of the prior decade (The Irrawaddy, 2022).

Despite China's de facto recognition of the SAC around August 2021 and the KIA's successful offensives near the Sino-Myanmar border, the relationship between the KIA and China has thus far not suffered from the coup. Reportedly, the KIA forbids KIA-trained PDFs from conducting sabotage attacks against strategic Chinese assets in territories under KIA-control, which is one of China's main concerns following the coup (USIP, 2022). Arguably, the Tatmadaw's complete failure to adequately tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, which is further worsened by the junta's persecution of pro-democracy health workers, is a second important factor explaining China's desire to maintain good relations with EAOs operating near its border (Amnesty International, 2021). Around July 2021 Beijing started treating the upcoming infectious Delta variant as a severe health crisis that threatened its national security. In this light, China began sending its own health workers to areas in northern Myanmar, including those controlled by the KIA, setting up a vaccination campaigns and providing other COVID-19 related health equipment to the rebel group. Furthermore, China began constructing an electrified fence alongside the border with Kachin state, encompassing approximately one third of the borders total length. In August 2021, the Chinese embassy in Yangon referred to these efforts as having created "COVID buffer zones" in Kachin and Shan state, which underscores how vital Beijing considers such collaborative efforts with nearby ethnic rebel groups like the KIA (USIP, 2022).

Due to the coup, the Tatmadaw and KIA began fighting in Hpakant itself, which in combination with the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the jade production, resulting in a decrease of jade sales through government

taxed jade emporiums. Subsequently, the April 2021 56th annual emporium in Nay Pyi Taw only raised 22 million USD in sales, a dramatic decrease from 2017-2018 emporium sales of more than 1 billion USD. On top of that, COVID-19 fears prompted Beijing to temporarily shut down the Muse-Ruili border in May 2021, which halted the smuggling of jade. Thus, these post-coup developments decreased the quantity of Myanmar jade production and limited the amount of jade smuggling, at least for the short-term (Global Witness, 2021). Furthermore, the coup is likely to increase illegal timber trafficking in Kachin state as the cash-strapped military junta is now even more incentivized to monetize timber that it seizes from timber smugglers. In fact, the Tatmadaw has plans to auction off all illegal timber that has been confiscated during the NLD administration (USIP, 2021).

Following the February 2021 coup, the already fragile peace negotiation process between the Tatmadaw and the MNDAA collapsed. Consequently, fighting between both parties reached heights not seen since 2017. Although initially refraining from being outspoken about the coup, the Brotherhood Alliance, a loose coalition consisting of the EAOs the MNDAA, TNLA and the AA, made its first statement on March 30th 2021 condemning the coup and threatening the Tatmadaw with a “spring revolution” in case the military continued its violence against civilians (The Diplomat, 2021). Furthermore, the MNDAA came out in support for the PDFs (USIP, 2022). Despite its initial post-coup restraint on fighting the Tatmadaw, the MNDAA immediately exploited the political turmoil in another manner by launching a failed assassination attempt against Bai Yingneng, the son of the powerful Kokang BGF leader Bai Xuoqian (USIP, 2021).

According to the MNDAA, between July and November 2021, the strategic Mongkoe border region witnessed more than 260 clashes and resulted in almost 200 Tatmadaw soldiers killed in action, which if correct would be a severe escalation of violence in comparison with earlier clashes over the past decade (The Irrawaddy, 2021). Reportedly, these heavy clashes motivated the Tatmadaw’s peace negotiating committee to pursue a ceasefire agreement separate from the NCA. However, this effort has failed because the Tatmadaw is not interested in accepting the MNDAA’s demands, which include regaining territorial control over the parts of the Kokang region it controlled prior to the 2009 Kokang incident (The Irrawaddy, 2021). Continued clashes around Mongkoe have been reported as recent as March 2022 whilst major EAOs like the MNDAA continue rejecting peace talks, which were requested by SAC chairman Hlaing in late April 2022 (The Irrawaddy, 2022).

According to the UNODC, illegal drug production surged following the coup, especially in the remote border

areas of Shan state that are under the control of criminal groups and pro-Tatmadaw militias (Reuters, 2022). On top of that, the increased production of drugs is not limited to methamphetamine, but the post-coup economic collapse also led to a growing trend of increased economic reliability of poppy cultivation and opium trafficking by the local population within these areas (Transnational Institute, 2021). Finally, the coup further increased the cross-border criminal activities of Chinese criminal syndicates and pro-Tatmadaw militias, including the Kokang BGF (USIP, 2022). In fact, casinos in Kokang have significantly increased their scale of operations and have increased the intensity of illegal online gambling advertisements, targeting Chinese citizens across the border (USIP, 2021). Arguably, the intrinsic criminal activity links between the Kokang's ruling Bai and Wei families and Chinese criminal gangs means that the Kokang BGF will likely exploit the region's new central role in the Cross-Border Economic Cooperation Zone (CBECZ), a prominent new CMEC project, by expanding its increasingly unhindered business empire consisting of drug and human trafficking, illegal gambling, extortion and illegal cryptocurrency operations even further, thus harming China's border security interests (The Irrawaddy, 2021), (SCMP, 2021).

6.4 Conclusion China's security interests in Myanmar

Process tracing the EAOs security developments in relation to the EAOs KIA and MNDAA shows that the coup harmed China's security interests in Myanmar. Regarding both EAOs, it was the clearly the Tatmadaw that broke the pre-existing bilateral ceasefire agreements that were in place with the MNDAA (until 2009) and the KIA (until 2011). Although in 2011 the Thein Sein government initiated peace negotiations for reaching a NCA, the efforts to do so have been consistently undermined and delegitimized by the Tatmadaw's continuous attacks on EAOs that the government was negotiating with. Furthermore, although the new NLD government managed to sign reach a NCA with some EAOs, the agreement was fragile from the start due to its non-inclusive nature, excluding up to 80% of the country's total combatants, including the KIA and MNDAA. Complicating matters further was the initial refusal by the NLD and Tatmadaw to refuse any further negotiating attempts with the MNDAA and with the powerful UWSA-led FPNCC bloc, plus the fact that various EAOs and the Tatmadaw kept clashing during the remainder of the NLD administration.

The February 2021 coup shattered any hope of reaching a sustainable ceasefire agreement with the KIA and MNDAA. Both rebel groups now refuse to negotiate with the SAC, the post-coup fighting has intensified and the territorial gains of especially the KIA further diminish the prospects of a ceasefire agreement in the foreseeable future. The coup has increased the adverse spillover effects of this intensified fighting, thus harming China's

security interests in its border regions with Myanmar. These post-coup fighting spillover effects include the increased likelihood of more refugees entering and staying on China's side of the border, more cross-border crime perpetrated by the Kokang BGF, repeated closures of border checkpoints, more COVID-19 cases in Yunnan due to the disastrous COVID-19 situation in Myanmar, increased drug trafficking to Yunnan and more missed tax revenues due to the increased smuggling of goods such as jade and timber.

VII. Conclusion

This thesis had the purpose of researching whether China benefited from the February 2021 coup in Myanmar. The research question accompanying this purpose was: to what extent did China materially benefit from the February 1 coup in Myanmar? The thesis author deemed this research question academically relevant due to the conflicting views on this topic that exist within the media.

The literature review explored the existence of possible gaps in the academic debate. First, it found that China and Myanmar enjoyed increasingly strong ties during the 2016-2021 era of NLD governance, which highlights the relevance of researching whether this trend was likely to continue post-coup. Secondly, it concluded that mainstream IR theories such as realism and liberalism are hindered by an oversimplified zero-sum thinking in their understanding of developments in the China-Myanmar bilateral relationship. Specifically, mainstream IR theories analyse the Sino-Myanmar bilateral relationship through an unconscious assumption in which the Myanmar state is viewed as being a singular sovereign state entity. This thesis argued that this assumption was unfounded due to the domestic dynamics within Myanmar that are characterized by intense power competition. These competing power actors include different factions within the Tatmadaw, the NUG, dozens of EAOs, PDFs, BGFs and various militias, often affiliated with powerful cross-border criminal syndicates. Thus, the thesis aimed to provide methodological criticism of mainstream IR theories by implementing a methodological approach which incorporates the role of these competing power actors within the context of assessing the February 2021 coup's impact on China's economic and security interests in Myanmar. The choice was made to implement a methodological approach based on qualitative research through the within-case study method of process tracing.

The Sino-Myanmar pipelines case study concluded that although the coup had no meaningful impact on the political risks of the pipelines, it did significantly impact the security risks due to the increased threat of sabotage. Furthermore, China's import of gas and oil through the pipelines kept rising post-coup, although more

research is needed in order to establish whether this can be attributed to the coup. The EAOs case study chapter showed that the coup had a devastating impact on the likelihood of a sustainable, inclusive ceasefire agreement being reached. On top of that, the coup further worsened most spill-over effects that were already negatively impacting China prior to the coup. In short, the coup harms China's security interests in Myanmar with regards to the conflict spill-over effects of clashes between the Myanmar government and rebel armies of the KIA and MNDAA. Therefore, the sum of the findings from the analysed case studies shows that the coup harmed China's security interests in Myanmar and heightened the economic sustainability risks of the Sino-Myanmar pipelines. Thus, the final answer to the research question of this thesis is that overall China did not materially benefit from the February 2021 coup in Myanmar.

The implications of this conclusion are that the very strong relationship that China and Myanmar developed during the NLD era did not continue post-coup, which is contrary to China's expectations and likely caused frustration in Beijing. Furthermore, mainstream IR theories like realism and liberalism failed to understand the complex domestic context of Myanmar, as well as the dynamics within China of local and regional officials in Yunnan province vs. the central government in Beijing. Additionally, this conclusion challenges the misconceived zero-sum thinking in which China's interests are served better through cultivating bilateral ties with authoritarian regimes rather than democratic ones.

In the event that anti-Tatmadaw forces would launch a successful attack against the Sino-Myanmar pipelines, depending on the scale and intensity of the attack, this could deal a significant blow to the China-Myanmar bilateral relationship. Ever since the Myanmar government cancelled the Myitsone dam project in 2011, Beijing has consistently communicated that its tolerance for problems regarding the Sino-Myanmar pipelines was much lower than other CMEC projects like the dam (Zhang, 2020). Arguably, this is because Chinese investments into the Sino-Myanmar pipelines are the highest of the whole CMEC and due to the strategic energy security implications of the project, which are now becoming even more important due to the global energy crisis that emerged following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Furthermore, the spillover effects of the fighting between the Tatmadaw, KIA and MNDAA are arguably of equal importance to Beijing. Having process traced these developments over a period of more than three decades, one can conclude that the severity of the spillover effects significantly increased post-coup, whilst the prospects of a sustainable NCA being reached became increasingly unattainable.

Recent developments in Myanmar's political landscape make it unlikely that the post-coup trend of a downward spiral of violence and political polarization will be reversible in the foreseeable future. On April 27th 2022, a Myanmar show trial found the ousted former NLD leader and state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi guilty of corruption and sentenced her to five years in prison. Suu Kyi is facing nine more made-up corruption charges, which could lead to a maximum prison sentence of 163 years (NY Times, 2022). Whilst both EAOs and PDFs have made significant territorial gains in the year following the coup (see figure 10), the pro-democracy opposition, consisting of various EAOs, PDFs, the NUG and anti-junta militias, struggles building unity due to a history of mutual distrust and unsolved grievances (Van Linge, 2022), (USIP, 2022). Thus, the lack of unity within the opposition in addition to the sentencing of Aung San Suu Kyi make any meaningful reform towards a better economic or security landscape in Myanmar unlikely, at least in the near future.

Finally, this master thesis will conclude with a suggestion for a follow-up study. This study identified that mainstream theories of the IR discipline are not sufficiently equipped to adequately explain the complex dynamics of bilateral relations between states in a context where at least one of the relevant states is a *de jure* single coherent sovereign state, but a *de facto* state consisting of many actors competing for state power, such as the dynamics of the China-Myanmar bilateral relationship. Complicating this matter further is the fact that the interests from the central government in Beijing differ from those of other Chinese actors such as provincial Yunnan officials, smugglers and Chinese crime syndicates. Therefore, the question whether these other actors may benefit from the coup could be an interesting subject for future research.

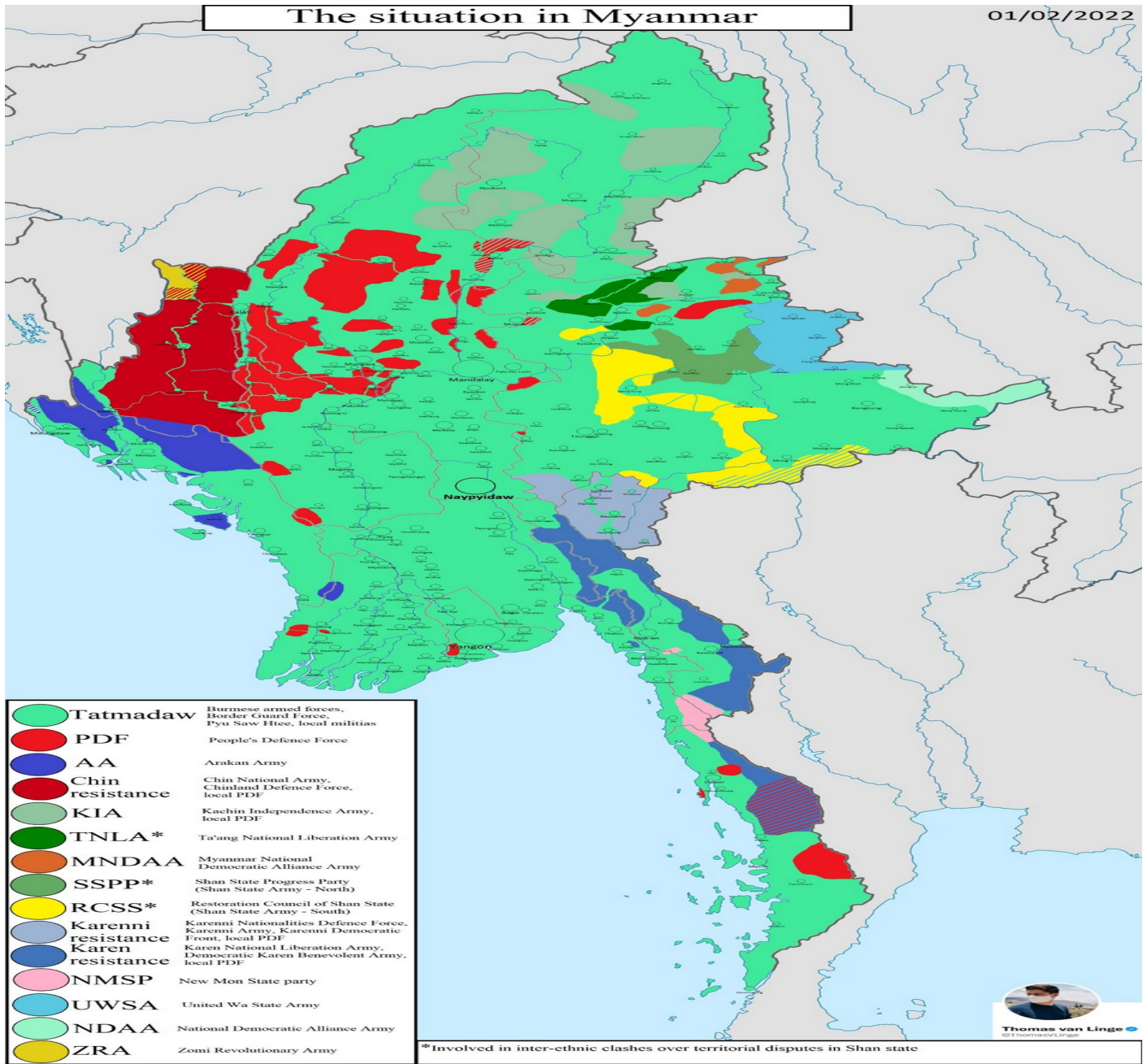


Figure 10: This figure visualizes the approximate areas of territorial control exercised by the Tatmadaw, EAOs and PDFs as of February 1st 2022 (Van Linge, 2022).

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