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The Dragon on the White Elephant: Two "Chinas" Fracture Myanmar's State-Building in the Cold War

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Abstract

Myanmar's state-building was constrained by the interaction between pre-programmed crises and foreign intervention. The collapse of the promises of autonomy in the 1947 Constitution transformed communist and ethnic insurgencies into enduring challenges to state authority. The spillover of the Chinese Civil War further weakened Yangon's ability to consolidate sovereignty, as the KMT retreated into northern Myanmar and the PRC supported the Burmese Communist Party (BCP). Following the 1962 coup, Ne Win's centralization policies and the 1967 anti-Chinese riots intensified Beijing's support for the BCP Northeastern Command, which evolved into a de facto buffer state, resembling a modern tributary system and a contemporary form of *Zomia* under Chinese influence. After 1989, the BCP collapsed following the withdrawal of CCP support, and the ceasefire system institutionalized fragmented sovereignty rather than national integration. Myanmar thus emerged as a product of failed state-building shaped by colonial legacies, Cold War geopolitics and competing visions of sovereignty.

Keywords: *State-building, Spillover of Chinese Civil War, Pre-programmed crisis, BCP Northeastern Command, Modern Zomia.*

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1. Introduction

The state is an intrinsic part of domestic society, which necessitates that state leaders contend with countervailing forces generated by various internal groups and organizations while governing. The state also functions as a component of the international system, and its leaders must respond to structural pressures imposed by that system. Since the colonial era, "the world social system" has institutionalized complex interstate relations (Migdal, 2001: 61-63). Within this world social system, neighboring states have frequently intervened in the domestic affairs of other countries to advance their own geopolitical interests. For a nascent state, the success of state-building depends heavily on how it navigates and responds to these external geopolitical pressures (Thongchai, 1994; Chong, 2020; Lintner, 2021).

In post-colonial countries, state-building is rarely undertaken within a pre-integrated community. As Christian Scherrer argues, the pre-programmed crises inherent in former colonies frequently obstruct their transition toward modern nation-states (Scherrer, 2003: 12). Such pre-programmed crises may serve as strategic assets for neighboring countries seeking to satisfy their own political or geopolitical interests. In this regard, external geopolitical pressure becomes a critical variable in determining whether a post-colonial country can successfully consolidate a cohesive state.

Myanmar's state-building has been deeply shaped by the interaction between internal fragmentation and external intervention. The tensions between Burman nationalism, non-Burman ethnic aspirations for autonomy and communist revolutionary movements, generated overlapping crises shortly after independence (Butwell, 1969; Taylor, 2007; South, 2005). As civil war expanded, Myanmar emerged as what Migdal terms a "weak state," unable to consolidate authority across its frontier regions (Migdal, 2001, 2022).

After 1949, the spillover of the Chinese Civil War transformed northern Myanmar into a geopolitical frontier contested by the KMT, the PRC, the Myanmar government and various ethnic armed organizations (EAOs). Both "Chinas" mobilized Myanmar's armed groups to pursue their own strategic objectives. With the support of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) Northeastern Command was established in 1969 (Lintner, 1990; Smith, 1999; Han, 2021). Functioning simultaneously as a *de facto* buffer state, a modern tributary system, and a contemporary

form of *Zomia* under Chinese influence, the Command further fragmented Myanmar's sovereignty.

From this perspective, and through related research, declassified reports, and my fieldwork along the Thai-Myanmar and Sino–Myanmar borders, this article examines how "China" has influenced and constrained Myanmar's efforts to forge a cohesive nation-state. Firstly, it draws upon the influential works of Han Enze and Tom Chin Yee-huei to examine the spillover effects of the Chinese Civil War after 1949 and Yangon's struggle against these external influences. Secondly, it explains how the CCP's support for the BCP Northeastern Command created a structural impediment to Myanmar's state-building. Finally, a brief conclusion is presented.

2. Chinese Civil War Spillover and Myanmar's State-Building Crisis

Fan Hongwei notes that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began organizing among the Chinese diaspora in Myanmar as early as the 1920s (Fan, 2012). The BCP was established by Burman nationalist elites in 1939. In 1946, the radical Red-Flag BCP launched an armed movement opposing Aung San's negotiations with Britain for independence, while the moderate White-Flag BCP later denounced the Nu–Attlee Treaty as evidence that Myanmar had become a British semi-colony and initiated an armed insurgency after independence (MOFA of ROC, 1948; Thompson, 1948; Tinker, 1959, 1986; CPB, 1963; Badgley, 1974).

At the same time, several non-Burman ethnic groups—including the Karen, Mon, Pa-O, and Arakanese—failed to obtain the states they expected under the 1947 Constitution. Tensions escalated further after Yangon authorities arrested and executed a prominent Karenni independence leader in 1949. Viewing the central government as steadily eroding their autonomy, these groups, by organizing their respective ethnic armed groups (EAOs), launched armed nationalist movements, pushing much of Myanmar into civil war (South, 2005; Leider, 2023; Yue, 2016).

The Chinese Civil War spilled over into Myanmar's northern frontier. Both the CCP and the KMT exploited Myanmar's internal conflicts and attempted to co-opt the EAOs to advance their own political agendas. During the final stages of the war, Myanmar feared that a CCP victory in China would strengthen the BCP insurgency and further destabilize the frontier (Fan, 2012; MOFA of ROC, 1948-1949).

2.1 KMT Retreat and Subsequent CCP Incursion into Northern Myanmar

Following the establishment of the PRC on 1st October 1949, leftist parties in Myanmar urged Yangon to recognize Beijing in order to preempt possible PRC support for the BCP. The situation escalated after Yunnan Governor Lu Han defected to the CCP on 9th December 1949, triggering the retreat of KMT troops into northern Myanmar (Taylor, 1973; Chin, 2015).

As a modern state depends on clearly demarcated borders to define and defend sovereignty, Myanmar's frontier with China remained a major security vulnerability. The northern section of the Sino–Myanmar border adjoining Kachin State and the southern section adjoining Shan State both remained undemarcated, while the ROC and the PRC each published maps claiming disputed frontier territories as part of China (Maung Aung Myoe, 2011: 41-42). Yangon was therefore eager to become the first non-socialist country to recognize the PRC, hoping to prevent the CCP from exploiting the unsettled frontier to occupy parts of Kachin State and Shan State under the pretext of pursuing the KMT, while also deterring cooperation between Beijing and the BCP (Fan, 2012; U Thant Myint, 2019).

Meanwhile, the ROC in Taiwan ordered General Li Mi to reorganize the KMT forces in northern Myanmar for future counteroffensives into Yunnan. The KMT established bases in Shan State and constructed an airfield at Mong Hsat to receive supplies from Taiwan (Wang, 1996: 87; Chin, 2015: 54-71). Within the emerging Cold War order, the ROC was regarded by the United States as an important anti-communist outpost. Yangon therefore appealed to Washington to pressure Taipei into withdrawing the KMT, arguing that operations against the KMT diverted resources from campaigns against the BCP and EAOs (Han, 2021: 77-78). Although the United States considered applying pressure on the ROC, historical circumstances afforded Myanmar no such opportunity.

In June 1950, as Yangon deployed troops to Tachileik in Shan State to confront the KMT, the Korean War erupted. To relieve military pressure on the Korean Peninsula, the CIA launched Operation Paper in December 1950, supplying KMT forces in northern Myanmar with arms for offensives into Yunnan in order to divert CCP military resources from Korea to China's southwestern frontier (Chin, 2015: 72-73, 91). With American assistance, Li Mi established the Yunnan Anti-Communist National Salvation Army and the Yunnanese People's Anti-Communist and Anti-Soviet Military and Political University in northern Myanmar to recruit anti-CCP elements from across

Southeast Asia (Chin, 2015). Yet, as Maung Maung notes, Li Mi himself preferred consolidating control over Kengtung in Shan State as a personal domain rather than serving as the leading anti-communist commander in northern Myanmar (Maung Maung, 1953: 11-16).

Yangon feared that the PRC might exploit anti-KMT operations to occupy undemarcated territories along the frontier, thereby gaining leverage in future boundary negotiations and threatening the sovereignty of Shan and Kachin States (Maung Aung Myoe, 2011: 14). The Myanmar government diverted military resources away from campaigns against the BCP and the EAOs to confront the KMT. However, the mountainous terrain of northern Myanmar enabled the KMT to evade decisive defeat and maintain fortified bases (Maung Maung, 1953: 13-15).

The influx of American aid and the expansion of Li Mi's military apparatus increasingly alarmed Beijing. The CCP eventually launched direct cross-border operations against KMT forces inside Myanmar. According to an ROC Military Intelligence Bureau report, CCP troops crossed west of the 1941 boundary line into the Ahwa Mountain sector of Myanmar to attack Li Mi's forces and subsequently failed to withdraw (MIB of ROC, 1964: 15). Although Zhu Zhaohua attributes this development to the delayed arrival of Myanmar government forces (Zhu, 2007: 268-274), the ROC intelligence report instead suggests that repeated CCP operations forced existing Myanmar garrisons to retreat (MIB of ROC, *ibid*.).

A 1953 CIA report indicates that the CCP was constructing roads linking Menglien to the Tayakou ferry area near the southern sector of the undemarcated 1941 Line, with specifications capable of accommodating heavy trucks. Given the deployment of exiled KMT forces in northern Myanmar and the CCP's growing concern over frontier security, these infrastructure projects may be interpreted as logistical preparations for future cross-border military operations against the remaining KMT forces in Myanmar (CIA, 11th December 1953).

The 1941 Line was never physically demarcated, and the PRC dismissed it as an imperialist boundary imposed during British encroachment upon Qing China, denying its legal validity (Zhu, 2007: 268-274). From a Weberian perspective, a modern state must monopolize legitimate violence within clearly defined territorial boundaries. Yet Myanmar, weakened by civil war, was unable to consolidate sovereign authority along its northern frontier. The CCP exploited this vacuum by stationing troops inside

Myanmar under the pretext of rejecting the legitimacy of the 1941 Line, thereby creating a *de facto* presence intended to strengthen Beijing's leverage in future border negotiations over territory and sovereignty.

The 1955 Huangguoyuan Incident revealed the strategic ambitions of Communist China with far greater clarity. Although Huangguoyuan lay west of the 1941 Line, the CCP regarded areas occupied by its forces as already under Chinese control, whereas Yangon insisted that Huangguoyuan formed part of Myanmar's sovereign territory (Cheng, 2014). The resulting armed confrontation was widely portrayed in the Myanmar press as evidence of "Chinese encroachment on Myanmar territory." Although Beijing later agreed to withdraw its forces in order to uphold the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" promoted at the Bandung Conference (Fan, 2010: 41), it simultaneously demanded that "Myanmar's military must not enter the areas from which China had withdrawn" (Zhu, 2007: 269). This conditional withdrawal lends support to Maung Aung Myoe's argument that China's approach toward neighboring states may reflect an imperial mentality (Maung Aung Myoe, 2011: 3).

The sovereignty of northern Myanmar was thus simultaneously eroded by the "Two Chinas." The KMT presence provided Beijing with a justification for cross-border military operations, while the undemarcated border prevented Yangon from effectively defining and enforcing the limits of its sovereignty. As a result, the spillover of the Chinese Civil War undermined Myanmar's state-building project.

2.2 KMT and CCP Entanglement in Myanmar's National Conflict

The conflict between the non-Burman ethnic nations and the Myanmar government constituted one of the two pre-programmed crises undermining Myanmar's state-building. This crisis deepened when domestic armed groups aligned with neighboring powers. In northern Myanmar, the KMT cooperated with the EAOs, while Beijing projected influence across the frontier by exploiting cross-border affinities among ethnic nations and cultivating local support networks capable of sustaining military operations against KMT forces.

In June 1950, the ROC military attaché in Thailand acted as an intermediary between the Kuomintang (KMT) remnants and the Mon National Defense Organization (MNDO). In the spring of 1951, Li Mi dispatched Ding Zuoshao, the representative responsible for negotiations

with the Rangoon authorities, to the headquarters of the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO) to explore possibilities for cooperation. Li Mi's collaboration with the Mon and the Karen was driven by the strategic objective of constructing a broader anti-communist alliance capable of supporting larger-scale counteroffensives against the CCP (Chin, 2015: 101). Sustaining such alliances also required the KMT to accommodate the EAOs' nationalist causes.

In July 1952, Li Mi not only discussed the formation of a military alliance with the KNDO against the Myanmar army, but also supported the establishment of a *Kawthoolei* government in Taunggyi, Shan State. *Kawthoolei* is the Karen term for the homeland envisioned in the Karen struggle for self-determination. To strengthen ties with the MNDO and the KNDO, Li Mi devised a maritime operation to transport arms from Taiwan to southern Myanmar. The plan was intended not only to support the EAOs but also to integrate recruits from northern Myanmar into a broader anti-communist front. According to Taylor, the Kuomintang maintained "their collusion with the KNDO throughout the 1950s" (Taylor, 1973: 51).

The KNDO sought to utilize Kuomintang-supplied arms to support Ba Sein, a leader of the Burma Democratic Party, in overthrowing the U Nu government, on the condition that a post-coup administration would recognize the establishment of an independent Karen State. For Li Mi, although Ba Sein was expected to offer reciprocal support, there is no conclusive evidence that he formally committed himself to backing KMT operations. To facilitate this KMT–KNDO–Ba Sein collaboration, the KMT established a liaison office in Karenni State in January 1952. Later that year, Li Mi sought to capitalize on the resentment of certain Shan *Sawbwas* over the abolition of their hereditary privileges in Shan State by proposing a "Great Alliance of Sino–Burmese *Sawbwas*" in opposition to the Rangoon authorities (Taylor, 1973: 52; Gibson, 2011: 103; Chin, 2015: 101-103). In her investigative report, Catherine Lamour recounted an unverified yet significant story: Ding Zuoshao advised Li Mi to assist the Kachin, Karen and Mon in establishing a "Federal Republic of Salween." This ambitious project aimed to forge a formidable anti-communist stronghold within Myanmar territory (Lamour, 1982: 68).

Regardless of Li Mi's position on EAOs' self-determination, his collaboration with the Mon and Karen amounted to a *de facto* intervention in Myanmar's internal affairs. This strategic alignment materially strengthened

these ethnic groups in their resistance to the Myanmar state-building project.

Recruitment into the Kuomintang forces in northern Myanmar drew upon caravan traders, Chinese expatriates displaced to the Golden Triangle during the Second World War, local nationalities, and Tai militias led by *Sawbwas* in western Yunnan (Gibson, 2011: 65). Historically, both the Chinese and Burmese empires operated as tributary systems with fluid frontiers rather than clearly demarcated borders. The Shan/Tai kingdoms situated between them occupied overlapping peripheral zones within these tributary orders. Leach further notes that many Shan *muang* in northern Myanmar continued to regard the Chinese emperor as their primary sovereign as late as the mid-eighteenth century (Leach, 1999: 36, 268-269).

Post-independence Myanmar had not completed the process of state-building, and its state capacity remained insufficient to extend authority into the frontier regions. Although the PRC no longer faced civil war under CCP rule, its ability to consolidate a *Zhonghua Minzu* (Chinese) identity in the borderlands remained fragile. Under these conditions, the Tai militias recruited by *Sawbwas* in western Yunnan possibly included Shan populations in northern Myanmar whose political loyalties remained shaped by the legacy of the tributary system rather than by modern Chinese or Myanmar national identities.

A similar absence of fixed national identity characterized local communities involved in the mule caravan trade. These traders operated within a fluid transborder world structured by kinship, commercial networks and regional affiliations rather than rigid state boundaries. During my field reporting on the Kokang conflict along the Yunnan–Myanmar border in April 2015, I encountered elders belonging to local nationalities who once participated in mule caravan cross-border trade and who recalled having no clear identification with either the Chinese or Myanmar state in their youth.

Regardless of the backgrounds of those recruited by Li Mi, the very process of local recruitment obstructed Myanmar's state-building project. Whether launching counteroffensives into Yunnan under KMT command, resisting CCP incursions, or opposing *Tatmadaw* clearance operations, these frontier groups directly challenged the Myanmar state's efforts to project and consolidate sovereign authority in the borderlands.

According to Liu Yuan-lin's memoirs, the KMT initially portrayed its presence in northern Myanmar as a temporary refuge for the future "recovery of the mainland." Yangon was skeptical of such claims, but some *Tatmadaw*

units in northern Myanmar appeared to tolerate the Kuomintang presence as a form of temporary stationing (Wang, 1996). However, the KMT's alliances with EAOs transformed this presence into a direct intervention in Myanmar's internal affairs, intensifying Myanmar's sovereign anxieties. Yangon brought the KMT issue before the United Nations. In 1953, the United Nations called upon the ROC in Taiwan to evacuate its exiled forces. Taipei evacuated only wounded soldiers, their families and local ethnic recruits, leaving the KMT presence largely intact (CIA, 7th April 1953).

Through continuous recruitment, the KMT forces expanded from several thousand troops to between 12,000 and 14,000 by late 1953, stretching from Kachin State to eastern Shan State (Taylor, 1973; Wang, 1996; Gibson, 2011). Given the BCP and EAO armed operations at the same time, Myanmar had to divert massive military resources toward the spillover of the Chinese Civil War. Kenton Clymer observes that by 1953, approximately 80 percent of Yangon's forces were deployed against the KMT, which fundamentally disrupted the domestic military balance (quoted in Han, 2021: 78).

To counter the Kuomintang, Beijing also sought to reshape the social fabric and political identities of ethnic communities in northern Myanmar. According to CCP ideology, local ethnic societies along the frontier remained structured by feudal relations between elites and the masses. To prevent the KMT from exploiting these traditional hierarchies and local tensions for military and intelligence purposes, Beijing attempted to restructure frontier society by co-opting ethnic elites and cultivating patriotic consciousness among local populations (Anonymous, 2025). Beijing dispatched "Nationalities Work Teams" to the Sino–Myanmar frontier to conduct United Front operations (Yang, 2008; Han, 2021). This work extended beyond Yunnan into undemarcated areas inside Myanmar, where PRC forces detained suspected Kuomintang spies and reportedly issued "Chinese identity cards" to some Kachin residents in Hpimaw. Alarmed by growing PRC influence, Yangon convened a meeting in Lweje in February 1956 to strengthen Kachin loyalty to the Myanmar state (Maung Aung Myoe, 2011: 43).

Zhang Zizhai, then Secretary-General of the Yunnan Provincial People's Committee, attended the meeting and later remarked that the Myanmar government was "seeking to offset China's political influence through the conference" (quoted in Fan, 2010: 38). His statement reveals the CCP's

attempt to compete with Yangon for political influence over the non-Burman ethnic nations along the frontier, reflecting a persistent perception among Chinese leadership that northern Myanmar historically belonged to China's tributary sphere of influence. In this context, the CCP's cross-border arrests and issuance of identity cards constituted a form of "police-tributary praxis" aimed at embedding the power and capacity of the Chinese state onto Myanmar's frontier territory. These operations not only redirected the loyalties of some frontier groups toward the PRC, thereby weakening the already undemarcated border, but also established an internal political rationale for future cross-border operations.

On 28th January 1960, Myanmar and the PRC began joint boundary demarcation and established a Joint Boundary Commission to manage the process. In order to avoid disruption from Kuomintang forces, Yangon and Beijing also concluded a memorandum in which Communist China agreed to assist Myanmar in clearing Li Mi's troops (Zhu, 2007: 271-272). Approximately one month after the signing of the Sino–Myanmar Boundary Treaty on 1st October 1960, the two sides launched joint military operations against KMT forces, forcing them to retreat into northern Thailand. Between 17th March and 30th April 1961, the ROC carried out Operation *Guolei* to withdraw KMT troops from northern Thailand to Taiwan. Yet the spillover effects of the Chinese Civil War did not disappear. After retreating into northern Thailand, KMT guerrillas adapted into new organizational and operational forms while continuing to maintain a low-visibility paramilitary and intelligence presence along the Yunnan–Myanmar borderlands.

Various memoirs and reports indicate that the ROC intelligence apparatus established an intelligence unit known as *Kuang Wu* in northern Thailand, operating under the designation of the 1920 Working Area for clandestine activities in the region. The ROC utilized Myanmar's borderlands adjoining northern Thailand as an armed-political space for intelligence gathering (Wang, 1996; Chin, 2015; Chen ed., 2025). The CCP also continued to collect intelligence in northern Myanmar through repeated incursions from Yunnan.

For Yangon, the challenge to state-building thus extended beyond the mere presence of foreign armed forces. More critically, the frontier had become a transborder intelligence–military zone in which foreign powers continued to shape local political alignments and penetrate borderland societies.

3. PRC-BCP Collusion and the Modern Zomia

3.1 BCP Grafted onto the PRC State to Survive

Myanmar adopted neutrality from the outset of independence (Maung Aung Myoe, 2011). This policy was partly rooted in the Nu–Attlee Treaty, through which Britain provided military assistance in return for the protection of British economic interests, thereby linking Myanmar to broader Western support during the Cold War. At the same time, Yangon feared that excessive alignment with the West would provoke intervention from Communist China. Fan Hongwei notes that after Myanmar signed an economic cooperation agreement with the United States, Beijing accused Rangoon of permitting imperialist activities under the guise of economic aid. In response, Myanmar's ambassador to the PRC assured Beijing that Myanmar would never allow foreign imperialist intervention on its soil (Fan, 2012: 12-13).

This neutrality failed to prevent the PRC from supporting the BCP's armed struggle. Despite extolling the Sino–Myanmar *Pauk-Phaw* brotherhood since the founding of the PRC, the CCP maintained clandestine ties with the BCP, and the PRC began to train Burmese communists, acting as their strategic mentor (Maung Aung Myoe, 2011: 18; Fan, 2012; Tinker, 1959; Lintner, 1990).

In April 1950, Naw Seng, a Kachin commander, escaped a government crackdown in Kachin State. Together with his followers, he crossed into Communist China through Mong Ko in Mu Se District, Shan State, where Beijing granted them unofficial asylum and later resettled the group in Guizhou Province (CIA, 1951a: 3; Lintner, 1990: 15; 2021: 58). This group later became known as the *Guizhou Laobing* (Guizhou Veterans). Lintner notes that in 1951, Liu Shaoqi urged the BCP leadership to adopt a moderate military strategy. The BCP subsequently initiated the Peace and Coalition Government (PCG), a united front with the AFPFL aimed at expelling KMT forces while simultaneously expanding the BCP's own strength. This tactic mirrored that employed by the CCP during World War II, when it feigned cooperated with the KMT against Japan while expanding its own forces (Lintner, 1990: 17; 2021: 56).

In July 1951, sixty-three Burmese communists traveled to the PRC to receive military and intelligence training (Maung Aung Myoe, 2011: 18-19). I do not have conclusive evidence demonstrating that this group was trained specifically to implement the PCG upon its return. Nevertheless,

the training provided by Beijing indicates a significant transition in which relations between the BCP and Communist China evolved beyond the mere provision of asylum into a partnership characterized by substantive political and military support. According to the CIA, the BCP was regarded as the most dangerous insurgent group and was believed to possess the capacity to overthrow the Myanmar government within a year, facilitated by training provided by the PRC state (CIA, 1951b).

The BCP forces remaining in Myanmar attempted to implement the PCG by urging soldiers to return confiscated land to local landlords. According to Lintner, this policy angered many rural-based soldiers and triggered mass desertions, enabling Yangon to inflict a series of major defeats on the BCP after rejecting the PCG proposal (Lintner, 1990: 17; 2021: 56). Yangon remained concerned about collusion between the PRC and the BCP. Beijing continued to support Burmese communists through political and military training in Beijing, Kunming, Chongqing and Sichuan, where some cadres were incorporated into the PLA and later became known as the *Sichuan Laobing* (Sichuan Veterans). With PRC support, exiled Burmese communists also established the BCP (Overseas) as a liaison organization linking the CCP and the communist movement inside Myanmar (Yebaw *et al.*, 1969: 195-196; Maung Aung Myoe, 2011: 19-20; Lintner, 2021: 57). In January 1953, a guerrilla unit composed of Burmese communists trained in Yunnan, together with ethnic Chinese from Myanmar and PRC nationals, crossed into Myanmar (Anonymous, 1960: 16).

Before the BCP Northeastern Command was established with Chinese assistance, Beijing refrained from providing overt support to the communist forces remaining in Myanmar for three probably interrelated reasons. First, despite Yangon's concerns over the relationship between the CCP and the BCP, Myanmar actively sought to maintain cordial diplomatic relations with the PRC. During his 1954 visit to China, U Nu raised the issue of Burmese communists receiving training in the PRC, to which Mao Zedong responded that "revolution cannot be exported" under the principles of peaceful coexistence and non-interference (quoted in Maung Aung Myoe, 2011: 20). Myanmar's efforts to preserve good relations with Beijing persuaded the PRC to suspend plans to send the *Guizhou Laobing* and *Sichuan Laobing* back to Myanmar (Lintner, 1990: 19; Maung Aung Myoe, ibid.: 21, 35).

Second, Beijing prioritized eliminating the exiled KMT forces and wished to avoid turning Myanmar into an obstacle to anti-KMT operations.

Maintaining workable relations with Yangon was therefore strategically necessary.

Thirdly, the widening Sino–Soviet split encouraged Beijing to cultivate Myanmar diplomatically in order to prevent Soviet influence from expanding into the country. Mao Zedong regarded Khrushchev's advocacy of the "parliamentary road" and "peaceful coexistence with the West" as a betrayal of Marxism–Leninism, while Moscow's neutrality during the 1959 Sino-Indian border clashes further deepened tensions between Beijing and the Soviet Union (Shen, 2016; Radchenko, 2023). Concerned that excessive pressure on Yangon might push Myanmar closer to Moscow, Beijing initially avoided providing overt support to the BCP.

History rarely unfolds in a linear fashion. As the Soviet Union increasingly inserted itself into Sino-Myanmar relations and anti-Chinese riots erupted in Myanmar in 1967, the PRC intensified its support for the BCP and eventually assisted in the establishment of the BCP Northeastern Command.

Following his 1962 military coup, Ne Win introduced the "Burmese Way to Socialism" (Brown, 1994; Smith, 1999). According to a declassified ROC document, Ne Win invited several influential communist-linked armed figures into the cabinet in an attempt to sever the PRC's support for the BCP insurgency. However, the BCP's continued armed activities during ceasefire negotiations convinced Ne Win to eradicate the communists. Ne Win's regime was divided between pro-PRC and pro-Soviet factions. While the pro-PRC camp advocated adopting Chinese governing methods, Ne Win leaned toward the Soviet model (MOFA of ROC, 1969-1970: 52, 62). In an open letter dated 6 September 1963, titled "The Origin and Development of the Differences Between the Leadership of the CPSU and Ourselves," the CCP criticized the CPSU for mistakenly promoting "Soviet–American cooperation" as the means of resolving Cold War issues (Editorial of People's Daily, 1963). Thereafter, the CPSU criticized the CCP for its "dogmatism," while Beijing accused the Soviet leadership of descending into "revisionism" and "opportunism." On 27th August 1964, the military regime issued a notification clarifying that the "Burmese Way to Socialism" was not communism but rather a unique path tailored to Myanmar's national circumstances (MOFA of ROC, *ibid*.).

Fan Hongwei notes that Mao Zedong issued nine open letters criticizing the CPSU, while in 1965 the CPSU publicly praised Ne Win's "Burmese

Way to Socialism." Given that the Yangon authorities denied that their left-leaning policies constituted communism and sought to eliminate the BCP while publicly adopting a pro-Soviet stance in domestic governance, the CPSU's commendation convinced the CCP that only those who steadfastly supported Beijing in the Sino–Soviet ideological rift were true revolutionaries committed to "Marxism" (Fan, 2012: 136-139, 144). The so-called true revolutionaries included the *Guizhou Laobing*, the *Sichuan Laobing*, and most importantly, the BCP forces that persisted in Myanmar to confront the Yangon authorities.

Within this context, Myanmar was no longer merely a neutral Third World state but a strategic frontier in the escalating Sino–Soviet split. As Ne Win distanced his regime from communism and intensified military campaigns against communist insurgents, the PRC increasingly treated support for the Burmese communists as a strategic means of preserving its influence in Myanmar. Communist China chose to openly export revolution by establishing a political-military foothold inside Myanmar. This foothold ultimately took institutional form in the establishment of the BCP Northeastern Command in 1969.

3.2 BCP Northeastern Command: Buffer State, Modern Tributary and Modern Zomia

Yangon's suppression of Kachin traditions and territory encouraged the emergence of armed resistance. The imposition of government-appointed officials over the traditional *Duwa* system and the dissolution of the Kachin 101 Special Force were widely perceived as assaults on Kachin autonomy and identity (Sadan, 2013: 322-325; Cockett, 2016: 168-169). According to my Kachin sources, the 1960 Sino–Burmese Boundary Treaty, which transferred Hpimaw, Gawlum, Kangfang and territories associated with the Panhung and Panlao tribes to China, was widely regarded as a serious violation of Kachin autonomy and provoked widespread anger within Kachin society. Against this backdrop, the Kachin established the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in 1960 and its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), in 1961 to pursue armed self-determination.

In Shan State, the Yangon authorities stripped the Shan of their autonomy by progressively weakening *Sawbwa* authority. Radical Shan elites responded by forming the Shan State Independence Army (SSIA) in 1958 to fight for the preservation of the *Sawbwa* system. After the first armed clash

with the Myanmar government in 1959, tensions escalated rapidly. The moderate Sawbwa Sao Shwe Thaike advocated a loose federal arrangement granting genuine autonomy to Shan State, but following Ne Win's 1962 coup, he and other moderates were arrested. This repression prompted other *Sawbwas* to establish the Shan State Army (SSA) in 1964 in pursuit of self-determination (Brown, 1994: 57-58). The Myanmar civil war consequently expanded deeper into the northern frontier.

The protracted civil war posed a profound challenge to the political legitimacy of the state and further weakened Yangon's capacity for state-building. During this period, the PRC sought to mobilize Chinese communities in Myanmar through the Cultural Revolution, encouraging expressions of loyalty to Beijing. This mobilization contributed to the anti-Chinese riots of 26th June 1967, known as the "626 anti-Chinese Incident" (Fan, 2012; Steinberg and Fan, 2012). Beijing portrayed the incident as an anti-China conspiracy orchestrated jointly by the Myanmar government, US imperialism and Soviet revisionism. Beijing even labeled Ne Win the "Chiang Kai-shek of Burma," driving bilateral relations to their lowest point (Maung Aung Myoe, 2011: 71-80). Given this situation, the PRC began officially providing support to the BCP, including military training and the construction of strategic roads linking Kunming to the Sino-Myanmar border.

In 1967, Beijing launched a ten-year assistance program that provided annual funding for the establishment and operation of the BCP Northeastern Command (Smith, 1999: 248). A group of KIA leaders traveled to Beijing in November of the same year. After receiving promises of arms from the PRC to fight the Myanmar government, these leaders aligned their KIA units with the communist camp. In 1968, Naw Seng's Kachin forces, which had previously taken refuge in Guizhou, together with Pheung Kya-shin's Kokang units, which had undergone training in Yunnan, re-entered Myanmar with PRC military support. They captured several towns along the Sino-Myanmar border in Shan and Kachin States. In October 1969, the BCP Northeastern Command was formally established (Lintner, 1990: 26; 2021: 66-70).

Around this period, Mahasang, the ruler of Ving Ngun State in the Wa Hills, collaborated with local Wa EAOs and KMT remnants in the opium trade. These KMT forces operated under the command of the Intelligence Bureau of Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense. Fearing that the KMT

might rebuild its influence in northern Myanmar through the narcotics network after withdrawing to northern Thailand, the PRC accelerated its United Front work to co-opt local EAOs (Lintner, 2003: 252-261; Winn, 2024: 132). By 1970, the CCP had successfully incorporated Wa leaders Zhao Nilai and Bao Youxiang, as well as the Akha leader Lao Er Ji Pyao and his followers. The Pa-O Shanland Nationalities Liberation Front (SNLF) also joined the BCP Northeastern Command. Through the provision of arms and ammunition, the communist camp further attracted more KIA units and established cooperative relations with the SSA (Lintner, 2019: 316; 2021: 84-85; Winn, 2024: 107-109).

Beijing's open support for the BCP Northeastern Command was concentrated primarily between the 1967 anti-Chinese riots and 1971. Following the gradual normalization of Sino-Myanmar relations after the severe deterioration triggered by the 1967 anti-Chinese riots, Beijing adopted a less overt approach toward supporting the BCP after 1971 (Smith, 1999: 249). However, the PRC did not abandon its export of communist revolution to Myanmar. As C. B. Smith notes, the PRC separated foreign relations into state-to-state and party-to-party dimensions, with the CCP defining its relationship with the BCP strictly as party-to-party ties (Smith, 1984: 8). As a result, diplomatic relations with Myanmar did not prevent the CCP from continuing to provide resources to the BCP Northeastern Command and assisting in the development of its institutional structures.

In March 1971, the CCP established the People's Voice of Burma radio station in Yunnan to broadcast the BCP's military campaigns, to conduct united front propaganda, and to mobilize the Myanmar populace. The CCP further assisted in constructing hydroelectric power plants at the BCP headquarters in Pangkham, while providing medical care for wounded BCP soldiers in Yunnan (Lintner, 1990; Smith, 1984). The PRC's PLA frequently entered the Northeastern Command to provide training or participate directly in combat. According to the National Security Bureau of the ROC, on 12th November 1973, the mixed CCP-BCP troops instructed the BCP 8th Brigade to employ a series of tactical maneuvers, including ambushes, surprise attacks, sparrow warfare and landmine warfare; such methods were the conventional insurgent tactics utilized by the CCP (NSB of ROC, 1973: 159). In mid-May 1974, the CCP dispatched cadres into Myanmar to take charge of the military and political education of the BCP (NSB of ROC, 1974: 168).

Large numbers of Chinese volunteers crossed the border to join the BCP Northeastern Command, making Mandarin the principal language in BCP-controlled territory (Winn, 2024). Under CCP patronage, the BCP established brigade- and battalion-level combat units responsible for defending specific sectors of its controlled territory. Beijing supplied not only weapons, but also printing equipment, vehicles, fuel, food and other essential materials (Smith, 1984: 7-8; Lintner, 1990: 26; 2003: 268-285; 2021: 81-82; Sai Kham Mong, 2005: 12-14). In summary, the BCP Northeastern Command possessed its own systems of administration, education, taxation, policing and military, underpinned by fortified borders. Within the Command, all vehicles displayed license plates issued by the BCP headquarters. Consequently, the BCP Northeastern Command functioned as "a d*e facto* buffer state" between Communist China and the government-held areas of Myanmar (Lintner, 2003: 282, 2019: 308).

The BCP Northeastern Command performed the four primary state functions identified by Giddens: allocation, demarcation, delimitation and administration (Giddens, 1985). Although it lacked legitimate sovereign jurisdiction and may therefore be regarded as a *de facto* buffer state, its relationship with the PRC more closely resembled a modern tributary system. Thongchai argues that pre-colonial tributary states maintained security through flexible and overlapping relationships with major powers rather than through fixed territorial boundaries (Thongchai, 1994). By contrast, the BCP Northeastern Command survived through structural dependence upon the PRC state, reproducing a modern form of tributary dependency under Beijing's patronage.

The Command operated within Myanmar's *de jure* sovereign territory while remaining beyond effective state control; it may also be understood as a form of modern *Zomia*. James C. Scott argues that the resistance of EAOs against the Myanmar State reflects the post-colonial condition of Zomia, a region historically characterized by the evasion of state rule (Scott, 2009: 179-182). The Wa guerrillas resisted external interference in their traditional institutions and way of life through armed struggle (Sai Kham Mong, 2005: 22-23; Ong, 2023: 70-75). Likewise, the early SSA and KIA movements pursued independence from Myanmar. For these EAOs, the Myanmar State represented a "sovereign other" claiming jurisdiction over their territories. Yet by the late 1960s, many *Zomia* groups that theoretically should have resisted incorporation into any state order were drawn into the

BCP Northeastern Command under the influence of another sovereign other: the Communist China.

Bolstered by PRC support, the BCP Northeastern Command sought, through armed struggle, to dismantle the governing authority of the Myanmar State and reshape the Myanmar political community. I possess no conclusive evidence that these EAOs abandoned their original political agendas after aligning with the BCP. Their relationship with the PRC instead suggests that they did not reject state authority per se, but rather contested the legitimacy of the Myanmar State itself. Nor did their acceptance of the PRC as a sovereign other necessarily imply a willingness to submit to Communist Chinese rule, particularly among those EAOs that joined the communist camp primarily to obtain arms and ammunition rather than ideological training.

Under these circumstances, the BCP Northeastern Command—a geopolitical entity spanning Shan and Kachin States—emerged as a form of modern *Zomia*. It simultaneously rejected the sovereign authority of the Myanmar State while remaining structurally dependent upon, and closely connected to, another state: the Communist China (Chao, 2020).

Regardless of whether the BCP Northeastern Command is defined as a *de facto* buffer state, a modern tributary, or a modern *Zomia*, this situation did not last long. After 1976, an internal power struggle erupted within the CCP between the far left and the reformists, during which the BCP leadership stood with the far-left faction. Once the reformists emerged victorious and consolidated control over the PRC, they initiated the "Reform and Opening-up" policy and ceased exporting communist revolution. Given the political change, Beijing began to reduce its support for the BCP. The reduction of PRC support for the BCP did not enable the Myanmar government to strengthen its governance over the northern frontier or to consolidate sovereignty for continued state-building. A CIA report notes that by late 1981 the BCP had established smuggling corridors in Karenni State along the Thai border. This development posed a dual threat to the Myanmar government by expanding the BCP's transborder networks while simultaneously disrupting communications between Yangon and northern Myanmar (CIA, 1982: 3).

Nevertheless, the CCP eventually terminated all assistance to the BCP forces in 1984 (Lintner, 2003: 28; Steinberg & Fan, 2012: 138-139). According to Shi Lei, son of the former *Tusi* (*Sawbwa*) of Munai in Yunnan's

Lancang County, the BCP once adopted a financial self-reliance policy after Chinese aid ceased. In the BCP headquarters, apart from the radio station built with Chinese assistance, most of the buildings were thatched huts, while irrigation systems deteriorated. Shi therefore argues that the termination of CCP financial support sounded the death knell for the BCP Northeastern Command (Shi, 2012: 180-181). During my fieldwork in Pangkham in 2015, interviewees also identified the withdrawal of Chinese support as a decisive factor in the BCP's collapse. But other factors served as the final nails in the coffin for the BCP Northeastern Command. These included the escalating tensions between the BCP political leadership and its combat units, as well as the strategic opportunity that Yangon seized from the change in PRC foreign policy to reassert dominance over the process of state-building.

The BCP leadership was dominated by Burman elites, while its combat units consisted largely of non-Burman ethnic groups. As Burman leaders directed operations from relative safety, non-Burman soldiers bore the overwhelming human cost of the conflict. Lintner notes, for example, that the BCP leadership once ordered Wa troops to conduct human-wave assaults, producing devastating casualties among the Wa population (Lintner, 2021: 86). The Burman leadership remained committed to Maoism, whereas many non-Burman combat units became increasingly alienated from the ideology. Following China's "Reform and Opening-up," Beijing shifted towards prioritizing border stability and cross-border economic connectivity with Myanmar. After the failure of Myanmar's 1988 pro-democracy movement and Ne Win's resignation, the new military regime made use of this change in PRC policy by offering ceasefires, limited autonomy and arms retention to EAOs willing to abandon the BCP (Chen and Wang, 2003; South, 2008; Shi, 2012; Lintner, 1990, 2003, 2021). Alienated from Maoism and dissatisfied with BCP policies, the non-Burman armed units defected from the BCP and formed their own EAOs.

Following the collapse of the BCP Northeastern Command, former communist ethnic forces reorganized into new EAOs and were granted Special Regions by the Myanmar government. These included the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in Kokang (Shan State Special Region 1), the United Wa State Party/United Wa State Army (UWSP/UWSA) in the Wa areas (Shan State Special Region 2), the National Democratic Alliance Army–Eastern Shan State (NDAA-ESS, the Mong La

Army) in Mong La (Shan State Special Region 4), and the New Democratic Army–Kachin (NDA-K) in Kachin State (Kachin State Special Region 1).

For Yangon, the collapse of the BCP Northeastern Command appeared to restore the state's capacity for state-building in Myanmar. Yet the former BCP EAOs retained substantial autonomy within the Special Regions, while PRC influence over the frontier persisted. Myanmar's state-building process therefore remained constrained by the triangular relationship between the PRC, the northern EAOs and the Myanmar government.

4. Conclusion

Myanmar's state-building was shaped from the outset by two pre-programmed crises: the demands of non-Burman ethnic groups for autonomy and the revolutionary project pursued by the BCP, whose vision of independence diverged fundamentally from Burman nationalism. The spillover of the Chinese Civil War after 1949 fused these internal crises with Cold War geopolitics, transforming northern Myanmar into a frontier contested by the KMT, the PRC, the Myanmar government and multiple EAOs.

The retreat of KMT forces into northern Myanmar reshaped the frontier balance and provided the PRC with justification for repeated cross-border intervention. During the Cold War, alliances between the KMT and non-Burman EAOs increasingly fused ethnic self-determination struggles with global geopolitics, further weakening the legitimacy of the nascent Myanmar State. Beijing later combined rhetorical *Pauk-Phaw* diplomacy with the export of revolution through the BCP Northeastern Command, transforming northern Myanmar into a geopolitical entity structurally dependent upon China and functioning simultaneously as a *de facto* buffer state, a modern tributary system and a modern *Zomia*.

The collapse of the BCP Northeastern Command in 1989 did not restore national unity but instead institutionalized fragmented sovereignty through the establishment of Special Regions controlled by former BCP EAOs. Although Beijing abandoned revolutionary exportation, the PRC continued to sustain influence through economic dependency and security mediation. Myanmar's state-building thus remained constrained by the triangular relationship between the PRC, the northern EAOs and the Myanmar government, where formal unity concealed substantive fragmentation (Kahrl, Weyerhaeuser & Su, 2004; Lintner, 2021; Ong, 2023).

Myanmar's experience exposes a profound paradox: as the borders of the modern nation-state became clearer, the internal divisions within those borders grew deeper. The interlocking layers of colonial legacy, securitized statecraft, and geopolitical penetration have formed a self-reinforcing structure of fragmentation. When unity is imposed through violence rather than established through consent, "shared statehood" remains a hollow incantation. "Myanmar" persists as a contested name, unaccepted by many of its "people," because the project of state-building was never fully realized. This imagined community once sought to materialize a vision of unity, yet it remains, in many respects, an unfinished political imagination.

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