



Understanding the relationship between external states and rebels: A typology

The British Journal of Politics and
International Relations

1–24

© The Author(s) 2026



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/13691481261445756
journals.sagepub.com/home/bpi

**Yaolong Xian** 

Abstract

Existing studies of external state–rebel relationships often rely on broad and ambiguous notions such as support, sponsorship, or influence, which obscure important variation in the nature and dynamics of these interactions. This article develops a conceptual typology arguing that such relationships, where they occur, are best understood as either cooperative or conflictual. Building on these two dimensions, it identifies four categories: alliance, partnership, coercion, and confrontation. The typology provides a consistent vocabulary and clear criteria for classification, enabling scholars to distinguish different modes of engagement and trace transitions between them over time. The article applies this framework to the case of China and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, illustrating how their relationship has evolved through successive phases of alliance, partnership, coercion, and renewed partnership. By distinguishing external states from incumbent governments and rebels from other non-state armed actors, the typology restores rebel agency by treating rebels as strategic interlocutors. The result is a transferable framework that enhances conceptual clarity and supports comparative research on external involvement in intrastate conflicts.

Keywords

China, diplomacy, external state, Myanmar, rebel

Introduction

Extensive interactions exist between external states and rebel groups. For instance, the United States has backed opposition forces in Syria (Knights and Van Wilgenburg, 2022), Russia has maintained military ties with Ukrainian separatists (Kuzio, 2018; Loshkariov and Sushentsov, 2016), China has engaged with Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) in Myanmar for decades (Sun, 2017), and Norway facilitated 12 years of mediation between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government (Guribye, 2013).

Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Corresponding author:

Yaolong Xian, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, Darmstädter Landstraße 112, Frankfurt am Main 60598, Germany.

Email: xian@prif.org

Despite the far-reaching consequences of these engagements (Gunter, 2015; Karlén, 2017; Outzen, 2025), much of the existing literature remains characterised by conceptual fragmentation. By fragmentation, I do not refer to a lack of theorising, but to the absence of a shared analytical vocabulary and the tendency to use overlapping or loosely defined concepts across studies. This conceptual ambiguity becomes evident in empirical research. For instance, analyses of China's role in Myanmar's peace process often claim that Beijing 'supports', 'influences', or 'has leverage over' EAOs (Adhikari, 2021; Kobayashi and King, 2022; Roy, 2022). Similar terminology is used to describe the United States' engagement with the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Democratic Forces (Firmian, 2021; Knights and Van Wilgenburg, 2022). However, these two cases differ significantly: while the United States provided direct military assistance to Syrian rebel factions to support their battles against both rival insurgent groups and the Assad regime, China's involvement with Myanmar's EAOs is primarily focused on cross-border governance and conflict mediation, maintaining diplomatic ties with both the incumbent government and the EAOs. Without proper conceptual clarity, such distinct relationships risk being conflated, thereby limiting comparative analysis and constraining the development of a more systematic understanding of external state–rebel interactions.

To be fair, scholars have not ignored the complexity of external state–rebel relations. Several have proposed frameworks to categorise these interactions, either by focusing on foreign support for rebel groups or by examining the broader dynamics between states and armed groups (Berkowitz, 2024; Costantini and Donelli, 2022; Staniland, 2012, 2021; Thaler, 2021). Yet prevailing conceptual approaches often understate the agency of insurgent organisations, portraying these relationships primarily as extensions of external states' foreign policy agendas rather than as relational dynamics between two strategic actors. Other frameworks, conversely, conflate external states with incumbent regimes or focus exclusively on the latter, thereby overlooking the distinctive logics and forms of their interactions. These works also tend to look broadly at non-state armed groups (NSAGs) as the primary lens of analysis, without sufficiently disaggregating this category. They thereby miss rebel groups' distinctive political objectives and organisational structures. As a result, existing frameworks remain limited: the former are too narrow to capture the multifaceted nature of these relationships, while the latter are often overly broad, hindering analytical precision.

In response to these conceptual gaps, this article proposes a more nuanced framework for classifying external state–rebel engagements: one that emphasises the strategic agency of both actors and captures the complexity of their interactions. I suggest that, where interactions occur, external state–rebel relationships are best characterised as either cooperative or conflictual. Within the two dimensions, I further distinguish four types: alliance and partnership under the cooperative category, and coercion and confrontation under the conflictual category. This fourfold classification offers a robust framework for analysing state–rebel interactions with greater precision compared to earlier, less systematic approaches. While this typology categorises distinct relationship types, it also acknowledges that the relationship between an external state and a rebel is dynamic and subject to change over time. Therefore, I apply this typology to the case of China and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), a rebel group in northern Myanmar.

Two considerations motivate the selection of this case. First, the China–MNDAA relationship is often described in broad and undifferentiated terms. Applying the typology to this case demonstrates its capacity to capture distinct types of external state–rebel relations and to trace how these relationships change over time, dynamics that

existing frameworks often overlook. Second, Southeast Asia remains comparatively underrepresented in political science, conflict research, and security studies (Brenner and Han, 2021; Pepinsky, 2019; Phillips and Greene, 2022). Examining a Myanmar-based rebel group therefore helps mitigate this regional imbalance in the broader literature. The analysis draws on multiple sources, including Chinese and Myanmar media reports, official statements issued by the Chinese government and the MNDAA, and relevant scholarship. To examine shifts in the relationship over time, the interaction is reconstructed chronologically, with particular attention to identifiable turning points and episodes that mark changes in the mode of engagement.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature and highlights its shortcomings in providing a comprehensive conceptual understanding of external state–rebel relationships. It then introduces a new typological framework, detailing its conceptual foundations and the analytical distinctions it offers. This is followed by an in-depth case study of China–MNDAA relations, which systematically traces the evolution of their relationship over several decades. The final section concludes by summarising this study and discussing its implications for future research on external state–rebel dynamics.

Literature review: External state–rebel relationships

Conceptualising state support for rebels

Much of the existing literature focuses on conceptualising the external support for rebels as proxy warfare (Berkowitz, 2024; Costantini and Donelli, 2022; Hughes, 2014; Yüksel, 2020). Proxy warfare refers to indirect intervention in another country's affairs by aligning with local actors to influence its political landscape (Farasoo, 2021). While some scholars use alternative concepts, such as state sponsorship (Berkowitz, 2018; Byman, 2022), outsourcing war (Wither, 2020), surrogate warfare (Krieg and Rickli, 2018), or conflict delegation (Salehyan, 2010), they largely adhere to its core assumptions rooted in principal–agent theory (PAT). According to this perspective, external states function as principals, delegating tasks to rebel groups, which act as agents who operate on their behalf to advance the principal's strategic objectives in the target country (Byman and Kreps, 2010; Salehyan et al., 2014; Szekely, 2016). This approach has been widely applied to analyse how external states engage in conflicts indirectly, using local actors to achieve strategic, ideological, or geopolitical goals while minimising direct military involvement (Mumford, 2013; Salehyan, 2010). For instance, conflicts in the Middle East, such as the Syrian civil war and the Yemeni conflict, are frequently examined through this lens. Scholars also highlight how states like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United States utilise rebel groups as instruments of foreign policy, shaping regional dynamics through indirect means (Berti and Guzansky, 2014; Hughes, 2014; Jahanbani and Levy, 2024; Phillips, 2020).

Although the concept of proxy warfare remains influential, it has several limitations. According to the PAT logic, state sponsors should rigorously monitor and control rebels to ensure compliance with delegated tasks and prevent agency slack. However, critics argue that this framework assumes a clear hierarchical relationship and thereby underplays the agency of rebel organisations, portraying them as subordinate instruments rather than autonomous political actors (Rauta, 2020; Salehyan, 2010). San-Akca (2016) advances this critique by emphasising that rebel groups should be understood as

independent decision-making entities that actively shape the dynamics of these relationships. Recent empirical research supports this view, showing that armed groups frequently pursue agendas that diverge from, or even contradict, those of their external sponsors (Huang et al., 2022; Popovic, 2017; Saad, 2019). For instance, Saad (2019) reinterprets the Iran–Hezbollah relationship not as a simple hierarchy of PAT but as a reciprocal partnership rooted in shared historical, religious, and political ties.

A growing body of literature on rebel diplomacy further challenges the traditional state-centric perspective (Coggins, 2015; Huang, 2016; Joshi, 2023; Malejacq, 2017). According to these scholars, rather than being passive actors reliant on external sponsors, rebels actively engage in diplomatic efforts to secure foreign recognition and strategic resources. Still, proxy-based analyses remain structured by PAT, which frames state–rebel relations primarily in terms of delegation and control. Even when monitoring difficulties and rebel agency are acknowledged, relationships continue to be interpreted within this hierarchical grammar. As Farasoo (2021) aptly questions, to what extent must an actor retain agency to still be classified as a proxy or, conversely, to be considered independent of proxy status? This question captures a central conceptual tension: the difficulty of distinguishing between delegated dependence and negotiated partnership.

Building on these critiques, some scholars have introduced innovative concepts that dilute strict hierarchy and emphasise mutual collaboration, such as partnership (Firmian, 2021; Knights and Van Wilgenburg, 2021), hybrid coalition (Reiter, 2022), unholy alignment (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2024), and transnational alliance (Tamm, 2016). Ameyaw-Brobbe (2024) introduces the concept of ‘unholy alignment’, referring to a strategic yet precarious form of cooperation between states and rebel groups that emerges not from ideological affinity or long-term interests, but from short-term security or political needs. Tamm (2016) conceptualises external state–rebel relationships as ‘transnational alliances’, defined as formal or informal security cooperation arrangements between sovereign states and rebel groups, which emerge when the ruler of one state and the leader of a rebel group from another state decide to collaborate for mutual security interests.

Despite these advances, they remain limited in capturing the full complexity of external state–rebel interactions, as they focus primarily on cooperative arrangements. In practice, external states often align with incumbent governments against rebel groups, as seen in Russia’s support for the Assad regime in Syria (Allison, 2013), and India’s backing of the Sri Lankan government in its fight against the LTTE (DeVotta, 2009). Their engagement can also take non-military and non-supportive forms. States and rebel organisations sometimes interact through humanitarian coordination (Jo et al., 2025) or peacebuilding initiatives (Iwami, 2016). For example, the Colombian peace process between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), facilitated by Norway and Cuba, illustrates how diplomatic engagement can occur without military alliance (Herbolzheimer, 2016). In other cases, external actors engage rebel groups to stabilise border regions and prevent the spillover of violence (Englehart, 2016; Salehyan, 2007). These examples highlight that external state–rebel relationships are often fraught with uncertainty, diversity, and dynamics that extend beyond the existing framework.

Conceptualising state–NSAGs interactions

On the other hand, scholars have sought to develop general frameworks for understanding the nature of interactions between states and various NSAGs. Staniland (2012), in his pioneering work on wartime political orders, categorises state–NSAG interactions into

six distinct forms, including collusion, shared sovereignty, spheres of influence, tacit coexistence, clashing monopolies, and guerrilla disorder. Extending this perspective, Staniland (2021) introduces four main types of armed orders, total war, containment, limited cooperation, and alliance, to explain why governments transition between these arrangements over time. Similarly, Thaler (2021) develops a framework that distinguishes among delegation, sponsorship, and autonomy, focusing on power asymmetries and strategic incentives in state–armed group relations. Another related work is by Kotajoki (2024), who offers a related typology of United Nations–NSAG interactions, mapping them along a continuum from confrontation to cooperation across multiple domains such as human rights, governance, and security. Collectively, these works make two important contributions: they construct typological tools that capture the diversity of state–NSAG relationships, and they underscore the fluid, evolving nature of these interactions.

These contributions remain largely confined to domestic contexts. Staniland’s models, for instance, are designed for settings where an incumbent government and insurgents contest authority within a single sovereign polity. The ‘wartime political orders’ presuppose a common institutional and territorial space where both sides bargain or compete over the monopoly of violence. Such conditions do not exist when an external state interacts with a foreign rebel group, as sovereignty is not shared and coexistence takes place across distinct political arenas. The later typology in *Ordering Violence* similarly remains incumbent-centric. Although the terms total war, containment, limited cooperation, and alliance appear broadly applicable, they are defined by an incumbent’s ability to coerce, police, or integrate armed groups within its own jurisdiction, with political ideology shaping these choices. External states, acting across borders and alongside the incumbent, mostly lack those prerogatives. Thaler (2021) explicitly includes both incumbent and external states in his discussion of state–armed group relations, but his typology of delegation, sponsorship, and autonomy remains grounded in a logic of state support, and therefore captures only cooperative or dependent ties. Consequently, the framework cannot account for relationships that are adversarial or neutral.

Furthermore, these typological works treat NSAGs as a unified analytical category. Indeed, this inclusive approach highlights the blurred boundaries between NSAGs, recognising that groups may evolve over time, shifting between anti-state, pro-state, or criminal roles (Kotajoki, 2024; Thaler, 2021). They could also facilitate comparisons across a wide range of empirical contexts and underscore the continuum of armed politics. However, this breadth often comes at the expense of conceptual precision. Rebels, militias, terrorists, criminal organisations, and vigilantes operate with distinct motives, strategies, and organisational structures, each shaped by specific historical and political contexts (Barter, 2013; Berti, 2016). Rebels, for instance, pursue political insurgency, seeking regime change or territorial autonomy, whereas militias often function as state-aligned paramilitary forces that extend government control (Carey et al., 2015; Voller, 2022). These political ambitions often drive rebels to seek external sponsorship as a means of gaining legitimacy, resources, and strategic leverage (Duyvesteyn, 2017; McWeeney et al., 2025), while militias primarily depend on incumbent patronage, exchanging loyalty for protection (Reno, 2011).

Taken together, existing work leaves three recurring limitations in the conceptualisation of external state–rebel relations. First, much of the literature approaches these relations as external support for rebels, typically through PAT. This support framing tends to understate rebel agency, and even when agency and monitoring problems are recognised, analysis often remains bounded by PAT’s delegation and control grammar. Second, recent

conceptual innovations have moved beyond hierarchical assumptions, yet they remain largely centred on cooperative interaction and less able to map a broader range of external state engagements. Third, existing state–NSAG typologies are largely developed for domestic, incumbent-centric settings and rely on umbrella categories that are too broad for capturing rebels’ distinctive political objectives and organisational structures. A more discriminating typology is therefore needed to capture the distinctive nature of these interactions.

A new conceptual typology of external state–rebel relationships

This study addresses gaps in the literature by systematically conceptualising the diverse relationships between external states and rebel groups. While all rebels are classified as NSAGs, not all NSAGs qualify as rebels. NSAGs are broadly defined as armed organisations operating outside state control, possessing both the willingness and capability to use force to achieve their objectives (Berti, 2016; Petrosyan, 2024). Among these actors, a defining feature of rebel groups is their political objectives, specifically the pursuit of government overthrow, regional secession, or the end of an occupational or colonial regime (Schneckener, 2009). Therefore, rebel groups can be defined as NSAGs that pursue such political objectives within the context of civil wars. Importantly, this article treats terrorism as a tactic rather than as an inherent organisational characteristic (Fortna, 2015). The use of terrorist tactics, or the labelling of a group as a terrorist organisation, does not in itself alter the group’s fundamental status as a rebel organisation.

A proper definition of external state–rebel relations is also essential before undertaking the analysis. In this article, such relations are understood as the patterns of interaction that emerge between external states and rebel groups and persist over a given period. On this basis, I develop a conceptual typology, which aims to provide a clear, comprehensive tool for classifying external state–rebel engagements, emphasising the strategic agency of both sides and capturing the nuanced forms of their interactions. I propose that, where interaction occurs, external state–rebel relationships can be broadly categorised as cooperative or conflictual. Cooperative relationships involve mutual support or collaboration across military, political, economic, or diplomatic domains, reflecting shared interests or complementary goals. Conflictual relationships, by contrast, involve efforts by one or both parties to constrain, compel, or oppose the other’s actions or influence, often characterised by tension or hostility.

Within these dimensions, I distinguish four types: alliance and partnership under the cooperative category, and coercion and confrontation under the conflictual category (Table 1). To ensure conceptual clarity, I differentiate these types by the presence or absence of military cooperation (in cooperative relationships) and military confrontation (in conflictual relationships), maintaining mutual exclusivity and collective exhaustiveness. Military cooperation refers to the incorporation of military resources and coordination within an external state–rebel relationship for the purpose of confronting a shared adversary or advancing common security objectives. Military confrontation denotes the condition in which the interaction between actors becomes manifestly violent, involving the deliberate use of armed force or sustained kinetic operations. Admittedly, some non-military engagements, such as governance training and humanitarian assistance, may produce military effects (Wood and Sullivan, 2015). Analytically, however, what distinguishes these activities is their intended function: they are not designed to alter the immediate

Table 1. Typology of external state–rebel relationships.

Nature of relationship	With military means	Without military means
Cooperative	Alliance	Partnership
Conflictual	Confrontation	Coercion

dynamics of armed confrontation but to influence the political or social conditions surrounding it. Last but not least, I deliberately avoid using state-centric terminology. This ensures that the framework remains flexible and applicable regardless of which party holds the dominant position, while also taking into account the agency of the weaker side.

The typology developed here is descriptive in nature, designed to classify the forms and dynamics of external state–rebel relationships rather than to explain their causal origins. I begin by introducing this typology through the definition of types that serve as descriptive characterisations, allowing cases to be systematically assigned to specific types. I then apply this framework to the case of China and the MNDAA, demonstrating how the typology facilitates a more nuanced and accurate understanding of their relationship over time.

Alliance

Drawing from Tamm (2016), an alliance in the context of external state–rebel relations refers to a sustained military collaboration between an external state and a rebel group, characterised by the provision of military assistance such as arms, training, logistical support, intelligence sharing, or even direct combat involvement. However, alliances of this nature diverge significantly from traditional conceptions of alliances in international relations (Snyder, 1990; Walt, 2013), which usually entail formal agreements codified through treaties and mutual defence obligations. Owing to rebels’ incentives to preserve autonomy and their limited ability to credibly commit (Corradi, 2023; Topal, 2025), as well as external states’ concerns about the risks of supporting insurgent actors (Bacon, 2018), alliance arrangements tend to remain flexible and operate without formal agreements. In addition, these alliances are primarily driven by shared security interests, particularly the aim of combating a common enemy, whether it be an incumbent government or a rival rebel group.

A clear example of this type of alliance is the relationship between the United States and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led rebel group in Syria, during the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS). From 2015 until early 2026, the United States provided the SDF with weapons, air support, intelligence coordination, and military training, enabling the group to become a pivotal local force in the counter-ISIS campaign. The cooperative relationship significantly enhanced the SDF’s governance capacity, enabling the group to assume control over territory vacated by ISIS and to function as a local security provider in parts of northeastern Syria. Building on these practices, the SDF’s political wing, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), also framed these battlefield contributions and governance practices in outward-facing communication and lobbying, developing strategic narratives that portrayed the SDC as a ‘different and responsible’ actor (Corradi, 2025).

In the understanding of proxy warfare, external states often limit their involvement to indirect military operations, whereas alliances in this typology blur these boundaries by

incorporating active participation of external states on the battlefield. A prominent example is the Congo Wars, where Rwanda and Uganda not only supported Congolese rebel factions, but also deployed their own troops to conduct joint military operations alongside allies such as the Rally for Congolese Democracy and the Movement for the Liberation of Congo during the Second Congo War (Tamm, 2016). Being shaped by shared security concerns and regional rivalries, these alliances illustrate how external states can become deeply entangled in local conflicts through direct military involvement.

Within this typology, military cooperation is the defining criterion for the alliance category. Its presence is sufficient, even when the relationship simultaneously includes non-military forms of cooperation across economic and political domains. In fact, military collaboration is rarely isolated from other forms of engagement. For example, Pakistan's relationship with the Afghan Taliban combined military collaboration with cross-border trade and logistical facilitation (Bacon, 2018). The simultaneous existence of these non-military dimensions only strengthens the alliance character of the relationship.

Partnership

Partnership represents a cooperative relationship that involves non-military collaboration across political, economic, or diplomatic domains. These interactions may take the form of political dialogue, humanitarian cooperation, economic exchange, or technical and governance support. Partnerships are often driven by shared interests or complementary objectives that stop short of joint military action, for instance, stabilising border regions, fostering local governance, or maintaining channels of influence. For rebel groups, such relationships offer opportunities to strengthen governance structures, gain international recognition, or secure economic and diplomatic resources necessary for their political survival (Joshi, 2023; Malejacq, 2017).

A notable example of this dynamic is the Taliban's informal diplomatic relationships prior to its takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021. Although not officially recognised as a governing authority at the time, the Taliban cultivated partnerships with external actors such as Qatar and China through diplomatic channels, facilitating dialogue and fostering strategic relationships (Faheem and Khan, 2022). In 2013, the Taliban opened its first overseas office in Qatar, which became a pivotal hub for peace talks and an official platform for the group's political engagement. This development significantly enhanced the Taliban's international visibility and legitimacy, enabling it to engage with global stakeholders despite its contested status. These diplomatic ties laid the groundwork for future political recognition, positioning the Taliban to influence international negotiations while remaining outside formal state structures. For state actors, these partnerships provided a strategic advantage by establishing early channels of communication to safeguard their interests and prepare for potential diplomatic engagement with a future Taliban-led government.

Geographically, this type of relationship is common between neighbouring states and rebel groups that share ethnic, economic, or cultural ties. One example is such a partnership between China and the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in Myanmar. While China refrains from providing direct military support, it actively engages in economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and governance coordination along the China–Myanmar border (Ong, 2018). This collaboration became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when both sides held regular meetings to discuss border management.

During the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in China, the UWSA, along with six other rebel groups from Myanmar, demonstrated solidarity by donating 480,000 medical masks to China (FPNCC, 2020). Later, when the situation came under control, China also provided significant medical support to the Wa State (Pwint, 2020).

Importantly, partnerships also encompass engagements that may appear neutral, such as mediation. While the external actor's purpose in these cases is not to advance the rebel cause, mediation nonetheless entails sustained interaction, mutual recognition, and coordinated communication between the parties. It therefore constitutes a cooperative form of engagement aimed at managing or transforming conflict rather than constraining or coercing the rebel organisation. For example, Norway's involvement with the LTTE in Sri Lanka was centred on mediation and conflict resolution. From 1997 to 2009, Norway played a key role in facilitating peace talks and served as a durable mediator between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE (Höglund and Svensson, 2011). This type of relationship therefore considers whether the two sides can work together on certain issues, rather than their specific political positions or end goals.

Coercion

A coercive relationship refers to conflictual interactions in which one or both actors seek to deter, constrain, or compel the other's behaviour without engaging in direct military confrontation. The purpose of coercion is to influence the opposing side's decision-making process, either by preventing certain actions or by inducing changes in ongoing plans. Coercion is a crucial concept in discussions across disciplines, and in various definitions, its specific measures range from diplomatic censure and economic sanctions to military intervention (Jakobsen, 2016; Koktsidis, 2013; Slantchev, 2005). In this conceptual framework, however, coercive relationships are defined strictly by non-violent strategies, such as economic sanctions, political isolation, diplomatic pressure, or deterrent military posturing, excluding any form of military intervention.

A common coercive practice is the designation of rebel groups as terrorist organisations, which is often accompanied by economic sanctions and restrictions. For instance, Australia in 2001 and Canada in 2006 designated the LTTE as a foreign terrorist organisation. These actions significantly disrupted the LTTE's extensive fundraising networks among the Tamil diaspora, further limiting its ability to finance military operations and weakening its political influence on the international stage (Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah, 2005). A recent example of coercion can be seen in the relationship between Thailand and the UWSA, which involves the Thai military's buildup along the Thai–Myanmar border in November 2024. In response to border disputes, Thailand reinforced its military presence along the Thai–Myanmar border in November 2024 to pressure the UWSA and deter its military activities near the border (Irrawaddy, 2024). This strategy aimed to restrict the UWSA's operational space and signal Thailand's readiness to protect its borders without escalating into open conflict.

While power asymmetries often exist between the two actors, with external states typically possessing superior economic, diplomatic, and political resources, rebel groups can also employ coercive measures to exert pressure on state actors. Historically, organisations such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Houthi rebels in Yemen have utilised tactics like targeting foreign assets, disrupting critical infrastructure, and controlling strategic territories to exert influence. Arguably, these tactics do not involve formal sanctions, but they function as adaptive forms of coercion, compelling states to reassess their

military and economic strategies. For instance, despite their military inferiority, the Houthis have repeatedly threatened to disrupt maritime traffic through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a vital global shipping corridor, primarily affecting the United States and its allies (Crisis Group, 2017).

Confrontation

A confrontational relationship refers to direct military engagement, characterised by armed hostilities, including ground offensives, airstrikes, and artillery bombardments. Unlike coercive relationships, confrontation involves the deliberate application of military force. This represents the most intense and violent dimension of external state–rebel relations, typically arising when diplomatic efforts, economic sanctions, or other non-military strategies fail to achieve the desired outcomes.

A clear example of confrontation is seen in Turkey's military operations against the SDF. Turkey views the SDF as closely linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which it classifies as a terrorist organisation due to long-standing security concerns along its southern border. The SDF's presence in northern Syria has prompted Turkey to launch a series of military campaigns aimed at reducing the group's influence and preventing the establishment of a semi-autonomous Kurdish region near Turkish territory. These confrontational efforts include Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), Operation Olive Branch (2018), and Operation Peace Spring (2019), which involved coordinated ground incursions, artillery bombardments, and airstrikes targeting SDF positions (Çevik, 2022). Turkey's sustained military engagements highlight how external states may pursue prolonged direct military campaigns to disrupt rebel group territorial control and influence.

Another notable case of a confrontational relationship can be seen in the ongoing conflict between the Houthi rebels and Saudi Arabia. Since at least 2015, the Houthis have actively engaged in military operations against Saudi targets, employing asymmetric tactics such as missile and drone strikes aimed at disrupting critical infrastructure. Two significant attacks occurred in 2019 and 2022, when coordinated Houthi strikes targeted Saudi Aramco oil facilities, temporarily halving Saudi oil production and revealing vulnerabilities in the kingdom's defence systems. In another high-profile instance in 2022, Houthi forces targeted an oil depot in Jeddah during an internationally televised sporting event, demonstrating their capacity to extend confrontational activities deep into Saudi territory (Al Jazeera, 2022). The Houthis' interaction with Israel further illustrates confrontational dynamics. While earlier exchanges could be understood as coercive signalling, the relationship escalated from November 2023 onward, when Houthi forces began targeting commercial vessels linked to Israel transiting the Red Sea. Subsequent missile exchanges between the two sides have reinforced and sustained this pattern of confrontation (CNN, 2025).

In many cases, confrontational relationships involve external states collaborating with incumbent governments in joint military operations against rebel groups, often under counterinsurgency or counterterrorism agendas. One example is Russia's military intervention in Syria, which began in September 2015 in support of Bashar al-Assad's government. Russia launched a coordinated military campaign, including airstrikes on rebel-held areas such as Aleppo and Idlib, primarily targeting groups like the Free Syrian Army and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Maher and Pieper, 2021). These efforts were characterised by a combination of Russian airpower and Syrian ground offensives, with additional support from Iranian-backed militias, culminating in major operations such as the brutal 2016 recapture of

Table 2. Selected external state–rebel relationships.

External state	Rebel	Relationship	Time period
United States	Syrian Democratic Forces	Cooperative (Alliance)	2015–2026
Rwanda	Rally for Congolese Democracy	Cooperative (Alliance)	1998–2003
Qatar	Taliban	Cooperative (Partnership)	2010–2021
Norway	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam	Cooperative (Partnership)	1997–2009
Canada	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam	Conflictual (Coercion)	2006–2009
Thailand	United Wa State Army	Conflictual (Coercion)	2024
Turkey	Syrian Democratic Forces	Conflictual (Confrontation)	2015
Saudi Arabia	Houthis	Conflictual (Confrontation)	2015

eastern Aleppo. Similarly, the French-led intervention in Mali, launched under Operation Serval in 2013, involved close coordination between French forces and the Malian government to combat Islamist rebel groups such as Ansar Dine and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Boeke and Schuurman, 2015). The campaign included a combination of air-strikes, ground offensives, and joint security patrols, effectively dismantling rebel strongholds in northern Mali and stabilising the region in the short term. Table 2 summarizes selected examples of the four types of external state–rebel relationships discussed above.

Application of the typology to the China–MNDAA relationship

A bio of the MNDAA

Myanmar has been plagued by protracted ethnic conflicts since its independence in 1948, driven by deep-rooted tensions between the central government and various ethnic minority groups (Kramer, 2021). These conflicts are largely concentrated in border regions, where EAOs have sought autonomy and greater political rights. The MNDAA was established in 1989 as one of four factions that emerged following the disintegration of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). Shortly after its formation, the MNDAA signed a ceasefire agreement with Myanmar’s central government, which allowed it to maintain control over the Kokang region in northern Shan State, designated as Shan State Special Region No. 1 (SR1). This ceasefire endured for two decades, during which the MNDAA exercised governance over SR1. Tensions escalated in 2009 when the Tatmadaw (Myanmar’s military) demanded that the MNDAA transform into a Border Guard Force under central military control, in line with the stipulations of Myanmar’s 2008 constitution (ISP, 2023). The MNDAA’s leader, Peng Jiasheng, refused, reigniting conflict in the region. After several days of fighting in August 2009, the Tatmadaw captured the Kokang region, forcing Peng and his loyal followers to retreat to Shan State Special Region No. 4, an area controlled by another EAO with close ties to Peng. Since then, the MNDAA had been actively seeking to reclaim the Kokang Self-Administered Zone (SAZ) previously known as SR1, by establishing bases in remote mountainous areas (Crisis Group, 2023). Despite launching two significant ‘go home’ offensives in 2015 and 2017, the MNDAA was unable to reclaim the Kokang SAZ. However, during this period, the MNDAA fortified its alliances with other EAOs, notably through the formation of the Northern Alliance and the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA), both of which frequently engage in coordinated military operations.

On 27 October 2023, the MNDAA, in collaboration with its partners in the 3BHA, launched Operation 1027, a large-scale offensive in northern Shan State aimed at reclaiming the Kokang SAZ. The operation advanced rapidly as government forces abandoned or surrendered several military installations and townships. By 5 January 2024, the MNDAA successfully captured Laukkai, the Kokang SAZ's capital, after the surrender of over a thousand government troops, civil servants, and their families (The Irrawaddy, 2024). In June 2024, the MNDAA launched another significant offensive targeting Lashio, the largest town in northern Shan State. Despite initial resistance, MNDAA forces made significant inroads, and by 3 August 2024, they announced the capture of the Northeastern Regional Military Command headquarters in Lashio, marking the first time a regional military command had fallen to rebel forces (AP News, 2024). Following these successes, the MNDAA declared a unilateral ceasefire in December 2024, expressing a willingness to engage in dialogue mediated by China to restore peace in the region. As of February 2025, the MNDAA maintains control over significant portions of the Kokang region and continues to influence broader dynamics in northern Shan State. The group's evolution from a regional actor to a formidable force reflects the complex interplay of ethnic identity, regional alliances, and geopolitical considerations in Myanmar's protracted conflicts.

Alliance, 1967–1980s

The relationship between China and the MNDAA cannot be fully understood without first examining the historical and organisational continuity between the MNDAA and its predecessor, the CPB. The early phase of the China–MNDAA relationship, rooted in the historical alliance between China and the CPB, fits within the typological category of an external state–rebel alliance. By the end of 1968, Chinese military assistance had enabled the CPB to establish its Northeast Base Area in Myanmar's Shan State, which became the group's principal operational stronghold. Chinese support included the provision of weapons, logistical aid, and the deployment of military advisors who facilitated training in guerrilla warfare (Seekins, 1997). This assistance was accompanied by the arrival of thousands of Chinese 'volunteers', many of whom were radicalised Red Guards, though elements of the People's Liberation Army also played a role in training CPB forces (Zhang, 2024).

During this period, Peng Jiasheng emerged as an important figure in the CPB's Chinese-backed operations. Having organised an armed resistance movement against Burmese state control in 1965, he played a pivotal role in consolidating CPB power in Kokang, which was formally incorporated into the CPB's administrative and military structure by 1969. As a commander in the CPB's Northeast Military Region, Peng oversaw one of the organisation's most battle-hardened and strategically significant units. His forces benefitted from continuous Chinese logistical and technical assistance, ensuring the CPB's consolidation of control over more than twenty thousand square kilometres of territory in northeastern and eastern Shan State by the mid-1970s (Lintner, 1999, 2019). However, as China's foreign policy shifted under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s towards economic modernisation and pragmatic engagement with regional governments, support for the CPB gradually diminished. By 1980, CPB-related messages had largely disappeared from Chinese state media, and the supply of military aid was effectively curtailed (Bert, 1985). The withdrawal of Chinese assistance, coupled with deepening internal divisions, ultimately led to the CPB's fragmentation.

Partnership, 1989–2023

After the CPB's collapse in 1989, the MNDAA emerged as its successor in Kokang, maintaining cooperative ties with China. Although the group distanced itself from communist ideology, it inherited the CPB's infrastructure and cross-border networks. This partnership evolved over two main phases. Under a ceasefire with Myanmar's central government from 1989 to 2009, the MNDAA governed Kokang with de facto autonomy as SR1, marking the first phase, characterised by extensive cross-border economic cooperation, humanitarian engagement, and governance support. The second phase (2009–2023) preserved this cooperative nature but shifted towards diplomatic gestures, public communication, and China-led mediation. Taken together, these two phases illustrate the enduring logic of partnership, which sustained non-military cooperation grounded in shared stability and pragmatic accommodation.

First of all, economic integration reflected the cooperative relationship between Kokang and China, especially with China's Yunnan province. Initially centred on agriculture and small-scale trade in the early 1990s, Kokang's economy later diversified into tourism, manufacturing, and gambling, largely serving Chinese visitors. Chinese investors, particularly from Yunnan, capitalised on Kokang's relaxed regulatory environment and investment-friendly policies (Liang, 2001). To facilitate greater commercial activity, China upgraded two key border ports, Nansan and Qingshuihe, in 1991, designating them as provincial-level border crossings. By 2004, Qingshuihe was further elevated to a national first-class port by the State Council of China, underscoring its increasing importance to bilateral trade (LincangGov, 2014). By the 2000s, Kokang had become a bustling trade zone, with over 900,000 crossings and significant cargo movements through Qingshuihe in 2003 (Sina, 2004). Notably, the tobacco industry thrived under the MNDAA governance, as Chinese-owned and joint-venture tobacco factories took advantage of low labour costs, minimal state interference, and special tax incentives (Wang, 2005).

The MNDAA also partnered with China in the mid-1990s to implement the Alternative Development Program (ADP). This initiative aimed to replace poppy cultivation with legal cash crops and sought to transition Kokang's economy away from opium production and towards legal cash crops (TNI, 2010). An early effort was the 1996 sugarcane partnership with Yunnan's Zhenkang County, resulting in over 2000 hectares under cultivation by the early 2000s (Sina, 2003). The combination of the MNDAA's strict enforcement measures and Chinese agricultural investment enabled Kokang to declare itself 'opium-free' in 2002, 3 years ahead of Myanmar's national anti-drug targets, effectively ending a 190-year history of opium production in the region (ChinaNews, 2004). Later, the Chinese government incentivised private companies via buy-back guarantees, ensuring that participating firms could sell their agricultural products at a fixed price (Woods and Kramer, 2012), and backed this with seed distribution and farming training (Sina, 2008).

In cross-border governance, China and the MNDAA cooperated on border security and crime prevention. The establishment of a structured system of border security consultations facilitated regular intelligence exchanges between Chinese local law enforcement agencies and the MNDAA (ChinaNews, 2004). A particularly notable example of this cooperation occurred in 2002, when MNDAA security forces and Chinese law enforcement jointly conducted an operation targeting Liu Ming, a Chinese drug lord operating in Kokang. Following a long-term intelligence-gathering effort, the MNDAA forces carried out a targeted raid on Liu's compound, resulting in his death, while forensic specialists from Yunnan handled the investigation (China Youth Daily, 2002). In the absence of

substantial support from Myanmar's central government, China emerged as the primary provider of humanitarian and development aid in Kokang. In 2006, during a severe food shortage in northern Myanmar, China initiated a major humanitarian relief operation, delivering 500 tonnes of rice and anti-malaria medication valued at 500,000 RMB to Kokang authorities (Sina, 2006). Concurrently, China intervened by distributing free textbooks and dispatching educators. By the early 2000s, over 90% of teachers in Kokang were from Yunnan Province (Liang, 2001).

This phase between 2009 and 2023 saw reduced direct engagement between the two sides as the MNDAA lost its territorial control following the Kokang Incident in 2009. However, the ethnic and cultural ties between the Kokang people and China enabled the MNDAA to cultivate sympathy and support among the Chinese public. The group strategically leveraged Chinese platforms such as Sina Blog, Sina Weibo, and WeChat to build an online presence and promote its political agenda despite its diminished territorial control. A notable example of this digital engagement was the MNDAA's 2015 fundraising campaign, which aimed to procure 40 motorcycles to support its operations in mountainous areas. A significant portion of the funds came from Chinese donors, underscoring the cross-border ethnic solidarity that continued to serve as a key source of support for the MNDAA (Kokang News, 2015).

Chinese official and semi-official media outlets also played a role in amplifying the MNDAA's narrative. Following its 2009 defeat, Peng Jiasheng used *Global Times*, an outlet closely aligned with the Communist Party of China (CPC), to reassure his supporters that he had survived the military offensive and that the struggle would continue (*Global Times*, 2009). Similarly, in 2015, Phoenix TV, a semi-official Chinese television network, conducted an exclusive interview with Peng at his command centre, providing him with a platform to communicate the MNDAA's commitment to its cause (Ifeng, 2015). During the interview, Peng tearfully reaffirmed the deep-rooted ties between the Kokang people and China, while emphasising that the MNDAA had no intention of dragging China into its conflict with the Myanmar military. The two sides also engaged in diplomatic gestures to maintain their partnership. In 2021, the group sent an official congratulatory letter to the CPC on its 100th anniversary, a move that signalled political alignment and sought to reinforce the MNDAA's connection to China's ideological legacy (Xian, 2021). The following year, when the MNDAA's founder, Peng Jiasheng, passed away, China underscored its continuing ties with this group by sending Guo Bao, Yunnan's top diplomatic envoy, to attend the funeral (*Eastern Shan State News*, 2022).

Furthermore, while China publicly distanced itself from Myanmar's internal armed conflicts, it engaged with the MNDAA through mediation efforts. For a long time, China sought to facilitate peace talks between the Myanmar government and the EAOs, including the MNDAA. Between 2017 and 2019, as well as in 2023 following the COVID-19 pandemic, the MNDAA delegates were invited to peace talks in Kunming, hosted by China's Special Envoy for Asian Affairs. A significant outcome of this engagement was the MNDAA's participation in the second 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference in Naypyidaw following the Kunming meeting in 2017 (Sun, 2019). This conference was part of a broader effort to integrate EAOs into Myanmar's national peace process. In response to China's mediation efforts, the MNDAA also once agreed to a temporary ceasefire with the Myanmar military, which lasted from late 2018 through April 2019 (Kokang News, 2019).

Coercion, 2023–2025

The relationship between China and the MNDAA underwent a fundamental transformation following the launch of Operation 1027 in late 2023, when the MNDAA and its allied groups rapidly expanded their territorial control in northern Shan State. In response to the escalating conflict, China implemented a series of restrictive measures aimed at curbing the MNDAA's operational capacity and preventing further destabilisation. These measures, including Internet censorship, economic sanctions, infrastructure disruptions, and extraterritorial law enforcement, exemplify a coercive relationship in which an external state seeks to constrain a rebel group's activities through non-military means.

One of the earliest coercive measures China imposed on the MNDAA was the curtailment of its access to Chinese social media platforms. In December 2023, at the peak of the MNDAA's military offensive towards Laukkai, the capital of Kokang, Chinese mainstream social media platforms, including Sina Weibo, Douyin, and WeChat, suspended the MNDAA's official accounts as well as those suspected to be linked to its members. For years, these platforms had served as key tools for the MNDAA's propaganda, battlefield updates, and public engagement among the Chinese-speaking audience. As a result, the MNDAA was forced to shift its outreach to Western platforms such as Facebook and X, which are not widely used by its primary audience. The strategic timing of this digital suppression underscored its function as a deliberate coercive measure aimed at restricting the MNDAA's ability to consolidate power.

In addition, China imposed economic sanctions that further constrained the MNDAA's operational capacity. By early 2024, despite the MNDAA having recaptured more territory than it had previously lost, China sealed all border checkpoints adjacent to MNDAA-controlled areas (ISP, 2024). This measure not only effectively blocked the group's ability to generate revenue through cross-border trade but also cut off its access to essential imports, including fuel, construction materials, pharmaceuticals, and consumer goods (ISP, 2024). After the MNDAA launched attacks against Lashio, the largest town in northern Shan State, China terminated the supply of electricity and Internet services to Kokang, a region heavily reliant on Chinese infrastructure for basic utilities and communication networks (Wansai, 2024). The inability to provide stable public services in newly governed areas increased civilian discontent and undermined the MNDAA's governance legitimacy.

Finally, China employed indirect coercive measures through its 'long-arm jurisdiction'. In response to China's sanctions, the MNDAA initially attempted to secure logistical support from Wa State. However, China exerted external pressure on the UWSA leadership, warning that any material aid to the MNDAA would result in similar economic and territorial restrictions on the UWSA itself (ISP, 2024). This pressure led the UWSA to criminalise the trade and transportation of goods into MNDAA-controlled areas, reinforcing China's strategy of economic isolation. On 12 November 2024, the Wa State Judicial Committee publicly sentenced nine officials in Pangkham for abusing their official positions to transport supplies into MNDAA-held territories, sentencing them to 6 years in prison (Wa State News, 2024). This enforcement of internal trade restrictions further demonstrated the extension of China's coercion beyond direct territorial constraints, as it restricted the MNDAA's access to external logistical support through rebel peers.

A renewed partnership, 2025–?

The relationship between the two appears to have entered a renewed phase of partnership following a formal ceasefire agreement signed between the MNDAA and the Myanmar government in Kunming in January 2025 (FMPRC, 2025). This shift marks a departure from the coercive measures China had imposed in previous years and signals a strategic recalibration of its engagement with the MNDAA. The removal of economic restrictions, the restoration of cross-border trade, and the resumption of diplomatic and infrastructural cooperation all suggest a return to the pragmatic partnership that characterised their relations from 1989 to 2009.

One of the earliest and most tangible indicators of this renewed partnership was the reopening of all border crossings on 22 February 2025. The unrestricted movement of supplies, including large shipments of gasoline and diesel, demonstrates not only the lifting of sanctions but also China's active facilitation of the MNDAA's economic recovery. A parallel shift occurred within the UWSA, which had previously restricted the transportation of goods to MNDAA-controlled areas under Chinese pressure. Following direct instructions from Chinese authorities, the UWSA reversed its restrictions, once again permitting trade between Wa State and MNDAA-administered territories (BNI, 2025).

China's renewed economic engagement is further reflected in its infrastructure developments. Local governments, particularly in Zhenkang County, have resumed advancing projects designed to leverage cross-border trade as a means of revitalising regional economies (Yunnan Network, 2025). A key milestone was the early 2025 announcement by China State Construction Engineering Corporation confirming the successful completion and inspection of the Lincang Nanting River Bridge and its connecting roads. This infrastructure is critical to the development of the Qingshuihe Port Economic Zone within the Lincang National Border Economic Cooperation Zone, underscoring China's new commitment to deepening economic integration between Kokang and Yunnan (CSCEC, 2025).

Beyond economic and infrastructural cooperation, another significant indicator of China's policy shift has been the reinstatement of the MNDAA's official accounts on Chinese social media platforms. This move reverses previous information suppression measures, which China had used as a tool to restrict the MNDAA's political visibility. The MNDAA leadership has actively responded to this realignment by publicly reaffirming its commitment to China's diplomatic and economic vision for the region. In his 2025 Chinese New Year message, the MNDAA's commander, Peng Deren, emphasised the organisation's dedication to China's peace-promotion policies and its role in fostering dialogue in Myanmar. He also expressed the MNDAA's intent to integrate into China's Belt and Road Initiative framework (Kokang News, 2025). This emphasis on leveraging Chinese investment and fostering economic collaboration signals a strategic shift – one that prioritises accommodation and alignment with China's regional objectives over previous resistance.

Discussion

The case of China and the MNDAA demonstrates that external state–rebel relations are dynamic and multi-dimensional rather than static or unidirectional. Over the past several decades, China's engagement with the Kokang-based insurgent movement has transitioned through distinct phases of alliance, partnership, coercion, and renewed

Table 3. The relationships between China and the MNDAA.

Time period	Nature	Type	Key interactions
1967–1980 (China–CPB)	Cooperative	Alliance	Direct military support
1989–2009		Partnership	Economic cooperation, cross-border trade, governance collaboration
2009–2023			Mediation, diplomatic engagement, political visibility
2023–2025	Conflictual	Coercion	Sanctions, media suppression, diplomatic pressure
2025–	Cooperative	Partnership	Mediation, cross-border trade, governance collaboration, political visibility

partnership. As summarised in Table 3, the proposed typology captures both the sequence of these transitions and the thematic factors defining each phase.

The relationship began as an external alliance during the Cold War, when China provided the CPB, the MNDAA’s precursor, with military aid, training, and logistical support grounded in shared ideological and strategic objectives. When China’s foreign policy shifted under Deng Xiaoping towards economic modernisation and pragmatic regional engagement, this military support gradually waned. While the MNDAA should not be treated as organisationally identical to the CPB, it emerged as the CPB’s successor in Kokang after the CPB’s collapse in 1989 and inherited key elements of its territorial base, leadership networks, and cross-border ties with China. Following the CPB’s collapse, the MNDAA retained the China connection, yet the relationship evolved into a partnership characterised by trade, cross-border governance, and development cooperation. China avoided direct military involvement, instead facilitating Kokang’s economic integration with its Yunnan province and supporting the MNDAA’s de facto governance under a ceasefire with the Myanmar government. The Kokang Incident of 2009 marked the beginning of a more discreet partnership. Losing territorial control constrained the MNDAA’s overt cooperation, prompting the two sides to rely on indirect channels such as diplomatic mediation, humanitarian assistance, and social media platforms. In China, where cyberspace is strictly regulated by the state, both the presence and portrayal of individuals or organisations in the media are direct manifestations of state policy (Tai and Fu, 2020), and therefore, this could be seen as a clear signal of tacit state approval. Even after Myanmar designated the MNDAA a terrorist organisation and Facebook banned its page in 2019 (Meta, 2019), the group remained active in China’s digital sphere, signalling continued though carefully managed cooperation. The typology also captures the subsequent shift from partnership to coercion, as seen during Operation 1027 (2023–2025). In response to the MNDAA’s military escalation, China imposed trade restrictions, economic sanctions, and digital censorship to constrain the group’s operations without resorting to direct military confrontation. The most recent phase, emerging after 2025, signals a return to partnership: China lifted economic restrictions, reopened border trade, and reinstated the MNDAA’s access to social media platforms.

Much of the existing literature on China’s engagement with Myanmar’s rebel groups portrays Beijing in terms such as support, sponsorship, influence, or leverage (Adhikari, 2021; Kobayashi and King, 2022; Roy, 2022; USIP, 2024). Correspondingly, rebels are frequently depicted as Beijing-backed or as Chinese proxies, or as actors operating under

Beijing's pressure (Han, 2017; Lin, 2025; Lintner, 2021). These formulations traverse historical periods without considering the nuance in engagement. The MNDAA, like other EAOs, has alternately been described as China's proxy or as a recipient of support, yet these labels obscure the transition from military alignment in the CPB era to economic, humanitarian, and governance cooperation after 1989.

The application of the typology to the China–MNDAA case demonstrates how this framework addresses the analytical gaps left by earlier approaches. The MNDAA–China relationship reveals how such interactions can be cooperative and conflictual. The transition from China's military assistance to the CPB to its later non-military partnership with the MNDAA cannot be captured by sponsorship or delegation models that assume enduring patron–client control. Instead, it reflects a pragmatic recalibration driven by mutual interests in border stability and development. China's involvement in ADP, humanitarian relief, and joint border security operations illustrates a form of cross-border cooperation that goes beyond the remit of conventional 'support'. Similarly, the coercive measures during Operation 1027, such as trade restrictions, economic sanctions, and digital censorship, represent non-kinetic forms of constraint rarely accounted for in frameworks focused solely on cooperation. The case also underscores the distinct features of external state–rebel relations. China's mediation during the 2017–2019 and 2023 Kunming peace talks demonstrates how external actors need to balance engagement with both rebels and incumbent governments. These dynamics defy frameworks that assume a shared sovereign space and treat external and incumbent states as analytically interchangeable.

Equally important, this framework restores rebel agency to the analysis. The MNDAA has consistently acted as an autonomous political and military actor rather than a passive client. It leveraged cooperative phases to attract Chinese investment, consolidate governance capacity, and sustain its legitimacy, while using conflictual periods to expand territorial control and renegotiate its position vis-à-vis both the Myanmar military and Chinese authorities. This reciprocal adaptation challenges the hierarchical assumptions embedded in proxy-war models and the instrumental logic of state-centric approaches. Recognising rebel agency not only refines the empirical understanding of the China–MNDAA case, but also broadens the theoretical lens for analysing external state–rebel relations more generally.

Conclusion

This article has developed a conceptual typology to capture the diverse and evolving nature of external state–rebel relationships. Drawing from and moving beyond existing frameworks, such as proxy-war and state–armed group typologies, it argues that external engagement with rebels cannot be understood solely in supportive terms. Rather, these relationships encompass both cooperative and conflictual dimensions that shift across time, domains, and strategic contexts. The fourfold typology introduced here, comprising alliance, partnership, coercion, and confrontation, distinguishes interactions along two analytical dimensions: cooperative versus conflictual relationships, and the presence or absence of military means. By linking these dimensions to specific mechanisms such as military assistance, diplomatic mediation, economic cooperation, sanctions, and cross-border governance, the typology offers a comprehensive framework. This design enables scholars to classify the relationships between external states and rebels more precisely and to trace their transformations over time.

Applied to the case of China and the MNDAA, the typology demonstrates its analytical utility. It reveals how the relationship evolved from a communist alliance to a pragmatic partnership centred on economic and governance cooperation, then shifted towards coercion during Operation 1027 through non-military means, and finally returned to partnership. This longitudinal trajectory highlights the nonlinear and adaptive nature of external state–rebel relations, which earlier frameworks have struggled to capture.

Beyond its descriptive value, the typology advances existing works in two significant ways. First, it disaggregates what previous studies have treated as undifferentiated ‘support’ or ‘influence’, identifying multiple empirically observable modes of interaction and linking each to distinct domains of engagement. This approach allows researchers to analyse not merely whether states engage with rebels, but also how and through what mechanisms. Second, it clarifies the actor configuration by explicitly distinguishing external states from incumbent governments and rebels from other NSAGs. This correction addresses a long-standing conceptual ambiguity and enhances the framework’s comparative and analytical precision.

Looking ahead, the typology opens several avenues for further research. Future studies could apply it comparatively across different regional and temporal contexts, including Russia’s engagement with separatist groups in Ukraine, Iran’s ties to Middle Eastern militias, or Turkey’s involvement with Syrian factions, to test its broader applicability. Quantitative researchers may employ the framework’s dimensions as coding criteria for new datasets, enabling systematic measurement of external state–rebel relationships over time. These efforts could identify potential predictors, such as territorial control, regime type, economic interdependence, international pressure, ideological alignment, and shifts in an external state’s relations with incumbent governments, that drive movement between cooperative and conflictual relationships. Doing so would not only extend the typology’s analytical reach, but also strengthen its potential to explain and anticipate how the two actors recalibrate their engagement.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Consent to participate

Not applicable

Consent for publication

Not applicable

ORCID iD

Yaolong Xian  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5855-5557>

References

- Adhikari M (2021) Peacebuilding with ‘Chinese characteristics’? Insights from China’s engagement in Myanmar’s peace process. *International Studies Review* 23(4): 1699–1726.
- Al Jazeera (2022) Saudi Aramco’s Jeddah oil depot hit by Houthi attack. *Al Jazeera*, 25 March. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/25/saudi-aramco-jeddah-storage-facility-hit-by-attack> (accessed 24 February 2025).
- Allison R (2013) Russia and Syria: Explaining alignment with a regime in crisis. *International Affairs* 89(4): 795–823.

- Ameyaw-Brobbe T (2024) Unholy alignment and boomerang civil conflicts: Examining how conflicts beget conflicts through external states support for rebels. *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 35(1): 51–79.
- AP News (2024) Ethnic armed groups in Myanmar claim capture of regional military headquarters and gem mining center. *AP News*, 25 July. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-mogok-lashio-shan-kokang-taang-mndaa-e1d1b94abdc78ac8048ca39ffbf2d341> (accessed 28 February 2025).
- Bacon T (2018) Slipping the Leash? Pakistan's relationship with the Afghan Taliban. *Survival* 60(5): 159–180.
- Barter SJ (2013) State proxy or security dilemma? Understanding anti-rebel militias in civil war. *Asian Security* 9(2): 75–92.
- Berkowitz JM (2018) Delegating terror: Principal–agent based decision making in state sponsorship of terrorism. *International Interactions* 44(4): 709–748.
- Berkowitz JM (2024) Success or shirking in terror: Control mechanisms in state sponsored terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 38: 88–108.
- Bert W (1985) Chinese policy toward Burma and Indonesia: A post-Mao perspective. *Asian Survey* 25(9): 963–980.
- Berti B (2016) What's in a name? Re-conceptualizing non-state armed groups in the Middle East. *Palgrave Communications* 2(1): 16089.
- Berti B and Guzansky Y (2014) Saudi Arabia's foreign policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a new chapter? *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 8(3): 25–34.
- BNI (2025) China reopens border crossings to MNDAA-controlled areas. *BNI*, 22 January. Available at: <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/china-reopens-border-crossings-mndaa-controlled-areas> (accessed 3 March 2025)
- Boeke S and Schuurman B (2015) Operation 'serval': A strategic analysis of the French intervention in Mali, 2013–2014. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38(6): 801–825.
- Brenner D and Han E (2021) Forgotten conflicts: Producing knowledge and ignorance in security studies. *Journal of Global Security Studies* 7(1): ogab022.
- Byman D (2022) Understanding, and misunderstanding, state sponsorship of terrorism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 45(12): 1031–1049.
- Byman D and Kreps SE (2010) Agents of destruction? Applying principal-agent analysis to state-sponsored terrorism. *International Studies Perspectives* 11(1): 1–18.
- Carey SC, Colaresi MP and Mitchell NJ (2015) Governments, informal links to militias, and accountability. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(5): 850–876.
- Çevik S (2022) Turkey's military operations in Syria and Iraq. *SWP Comment*. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) (37/2022). Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs.
- China Youth Daily (2002) Laizi zhongguo jindu yixian de tebie baogao [Special report from the front line of counter-narcotics]. Available at: https://zqb.cyol.com/content/2002-06/26/content_480092.htm (accessed 25 February 2025).
- ChinaNews (2004) Yunnan jingfang jiji tuijin jindu guoji hezuo yi qude shizhi jinzhan [Yunnan police actively promote international cooperation on anti-drugs, and substantial progress has been made]. *ChinaNews*, 29 July. Available at: <https://www.chinanews.com/news/2004year/2004-07-29/26/465578.shtml> (accessed 25 February 2025).
- CNN (2025) Israel strikes Yemen after Houthis fire new type of missile. *CNN*, 28 August. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2025/08/24/middleeast/israel-yemen-houthi-missile-intl> (accessed 20 February 2026).
- Coggins BL (2015) Rebel diplomacy: Theorizing violent non-state actors' strategic use of talk. In: Arjona A, Kasfir N and Mampilly Z (eds) *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, 1st edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.98–118.
- Corradi E (2023) Beyond armed competition: The logic of rebel groups' alliance formation. *Civil Wars* 25(2–3): 249–267.
- Corradi E (2025) 'Talkin' 'bout a revolution'? The strategic narratives of the Syrian Democratic Council. *Media, War & Conflict*. Epub ahead of print May 2025.
- Costantini I and Donelli F (2022) Sponsor-proxy dynamics between decentered multipolarity and non-state actors: Evidence from the MENA region. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. Epub ahead of print January 2022.
- Crisis Group (2017) Bab al-Mandab, Yemen. Crisis Group. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-usisrael-trigger-list/flashpoints/bab-al-mandab-yemen> (accessed 24 February 2025).
- Crisis Group (2023) A new escalation of armed conflict in Myanmar. Crisis Group. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/new-escalation-armed-conflict-myanmar> (accessed 21 September 2024).

- CSCEC (2025) Yunnan canglin nantinghe daqiao ji llianjiexian gongcheng tongguo jiaogong yanshou [Yunnan Lincang Nanting River Bridge and connecting line project passed the handover acceptance]. Available at: https://www.cscec.com.cn/xwzx_new/zqydt_new/202502/3856973.html (accessed 4 March 2025).
- DeVotta N (2009) The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the lost quest for separatism in Sri Lanka. *Asian Survey* 49(6): 1021–1051.
- Duyvesteyn I (2017) Rebels & legitimacy; an introduction. *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28(4–5): 669–685.
- Eastern Shan State News (2022) Peng jiaoheng tongzhi zhuidao dahui zai shanbang dongbu disi tequ juxing [Comrade Peng Jiaoheng's memorial service was held in Mongla, the capital of the fourth special administrative region in Shan State-East]. *Eastern Shan State News*, 29 March. Available at: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/80_yy4aJCJg4jUuFdLTog (accessed 28 February 2025).
- Englehart NA (2016) Non-state armed groups as a threat to global security: What threat, whose security? *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1(2): 171–183.
- Faheem M and Khan MM (2022) Recognition of the Taliban government in Afghanistan and international community. *Strategic Studies* 42(1): 81–96.
- Farasoo A (2021) Rethinking proxy war theory in IR: A critical analysis of principal–agent theory. *International Studies Review* 23(4): 1835–1858.
- Firmian FM (2021) Strengthening the US partnership with the Syrian democratic forces. *Survival* 63(6): 159–182.
- FMPRC (2025) Foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning's regular press Conference on January 20, 2025. Available at: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202501/t20250120_11541005.html (accessed 3 March 2025).
- Fortna VP (2015) Do terrorists win? Rebels' use of terrorism and civil war outcomes. *International Organization* 69(3): 519–556.
- FPNCC (2020) FPNCC Jiu Cici Xiang Zhongguo Juanzeng 48 Wange Kouzhao Suo Fabu De Xinwengao [FPNCC press release on the donation of over 480,000 medical masks to China]. Available at: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/PKIAe71YlwMOaliMnyfmTg> (accessed 19 May 2025).
- Global Times (2009) Myanmar conflict subsiding. Available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/462483.shtml> (accessed 2 March 2025).
- Gunter MM (2015) Iraq, Syria, Isis and the Kurds: Geostrategic concerns for the U.S. and Turkey. *Middle East Policy* 22(1): 102–111.
- Guribye E (2013) 'Quislings': Barriers to linking social capital amongst members of pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam non-governmental organizations in Norway in a Post-conflict situation. *Journal of Civil Society* 9(3): 233–247.
- Han E (2017) Geopolitics, ethnic conflicts along the border, and Chinese foreign policy changes toward Myanmar. *Asian Security* 13(1): 59–73.
- Herbolzheimer K (2016) Innovations in the Colombian peace process. *NOREF, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*. Available at: https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/NOREF_CR_Report_Colombia%20Innovations_final.pdf (accessed 27 April 2026).
- Höglund K and Svensson I (2011) Should I stay or should I go? Termination as a tactic and Norwegian mediation in Sri Lanka. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research* 4(1): 12–32.
- Huang R (2016) Rebel diplomacy in civil war. *International Security* 40(4): 89–126.
- Huang R, Silverman D and Acosta B (2022) Friends in the profession: Rebel leaders, international social networks, and external support for rebellion. *International Studies Quarterly* 66(1): sqab085.
- Hughes GA (2014) Syria and the perils of proxy warfare. *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25(3): 522–538.
- Ifeng (2015) Tongmengjun yu mianju jiaozhan peng jiaoheng: huijia tanqin daizhe zhenqiang zhenpao [The MNDAA fought with the Burmese army. Peng Jiaoheng: Went home to visit family with real guns and artillery]. Available at: http://phtv.ifeng.com/a/20150429/41071407_0.shtml (accessed 2 March 2025).
- Irrawaddy T (2024) Tensions high on Myanmar Border as Thai troops demand UWSA withdrawal. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/tensions-high-on-myanmar-border-as-thai-troops-demand-uwsa-withdrawal.html> (accessed 24 February 2025).
- ISP (2023) *Operation 1027: Will All Roads Lead to Laukkai or Naypyitaw?* 10 November. The Institute for Strategy and Policy. Available at: <https://ispmyanmar.com/op-17/> (accessed 27 April 2026).
- ISP (2024) Sanctions with Chinese characteristics: The case of Myanmar. Available at: <https://ispmyanmar.com/sanctions-with-chinese-characteristics-the-case-of-myanmar/> (accessed 2 March 2025).
- Iwami T (2016) Understanding Japan's peacebuilding in concept and practice. *East Asia* 33(2): 111–132.
- Jahanbani N and Levy SW (2024) Iran's proxy war strategy. In: Moghadam A, Rauta V and Wyss M (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*. London: Routledge, pp.340–353.

- Jakobsen PV (2016) Coercive diplomacy. In: Constantinou CM, Kerr P and Sharp P (eds) *The SAGE handbook of diplomacy*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage, pp.476–486.
- Jo H, Yi J and Barrett J (2025) Humanitarian rebels? Rebel governance and international humanitarian engagement. *International Politics* 62(2): 336–357.
- Joshi M (2023) Rebel diplomacy and negotiated settlement in civil wars. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 26: 940–964.
- Karlén N (2017) The legacy of foreign patrons: External state support and conflict recurrence. *Journal of Peace Research* 54(4): 499–512.
- Knights M and Van Wilgenburg W (2021) *Accidental Allies: The US-SDF Partnership against the Islamic State*. London; New York; Washington, D.C: I.B. Tauris; Washington Institute for Near East Policy.
- Knights M and Van Wilgenburg W (2022) *Accidental Allies: The U.S.-Syrian Democratic Forces against the Islamic State*. London; New York; Oxford; New Delhi, India; Sydney, NSW, Australia: I.B. Tauris.
- Kobayashi Y and King J (2022) Myanmar's strategy in the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor: A failure in hedging? *International Affairs* 98(3): 1013–1032.
- Kokang News (2015) Guogan xizunwang wei guogan minzu zhengyi shiye mujuan 40 liang motuoche de changyishu [Kokang Information Network's initiative to collect donations of 40 motorcycles for the cause of justice for the Kokang people]. Available at: <http://kokang888.com/thread-1680-1-1.html> (accessed 28 February 2025).
- Kokang News (2019) Tongmeng jun geming licheng jianyao huigu [A brief review of the MNDAA]. Available at: https://kokang123.blogspot.com/2019/02/blog-post_14.html (accessed 28 February 2025).
- Kokang News (2025) Peng deren zongshuji 2025 xinnian xianci [General Secretary Peng Deren's 2025 New Year message]. Available at: https://kokang123.blogspot.com/2025/01/2025_28.html (accessed 4 March 2025).
- Koktsidis PI (2013) Nipping an insurgency in the Bud—Part II: The success and limits of non-military coercion in FYR Macedonia. *Ethnopolitics* 12(3): 290–306.
- Kotajoki J (2024) From confrontation to cooperation: Describing non-state armed group–UN interactions in peace operations. *International Studies Review* 26(2): viae015.
- Kramer T (2021) 'Neither war nor peace': Failed ceasefires and dispossession in Myanmar's ethnic borderlands. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48(3): 476–496.
- Krieg A and Rickli J-M (2018) Surrogate warfare: The art of war in the 21st century? *Defence Studies* 18(2): 113–130.
- Kuzio T (2018) Russia–Ukraine crisis: The blame game, geopolitics and national identity. *Europe-Asia Studies* 70(3): 462–473.
- Liang J (2001) History and the present situation of Burma's Guogan County. *China's Borderland History and Geography Studies* 10(2): 87–94.
- Lin HM (2025) The Lashio dilemma: How China's influence shaped a turning point in Myanmar's conflict. Available at: <https://thediplomaticinsight.com/the-lashio-dilemma-in-myanmars-conflict/> (accessed 16 October 2025).
- LincangGov (2014) Qingshuihe kouan qingkuang jieshao [Briefing on the situation of the Qingshuihe Border Crossing]. Available at: <https://www.lincang.gov.cn/info/2477/47662.htm> (accessed 27 February 2025).
- Lintner B (1999) *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948*, 2nd edn. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkwork Books.
- Lintner B (2019) *The United Wa State Army and Burma's Peace Process*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- Lintner B (2021) *The Wa of Myanmar and China's Quest for Global Dominance*. European edn. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Loshkariov ID and Sushentsov AA (2016) Radicalization of Russians in Ukraine: From 'accidental' diaspora to rebel movement. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16(1): 71–90.
- McWeeney M, Cunningham KG and Bauer L (2025) Rebel actors and legitimacy building. *International Politics* 62(2): 269–290.
- Maher D and Pieper M (2021) Russian intervention in Syria: Exploring the nexus between regime consolidation and energy transnationalisation. *Political Studies* 69(4): 944–964.
- Malejacq R (2017) From rebel to Quasi-State: Governance, diplomacy and legitimacy in the midst of Afghanistan's wars (1979–2001). *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28(4–5): 867–886.
- Meta (2019) Banning more dangerous organizations from Facebook in Myanmar. Available at: <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/02/dangerous-organizations-in-myanmar/> (accessed 4 March 2025).
- Mumford A (2013) Proxy warfare and the future of conflict. *The RUSI Journal* 158(2): 40–46.

- Nadarajah S and Sriskandarajah D (2005) Liberation struggle or terrorism? The politics of naming the LTTE. *Third World Quarterly* 26(1): 87–100.
- Ong A (2018) Producing intransigence: (Mis)understanding the United Wa State Army in Myanmar. *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 40(3): 449–474.
- Outzen R (2025) Costly incrementalism: U.S. PKK policy and relations with Türkiye. *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 14(1): 20–41.
- Pepinsky TB (2019) The return of the single-country study. *Annual Review of Political Science* 22(1): 187–203.
- Petrosyan M (2024) The role of non-state actors in modern warfare: The case of Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 26(2): 149–163.
- Phillips BJ and Greene KT (2022) Where is conflict research? Western Bias in the literature on armed violence. *International Studies Review* 24(3): viac038.
- Phillips C (2020) *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, New edn. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Popovic M (2017) Fragile proxies: Explaining rebel defection against their state sponsors. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29(5): 922–942.
- Pwint NLH (2020) China provides high-tech COVID-19 lab in WA state. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/myanmar-covid-19/china-provides-high-tech-covid-19-lab-wa-state.html> (accessed 19 May 2025).
- Rauta V (2020) Proxy warfare and the future of conflict: Take two. *The RUSI Journal* 165(2): 1–10.
- Reiter D (2022) Command and military effectiveness in rebel and hybrid battlefield coalitions. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45(2): 211–233.
- Reno W (2011) *Warfare in Independent Africa*, 1st edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/9780511993428/type/book> (accessed 6 February 2025)
- Roy C (2022) China's grand strategy and Myanmar's peace process. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 22(1): 69–99.
- Saad A (2019) Challenging the sponsor-proxy model: The Iran–Hizbullah relationship. *Global Discourse* 9(4): 627–650.
- Salehyan I (2007) Transnational rebels: Neighboring states as sanctuary for rebel groups. *World Politics* 59(2): 217–242.
- Salehyan I (2010) The delegation of war to rebel organizations. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54(3): 493–515.
- Salehyan I, Siroky D and Wood RM (2014) External rebel sponsorship and civilian abuse: A principal-agent analysis of wartime atrocities. *International Organization* 68(3): 633–661.
- San-Akca B (2016) *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schneekener U (2009) *Spoilers or Governance Actors? Engaging Armed Non-State Groups in Areas of Limited Statehood*. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.
- Seekins DM (1997) Burma-China relations: Playing with fire. *Asian Survey* 37(6): 525–539.
- Sina (2003) 云南镇康县积极开展国际替代种植禁毒合作 [Zhenkang County, Yunnan Province, is actively engaged in international cooperation on counter-narcotics through alternative development]. Available at: <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2003-02-17/1335911222.html> (accessed 25 February 2025).
- Sina (2004) Yunnan lincangshi mengding kouan shengji wei guojia yilei kouan [Mengding Port in Lincang, Yunnan upgraded to a Class I national port]. Available at: <https://news.sina.com.cn/o/2004-11-18/09414273054s.shtml> (accessed 27 February 2025).
- Sina (2006) Zhongguo yuanzhu wandun dami huanjie mianbei liangshi jinzhang [China aids 10,000 tons of rice to ease famine in northern Myanmar]. Available at: <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2006-09-20/095110065341s.shtml> (accessed 25 February 2025).
- Sina (2008) Jizhe myji miandian jingsanjiao jietu yannong yong ganze quzhu yinsu [Reporter witnesses drug rehabilitation in Myanmar's Golden Triangle: Tobacco farmers use sugar cane to banish poppies]. Available at: <https://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/20080626/02202297746.shtml> (accessed 25 February 2025).
- Slantchev BL (2005) Military coercion in interstate crises. *American Political Science Review* 99(4): 533–547.
- Snyder GH (1990) Alliance theory: A neorealist first cut. *Journal of International Affairs* 44: 103–123.
- Staniland P (2012) States, insurgents, and wartime political orders. *Perspectives on Politics* 10(2): 243–264.
- Staniland P (2021) *Ordering Violence: Explaining Armed Group-state Relations from Conflict to Cooperation*, 1st edn. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/cornell-scholarship-online/book/42265> (accessed 18 September 2024).

- Sun Y (2017) *China and Myanmar's Peace Process*. U.S. Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12188> (accessed 8 February 2025).
- Sun Y (2019) Why China is sceptical about the peace process. Available at: <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/why-china-is-sceptical-about-the-peace-process/> (accessed 28 February 2025).
- Szekely O (2016) A friend in need: The impact of the Syrian civil war on Syria's clients (A principal-agent approach). *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12(3): 450–468.
- Tai Y and Fu K (2020) Specificity, conflict, and focal point: A systematic investigation into social media censorship in China. *Journal of Communication* 70(6): 842–867.
- Tamm H (2016) The origins of transnational alliances: Rulers, rebels, and political survival in the Congo wars. *International Security* 41(1): 147–181.
- Thaler KM (2021) Delegation, sponsorship, and autonomy: An integrated framework for understanding armed group–state relationships. *Journal of Global Security Studies* 7(1): ogab026.
- The Irrawaddy (2024) Myanmar regime raises the White Flag in Kokang zone on China border in Shan State. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/war-against-the-junta/myanmar-regime-raises-the-white-flag-in-kokang-zone-on-china-border-in-shan-state.html> (accessed 22 September 2024).
- TNI (2010) *Alternative Development or Business as Usual?*. 15 November. Transnational Institute. Available at: <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/alternative-development-or-business-as-usual> (accessed 27 February 2025)
- Topal SA (2025) Pathways to cooperation: A relational theory of rebel alliance formation. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 69(2–3): 268–295.
- USIP (2024) Myanmar's collapsing military creates a crisis on China's border. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/04/myanmars-collapsing-military-creates-crisis-chinas-border> (accessed 16 October 2025).
- Voller Y (2022) Rethinking armed groups and order: Syria and the rise of militiocracies. *International Affairs* 98(3): 853–871.
- Wa State News (2024) Wabang sifawei zai bangkang juxing gongpan dahui [Wa State Judicial Commission Holds Public Trial in Pangkham]. Available at: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/r3jQUCiW0LS1uIPEL026ng> (accessed 2 March 2025).
- Walt SM (2013) *Origins of Alliances*. Cornell Studies in Security Affairs. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Wang S (2005) Miandian de guogan zu zuchen, laili, zhuangkuang ji kuaguo hudong [The Kokang of Myanmar: Ethnic name, origin, situation and transnational interactions]. *Journal of World Peoples Studies* 5: 70–77.
- Wansai S (2024) MNDAA, TNLA, SAC AND CHINESE MEDIATION: Another Chinese brokered Haigeng Ceasefire in the making?. Available at: <https://english.shannews.org/archives/27549> (accessed 3 March 2025).
- Wither J (2020) Outsourcing warfare: Proxy forces in contemporary armed conflicts. *Security and Defence Quarterly* 31(4): 17–34.
- Wood RM and Sullivan C (2015) Doing harm by doing good? The negative externalities of humanitarian aid provision during civil conflict. *The Journal of Politics* 77(3): 736–748.
- Woods K and Kramer T (2012) *Financing Dispossession: China's Opium Substitution Programme in Northern Burma*. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute.
- Xian Y (2021) EAOs & China: Two letters from Northern Myanmar to the CCP. Available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/eaos-china-two-letters-from-northern-myanmar-to-the-ccp/> (accessed 25 March 2025).
- Yüksel E (2020) Turkey's approach to proxy war in the Middle East and North Africa. *Security and Defence Quarterly* 31(4): 137–152.
- Yunnan Network (2025) Zhenkang xian weibu tuijin nansan kouan shengge jianshe [Zhenkang County steadily pushes forward the upgrading construction of the Nansan Border Crossing]. Available at: <http://m.yunnan.cn/system/2025/02/10/033388291.shtml> (accessed 3 March 2025).
- Zhang N (2024) Fighting for international communism? Two Beijing red guards in Burma. *THE Chinese Historical Review* 31(2): 147–169.