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**China's Engagement with
Ethnic Armed Organisations
in Myanmar's Shan and
Kachin States: Instruments,
Leverage, and Policy
Implications**

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Abstract

Myanmar's post-2021 civil unrest has laid bare the country's fragility and the challenges it poses for the security of its neighbours. China shares a long border with Myanmar's restive Shan and Kachin states. These states are home to dozens of Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) that challenge the authority of Myanmar. All the EAOs are predominantly non-Bamar, minority-led armed organisations seeking some form of autonomy from the state. China, because of its geographical proximity and geopolitical interests, deals with these EAOs using a variety of instruments, both accommodative and coercive. This issue brief aims to decipher the aspect of China's relations with Shan and Kachin-based EAOs. What are the key instruments and leverage that are used by the Chinese since 2021? What is the nature of these ties? The brief argues that the ties between China and EAOs are not unilateral, where China has all the leverage. Instead, the relationship can be best described as asymmetrical interdependence where EAOs also exercise limited agency. By examining China's engagement with EAOs, the brief identifies policy lessons for Indian decision-makers.

Keywords: China-Myanmar Relations, Ethnic Armed Organisations, Shan State, Kachin State, Multi-Actor Diplomacy, Borderland Security, Chinese Leverage, China-Myanmar Economic Corridor

Introduction

Since independence, Myanmar has faced challenges to state-building from non-Bamar Ethnic Armed Organisations. The Karen National Union (KNU) emerged in 1949, just months after independence, to establish an independent Karen state (Graceffo, 2024). In 1961, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) was formed to demand autonomy for the resource-rich Kachin State. Post 1962 military coup, the challenges of state-building only worsened. Currently, around 20 EAOs operate in Myanmar (Cidale, 2025). The Shan and Kachin states, strategically located towards the country's border with China, are home to the majority of EAOs. Shan state is home to around 13-15 EAOs (Graceffo, 2025), whereas Kachin has two EAOs (Jaquet, 2013).

Historically, Myanmar's EAOs have not operated as mere domestic actors. Those based in the borderlands often maintain political, economic, social, and ethnic connections that extend across Myanmar's international boundaries into neighbouring countries such as China, India,

and Thailand. Consequently, these neighbouring states have maintained varying forms of contact with armed non-state actors to manage border security and other cross-border concerns. Such engagement has been particularly extensive in China's relations with EAOs operating in Shan and Kachin States along the China-Myanmar frontier. These complex ties encompass border management with de facto authorities such as the United Wa State Army, efforts to counter Myanmar-based cybercrime networks, access to critical rare-earth minerals, occasional mediation between the military junta and EAOs, and the protection of Chinese Belt and Road Initiative projects, including the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.

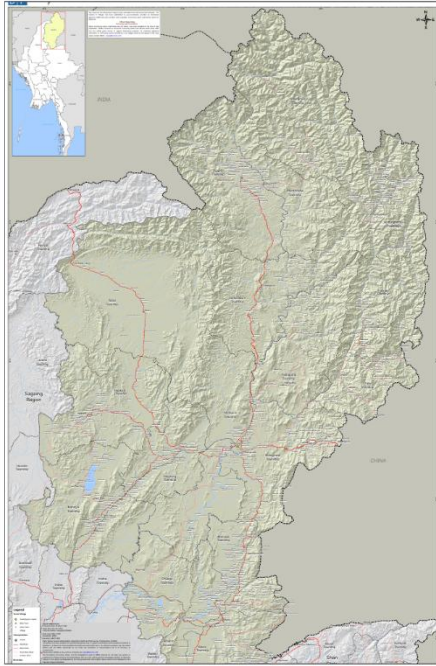
After the 2021 coup, EAOs, along with the National Unity Government (NUG) led forces, emerged as major challengers to the junta regime. Given the historical importance of the EAOs, China employs a variety of instruments and leverage to achieve its objectives in the aftermath of the latest coup. Given the country's complex ethnic landscape, the article examines the major Shan- and Kachin-based EAOs, the nature of their ties with China, and addresses the following questions: How has China historically dealt with Shan and Kachin-based EAOs? What instruments of engagement, leverage, and constraints operate within this complex network of relationships?

The Northern EAO Landscape

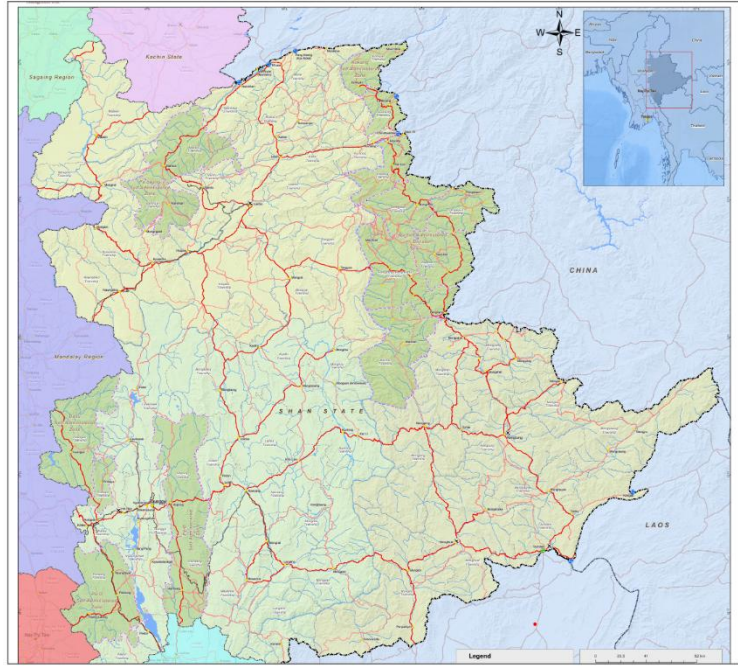
Shan State borders China's Yunnan Province, while Kachin State borders both Yunnan Province and the Tibet Autonomous Region, spanning around 2000 Kilometres (SCMP, 2023). Kachin also shares a long international boundary with India to the west. Meanwhile, Shan State also shares a boundary with Laos towards its east and Thailand towards its south. Their geographical location places them at the centre of South Asia, China, and Continental Southeast Asia. The topography is notably mostly comprised of mountains and rugged highlands, making it strategically difficult to govern from the plains of Bamar-majority regions. Scholars like James Scott consider this region as the core part of the so-called historical *Zomia* where the population has historically resisted the rule of the lowland states in the region (Scott, 2009). The post-independence era is no different, as these states contest the majority Bamar rule throughout most of the independence period of the country.

Map 1: Maps of Kachin and Shan States

Kachin State



Shan State



Source: Myanmar Information Management Unit

This issue brief focuses on six EAOs. Selection of these organisations is based on the following four criteria: proximity to the Chinese border, territorial control, military capacity, and significance for Chinese security and economic interests.

Among all the Shan and Kachin-based EAOs, the United Wa State Army (UWSA) is arguably the most important player because of its geographical proximity and historical relations with the Chinese government and the CCP (Lintner, 2019). According to an academic study, in 2021 UWSA maintained around 30,000 troops in the semi-autonomous Wa State (Tonnesson et al., 2022). Current estimates also place somewhat similar numbers. This makes it the largest EAO in the Shan State, and possibly the second largest in the country¹. The UWSA has historically been associated with large-scale narcotics production and trafficking in the Golden Triangle. Due to its proximity to China, UWSA has historically acquired sophisticated weaponry from China (Lintner, 2019). Since its formation in 1989, UWSA has

¹ Since 2021, Rakhine state's Arakan Army (AA) has emerged as the largest EAO in the country commanding around 40,000 regular troops (Rejwan, 2026).

maintained close ties with China, and this, in turn, provides leverage to the Chinese when it comes to their Myanmar policy.

Formed in 1961, by 2021, the KIA commanded around 10,000 troops composed mostly of ethnic Kachin and “dominated by Christian Baptists” (Tonnesson et al., 2022). Its principal area of operation lies in the Kachin state with “at least one brigade operating in northern Shan state” (Tonnesson et al., 2019). After the 2021 unrest, the outfit has clearly expanded substantially due to KIA's active participation in the anti-Junta coalition, unlike neutral organisations like the UWSA.

The other two Shan-based EAOs that share a direct border with the Chinese province of Yunnan are the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) (Tonnesson et al., 2022). MNDAA, NDAA, and UWSA all share a common past in the communist insurgency that plagued the region from 1948 to 1989. In 2021, the MNDAA was estimated to have around 3000-4000 troops, whereas NDAA's combined strength was around 5,000 active personnel.

Shan State Army North (SSA-N) doesn't have a substantial presence along the Yunnan border and operates primarily in central regions of the Shan State. The group was established in 1964 to pursue ethnic liberation of the Shan people (Lintner, 2019). For most of its Cold War history, the group actively aligned with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) for support. SSA-N was one of the foremost groups to enter into the ceasefire agreement in the aftermath of the collapse of CPB in 1989. The group also joined the UWSA-led bloc Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) in 2017 (Li, 2020). Historically, the group and its presence in the central Shan state act as a buffer between Myanmar's military and UWSA forces (Lintner, 2019). As a result, UWSA actively supports the group by providing arms and acting as its patron. This support was instrumental for the SSA-N as it has been involved in a conflict with the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) since 2015. In 2026, SSA-N continues to be a key player in the state, and the group continues to participate in the junta-led National Solidarity and Peacemaking Negotiation Committee (NSPNC) (ISP, 2026).

The contemporary TNLA grew in recent years as it was trained by the KIA while also receiving arms and support from the UWSA (Lintner, 2019). Located in the northern Shan State, the group shares a direct border with Yunnan Province. Along with MNDAA and AA, the TNLA is part of the Three Brotherhood Alliance (Thiha, 2025). During Operation 1027, launched in October 2023, and the subsequent phases of fighting, the TNLA captured several

strategically important towns and transport routes in northern Shan State; the group seized key townships like Namhkan, Nawnghkio, Hsipaw and Kyaukme. It also gained strategic access to the CMEC corridor.

China has engaged directly with these groups throughout their history, as managing these groups is central to China's primary interests in the region: economic corridors that pass through Myanmar, border security, and geopolitical leverage over Myanmar (Li, 2020). To protect these interests, China employs a variety of instruments that help it to maintain the complex security challenge.

China's Instruments of Engagement

When it comes to China's engagement with the EAOs, it adopts a differentiated approach based on its immediate and long-term interests, proximity of the EAOs to the Chinese borderland, and what leverage they provide to the Chinese. Hence, the Chinese have adopted a "multilayered and multiagency" approach (Thiha, 2025). The level of Chinese presence in Myanmar is directly dependent on "the intensity of the conflict and its spillover effect on China" (Sun, 2017). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that in the aftermath of the 2021 civil war, the intensity of Chinese interference in the domestic politics of Myanmar only increased dramatically. This section analyses key instruments of Chinese engagements with the EAOs since 2021.

Diplomatic Access and Multi-Actor Channels

China's historic ties and ethnic-geographical proximity make it well positioned to mediate in peace talks between the government and the EAOs. After the outbreak of the latest civil unrest in 2021, Deng Xijun, special envoy to Myanmar, met representatives of seven EAOs in China's Yunnan province before arriving in Naypyitaw in December 2022 (The Irrawaddy, 2022). This separate meeting comprised representatives of the Arakan Army (AA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), KIA, UWSA, SSPP, NDAA, and MNDAA. One representative from SSPP later said that China did caution the EAOs in the meeting that any outbreak of fighting post-2021 would destabilise the border (The Irrawaddy, 2022). Again, in February 2023, Chinese special envoy Deng Xijun met the representatives of these seven organisations "in the Mongla area of eastern Shan State" (Myanmar Now, 2023). He also visited a camp for internally displaced persons.

In March 2026, Deng Xijun again visited Naypyitaw to meet state officials. The Burmese Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged the “constructive” role of China in the country’s peace process (Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Myanmar, 2026). China’s diplomacy in the country is more than a traditional government-to-government engagement. Instead, China deals with a variety of state and non-state actors in the country. More importantly, there is acceptance of Chinese mediation efforts across these various state and non-state actors. This points to China’s multi-tiered approach when it comes to diplomacy in Myanmar, and it goes much beyond the visits of special envoys and high-ranking Chinese officials.

China has developed a multi-actor diplomatic strategy in Myanmar. This approach is based on a “pragmatic risk management” (Lynn, 2026). This includes maintaining direct channels of communication and engagement with state institutions, political parties, EAOs, and other influential domestic actors. Beijing treats relations with certain EAOs as instruments of border and economic security.

Coercive Border Instruments

When diplomacy fails, China also employs coercive instruments to pressure non-compliant EAOs. According to some analysts, China actively follows the “five cuts policy” in recent years against EAOs that “do not follow its wishes” (ISP, 2024). China, under this policy, actively denies five essentials i.e. electricity, water, internet, supply chains, and personnel. This denial of essentials is used only occasionally in case of EAOs that resist Chinese pressure or violate Beijing’s declared red lines. One such red line is the disruption of BRI infrastructure and trade, which includes rare earth minerals, between the two countries.

Mediation and Ceasefire Brokerage

Coined by ISP-Myanmar in 2025, the “Lashio Model” refers to China-brokered bilateral ceasefires between Myanmar’s Armed Forces and EAOs (ISP, 2026). The focus of this type of arrangement is mainly on local stabilisation, with protection of the BRI/CMEC infrastructure being a core component. Its local and immediate rather than any comprehensive national-level political reform. In simple words, this approach is primarily about conflict management.

The name comes from a China-brokered deal that forced the MNDAA to give up the strategic city of Lashio and facilitated the return of the strategic border town to the junta (Myint, 2025). Here, China intervened to protect its BRI infrastructure and reopen trade routes that are

essential for its economy. Since then, this model has been implemented against other EAOs based in northern Myanmar too (ISP, 2026).

Material and Security Patronage

Officially, China follows a policy of non-interference when it comes to providing material support to the EAOs (Sun, 2017). However, in reality, Chinese patronage of these EAOs is driven by pragmatism (Lynn, 2026). Historically, during the early period of the Cold War, there was support provided to the CPB; however, by the late 1980s, the end of Chinese support led to the disintegration of the CPB into smaller ethnic armed organisations like UWSA and MNDAA (Sun, 2017). EAOs continued to maintain the Cold War-era ties and networks across the border based on both ethnicity and old Communist Party ties.

Chinese arms and ammunition are often acquired using these unofficial networks. The extent of the Chinese government's involvement when it comes to the transfer of military hardware, essential commodities, infrastructure, and technological support is not clear. However, what cannot be denied is that the UWSA is one of the major beneficiaries of this sort of cross-border patronage. The non-state actor functions as a de facto state because of an arsenal of Chinese artillery, Man-Portable Air Defence Systems, armoured fighting vehicles, and heavy machine guns (Sun, 2017). It is well documented that organisations like UWSA then further supply these Chinese arms to smaller EAOs in Myanmar (Lintner, 2019).

However, when it comes to providing patronage for non-military materials like rare earth minerals, China does provide direct technical support (Soe, 2025). The rare earth mineral mines are largely located in the troubled northern borderlands of the Shan and Kachin states. When it comes to the movement of these minerals, the military junta, UWSA, and the Chinese government actively coordinate (Soe, 2025).

Asymmetric Interdependence: Chinese Leverage and Its Limits

Most of the literature on China-EAO ties treats them as unilateral relations in which Chinese holds the leverage while EAOs are constrained. In practice, the picture is more complicated. Chinese leverage derives from the EAOs' dependence on China's economy, border crossings, political and material patronage, and mediation capabilities. However, EAOs also hold certain leverage that makes China's economic and strategic position in the region

vulnerable. China is forced to intervene in periods of severe crisis because EAOs control significant border territory in its borderland with Myanmar. This vulnerability is further compounded by the fact that the CMEC projects pass through these vulnerable borderlands. The presence of rare earth minerals further makes these EAOs an important player in the region. As a result, the China-EAO relations can best be described as “asymmetric interdependence”.

Table 1: Comparative Mapping of Shan and Kachin State EAOs

EAO/Political Wing	Principal Area of Operation	China-border Proximity	Position Since 2021	Principal Source of Chinese Leverage
Kachin Independence Army (KIA)/Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO)	Kachin State, northern Shan State, parts of Sagaing and Mandalay regions	Controls significant borderland in Kachin State along Yunnan Province	1. Military aid provided to People's Defense Force (PDF): training and weapons. 2. Seized Rare Earth Hubs in late 2024.	1. Monopoly over Rare Earth Infrastructure. 2. Control over border trade/ “Five Cuts” Policy (electricity, water, internet, supply chains, and personnel)
United Wa State Army (UWSA)/United Wa State Party (UWSP)	Wa Self-Administered Division	Shares a direct border with China/Yunnan Province	Doesn't align with anti-junta forces.	1. Political Patronage 2. Advanced Chinese Military Hardware
Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)/Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party	Kokang Self-Administered Zone/Northern Shan State	Shares a direct border with China/Yunnan Province	1. Led Operation 1027 to recapture Kokang and Lashio 2. Gave up Lashio in 2025 under Chinese pressure 3. Fighting against TNLA	1. Geographic dependency 2. Han ethnic ties 3. Control over banking and trade
Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)/Palaung State Liberation Front	Northern Shan State	Shares direct border with China, controlling key highways	1. Core member of Three Brotherhood Alliance (3 BHA) 2. Coerced to sign ceasefire in 2025 and relinquish 5 towns to military junta. 3. Lost Kutkai to MNDAA	1. “Five Cuts” Policy 2. Control over BRI corridor
Shan State Army-North (SSA-N)/Shan State Progress Party	Central Shan State	No direct border; Wa state acts as buffer	Participated in 2026 stabilization talks with the military in Naypyidaw to reopen border trade routes	1. Buffer zone for Wa/China 2. Reliance on border trade
National Democratic Alliance Army-NDAA/Peace and Solidarity Committee	Eastern Shan State	Its administrative headquarters, Mong La, on the China-Myanmar border	Assurance to junta regarding strict neutrality	1. Economic dependency on Chinese tourism 2. Dependence on Yunnan Border for all trade

Source: Prepared by Author

Policy Implications and Recommendations

- ***Move Beyond a Junta-Centric Policy:*** China's complicated set of engagement with the EAOs means that a successful Myanmar policy has to be beyond the government-to-government ties. China's effective use of its relations with the EAOs has cemented China as an important player in the country.
- ***Institutionalise Multi-Actor Engagement:*** China has institutionalised its engagement with a variety of state and non-state actors in Myanmar. It deals with the state institutions, political parties, EAOs, and other influential domestic actors regularly. India must move away from episodic contacts and instead enhance its presence at various levels by embracing its own multi-actor engagement approach.
- ***Differentiate Among EAOs:*** Not all EAOs are detrimental to India's interests. Policymakers and analysts must move away from a simplistic one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to such actors. The level and nature of engagement must be case-specific and must depend on factors like EAOs' proximity to India, territorial control, their connection with Indian insurgent groups, attitude towards core Indian interests like connectivity projects, nature of ties with China, and their willingness to cooperate on common security challenges.
- ***Studying Growing Chinese Influence Over the Strategic Borderland Resources:*** To manage China's rise as a great power and its growing influence in India's neighbourhood, India must strengthen its understanding of Chinese activities in the region. More detailed studies are needed on every major aspect of China's engagement in North Myanmar.
- ***Develop Economic and Humanitarian Instruments:*** China's economic relationships and the EAOs' dependence on cross-border trade demonstrates the strategic value of sustained economic and humanitarian engagement. India should develop lawful trade, development and humanitarian instruments appropriate to Myanmar's western borderlands. India's northeast region also shares deep ethnic and historical ties with Myanmar's western borderlands. Historically, persistent infrastructure deficits in India's Northeast have constrained land-based connectivity with Myanmar.

Conclusion

The nature of China's ties with Shan and Kachin-based EAOs is a stark reminder that an effective Myanmar policy has to take into account the complex social and political context. Especially since 2021, after the military decided to completely capture state power, the authority of the centre has only weakened throughout the country. Since the 2021 coup, the military's territorial control has contracted considerably, while EAOs and resistance forces have acquired greater political and strategic significance. The EAOs have gained greater significance as actors, as some have decided to support the uprising while others profess neutrality. Either way, their importance is unquestionable. In such a situation, a closer understanding of their role and politics is important for policymakers. By looking at the Chinese-EAO ties, one can better decipher the role of EAOs and how to deal with such actors.

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