

GAUGING THE INFLUENCE OF CHINA'S PLA OVER THE RULING JUNTA IN MYANMAR

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Since the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, China has been a critical lifeline for the ruling military regime. However, the outsized political influence over the state-run institutions does not directly transfer to the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which operates primarily along the Chinese side of their shared borders. This analysis examines how the PLA operates in the bureaucracy of Chinese institutions. It elucidates the limitations of PLA influence, as punctuated by a CCP-led anti-corruption crackdown against top PLA officers and the growth of both private security companies (PSCs) and the influence of state-owned defense manufacturers.

Introduction

Understanding the extent of China's complex relationship with the ruling military-backed government requires comprehension of the intricate but tightly-managed relationships between China's formal institutions and the array of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) vying for control in the post-coup conflict environment. As China works to maintain influence over Southeast Asia's "last frontier," it also carefully controls its own state institutions, including the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The purpose of this issue brief is to analyze how the PLA operates within Myanmar,

while acknowledging both the limitations placed upon it and the potential for its influence among a myriad of regional actors.

In the post-2021 security environment in Myanmar, Beijing's ability to protect its own interests has steadily diminished over time. For instance, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a giant Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project, extends across the heart of the country into conflict-prone states, running from the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on the Bay of Bengal to Yunnan Province in China.

Cross-border trade has diminished between Yunnan and two Myanmar administrative regions, Shan State to China's southeast and Kachin State to its northwest. To make matters worse, state-sanctioned criminal organizations have created significant regional problems with neighboring Thailand,¹ ensnaring thousands of Chinese nationals² into scam center compounds operated by border militias in alliance with the ruling military regime. These pressing Chinese regional security concerns led to its tacit approval of "Operation 1027" in late 2023, an offensive against the Myanmar regime involving 15,000 fighters from three different groups, the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA).

The PLA does not explicitly operate in Myanmar, but rather along its borders. Through the Southern Theater Command, the PLA carries out periodic armed patrols near the Yunnan provincial border in southwest China, where EAOs have been fighting for territory in the adjacent Myanmar

administrative regions. In 2024, live-fire exercises consisted of armed patrols and joint air-ground patrols designed to build the capacity to block, control, and strike together.³ China also uses the live-fire drills as a deterrent and a warning to both the Tatmadaw and EAOs, particularly if the conflict spreads or endangers Chinese nationals living in the border areas.⁴

However, institutional relationships can be dissimilar at the ministerial and senior leadership levels, as well as in interpersonal relations. The diplomatic relationships, largely channeled through China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, appear pragmatic, but are far more influential due to the large number of institutions that are tightly-controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Power and influence are seen in earlier denials of recognition, evidenced in the long delay in granting Senior General Hlaing recognition as head of state, and the two-year gap before an official visit by then-Foreign Minister Qin Gang, which did not occur until May 2023.⁵ The tension in the state-level relationship also dates back to 2009, when then-Lieutenant General and Chief of the Bureau of Special Operations, Min Aung Hlaing led Tatmadaw ground operations against the MNDAA, a Chinese-backed Kokang militia, driving them out of Laukkai, a region of Shan State.⁶ This continued into 2015, when clashes between Myanmar troops and the MNDAA saw Myanmar blame China for providing weapons to Kokang rebels and order an airstrike on insurgents in the border regions, causing five Chinese casualties.⁷ A live-fire exercise by the PLA did not dissuade Myanmar from its offensive against the MNDAA.⁸ Unlike neighboring Thailand, where the military plays a role in back channel diplomacy, other Chinese state institutions are tasked with engagement with Myanmar's EAOs, including the MNDAA, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA),

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groups that received Chinese support after a brutal Burmese crackdown following the 8888 Uprising and subsequent sanctions by Western states on the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).⁹

It is against this backdrop that Chinese state officials, rather than the PLA, drive current security cooperation with Myanmar. This can be seen through the lens of Xi Jinping's Global Security Initiative (GSI), under which coordination has been driven by China's Assistant Minister for Public Security, Liu Zhongyi to tighten law enforcement cooperation along the Thai-Myanmar border.¹⁰ The contrast in power dynamics can also be seen in mediation efforts to force the MNDAA, an ethnic Kokang-Chinese group that operates along the shared border in northern Shan State, into a ceasefire in 2025. The efforts were conducted by China's Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Deng Xijun, who informed the UWSA that China would not accept the collapse of Myanmar's military-backed regime or the potential rise of a National Unity Government (NUG) and pressured the group to deny the MNDAA further food, fuel, weapons, or other provisions.¹¹ In these mediation efforts, it was the Envoy's Office rather than the Central Military Commission (CMC) which has primary authority over the PLA—or the PLA chain of command—that brokered cross-border closures, oversaw the detention of MNDAA commander Peng Daxun, coordinated electrical blackouts, and gathered relevant intelligence.¹² The layering, or separation of the PLA from Chinese state-level affairs is common, with recent interaction between junta officials and CMC-level officials coming relatively late, with Major-General Yang Yang, of the Central Military Commission meeting with then-Deputy Prime Minister Soe Win in May 2023 to promote “cooperation between the two armies”¹³ and a 2024 meeting between Myanmar's Defence Minister Tin Aung

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San and then-CMC Vice Chairman He Weidong in Beijing in September 2024.¹⁴

The aforementioned incidents indicate that the PLA is far more tightly controlled as an institution than is observed in other Southeast Asian contexts. The separation of state-level interactions from that of the PLA is a deliberate expression of CCP institutional control, and meetings between CMC officials and junta leaders should not be seen as personalist in nature, but rather through the lens of China's institutional command structures. Comparatively, a Thailand-Myanmar military-style relationship and its “khaki capital”—which refers to the accumulation of assets, holdings, and economic power within a nation's armed services for the purposes of political influence¹⁵—is precisely the type of institutional corruption that

the CCP would like to avoid. Thus, maneuvers by the PLA along the border regions, such as the previously mentioned unilateral live-fire drills in 2024 by the Southern Theater Command, were carried out under their respective institutional mandates.¹⁶

An Opening for the PLA in Myanmar?

With funding to the junta a clear priority, what remains to be seen is the extent of direct PLA involvement in Myanmar. Previous developments have included the creation of a joint security company, endorsed by the junta in October 2024 through an MoU, which paved the way for Chinese personnel to be deployed alongside

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the Tatmadaw to protect joint strategic and economic interests.¹⁷ Private security companies operating in Myanmar have been enabled by the State Administrative Council’s (SAC) passage of the Private Security Service Law in February 2025, which allowed foreign companies apply for licenses to establish private security companies (PSCs).¹⁸ The law also permits PLA soldiers to operate under the direction of PSCs such as the China Overseas Security Group, which protects key infrastructure projects, including joint China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines. Another example of insecurity came as a proposed train linking Muse along the Chinese border in Shan State to Kyaukphyu in Rakhine State was delayed because of Brotherhood Alliance advances across both states.¹⁹ A 2025 Lemkin Institute analysis noted that the blurring of lines between private security companies and direct PLA involvement in Myanmar has been made less opaque by reports from EAOs on social media alleging that Chinese troops, drone pilots, or drone trainers have been operating on Myanmar soil, with sightings of Chinese military convoys in northern Shan State.²⁰ Further, the dividing line between private security or military companies (PMCs), is blurred, as corporate leaders and rank-and-file personnel have come directly from the PLA, the People’s Armed Police, or other Chinese security ministries.²¹ Regardless, PSCs are likely the core motivation behind the expansion of these entities, particularly as the capacity of the Tatmadaw remains diminished and the probability of it being able to defend China’s economic assets continues to decline. Further blurring the rules of engagement for Chinese personnel operating either as active-duty PLA members or through a PSC, China has been reluctant to engage its military in ground operations. The last time Chinese forces were deployed in the region, in Vietnam in 1979, the outcome was less than favorable, with as many as 26,000 troops killed in action.²²

However, there are restrictions for PSCs on both ends. The 2025 Private Security Service Law requires that staff cannot be active-duty members of any foreign military, a provision that is in line with Myanmar's own 2008 constitutional ban on foreign forces. In addition, the law requires that 75 percent of hired private security staff be Myanmar citizens, with companies providing private security services required to comply with existing laws on weapons. However, this local requirement is not a complete deterrent, as PLA soldiers can simply resign their commissions in the PLA before assuming roles in PSCs, which can constitute a Chinese military presence in Myanmar without the diplomatic or political ramifications. A Soufan Center analysis in 2025 also identified the same tactic in Pakistan, where China had allegedly deployed personnel from PSCs to protect Chinese nationals working on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects in the country.²³

Institutional Corruption and Subsequent CCP Control of the PLA

A plausible explanation for the distinct lack of direct influence over the regime in Myanmar comes from China's anti-corruption campaign, seen in two major crackdowns: one in 2012 that saw 31 generals removed, and the other in January 2026, when more than 50 officers, including the PLA's top two uniformed officers, were removed. Firm control over the PLA was a major effort by Xi shortly after assuming power in 2012, with various units accused of corruption, profiteering, misappropriation of state resources, and bribery. The largest expulsion was that of Gen. Guo Boxiong, the former Vice-Chairman of the CMC from 2002 through 2012 and a Member of the Politburo, who was accused of using his influence to seek promotions for others and accepting bribes.²⁴ The second purge of PLA leadership saw the investigation of Generals Zhang Youxia and

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Liu Zhenli for corruption, with reports suggesting that they had leaked secrets to the United States.²⁵ Their investigations were seen as a continuation of the CCP's October 2025 plenum. However, the systematic removal of CMC officers was judged to be a calculated, long-term process by Xi,²⁶ as several were seen as sources of embarrassment for Beijing. In a specialized branch of the PLA known as the Rocket Force, corruption in the procurement process related to ballistic missiles led to reports of fuel being switched with water, and defective silo doors in fields located in Xinjiang.²⁷ However, these two crackdowns are part of a larger trend within Chinese institutions, as contradictory decision-making has undermined institutional logic. While there has been elements of personalist decision-making that allowed the PLA to have a greater degree of independence and consequently led to cronyism and the aforementioned acts of corruption, the primary cause of the problem within the PLA was a lack of oversight that allowed unprofessional conduct to persist.²⁸

It is not surprising, then, that data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) revealed that revenue generated from China's largest state-owned defense companies dropped 10 percent in 2024, with the steep decline attributed to delayed or canceled contracts due to purges within the PLA and major state-owned defense contractors, such as NORINCO, the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC), and the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation.²⁹

Direct Cooperation Between the PLA and the Myanmar Junta?

While Chinese influence over the regime in Myanmar is well documented, direct ties, or avenues of direct cooperation are limited to assigned military liaisons and periodic joint exercises. As previously mentioned, the CCP manages control over state-owned defense contractors to curtail power within the PLA. In that relationship, the influence of Chinese contractors is outsized, with

the UN Special Rapporteur for Myanmar in a May 2023 report to the Human Rights Council reporting that between February 2021 and December 2022, more than USD 267 million in weapons were sold, including six FTC-2000G multirole trainer jets, parts for MI-2 and Airbus H120-B helicopters, spare parts and repair, Chinese A-5IIK ground-attack fighter jets, F-7IIK, K-8W, and JF-17 fighter jets, as well as upgrades to Type-59 and Type-63 tanks.³⁰ Expansions arms sales included the 2025 purchase and usage of Chinese-made aerial attack drones, including the CH-4 Rainbow and CH-3A models, as well as military engineers receiving training at a military academy in Kunming.³¹ Despite increased capacity building and the growing transactional relationship between the regime and Chinese weapons manufacturers, there is little support for a PLA-Tatmadaw relationship that rivals China's other partnerships with regional powers.

Limitations of PLA Influence in Myanmar

This broad analysis suggests that the PLA's influence in Myanmar has potential, but is limited by the CCP's control of the CMC. The institutional relationships established previously, including those involving the Southern Theater Command that operates along the shared border, are tightly controlled and arguably restrained by China's non-interference principle—which also helps explain the opaque security tactics evidenced in the creation of PSCs. China's reforms of civilian and military agencies that were created under Deng Xiaoping, particularly the old Commission for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (COSTIND), which was responsible for weapons research and military procurement under the umbrella of the CMC, resulted in its abolition and replacement by the State Administration for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (SASTIND) in 2008.

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Individual relationships with the ruling military-backed government that would see a more robust relationship between defense attachés or intelligence liaisons are instead managed more closely by other institutions. These interactions are limited. China's Defense Minister welcomed Myanmar's Gen. Tin Aung San, along with 1,800 delegates, at the 2024 Beijing Xiangshan Forum. Tin Aung San was received by Gen. He Weidong, who was then-vice chairman of the CMC. However, he was expelled from his post and stripped of his rank seven months after the National People's Congress in March 2025.³² At the same Xiangshan Forum, an event for security personnel, Myanmar's delegation toured China's industrial technology companies to learn more about aviation technology, specifically drone production and military-grade equipment for electronic warfare and air defenses.³³

However, again these relationships are not managed through CMC channels, but through state-owned defense companies. Thus, it is clear that the PLA's influence is thin compared with that of other institutions, but within a network of state-owned conglomerates and PSCs, it remains critical to supporting China's objectives of protecting its assets and BRI investments in Myanmar. In short, the PLA is a robust and more powerful institution in terms of capacity and technological advantage, but in the context of a larger question about whether it is a determining factor in the military government's survival, state-owned enterprises and higher-level state institutions remain primary, while the PLA itself is currently a secondary influence.

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