

PEACEWORKS



The United Wa State Army and Burma's Peace Process

By Bertil Lintner



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

NO. 147 | APRIL 2019

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ABOUT THE REPORT

Supported by USIP's Asia Center to provide policymakers and the general public with a better understanding of Burma's ethnic conflicts, this report examines the role of both the United Wa State Army and China in Burma's peace process and suggests ways forward to break the present stalemate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Cover photo: United Wa State Army soldiers march during a media display in Panghsang, in the Wa Self-Administered Division of Shan State, Burma. (Photo by Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

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Peaceworks No. 147. First published 2019.

ISBN: 978-1-60127-765-7



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Summary



The United Wa State Army (UWSA), with its twenty-odd thousand men in arms, is the largest of Burma's ethnic armed organizations (EAOs). It is also the best equipped, boasting modern and sophisticated Chinese weaponry. Understanding the special relationship between the UWSA and China, as well as what long-term benefits China anticipates, is critical with respect to long-term peace prospects in Burma, as is better understanding the UWSA itself.

The conflict in Burma, ongoing since independence in 1948, involves numerous ethnic groups, most armed, some not. In 2015, the government in Naypyidaw and the Burmese military came to terms with some of those groups, but only 20 percent. The other 80 percent considered the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement a demand for surrender and declined to sign.

The first peace conference in Burma was held in the Panglong region in 1947. Its successor, 21st Century Panglong, was held in late summer of 2016. The UWSA and other EAOs attended, but walked out.

Early in 2017, these groups established the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee, replacing a previous Thailand-based alliance. Effectively led by the UWSA, the committee also includes the Kachin Independence Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Shan State Army, the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the National Democratic Alliance Army. Given their numbers, and arms, peace in Burma without the active participation of the UWSA and its allies is clearly not a realistic goal.

In mid-2017, a second round of peace talks was held. This time the UWSA and its allies also attended, presenting a detailed alternative to the government's and military's agreement. Again they walked out. After much delay, a third and equally inconclusive peace conference was held in the summer of 2018. Neither side has indicated any willingness to compromise.

The West is hampered by the US indictments of most UWSA leaders for their involvement in the Golden Triangle drug trade. Thus no direct contacts between US officials and the UWSA are possible. Local and international organizations, however, could still engage with the UWSA and its political arm, civil society groups, and (possibly) church organizations.



Bao Youxiang, leader of the United Wa State Army, is seen during a May 2015 meeting with leaders of Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations at UWSA headquarters in Panghsang. (Photo by Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

Introduction

The United Wa State Army is the largest ethnic armed organization in Burma, as well as the best equipped. It is also the largest narcotics trafficking organization in Southeast Asia.

Burma's United Wa State Army (UWSA) is the main player in the ongoing peace talks between the government and military in Naypyidaw and the country's many ethnic armed organizations (EOs). With a force of between twenty and twenty-five thousand, the UWSA is the largest such organization as well as the best equipped, thanks to transfers of modern and sophisticated weaponry from China. It is also the largest narcotics trafficking organization in Southeast Asia. As the most powerful armed group, it effectively leads the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC, or Federal Committee), which was established in 2017 and represents some 80 percent of Burma's armed groups, the other 20 percent having chosen to sign the government's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015. Lasting peace in Burma thus depends in large part on the UWSA.

To fully understand the United Wa State Army's position in the peace process and its relation to Burma, China, and the outside world, it is essential to first look at the unique history and culture of the Wa people and how the Wa have interacted with the outside world since they first came into contact with Westerners and Burmese in the twentieth century. Until then, the Wa's only interaction with outsiders had been sporadic, most often with the ethnic Shan and occasional Chinese traders.

Who Are the Wa?



Ethnically, the Wa are among the Mon-Khmer-speaking peoples (also known as Austroasiatic), one of the world's primary language families, numbering some 117 million speakers. The Wa are thus part of a large family that has little more than language in common. Culture is a separate matter. The Wa are not, as many in Burma seem to believe, a Chinese people (the sizable Wa population in China's Yunnan Province notwithstanding). They are also not related to China's majority Han population. A fair estimate of the number of Wa in China would be about a half million, roughly the same number as on the Burmese side of the border.¹ In Burma, the Wa are related to the Palaung, an ethnic minority found in eastern Burma, southern China, and northern Thailand. Despite the Wa's not being a Chinese people, however, many individuals with Chinese backgrounds have taken leadership positions in the United Wa State Army. These include Chinese from China and Kokang Chinese from Burma. Kokang is a district north of the Wa Hills, in the northeast of Shan State, where the vast majority of people are ethnic Chinese but Burmese citizens.

The Wa in China have been under central Chinese governmental control since the 1950s. Those in Burma, however, differ from all other ethnic groups in the country in that they have never been ruled by any central government. During the British colonial era, government presence in the Wa Hills was limited to annual flag marches up to the Chinese border. The Wa were headhunters and feared by the plainspeople, and the British troops that carried their flag up to the border were always heavily armed.

The Wa Hills were first surveyed by outsiders in 1935 and 1936, when the Iselin Commission (established

under the League of Nations) began to more firmly demarcate the border between the Wa Hills and China, which the British and the Chinese finally agreed to in 1941. Even so, the Wa Hills were never fully explored and even then only nominally under British and later Burmese sovereignty. The first road in the area was built in 1941, running from Kunlong near the Salween River into the northern fringes of the Wa Hills. That road enabled Western missionaries to enter the area, the most prominent among them being Vincent Young, an American Baptist, who also was instrumental in romanizing the Wa language. But the Wa speak many dialects, and written, romanized Wa is closer to the dialects spoken in the north than those in the south. No other Wa script existed until the 1950s, when the Chinese developed a second alphabet, which shares many features with the Pinyin transcription of Chinese. The latter is used mostly in China. A modified version of the old missionary-made alphabet is still standard in Burma's Wa region.

Before and after World War II, the Wa Hills were generally divided into "tame Wa" and "wild Wa" areas. The tame Wa were those who had adopted Shan customs, learned to speak Shan, and become Buddhists. The area where they lived was referred to as Möng Lun and encompassed parts of the southern Wa Hills, mainly around the town of Pang Yang. Möng Lun has its own *saohpa* or prince (*sawbwa* in Burmese), who interacted with other Shan princely families.² For the period from the end of World War II to independence in 1948, the British government appointed Harold Young, an American missionary and brother of Vincent Young, as an administrator for the tame Wa area. But even there his authority was limited. The wild Wa who lived in the northern and eastern hills had little or no contact with



Wa Territories in Burma

(Adapted from artwork by Lucidity Information Design, LLC)

the outside world. The British-initiated Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry—set up to ascertain the views of Burma’s many minority peoples just before independence—reported in 1947 that the Wa Hills “pay no contribution to central revenue. . . . There are no post offices. . . . The only medical facilities are those provided by the Frontier Constabulary outpost . . . and by itinerant [non-certified] Chinese practitioners.” The prince of the tame Wa in Möng Lun was represented before the Committee of Enquiry by two designates. The wild Wa participated as well, also sending two representatives to the committee’s hearings in Maymyo (now Pyin Oo Lwin). Those talks revealed the gap between the Wa’s way of looking at life and the committee’s perception of it. When asked whether they wanted to join the Federated Shan States, a part of the proposed Union of Burma, the answer was “we do not want to join with anybody because in the past we have been very independent.” When asked whether they wanted schools, hospitals, and roads in their area, they replied, “We are very wild people and do not appreciate all these things.”³ Exactly what status they wanted for their areas was not clear, and no alternative to joining the Shan States was given. Möng Lun therefore became one of those states after Burma’s independence in 1948.

In retrospect, the Wa’s performance before the Committee of Enquiry may appear almost farcical, but it nevertheless shows that they did not think of themselves as citizens of Burma. That was not going to change after Burma’s independence from Britain.

Communism



In the 1950s, large tracts of the Wa Hills were occupied by renegade Nationalist Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) forces that retreated across the border into northeastern Burma following their defeat by Mao Zedong's communists in the Chinese civil war. The KMT established bases in the Wa Hills and in the mountains north of Kengtung, from which they tried on no fewer than seven occasions between 1950 and 1952 to invade Yunnan, each time driven back to the Burmese side of the border. The parts of the Wa Hills where the KMT was not present were controlled by various local warlords.

The KMT's presence in northeastern Burma was one reason China decided to support the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in the early 1960s. Burmese communists in exile in China began surveying the border as early as 1963 to identify possible infiltration routes. On the first day of January in 1968, the CPB—and its Chinese backers—made its move. The old KMT bases were some of the first targets, and although the political commissars were Burmese communists, the foot soldiers were almost exclusively “volunteers” from China.⁴ It was only when the CPB had captured the Wa Hills in the early 1970s that its so-called people's army began to consist of recruits from Burma—and those were predominantly Wa. But China was still supplying the CPB troops with all their weapons and other equipment, which made them the most formidable rebel army in Burma.

By the mid-1970s, the CPB had established control over more than twenty thousand square kilometers of territory in northeastern and eastern Shan State. Burma's central authorities were as remote and alien as they had always been in regard to the Wa Hills. But severe frictions between the CPB's aging Bamar leadership and its mostly hill tribe troops, which had little or no sympathy for communist

ideals, were also clear. In March and April 1989, the CPB unit in Kokang, followed by Wa tribesmen, rose in revolt and drove the old Burmese communist leaders into exile in China. The mutineers then formed four armies along ethnic lines, and, because most of the CPB's foot soldiers had been Wa, the UWSA became by far the strongest.⁵

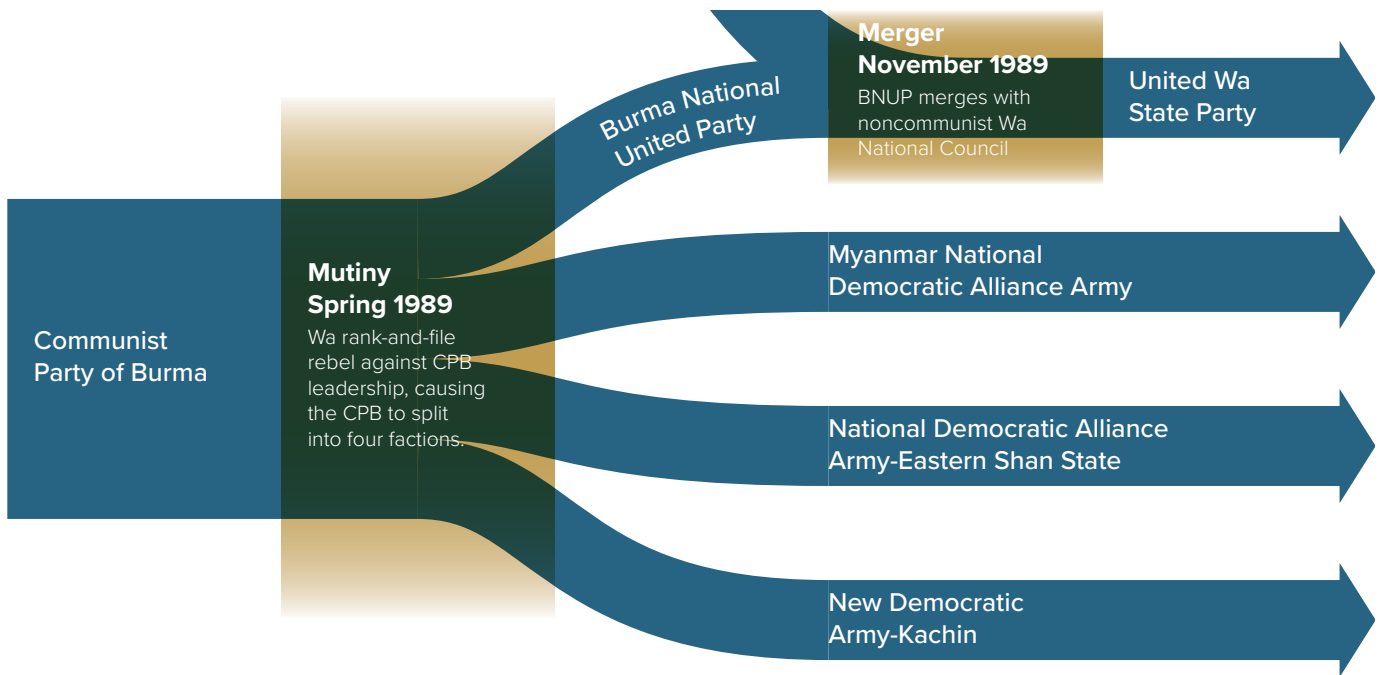
Years of simmering discontent among the mostly hill tribe rank-and-file with the predominantly Burman leadership of the party had led to the mutiny, though several sources close to the Wa have also asserted that China had a hand in it. By the late 1980s, China's foreign policy had shifted from exporting world revolution to promoting trade with its neighbors and even beyond. The “old” Communist Party of Burma had become a liability because the Chinese wanted to open the border for trade and commerce.

Even in 1981, though, the Chinese had begun offering asylum to CPB leaders and high-ranking cadres. They were told they could live in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, with a modest pension provided by the government, a house or an apartment, and even a small plot of land on condition that they refrained from political activity of any kind while in China. The old guard, who had lived in exile in China during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and been close to Mao Zedong, saw the offer as treachery, though they never criticized the Chinese Communist Party openly. The offer was repeated in 1985 and again in 1988. Some of the younger, lower-ranking CPB cadres accepted the offer. The top leaders did not.⁶

In early 1989, six months after China had signed a border-trade agreement with Burma, the Chinese once again approached the CPB and tried to persuade the top leadership to give up and retire in Kunming. A crisis

Evolution of the UWSP

The origins of the United Wa State Party—along with three other ethnic armed organizations—date back to the crack up of the Communist Party of Burma in 1989. The UWSP was formed from a merger of the Burma National United Party and the noncommunist Wa National Council in November 1989.



meeting was convened on February 20 at the CPB's Panghsang headquarters. For the first time, the seventy-five-year-old party chairman Thakin Ba Thein Tin lashed out at the Chinese. In his address to the secret meeting, he referred to "misunderstandings in our relationship with a sister party. Even if there are differences between us, we have to coexist and adhere to the principle of noninterference in each other's affairs. This is the same as in 1981, 1985, and 1988. We have no desire to become revisionists."⁷

The minutes of the secret meeting were leaked, which may have encouraged the disgruntled rank-and-file to rise up against the old guard. Some Wa leaders held a secret meeting of their own and informed the Chinese of their plans. Before the Wa could act, however, CPB units in Kokang did. Kokang, part of Burma but populated by ethnic Chinese, was even closer to the security services across the border, who also may have thought it would

be best if Kokang took the lead. On March 12, the Kokang Chinese, led by Peng Jiasheng, declared that they had broken away from the CPB. They also captured Mōng Ko, an important CPB base west of the Salween River.

Within days, the mutiny spread to other communist-held areas in northeastern Shan State. On the night of April 16, Wa troops entered Panghsang and the CPB's leaders fled across the Nam Hka border river into safety in China. On April 18, the mutineers took over the CPB radio station at Panghsang and broadcast their first denouncement of what they termed "the narrow racist policies of the Communist Party of Burma."⁸ The CPB was no more. More than three hundred Burmese communists ended up in exile in China. Most were resettled in a housing estate in Kunming. A few ended up at Pangwa, a village on the border between Burma's Kachin State and China where a unit of the CPB had been active, and now joined the mutiny.

The Communist Party of Burma's breakup came at a time when the country was in turmoil. In August and September 1988, millions of people from virtually every city, town, and major village across the country had taken to the streets to demand an end to twenty-six years of military misrule.

The four regional armies that the once-mighty Communist Party of Burma split into were these:

- **The Burma National United Party and Army (later the UWSA)**, which was set up by the Wa component of the former CPB army and led by Chao Ngi Lai and Bao Youxiang, the only Wa who had been alternate members of the CPB's Central Committee. Its area encompassed the northern and southern Wa Hills.
- **The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)** led by Peng Jiasheng in Kokang and the Mōng Ko area west of the Salween River.
- **The National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA-ESS)** in eastern Shan State with headquarters at Mōng La. The leader was, and is, Peng Jiasheng's son-in-law Lin Mingxian (a.k.a. Sai Leun or U Sai Lin). He was born in Kyuhkok (Panfhsai) on the Chinese border, attended school in Lashio, and left with his family for China in the early 1960s. After joining the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution, he came across the border in 1968 to fight alongside the communists in Burma.
- **The New Democratic Army**, sometimes referred to as the **New Democratic Army-Kachin**, which had only a few hundred men, was the smallest group. Led by Sakhon Ting Ying, it had a small base area along the Chinese border in eastern Kachin State and established its headquarters at Pangwa.

The Communist Party breakup came at a time when central Burma was in turmoil. In August and September 1988, millions of people from virtually every city, town, and major village across the country had taken to the streets to demand an end to twenty-six years of military misrule. The uprising was crushed when the army moved into Yangon (known as Rangoon during colonial times, and the national capital until 2005) and other cities and opened fire, killing perhaps thousands. But more than ten

thousand urban dissidents fled to the Thai border areas, where they linked up with Karen, Mon, and other ethnic rebels. They wanted to fight, but those ethnic armies did not have significant numbers of weapons they could share. Only the CPB had vast stockpiles, which they had received from the Chinese between 1968 and 1978. Because the urban dissidents were pro-democracy activists, almost none had gone to the communist-held area. But now, when no communist army had a presence in Burma, only ethnic rebels, a wider alliance that included the CPB mutineers was a possibility.

The military government in Yangon, however, acted more quickly and with more determination than the ethnic rebels and urban dissidents on the Thai border. Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, the head of Burma's military intelligence service, sent three emissaries to negotiate with the mutineers. They went to Kokang, and the group included three ethnic Chinese: Lo Hsing-han, a former drug lord from Kokang; Olive Yang, from an old princely family in Kokang; and Aung Gyi, a retired ethnic Sino-Burman army brigadier. Then came Khin Nyunt himself, and he also met representatives of the Wa.

The mutineers were given a unique offer.⁹ They could retain control over their respective areas, keep their weapons, and engage in any kind of business in exchange for not fighting the government's forces—and not sharing their stockpiles of arms with the urban dissidents. They accepted the offer. Cease-fire agreements were reached (but not signed) with all four former CPB forces. The threat from the border areas was eliminated, and the military government in Yangon was secure.

The only link-up between the CPB mutineers and any Thai border-based group occurred in November 1989.



Soldiers belonging to the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army patrol near a military base. Like the UWSA, the MNDAA was formed from remnants of the Communist Party of Burma after it splintered in 1989. (Photo by Stringer/Reuters)

The Burma National United Party merged with the non-communist Wa National Council, former enemies that also controlled parts of the Wa National Army and the Wa National Organization. The result of the merger was the United Wa State Army and United Wa State Party (UWSP). The Wa now had a large base area along the Chinese border—and a foothold on the Thai border. But as soon as the UWSA had established that base area, it began fighting the Mōng Tai Army of opium warlord Khun Sa—a development that suited the interests of the military government in Yangon.

When the former CPB forces had made peace with the government, other ethnic armies that had depended on the Communist Party for supplies of arms and

ammunition had no choice but to enter into similar cease-fire agreements with the authorities in Yangon. The Shan State Army, the armed wing of the Shan State Progress Party, made peace on September 2, 1989, as did several smaller Pa-O, Kayan, Karenni, and Palaung armies, which had also been allied with the Communist Party. In January 1991, the 4th Brigade of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA)—which was active in areas close to MNDAA-controlled areas in northeastern Shan State—broke away and entered into a cease-fire agreement with the government. Then, on February 24, 1994, the KIA gave in as well. Although all other cease-fire agreements had been oral, the KIA insisted on a written agreement, and got it. No other group actually signed a cease-fire agreement with the government.

Drug Trafficking



Together with its alliance with the Thai border-based Wa, the UWSA's agreement with the government—to not fight against government forces in exchange for the freedom to pursue whatever business activities it chose—enabled the UWSA to build a drug empire that outmatched anything Burma had seen. In the late 1980s, Burma's opium production more than doubled. With the Wa National Council came the notorious Wei brothers (Wei Xuelong, Wei Xuegang, and Wei Yueying), who for years had been running heroin refineries on the Thai border. Large quantities of opium had been grown in Kokang, the Wa Hills, and the Mōng La area even before the CPB mutiny, but no chemists there could produce white powder heroin (No. 4 heroin). At that time, they could only produce heroin base, the yellowish-pinkish powder that can be purified into higher-grade heroin.

What had been small, scattered camps on the Thai border were thus turned into an entirely new base area. The Shan who had lived there before the Wa arrived fled to Thailand, where most of them still reside. According to a former US official who served in Burma, the UWSA helped bring down Khun Sa's Mōng Tai Army—a drug-running, Shan army led by ethnic Chinese from Burma—which until then had dominated most areas between Burma's Shan State and Thailand. In return, Burma's military authorities let the UWSA retain control over a large, well-organized, Wa-populated base area along the Thai border, which we know as southern Wa today. And rather than being part of an antidrug program, as Burma's military authorities claimed at the time, this exchange enabled the UWSA to expand its narcotics networks.

Satellite imagery has revealed that the area under poppy cultivation had increased from 92,300 hectares in 1987 to 142,700 in 1989 and to 154,000 in 1992. By the mid-1990s,

Burma's opium production reached 2,000 tons, up from between 350 and 600 tons annually before the Communist Party mutiny.¹⁰ New heroin refineries went into operation at Mōng Kang mountain southwest of Kokang, at Mōng Hom-Mōng Ya south of Mōng Ko, in Kokang itself, and at Ho Tao east of Panghsang in the southern Wa Hills. More refineries were opened in the mountains east of Mōng La and on the Thai border. Those on the Thai border were not actually new; they had been there even before the CPB mutiny. But when the Wa National Council leader Ai Chau Hsō merged his group with the Burma National United Party, more opium could be transported to the refineries on the Thai border whose capacity to produce heroin increased dramatically. Ten kilograms of raw opium, plus chemicals, is needed to produce a kilogram of No. 4 heroin, and the main chemical, acetic anhydride, was brought in from India, China, and Thailand.¹¹

Before long, methamphetamines were added to the list of drugs produced in the Wa area. Crackdowns on the production of what is called *ya ba* ("madness drug," a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine) in Thailand forced the manufacturers across the border into Burma, where they were given sanctuary by the UWSA, and then mainly into the units on the Thai border where Wei Xuegang, the most powerful of the three Wei brothers, was in charge. In the early 1990s, the UWSA also moved tens of thousands of Wa from the hills in the north down to the Thai border, ostensibly to get them away from opium production (the reason given to UN agencies at the time), but in reality to strengthen the UWSA's presence on the Thai border and to find a new outlet for its booming methamphetamine production. What had been small camps on the Thai border was turned into an entirely new base area. The Shan who had lived there before the Wa arrived fled to Thailand, where most of them still live.

A big blow to the UWSA came on January 24, 2005, when the US attorney for the Eastern District of New York and the special agent-in-charge for the New York Field Division of the Drug Enforcement Administration announced the unsealing of an indictment against eight high-ranking UWSA leaders on heroin and methamphetamine trafficking charges.¹²

Those indicted and named in the unsealed list were (spellings as in the announcement, alternative spellings in parentheses):

- Pao Yu Yi (Bao Youyi)
- Pao Yu Hsiang (Bao Youxiang)
- Pao Yu Liang (Bao Youliang)
- Pao Yu Hua (Bao Youhua)
- Wei Hsueh Long (Wei Xuelong)
- Wei Hsueh Kang (Wei Xuegang)
- Wei Hsueh Ying (Wei Xueying)
- Pao Hua Chiang, a.k.a. Ta Kat (Bao Huachiang)

An additional but sealed list included the names of thirteen UWSA officers who also had been indicted, but that list was not made public at the time (spellings as in the sealed indictments):

- Warin Chaijamroonphan [Wei Xuegang's wife]
- Li Ziru [now deceased]
- Li Kai Shou
- Tuan Shao Kui, a.k.a. Mi Chung
- Cha Ta Fa, a.k.a. Lu Chin Shun
- Ho Chin Ting, a.k.a. Hsiao Ho
- Shih Kuo Neng
- Wang Su, a.k.a. Witthaya Ngamthiralert
- Li Cheng Yu, a.k.a. Bunthawee Sae Chang
- Ma Kuang Ting, a.k.a. Sakchai Suwanapeng
- Kya La Bo
- Chang Chin Song
- Yun Cheng, a.k.a. U Yin Ching¹³

The two lists reveal an important feature in drug production under the aegis of the UWSA. Although all three Bao brothers are in the unsealed list along with one other Wa, Bao Huachiang (not a relative), the rest

are ethnic Chinese—and all of them connected with Wei Xuegang's network. The ethnic Chinese are of Thai or Burmese nationality, and long-term associates of the Weis. Li Ziru was a former Red Guard volunteer from Baoshan in China who joined the CPB in the late 1960s and stayed on after the 1989 mutiny (even serving as deputy chief of the UWSA until he died of a heart attack in January 2005).¹⁴

The Bao brothers set up their own refineries and laboratories, but a number of operators also produced heroin and methamphetamines in the UWSA's area. Those operators pay “taxes” to the UWSA in exchange for protection and then arrange for the drugs to be smuggled out of the area. By contrast, in the National Democratic Alliance Army area, a committee of thirteen people headed by Lin Mingxian decided how the raw opium should be collected and where the refineries should be established. All produce had to be sold centrally, and the various “shareholders” in the “company” drew dividends from the profits. The income was reinvested in real estate in Yangon and Mandalay, Yunnan, northern Thailand, and even Hong Kong and Taiwan.¹⁵

The wealth Lin amassed was used to turn Mōng La into a glitzy metropole of hotels, shopping centers, and casinos. Thousands of Chinese tourists flocked there, where they could even watch transvestite shows and buy tiger skins and other parts of endangered species. Today, Lin claims to earn all his income from such activities, not from drugs. Whether that is true is hard to say, but opium cultivation in his area seems to have disappeared. Several sources interviewed for this report, however, assert that methamphetamine is still being produced in the area controlled by the National Democratic Alliance Army-Eastern Shan State.

While opium production has declined inside the UWSA's area, it has been replaced by the methamphetamine-caffeine mix ya ba. The most famous ya ba brand is called WY—and although it is not clear what that stands for, pills marked WY have been found



A signboard in the Thai village of Sop Ruak along the Mekong River, which flows through the opium-growing Golden Triangle region of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. (Photo by Sukree Sukplang/Reuters)

in Thailand, Burma, Laos, northeastern India, and Bangladesh. Unlike heroin, which is mainly exported to countries outside the region, ya ba is sold locally and almost never found in, for instance, Australia, Europe, and North America.

But Burma-produced heroin is nevertheless found in China—and, increasingly, in Kachin State. After the 1989 mutiny, Sakhon Ting Ying and the New Democratic Army-Kachin began exporting huge quantities of timber to China. Most of the forest inside the area controlled by the group is now gone, and has been replaced by poppy fields—and a heroin refinery. As a direct result of this, heroin addiction has become a severe problem in Kachin State. The New Democratic Army subsequently split into factions and became either a

government-recognized Border Guard Force or local *pyi thu sit* (militias) involved in fighting the KIA. China's policy toward all the former CPB forces has been one of using them as proxies inside Burma, and making sure that the drugs they produce are not smuggled into China.

Developments in the former CPB areas after the 1989 mutiny have another side. Communism was gone as the ideology of the forces, but local nationalism emerged in its stead. The Wa language, Wa culture, and Wa traditions experienced a renaissance and were cultivated through schools run by the UWSP in its area. Christianity, introduced by Western missionaries in the 1930s, was revived and churches were built in Panghsang and elsewhere.

The UWSP, UWSA, and Their Allies



The first leader of the United Wa State Party, Chao Ngi Lai (Kyauk Nyilai, a.k.a. Ta Lai), suffered a stroke in 1995 and died in 2009. After his stroke, Bao Youxiang, already military commander of the UWSA, emerged as the main leader of the party. The first deputy commander of the UWSA, Li Ziru, died in 2005. An ethnic Chinese born in Baoshan, in China, he had joined the CPB as a young Red Guard volunteer in the late 1960s. Bao Youxiang now effectively runs the UWSA together with his brothers Bao Youyi and Bao Youliang. A third brother, Bao Youhua, was told to retire in 2005 because of his drug addiction. Bao Youliang is the “mayor” of Möng Mao, the headquarters of the northern Wa Hills. Bao Youyi holds an important position in the army. In addition, Zhao Guoan, another China-born veteran, functions as foreign affairs spokesperson of the organization. A Burmese speaker, he took part in the 21st Century Panglong (Panglong-21) peace talks in Naypyidaw in May 2017 and July 2018. Ironically, although an ethnic Chinese from Yunnan (not Kokang, as some have claimed, but instead Jingkan, near Mangshi) he was the only delegate to the 2017 and 2018 talks who felt comfortable speaking Burmese. Zhao appears to have taken over the role previously played by Li Ziru.

Both Zhao and Li were among the former Chinese volunteers who joined the CPB in the late 1960s, most of whom returned to China in the late 1970s. A few, however, among them Zhao, Li, and Zhang Zhiming (a.k.a. Kyi Myint, the second in command in the Möng La group led by Lin Mingxian, another former Red Guard volunteer), stayed on even after the 1989 mutiny. It is plausible to assume that China’s security services

wanted to maintain a degree of influence over the former CPB forces even after the mutiny.

Presently, the UWSA has five divisions deployed on the Thai-Burma border: 518, 248, 773, 775 (b), and 778. They control the same area that the UWSA occupied in the early 1990s and their estimated collective strength is eight thousand. Four divisions are in the Wa Hills proper in the north: 318 at Panglong-Man Hpan, 618 at Manshang, 418 at Mawhpa, and 468 at Möng Pawk-Ho Tao. Those four are stronger and better armed than their counterparts in the south. Including local militia forces, their full strength would be between twelve thousand and seventeen thousand.

The area under the UWSA’s control could be divided into a southern stretch of land opposite the Hong Son, Chiang Mai, and Chiang Rai provinces in Thailand, and the main area in the north. The northern area corresponds with the CPB’s old Northern Wa District, Southern Wa District, Panghsang Special Township, and the western part of the former Northern Kengtung District, now divided into six townships. The United Wa State Party runs a fairly effective administration in those townships with local “government” offices, schools, and clinics. The southern area along the Thai border is more loosely organized and serves mainly as a conduit for goods, including drugs, going in and out of Burma.

The division between the Bao and the Wei brothers is clear also in the organizational setup of the United Wa State Party and Army. The Bao brothers control the army and local administration while the Weis (and

The Ta'ang Army has grown from a handful of soldiers just a few years ago into the five-thousand-strong, formidable fighting force today. The Arakan Army has grown into an army of up to three thousand. Both groups get their guns from the UWSA, either as gifts or bought at “friendship” prices.

mainly Wei Xuegang) are in charge of most of the organization's finances. The political wing runs the civil administration in the area, and the role of the UWSA is to defend it. A conflict of interest is in play: the Baos want to maintain the status quo (that is, some kind of semi-autonomous state within Burma), while Wei, an ethnic Chinese with no interest in the national aspirations of the Wa, may be contemplating a deal similar to the one Khun Sa, a former kingpin of the Golden Triangle drug trade, struck with the central authorities in January 1996. Khun Sa disbanded his ten thousand-strong Mōng Tai Army, moved to Yangon with his money, and several of his former officers became prominent businessmen. The argument against such a scenario is that Wei does not control the UWSA and would most likely prefer retirement in China to living in a Burmese city where he would be exposed to pressure from Washington for his extradition to the United States to stand trial for drug trafficking.

THE UWSA AND ITS ALLIES

The UWSA maintains close links primarily with its Federal Committee partners—the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (Ta'ang Army), and the Arakan Army—as well as with others who are dissatisfied with their leaders' having signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in October 2015. Chinese diplomats from Bangkok are also known to have visited the headquarters of the Restoration Council of Shan State (a rival Shan army sometimes referred to as Shan State Army South) at Doi Taleng on the Thai-Burma border.¹⁶

The Ta'ang Army and the Arakan Army were formed in and have grown since October 2015. Both groups were initially trained by the Kachin Independence Army and later moved to other areas: the Ta'ang into the Palaung-inhabited hills of northern Shan State and the Arakan

to Rakhine State. Both groups saw action in Kokang in 2015 when they fought alongside the MNDAA against the Burmese army. The Ta'ang Army has grown from a handful of soldiers just a few years ago into the five thousand-strong, formidable fighting force it is today. The Arakan Army, meanwhile, has grown also from a handful of fighters recruited from among Rakhine migrant workers in Kachin State to an army of between two thousand and three thousand. Both groups get their guns from the UWSA, either as gifts or bought at “friendship” prices.¹⁷

Echoing Beijing's concern over Islamic militancy in its Xinjiang region, and alleged links with likeminded groups in Asia, the Federal Committee has been warned by its Chinese contacts to have nothing to do with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), an Islamic outfit operating along the Burma-Bangladesh border areas. That warning was probably intended specifically for the Arakan Army, which is active in Rakhine State, where the Rohingya also originate. Even though the emergence of the Arakan Army was fueled by rising ethnic Rakhine nationalism, and the group has issued statements branding ARSA as “savage Bengali Muslim terrorists,” the very fact that China made such a warning—and the members of the committee felt obliged to respond to it—shows the degree of Chinese influence over the alliance and the peace process.¹⁸

The UWSA has also supplied the Shah State Army with weapons, which enabled it to defend its Wan Hai headquarters when they came under attack in 2015. The Shah State Army's area in central Shan State west of the Salween River is the UWSA's buffer between them and the Burmese army. Were the Shah State Army forced out of its strongholds, it would be easier for the Burmese army to attack



A United Wa State Army soldier holds his rifle while on display in Panghsang, where the UWSA is headquartered. (Photo by Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

the UWSA area east of the river, should the military desire to launch such an offensive.¹⁹

The Kachin Independence Army is a Federal Committee member, but has not benefited as much as some other members of the group from UWSA arms supplies. It has gotten some .50-caliber machine guns from the UWSA, but little more than that. The reason could be that the Chinese are still somewhat suspicious of the Kachins, a predominantly Christian people who in the past have reached out to the West, especially the United States, for at least moral support. In the early 1990s, before the KIA signed its failed ceasefire agreement with the government, it received support from India, including weapons, which also could help explain Chinese attitudes toward the group.

Relations with the National Democratic Alliance Army remain tense after the UWSA sent in troops to take over some of its positions in 2016. The problems arose after NDAA-ESS leaders had attended the first Panglong-21 meeting that August, and the UWSA leaders feared that the NDAA-ESS was on the verge of reaching an agreement with the central authorities that would adversely affect UWSA interests.²⁰ The UWSA gets much of its Chinese weaponry channeled through Laos, and the National Democratic Alliance controls the former Communist Party area adjacent to the Mekong River, which forms the border between Laos and Burma. The UWSA also keeps troops in that area and elsewhere in National Democratic Alliance territory.



Kachin Independence Organization chairman N'Ban La, United Wa State Party chairman Bao Youyi, Union Solidarity and Development Party chairman Than Htay, and Win Htein, one of the leaders of the National League for Democracy party, at the opening ceremony of the 21st Century Panglong conference in May 2017. (Photo by Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

The UWSP and China's Role in the Peace Process

China's role in Burma's peace process cannot and should not be underestimated. Since it was founded in 1989, the UWSA has had a close relationship with China's security agencies, which is hardly surprising given that all its Wa leaders were once officers in the CPB army. But the drug explosion in the Wa area has also spilled over into China, and Bao Youxiang is known to have been called several times to Kunming, where he has been told to make certain that drugs do not enter China.²¹

This is not the only reason the UWSA is important to China. The UWSA gives the Chinese leverage inside Burma, which is helpful when China wants to push other issues, such as the Sino-Myanmar pipeline and access to

the Kyaukpyu deep-water port along the Indian Ocean. China's involvement in Burma's peace process should be seen in that perspective. China's official delegate to the peace talks is Sun Guoxiang, Beijing's special envoy for Asian affairs. He has repeatedly expressed support for Burma's peace process. But, as a Foreign Ministry official, Sun is playing only one role in China's multilayered foreign policy. Sun's positive message and frequent references to "amicable talks" and "friendly neighborly relations" are only the surface layer of that policy.²²

The second layer consists of the International Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. The body was originally set up in the

1950s to develop contacts with other communist parties and to support revolutionary movements all over the world. These days, however, its representatives are often seen at conferences with political parties of all stripes. According to several local sources close to the former Communist Party forces, it also maintains close contacts with groups such as the UWSA, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the National Democratic Alliance Army to preserve and enhance China's long-term strategic interests in Burma.

The third layer is the People's Liberation Army, which maintains links with other militaries across the world. Apart from selling weapons to foreign governmental and nongovernmental clients, directly or through front companies, it provides beneficiaries such as the UWSA with a wide variety of weaponry. Some of those armaments are then shared with other ethnic armed groups in Burma.

China may have transformed its economic system from rigid socialism to free-wheeling capitalism, but politically it remains an authoritarian one-party state where its Communist Party is above the government and the military. And the old policy of maintaining party-to-party relations alongside government-to-government relations has not changed. Consequently, China's main official in dealing with Burma's many political actors is not Sun Guoxiang but Song Tao, the head of the International Liaison Department. Song was educated at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, from September 1988 to August 1991—at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre. That he did not defect underscores his immense loyalty to the Communist Party. He served as assistant to the Chinese ambassador to India in the early 2000s before becoming ambassador himself to Guyana and the Philippines. In October 2015, he took part in a high-profile visit to North Korea, and the following month took over the post as International Liaison Department chief from Wang Jiarui, a Communist Party veteran who was in charge of maintaining relations with communist parties in North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam. In recent years, Burma and North Korea have been Song's most

important assignments. In mid-April 2018, for example, he visited Pyongyang with an “art troupe” shortly after the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un had been to Beijing as part of China's attempts to force him to the negotiating table with the United States and South Korea—China playing its own games from behind the scenes.

Although Song is not the high-profile figure that Sun is, he is known to work actively in the background and prefers to meet Burmese politicians and army officers in Beijing rather than Naypyidaw. Significantly, he met Aung San Suu Kyi in Naypyidaw in August 2016, just a week or so before her peace process began with the series of meetings designated 21st Century Panglong. While in Naypyidaw, he also met with General Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of Burma's armed forces.

The differentiation between government-to-government relations maintained by China's Foreign Ministry and the International Liaison Department's party-to-party links (not only with groups like the UWSA but also with Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, the Communist Party of China, and the People's Liberation Army) explains why and how China can publicly praise Burma's peace process even as it quietly provides the UWSA with heavy weaponry. Arms shipments from China to the UWSA have included heavy machine guns, HN-5A Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS), artillery, armored fighting vehicles, and other sophisticated military equipment. The UWSA's latest acquisition, in 2014, was a large number of Chinese FN-6 MANPADS, which are effective up to 3,500 meters and have been used effectively by Syrian rebels against their regime's helicopters. This is not the kind of kit that falls off the back of a truck or could be supplied by a local People's Liberation Army unit in Yunnan: the deliveries were almost certainly directed from the highest level in Beijing.²³

Despite fighting between the Burmese army and UWSA-allied rebel armies in the north, it is not in China's interest to see more unrest along its southwestern border.



United Wa State Army soldiers march during a media display in Pangsang, Wa territory in northeast Myanmar. (Photo by Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

But a strong UWSA, which sometimes shares its China-supplied arsenal with other groups, serves as a stick in Beijing's relationship with Burma (diplomacy and promises of aid and investment being the carrot). This does not mean that the Chinese want to see more fighting along the border, but they can show that they—and only they—would be able to help the Burmese government solve its internal ethnic problems.

China was also instrumental in helping the UWSA set up the seven-member Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee on April 19, 2017, effectively replacing a mainly Thailand-based alliance, the United Nationalities Federal Council. That alliance began to fall apart after eight of its members signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement with the government on October 15, 2015. But of those, only three—the Karen National Union, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, and the

Restoration Council of Shah State—actually had any armed forces. The other five were more akin to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or tiny militias. On February 13, 2018, two more groups signed the NCA: one of them, the New Mon State Party, has an army; the other, the Lahu Democratic Union, is a Thailand-based NGO.

The Federal Committee was formed in April 2017, a month before the second Panglong-21 conference and just after the collapse of the United Nationalities Federal Council.²⁴ Its seven members represent the overwhelming majority of all armed rebels in the country but are unlikely to sign the cease-fire agreement because it stipulates that ethnic armed groups have to sign the agreement before a political dialogue can be held. The groups that have not signed the NCA argue that political talks would have to come before any agreement is signed with the government.²⁵ That conclusion is based

The Federal Committee has called on China to supervise the peace process, including all talks with the government. “China’s positive involvement in Myanmar’s peace process has become more important and cannot be averted,” the committee said in a statement.

partly on the experiences of the KIA, which did sign a cease-fire agreement in 1994, but instead of meeting for the promised talks was attacked by the Burmese army in June 2011. Since then, the war in the far north has become even more intense: more than one hundred thousand people internally displaced and the Burmese military for the first time in this civil war using helicopter gunships and jet fighters to attack rebel positions.

Significantly, the Federal Committee has called on China to supervise the peace process, including all talks with the government. “China’s positive involvement in Myanmar’s peace process has become more important and cannot be averted,” the committee said in a statement released on March 28, 2018.²⁶ This follows its press release on August 24, 2017, which stated that “to be successful, we request China to [be] more involved in [the] Myanmar peace process.”²⁷

The committee has also declared support for China’s Belt and Road Initiative, launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping to build infrastructure and open trade routes connecting China, Africa, and Europe.²⁸ Burma, China’s main corridor to South and Southeast Asia as well as the Indian Ocean, is far too strategically important for China to allow all the Western peacemakers, who have been flocking to the country since 2011, to seize influence over Burma’s future direction. After a brief hesitation during the 2011–15 transition from direct military to quasi-democratic rule, China is once again reasserting its influence in Burma, and it is doing so through its time-tested, multilayered policies, which include support for the UWSA.

China’s role in the peace process was clearly demonstrated on May 18, 2018, when leaders of all the seven members of the committee were summoned to Kunming for talks with Sun Guoxiang. Sun had made it clear that China would not accept any fighting near

the border. This happened on May 12, when the Ta’ang National Liberation Army attacked a casino near Muse and killed two Chinese nationals, which was the reason the Chinese summoned the committee to Kunming. Sun also urged the committee to take part in upcoming Panglong-21 talks. He suggested that, even if they were not accepted as participants and therefore not allowed to speak, they could distribute their demands in writing. Perhaps more significantly, he told them to stay clear of any Western peacemaking outfits. “Whenever the West gets involved, it only leads to more conflict,” he said.²⁹ Only China would be able to act as an arbiter in the ongoing peace talks.

Despite Chinese influence over the committee as a group as well as its individual members, it would be wrong to view the committee members as Chinese puppets. Their reluctance to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement is one example of this, as are attempts by some of the groups to reach out to Western governments and NGOs. In April 2014, the deputy commander-in-chief of the Kachin Independence Army, General Gun Maw, traveled to the United States, where he met with State Department officials and urged the United States to play a role in Burma’s peace process.³⁰ But that—and the lack of expected US involvement—could also be the reason he was sidelined in January 2016.³¹ In January 2018, the Kachin Independence Organization elected a new chairman, N’Ban La, who is seen as more aligned to China and less keen to win sympathy from the West. Nevertheless, interviews with lower- and middle-ranking Kachin officers suggest that not everyone in the Kachin movement shares his policy of steering it closer to China and the UWSA. But even N’Ban La admitted in an interview that many Kachins are apprehensive that several UWSA leaders have been indicted by US courts for their involvement in the Golden Triangle drug trade.³²

Sentiment among the other Federal Committee members is more difficult to ascertain. They depend on the UWSA for arms and ammunition and have no difference in opinion when it comes to rejecting the NCA in its present form. But no other group is as close to China's security services as the UWSA. Committee members have expressed in private conversations a desire to diversify international contacts, acknowledging their inability to do so because of Chinese pressure and the dominant role China has come to play in the peace process.³³

On the other hand, researcher Andrew Ong of the National University of Singapore points out in an August 2018 article that the Wa are not as dependent on the Chinese as many outside observers have suggested. The UWSA is also connected with business interests elsewhere in Burma:

With telecommunications systems and somewhat a stable kyat only a relatively recent phenomena in Myanmar, the UWSA has for decades relied on Chinese currency and Chinese markets for its rubber and mining industries, construction technology, and communication networks. Yet since the 1990s, the UWSA has demonstrated a creativity and ability to navigate different routes, markets, and investments to buttress its self-reliance. Collaborations between Wa-owned companies and other Myanmar conglomerates point to strong business ties with elites in Yangon and Mandalay.³⁴

The UWSA has used proxies such as Ho Chin Ting (a.k.a. Ai Haw, a.k.a. Hsiao Haw) to invest in enterprises such as Yangon Airways and a chain of hotels in Burma, among them the luxurious Thanlwin Hotel in Yangon. Ai Haw is now the principal owner and managing director of Yangon Airways.³⁵ Because any armed conflict with the Burmese army would put such investments in jeopardy, the UWSA is therefore more interested in maintaining the status quo rather than joining forces with other groups—Kachin, Ta'ang, Arakan, and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance—and fighting against the Burmese army. The Kachin leader N'Ban La is known to have asked the UWSA to launch attacks on the Burmese army

to relieve the pressure on his forces when they came under attack, but the UWSA turned down the request.³⁶

The Federal Committee has also acted independently. On April 19, 2017, it issued a forty-seven-page counter-proposal in Burmese and English, the essence of which is that “all ethnic revolutionary armed forces may participate in the political dialogue and political negotiations and finally enter into Federal Political Agreement [*sic*].” The word *finally* indicates that political talks would have to be held first and an agreement signed later. The statement also calls for the withdrawal of the Myanmar Army from “conflict areas of national minorities.”³⁷

The statement reflects deep suspicions of the authorities' intentions with the talks. Even in September 2015, before the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement was announced, the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) issued a statement urging the KIA not to sign without political guarantees and stating that unless political goals were materialized it opposed disarming. As the most influential civil society organization among the predominantly Christian Kachins, the KBC apparently did not want the KIA to repeat the mistake it had made in 1994. The Kachins were then promised political talks, which never materialized. Instead, in June 2011—ironically only a few months after the Thein Sein government had announced its peace process—the Burmese army broke the agreement and launched a massive offensive against the Kachins.

Apart from insisting that the ethnic armed organizations sign the NCA, the Burmese military has also made it clear that it wants to implement a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process for the ethnic armies as soon as possible. Those groups for their part again see the authorities' demands as a request for surrender. The EAOs also emphasize that this is not the first time such talks have been held. All have proved inconclusive. Held in the late 1950s, in 1963, and in 1980, talks broke down because the government demanded that the groups surrender and offered little in return except what it termed rehabilitation. In the late 1980s and early 1990s,

The EU, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan, Britain, and Australia have poured millions of dollars into what has become known as Burma's peace-industrial complex, which turned out to be a lucrative business for many international NGOs and individual players.

Burma's military also entered into cease-fire agreements with about two dozen ethnic rebel groups—so that idea is not new either. The difference this time is the involvement of foreign interests. The European Union and the governments of Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan, Britain, and Australia have poured millions of dollars into what has become known as the peace-industrial complex, which turned out to be a lucrative business for many international NGOs and individual players.³⁸ It has not, however, encouraged the Burmese military to adopt a more compromising stance.


The Wa position is that they want an official Wa State to be carved out of Shan State, amendments to the NCA and Burma's 2008 constitution, and recognition of the Wa-controlled areas on the Thai border. It may be impossible for any Burmese government to concede to the last demand because it would mean recognition of the forcible eviction of thousands of Shans from that area. As for the other demands, the Burmese military has showed no interest in even discussing the issues. China may currently be the only viable interlocutor, but promoting other mediators through which the military could balance the UWSA's reliance on Chinese political officers is possible.³⁹

Ong, the Singapore-based researcher, identifies the World Food Programme, which has worked in the Wa Hills since 2004, as a possible avenue. At the same time, he points out that the organization's programs have been scaled down owing to "lack of funding and shifting priorities." He also argues that premature rumors of the willingness of the UWSA to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement has created confusion among its allies and "is part of the motivation to create a unified stance under the FPNCC."⁴⁰ Ong asks for a more nuanced approach to the Wa, which would include increased development assistance to lessen their dependence on China.

Any related direct American involvement would mean a fundamental change in US attitudes toward the UWSA, which may not be possible given the 2005 indictments. It is, however, possible to work indirectly through local NGOs, civil society groups, and the Wa church—even though Christians have recently come under pressure from the UWSA leadership. In September 2018, the UWSA, apparently acting on orders from China, detained church workers and demolished churches during the campaign, an action believed to have been driven by Chinese suspicion against possible influence from foreign missionaries.⁴¹ It also remains to be seen what impact the crackdown will have on the UWSA's relations with the predominantly Christian KIA.

According to several sources close to the UWSA's leaders, they would welcome ties with non-Chinese actors. For now, the UWSA has no choice but to work closely with the Chinese, though not as puppets. China and the UWSA share an interest in avoiding any armed confrontation between the UWSA and the Burmese army. But the UWSA position, to maintain the status quo, is untenable in the long run. No country would want to accept an entirely self-governing state within its boundaries. The Chinese realize this, and are putting pressure on the UWSA to enter into some kind of deal with the central government. They do not refer to the National Ceasefire Agreement, which is unworkable. Consequently, the conflict of interests between the Chinese and the UWSA is obvious, and because no third party is involved with the Wa, China remains their only choice. Thus, engagement with the Wa is an avenue worth pursuing because the alternative—a continuation of the policy of isolating the UWSA—will only play in favor of China and China's geostrategic interests in the region. And that is not in America's—or Burma's—interest.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations



It is important to be realistic about the limitations of the ability of Western governments and NGOs to influence Burma's peace process. China, Burma's most powerful neighbor, is also unlikely to let any other outside power or outfit strip it of its dominant role in the process. China has also benefited from the West's condemnation of the Burmese army's violent offensive in Rakhine State, which has seen more than eight hundred thousand Rohingya Muslims flee across Burma's border to Bangladesh in what the Burmese army termed a "clearance operation" following a series of attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on August 25, 2017. Although the West has unanimously condemned the carnage and even imposed sanctions on specific Burmese army officers, China has blocked attempts to impose punitive measures in the United Nations Security Council. The United States is also restricted in its actions and activities regarding the Wa by the indictment of the UWSA's leaders on drug trafficking charges. However, outside players could take a number of steps to balance China's influence over the UWSA and its allies and promote peace in Burma:

A dialogue could begin with UWSA allies—such as the Kachin Independence Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and the Shah State Army North—whose leaders have not been indicted by US courts to show that China is not the only outside actor in the peace process.

Meetings could also be held with the Burmese government and military to persuade them to be more flexible, and not stick to their uncompromising attitude toward so-called nonsignatories of the NCA.

Avenues to the Wa could be established through UN agencies, local civil society organizations, and the Wa church. An indirect dialogue could be followed by a more direct approach. However, the UWSA crackdown on "unauthorized" Christian churches in September 2018 would make such an approach difficult, though not impossible.

As a gesture of goodwill, food and development aid should be provided to the Wa Hills. This could be done through UN agencies, local civil society organizations, and the Wa church.

It is important for all outside actors to be more active—and visible—at Panglong-21 meetings. China may not be pleased with such a development, but it is up to the Burmese government to decide whom to invite and listen to.

A more nuanced approach to the Wa that includes studies of their history and culture is needed. Presently, the lack of knowledge on these issues is hampering any attempt to understand the Wa, their attitudes toward China and Burma, and their view of the world beyond.

The international community should push for all members of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee to be included as full participants in the peace talks rather than as observers only because they have not signed the cease-fire agreement. It makes little sense to exclude groups representing 80 percent of all the soldiers in Burma's ethnic armed organizations. It would also be an essential first step toward building bridges between the committee, the government, and the Burmese military.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive and scholarly account of the history of the Wa, see Magnus Fiskesjö, "The Fate of Sacrifice: The Making of Wa History," PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2000, www.researchgate.net/publication/35888799_The_fate_of_sacrifice_and_the_making_of_Wa_history. According to China's 2010 census, the population of Wa in the country stood at 427,000. Chinese sources estimate the number of Wa in Burma to be around six hundred thousand. A more realistic estimate would be four hundred to five hundred thousand.
2. See Sao Sanda Simms, "Great Lords of the Sky: Burma's Shan Aristocracy," *Asian Highlands Perspective* 48, www.academia.edu/34151672/AHP_48_GREAT_LORDS_OF_THE_SKY_BURMAS_SHAN_ARISTOCRACY_by_Sao_Sanda_Simms.
3. "Part II: Appendices," in *Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry 1947* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1947), 37–8, 190.
4. I walked through the entire Communist Party of Burma base area from October 1986 to April 1987 and, during that time, met and interviewed many fighters and cadres who told me about their experiences.
5. For an account of the 1989 mutiny, see Bertil Lintner, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).
6. I discussed these issues with Communist Party of Burma members during my stay in their area from October 1986 to April 1987 and on visits in 1989 and 1990 to Yunnan, China.
7. A handwritten copy of the minutes from the meeting in the author's possession.
8. Based on notes taken when the statement was broadcast. Also quoted in Lintner, *Rise and Fall*.
9. Private communication with sources close to the negotiations, July 1989.
10. These figures are from the US State Department's International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports (1987–92).
11. For this development, see Bertil Lintner and Michael Black, *Merchants of Madness: The Methamphetamine Explosion in the Golden Triangle* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009).
12. US Drug Enforcement Administration, "Eight High-Ranking Leaders of Southeast Asia's Largest Narcotics Trafficking Organization Indicted," news release, January 24, 2005, www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/pubs/states/newsrel/nyc012405.html.
13. Copies of the unsealed and sealed lists in the author's possession.
14. *The Irrawaddy*, "Deputy Chief of UWSA Dies of a Heart Attack," January 11, 2005, www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=4278.
15. This is based on numerous interviews with local sources close to the drug trade throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Dates and places cannot be disclosed for security reasons.
16. According to Shan sources at Doi Taleng.
17. Interviews with former Communist Party of Burma members and EAO leaders, Ruili, March 2018.
18. The United League of Arakan is the Arakan Army's political wing (<https://ula.today/welcometoula>).
19. The Shan State Army (SSA) was set up in 1964 and in 1971 formed a political wing called the Shan State Progress Party. The SSA should not be confused with the army of the Restoration Council of Shan State (another Shan group led by Yawt Seik, a former officer of Khun Sa's Möng Tai Army), which has assumed the same name. To distinguish the two, the Shan State Progress Party's army is often referred to as SSA-North and that of the Restoration Council of Shan State as SSA-South.
20. Private communication with sources close to the Wa, September 2016.
21. Private communication with Wa sources, 1989–92.
22. This account of China's policy toward the Wa, and Burma and China's involvement in the peace process, is based on discussions with several former CPB members who worked with Chinese officials for years and now are close to the UWSA leadership. For security reasons, the time and place of my meetings with them cannot be disclosed.
23. The list of Chinese weapons in the hands of the UWSA is based on internal reports compiled by *Jane's Information Group* in the UK and interviews with sources close to the UWSA leadership. See, for instance, Anthony Davis, "Wa army fielding new Chinese artillery, ATGMs," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, July 22, 2015; "China sends armed helicopters to Myanmar separatists," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, April 26, 2013; "State of Wa," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 21, 2012.
24. For a succinct account of the formation of the Federal Committee, see Liu Yun, "Building Peace in Myanmar: The Birth of the FPNCC," *Asia Dialogue*, October 6, 2017, www.theasiadialogue.com/2017/10/06/building-peace-in-myanmar-birth-of-the-fpncc.

25. Interviews with leaders of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, Ruili, China, March 10, 2018. Leaders and members of the Kachin Independence Army have expressed the same views in several discussions with me ever since their cease-fire with the government broke down in June 2011.
26. Nyein Nyein, "Northern Alliance Seeks Continued Support From China in Peace Process Negotiations," *The Irrawaddy*, March 29, 2018, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/northern-alliance-seeks-continued-support-china-peace-process-negotiations.html.
27. Quoted in Bertil Lintner, "China Looms Large over Myanmar War and Peace," *Asia Times*, November 28, 2017, www.asiatimes.com/2017/11/article/china-looms-large-myanmar-war-peace/?_=3452381.
28. See Amara Thiha, "Repositioning Myanmar through the Belt and Road Initiative," *The Frontier*, June 16, 2017, www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/repositioning-myanmar-through-the-belt-and-road-initiative.
29. Minutes from the meeting in the author's possession.
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37. A copy of the proposal in the author's possession.
38. Based on numerous interviews and conversations with Kachin, Shan, Palaung and Karen EAO leaders.
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41. See Bertil Lintner, "Why China fears Myanmar's Christians," *Asia Times*, September 17, 2018, www.atimes.com/article/why-china-fears-myanmars-christians; *Mizzima*, "UWSA Releases 100 Ethnic Wa Christians," October 6, 2018, www.mizzima.com/news/uwsa-releases-100-ethnic-wa-christians. That China is worried about the influence Western missionaries may have on the Wa was confirmed in an email to the author from a source in Yunnan, September 18, 2018.

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PEACEWORKS

NO. 147 | APRIL 2019

As the leading force in the alliance that brings together 80 percent of Burma's many ethnic armed organizations, the United Wa State Army (UWSA) has become the main player in peace talks with the government and military. But because the alliance's seven members have not signed the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, they can take part in talks only as observers. The agreement in its present form, they say, amounts to surrender. They have presented an alternative course of action. Meanwhile, China is playing an important role both at the talks and behind the scenes and has managed to effectively sideline other foreign interlocutors. This report examines the history of the UWSA in the context of its role and China's in Burma's peace process and suggests ways forward to break the stalemate.

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