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Xu Peng

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The Enduring Legacy and Historical Continuity of Kokang's Mutinies in the China–Myanmar Borderlands

Xu Peng

Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the persistent conflicts in the Kokang region, a territory on the China–Myanmar border occupied by a Han Chinese community. The conflicts in 2009, 2015 and 2023, characterised by intense clashes between Kokang's Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Myanmar government, escalated local mutinies into broader regional conflicts. Utilising archival research, including important Chinese material, this article traces the conflict's evolution from colonial-era family strife through Cold War proxy battles to complex post-Cold War family–faction contestations. It explores how Kokang has historically leveraged external powers, transitioning from interactions during British colonial rule in Burma and the Republic of China to engagements with the People's Republic of China during and after the Cold War. This historical engagement has shaped Kokang's regional and international conflict profile. The findings indicate that while external state interactions have played a role, the primary drivers are the Kokang factions themselves, who use these mutinies for self-governance and power accumulation. This analysis provides insights into the complex dynamics driving ongoing conflicts in the China–Myanmar borderland.

KEY WORDS

China-Myanmar borderlands; Kokang; ethnic armed organisations; ethnic conflicts

Kokang is a region in northern Myanmar's Shan State bordered by China's Yunnan Province to the east and situated west of the Salween River (see Figure 1).[1] Covering approximately 1,895 square kilometres, the region is predominantly populated by the Kokang Chinese. This Han Chinese group identifies as migrants but is officially classified as part of Myanmar's ethnic minorities and the territory remains under Myanmar's tenuous jurisdiction. The region has a history of conflict involving the Kokang army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the military of Myanmar – known as the Tatmadaw. Key incidents include the 2009 Kokang incident, the 2015 Kokang offensive, and a recent outbreak of violence in October 2023. Such conflicts have

CONTACT Xu Peng xp1@soas.ac.uk Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London, 10 Thornhaugh St, London WC1H 0XG, UK.

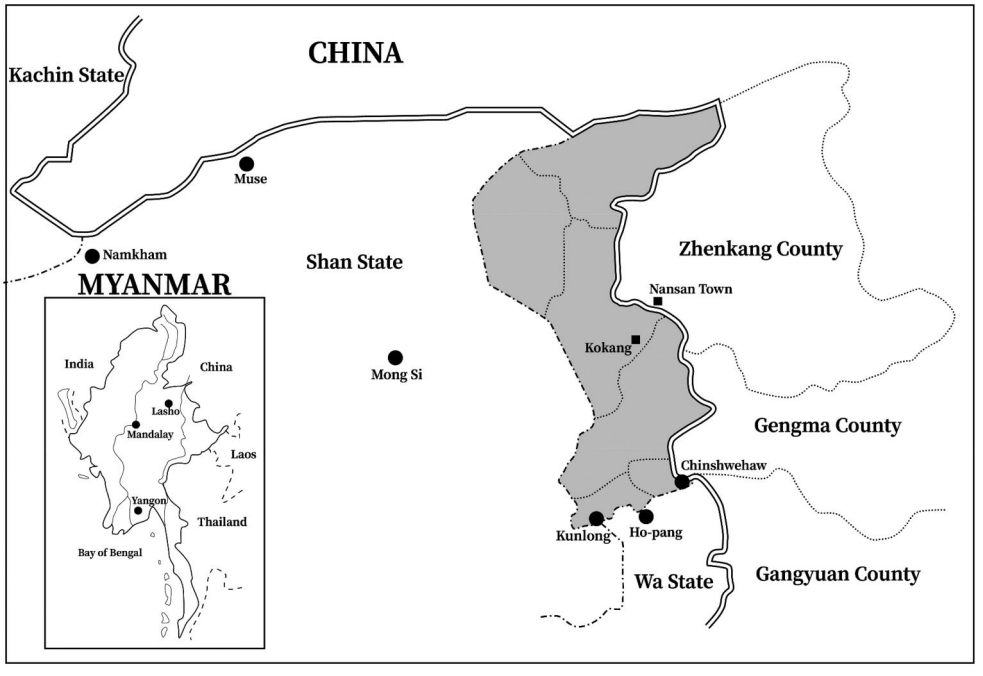

Figure 1. Kokang's location in the China–Myanmar Borderland
Source: Map created by the author.

often escalated into broader regional conflicts, drawing attention from both the Chinese and Myanmar governments due to the region's dual identity (Han Chinese versus ethnic minorities in Myanmar) and strategic location.

To understand the persistence of these conflicts, a thorough examination of the intricate dynamics along the China–Myanmar border is essential. Conventional perspectives on the Myanmar conflict view the borderlands as contested by various groups, particularly between ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and the Myanmar military or between non-state actors and the incumbent government. Nevertheless, these perspectives often neglect the internal dynamics within the EAOs, which could be significant for understanding the escalation of conflicts in Myanmar. This study seeks to explore how internal rivalries within EAOs impact and potentially intensify their conflicts with the Myanmar military. It aims to reveal the links between these internal rivalries and wider conflict dynamics, thereby providing a more detailed understanding of intra-group politics and their influence on inter-group conflicts. The focus is on Kokang, using it as a case study to investigate why it consistently experiences internal skirmishes that escalate into broader regional conflicts – a phenomenon not usually seen among other ethnic groups in the region. Delving into this issue is vital for comprehending the broader complexities of borderland conflicts.

This article investigates the mutinies in Kokang from the era of British Burma through the Cold War and into the post-Cold War period. It argues that the nature of power competition within Kokang has evolved from a single-lineage struggle for chieftainship through familial factions during proxy wars to mixed family-based faction conflicts. In these conflicts, various family sides and factions have increasingly sought to leverage external powers in their internal power struggles, explaining why they have escalated into regional conflicts and persisted over time.

The article is in three main sections. The first reviews the contested ethnic armed conflicts along the China–Myanmar borderland, examining prior research on these conflicts and highlighting the need to investigate the Kokang case. The second section justifies the use of historical and comparative institutional analysis to understand the trajectory and legacy of conflicts in these contested borderlands. The third section explores three historical periods of Kokang mutinies – during colonisation, the Cold War, and the twenty-first century – detailing the evolution of internal and regional conflicts.

Ethnic Armed Conflicts in the China–Myanmar Borderlands

Myanmar's persistent conflicts are driven by a complex interplay of historical legacies, ethnic diversity, and political repression (Smith 1999, 27–38). After gaining independence from British rule in 1948, arbitrarily drawn borders consolidated over 100 ethnic communities into a single nation, leading to enduring ethnic strife and demands for autonomy. Prolonged military dominance has exacerbated political exclusion and economic disparities, particularly in resource-rich regions, fuelling resistance from various armed ethnic groups (Lintner 1994, 25–96). Collectively, these factors have contributed to a protracted struggle over identity, governance, and resource control, rendering peace an elusive goal in the region (Farrelly 2018, 3–7). Since 2021, Myanmar has faced the compounded crisis of a pandemic and a military coup, plunging the country into a lasting state of emergency (Chambers 2023, 17).

The porous and multi-scalar border between China and Myanmar, extending over 2,129 kilometres of challenging terrain, profoundly influences Myanmar's conflicts (see Hu and Konrad 2018). Its permeability allows the free movement of ethnic groups with cross-border ties, facilitates arms trafficking, and supports a thriving informal economy that trades in natural resources and narcotics (Su 2022). These dynamics provide substantial financial and material support to EAOs while enabling the movement of refugees and combatants, as well as cross-border criminals, thus complicating security and humanitarian efforts (see, for example, Ho 2018; Zhou, Wu, and Su 2022). Previous research has shed light on the complex realities of the China–Myanmar borderlands. For instance, Meehan and Dan's (2023) "brokered rule," Kramer's (2020) "neither war nor peace economy," and Woods's (2011) concept of "ceasefire capitalism," explore the intertwined roles of EAOs, illicit economies, and state-building from a political economy perspective, underscoring the significant impact of China's economic influence and porous borders on this political ecology. Moreover, Han (2019, 20–35) provides a macro-level analysis that examines how the asymmetrical state capacities of China and Myanmar contribute to instability in the border regions. Sun's (2012) and Tower and Clapp's (2024) policy analyses further delve into the geo-political nuances, examining how China and Myanmar manage peace negotiations and conflict resolution.

Recent studies on the ethnic armed conflicts in the China–Myanmar borderlands tend to focus on detailed case studies of individual EAOs, employing micro-level analyses to explore issues of class, governance, and ethnic identity. Brenner's (2019, 10) work scrutinises the Kachin Independence Army and the Karen National Union, exploring the dynamics between elite and non-elite members and how internal conflicts influence novel strategies in their rebellions. Ong (2020), in his anthropological study of the United Wa State Army (UWSA), introduces the concept of "tactical dissonance" to describe the group's shifting political stances – alternately aligning with the Myanmar state or asserting independence to resist control and maintain autonomy. In a later work, Ong (2023, 8)

further investigates how the Wa's "relational autonomy" – a concept demonstrating their engagement with the "outside" to maintain autonomy – is characterised by intermittent, shifting political relations and managing porosity.

Lintner (2021) examines the transformation of the Wa into both a narco-state and an ethnic nationalist resistance movement. He details how the group harnesses revenues from opium and methamphetamine to advance political objectives, bolster Wa nationalism, and invest in community infrastructure such as roads, schools, and hospitals. Lintner clarifies that the Wa do not subscribe to Marxist or communist ideologies. His work revisits Kramer's (2018, 23–37) research into whether the United Wa State Party (UWSP) should be considered a "narco-army" or an ethnic nationalist party. Despite international perceptions of the UWSP as a "narco-trafficking army," it also actively seeks to establish a Wa state within Myanmar, following a nationalist agenda. While Lintner points to the historical influence of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which is tied to China's influence, his evaluation of the Wa's current role in China's foreign policy strategy remains unresolved (see Marston 2022).

Regarding the Kokang region and the MNDAA, Widiatmo and Wardani's (2023) research examines the role of identity in the Kokang conflict. They explore the complexities of Kokang's dual identity, illustrating how the group strategically navigates its affiliation with both Chinese identity and that of ethnic minorities within Myanmar. This flexibility supports their geo-political manoeuvres. Dual identity is not unique to Kokang but is common among borderland ethnic groups, who often experience ambiguities in their national identity.

Despite the insights offered by both micro and macro approaches, most studies have not addressed the degree to which regional conflicts could be extensions of internal factional politics within EAOs. Gaining more understanding of these internal power dynamics offers a fresh perspective on the persistence of conflicts. This aligns with Keen's (2007) seminal work *Complex Emergencies*, which proposes that combatants in civil wars might find conflict advantageous, yielding economic gains or political leverage. This perspective offers a compelling explanation for the protracted nature of borderland conflicts, suggesting that the involved parties may perceive ongoing strife as beneficial, leading to its continuation over time.

The Kokang region and its army, the MNDAA, stand out as particularly significant due to their unique pattern of internal mutinies consistently escalating into broader regional conflicts, as seen in the 2009, 2015, and 2023 incidents. These conflicts, originating from internal power struggles, not only expanded into regional conflicts but also captured widespread attention. The dual identity of Kokang complicates its motivations and tactics, enabling it to manipulate its relationships with both China and Myanmar. This raises critical questions about the mechanisms through which internal mutinies are escalated into regional conflicts. To deepen our understanding of the Han Chinese wars (a narrative mainly adopted by the MNDAA) along the China–Myanmar borderland and the escalation of local mutinies into broader conflicts, it is essential to explore the underlying motivations of these clashes. Are the groups driven by the desires for autonomy, independence, or other motivations? Is there a strategic benefit in perpetuating conflict or creating chaos? If these groups consider it advantageous to escalate conflicts to the regional level, it raises critical questions about their motives. Therefore, a detailed examination of the Kokang conflicts, focusing on their contested nature, the reasons for their persistence, and their significant implications, is imperative for a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics involved in border conflicts.

Historical and Comparative Institutional Analysis

The contested nature of the Kokang conflicts along the China–Myanmar borderland epitomises the broader conflict dynamics that have characterised post-independence Southeast Asia. Since 1945, many regional states have grappled with internal conflicts stemming from the interplay between state legitimacy deficits and persistent insurgencies. Despite efforts at nation-building, several governments need help securing allegiance, particularly in peripheral regions (Tan 2007, 7). The end of the Cold War marked a shift in the understanding of ethnic conflicts, previously viewed primarily through the lens of state security. In the contemporary globalised context, these conflicts are seen as part of a broader interaction between regional and international dynamics. This makes the new kind of warfare difficult to distinguish from merely inter-state and civil wars. This phenomenon is discussed by Kaldor (2013, 1–15), who argues that this new war after the Cold War is both global and local. This blurring also extends to the distinctions between wars, organised crime, and large-scale human rights violations.

The historical and comparative institutional analysis (HCIA) approach provides a useful perspective for understanding enduring conflicts in this complex interplay of historical legacies and contemporary geo-political shifts. Unlike conventional analyses focusing on immediate political or economic factors, HCIA integrates a historical perspective, examining the evolution and interaction of institutions across various contexts over time. This method underscores the role of history in shaping current institutional dynamics and governing rules, offering a nuanced understanding of conflict mechanisms (see Greif 1998).

HCIA is characterised by two principal analytical threads. The first adopts a historical and comparative perspective, integrating the evolution and interaction of institutional traits over time and across different contexts. This exploration sets HCIA apart from more conventional studies that are narrowly focused on the immediate causes of conflict. The second thread emphasises the role of strategic interactions, cultural dynamics, and cognitive factors in shaping institutions, offering a comprehensive framework incorporating structural and behavioural dimensions.

The first analytical line, Greif (1998, 81) identifies as "internalisation of traits through the evolutionary process." This involves a sophisticated process through which institutions progressively embed and normalise specific behaviours, strategies, and cultural practices. Facilitated by evolutionary processes and learning, this approach employs tools such as evolutionary game theory and learning models to examine how traits like organisational features, individual preferences, or habitual behaviours emerge among decision-makers and influence institutional rule formation. It extends to exploring the synergies between these traits and various economic activities, along with their interactions with government regulations. This ensures that adaptive and beneficial traits become deeply embedded within the institutional context, thereby shaping long-term development and response to conflicts. A practical application of the HCIA approach can be seen in the work of Besley and Reynal-Querol (2014), who leveraged variations between and within countries to explore the legacy of recorded conflicts in Africa during the pre-colonial period from 1400 to 1700. Their findings reveal that historical conflicts correlate with a higher incidence of post-colonial conflicts, underscoring the value of HCIA in understanding the deep-rooted and evolving nature of contemporary conflicts. This case exemplifies how HCIA can provide comprehensive insights into the historical continuities and comparative institutional impacts that shape modern conflict landscapes.

This article applies HCIA to trace the history of Kokang mutinies, spanning the British colonial period, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War era. Research on the Kokang region remains limited. Open access resources are primarily confined to books. Myint

Myint Kyu (2016; 2018a; 2018b) provides an overarching view of Kokang's history with a particular focus on the MNDAA period. Another concise resource is a book by Sai Kam Mong (2005), which offers a brief history of Kokang. An important English-language source is "House of Yang" produced by the Yang family (1997), the last chieftains of Kokang before its integration into the Myanmar political system.

In contrast, a substantial body of resources is available in Chinese, the region's primary language. Notably, two significant books detail Kokang's history "果敢" ("Kokang") by 蔡山/Cai Shan (1989), who lived in Kokang until 1989, and "果敢志" ("Kokang Chronicle") by 鲁成旺/Lu Chengwang (2012), a Chinese historian invited by the MNDAA to compile the first official history of Kokang. The British Library also holds extensive archives from the British Burma period, documenting interactions between Kokang chieftains and British colonial officials. Archives from the Republic of China (ROC) during the same period also provide valuable insights. Since the Cold War, Chinese border county foreign affairs office records have extensively documented Kokang's activities. In addition, US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) documents particularly concerning the retreat of the Kuomintang (KMT) during the 1950s and the rise of the CPB in the China–Myanmar borderland since the late 1960s have become available. Additionally, internal documents from Kokang, including speeches, policies, and correspondence with Chinese border counties, have been preserved since the CPB era. Even after the mutiny within the CPB in 1989 initiated by Kokang leaders who opposed CPB rule – a rebellion that precipitated the CPB's collapse and led to the establishment of the MNDAA – numerous internal and external communications with China and other EAOs have been meticulously recorded.

Drawing on a diverse range of sources and utilising HCIA, this study views the Kokang region as an institution. It aims to elucidate the incentives driving their mutinies by considering endogenous and exogenous factors. Of particular interest is the role of emerging geo-political actors in the region. This article examines how the Kokang leverage the interests of incumbent and neighbouring states to their advantage and considers whether these interactions have influenced their patterns of conflict and mutiny. It aims to uncover changes and the enduring constants within these conflict dynamics. Regarding changes, the article investigates the types of transformations that have escalated Kokang mutinies into regional conflicts and any divergences that may have arisen. For aspects that remain unchanged, it questions whether the core motivations behind the mutinies persist.

Mutinies During the Colonial Period: Single-Lineage Struggles for Chieftainship

This section addresses Kokang mutinies during the colonial era, which are primarily characterised as family mutinies and competition for chieftainship. These early mutinies provide a foundational understanding of the complex dynamics that have shaped Kokang's historical trajectory. By examining these conflicts, this section highlights how local power struggles within the Yang family intersected with broader colonial and geo-political influences. This analysis indicates the nature of internal mutinies and explores how external actors, such as the British and Chinese authorities, became involved in these local conflicts.

In 1886, the British authorities in Mandalay enacted an ordinance to govern Upper Burma. Article 33, paragraph 3 of this ordinance incorporated Upper Burma and Shan State, which included the Dai chieftain region and Kokang, into the British Indian

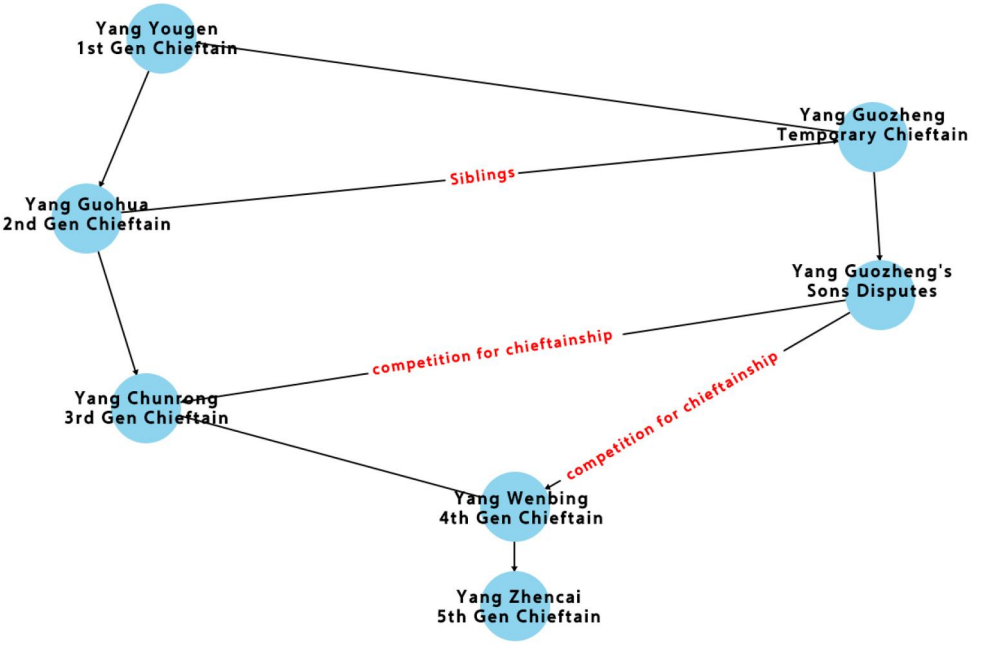

Figure 2. Detailed Yang family tree with succession and internal strife
Source: By the author.

Empire. Within this administrative structure, Kokang was designated as "Kokang State," where an individual chieftain oversaw each county. Previously under the control of Imperial China, Kokang was ceded to British India – of which Burma was a part – in 1897, thereby integrating it into the colonial administrative framework. However, the Yang family, local chieftains known to the British as Myosa, maintained substantive control. It is crucial to understand that the British viewed the Shan State as a significant grouping of semi-independent and, in their view, semi-civilised states. This perception dictated that these states should be governed by their local chiefs, known as Sawbwas, though under the oversight of British political officers. Consequently, the British government's involvement in the internal affairs of these states was designed to be minimal, primarily focused on ensuring the maintenance of peace within these states and securing a moderate tribute. This policy was a component of the broader British colonial strategy of indirect rule, which aimed to govern through the existing local power structures while aligning them with colonial objectives (see W.B.B. 1887).

The relationship between the Yangs and the British was essentially harmonious. However, the succession of chieftains within the Yang family was marked by mutinies. The first-generation chieftain, Yang Yougen, had two sons: the elder, Yang Guohua, and the younger, Yang Guozheng. Upon Yougen's death in 1840, Guohua became chieftain (Lu 2012, 91). However, Guohua's son, Yang Chunrong, was too young to assume the role of chieftain when his father passed away in 1875 (Lu 2012, 91). Guohua's younger brother, Guozheng, temporarily took over as chieftain. When Chunrong reached the appropriate age, Guozheng handed over the leadership to him, sparking the first dispute. Guozheng's elder son, Yang Wenhuan, also claimed rights to the chieftainship, leading to divisions within Kokang. Aware of his cousins' ambitions for power, Yang Chunrong chose to decentralise authority by assigning different cousins to govern various districts in Kokang (Lu 2012, 92).

When Yang Chunrong died in 1929, again, his cousins reignited disputes, contesting the succession to his son Yang Wenbing through a lawsuit filed with the Hsenwi Chieftain's Office. The conflict intensified around the preparations for Yang Chunrong's funeral. The Hsenwi Chieftain's Office, the higher jurisdiction in Kokang, summoned parties to resolve the legal challenge posed by individuals like Yang Wenhuan (Cai 1989, 122). Ultimately, the Hsenwi Chieftain adjudicated in favour of Yang Wenhuan taking over the chieftainship, a decision that stood despite Yang Wenbing's repeated appeals. In response to the succession dispute, Yang Wenbing sought and received support from the British. Arguing that he was the rightful heir as the eldest grandson of the chieftain according to the hereditary system, this external backing helped him conclusively resolve the dispute in 1929 (Cai 1989, 122; Lu 2012, 92). After serving a decade as chieftain, Yang Wenbing relinquished his title in 1941 to his son Yang Zhencai (known as Sao Edward Yang Kyein Tsai), who became the last chieftain (Yang 1997, 41) (see Figure 2).

The previous mutinies within the Yang family required only limited British involvement, largely serving as symbolic mediation without any armed clashes. However, the dynamics shifted dramatically in the 1940s with the Japanese invasion of northern Shan State, which exposed Kokang to greater vulnerabilities. Consequently, the involvement of multiple new actors such as the Republic of China in Kokang affairs during this period provided the Yang clan with increased opportunities to leverage these relationships to their advantage.

In 1942, as Japan invaded Burma and advanced northward to disrupt the vital Burma Road connecting Southwest China and Northern Burma, Kokang, situated north of the Salween River confluence, found itself precariously positioned between the Chinese and Japanese front lines. The region became increasingly vulnerable after the British lost Burma in April 1942 and with no British forces in Kokang (Yang 1997, 48–50). By late May 1942, the Japanese intensified their campaign, sending armed units to Kokang's chieftain's offices to coerce the chieftain into surrender. The Kokang chieftain then fled to Gengma county in Yunnan, seeking help from the 71st Cavalry Regiment of the Chinese Expeditionary Army (CEA) and appealing to Chiang Kai-shek for military support and assistance, expressing their willingness to be reintegrated into China in exchange (ROC MFA 1942–1946). In August 1942, Yang Wenbing was invited to Chongqing to meet with Chiang Kai-shek. Subsequently, he was appointed a CEA colonel and Commander of the Kokang Anti-Japanese Self-Defence Force (KDF). By September 1942, the KDF, comprising over 500 personnel, was established and integrated into the allied war zone division, receiving support from the CEA (BNA WO 1944a). The CEA helped Kokang establish the KDF in 1942 and admitted Yang Wenbing's nephew to the KMT military academy in Chengdu for military training (ROC POB 1943a).

Yang's correspondence to the ROC, requesting to be reintegrated into China, was essentially a strategy to encourage China to deploy stronger defensive forces in Kokang. The British, recognising this as a survival strategy for the Kokang, nevertheless emphasised to Yang that any changes to the current political structure required authorisation (BNA FO 1943; BL IOR 1945). A significant event occurred on September 30, 1943, with a mutiny within the KDF, where Yang Wentai, a distant cousin of Yang Wenbing and other soldiers attacked the Kokang chieftain, resulting in the death of one of his sons (ROC POB 1943b). This marked the initial stage of the Kokang leveraging the involvement of two states in a mutiny. The result was distrust between the Kokang, China, and the British and investigations into the chieftain's alleged collaboration with the enemy.

The incident, which British officials referred to as the "revolt of the KDF," garnered attention from both British and Chinese authorities (BNA FO 1944). According to

investigations by the British and the Chinese authorities, the mutiny was Yang Wentai's attempt to replace the chieftain by falsely accusing him of collaborating with the enemy to garner armed support from the CEA in Dali. Through secret wireless messages with General Sung of the CEA, Wentai manipulated suspicions by accusing the Kokang chieftain of: (i) sending agents to the Japanese; (ii) killing people every day; (iii) not allowing Chinese troops to enter Kokang; and (iv) not flying the Chinese flag (BNA WO 1944b). These messages apparently convinced the Chinese that the Kokang chieftain was conspiring with the Japanese. This accusation led some Chinese soldiers to join the KDF revolt. Following the mutiny, the Kokang chieftain fled to China, where he was detained as a Japanese collaborator.

Although China's involvement in Kokang was multi-dimensional, it responded to the Kokang chieftain's appeal for assistance as a strategic measure to prevent potential collaboration between Kokang and Japan, given the region's significance in the broader warzone. However, China's proactive stance raised concerns for the British. The crux of these concerns centred on the extent of China's jurisdictional rights, particularly in detaining and potentially prosecuting the Kokang chieftain. The apprehension of the British concerned international legal boundaries and how such actions would influence regional stability and their strategic interests.

The analysis of Kokang mutinies during colonisation reveals the initial shift from relying solely on the incumbent state's involvement in internal conflicts to engaging both the incumbent and neighbouring states. However, at this stage, the mutiny remained confined within the chieftain's family, focused on the hereditary leadership system.

Familial Factions and Proxy Wars, 1940s–1990s

This section examines the profound shifts in leadership dynamics within Kokang between the 1940s and 1990s, a period marked by significant political transformations in Myanmar. It explores how Kokang factions navigated their autonomy amidst evolving federal structures and the abolition of the chieftain system. The analysis highlights the emergence of multiple factions within Kokang, strategically leveraging external factors to strengthen their positions. This includes remnants of the KMT in the 1950s and the increasingly influential CPB forces from the 1960s through the 1980s.

By investigating these dynamics, the section aims to provide an understanding of how familial factions and geo-political tensions shaped the patterns of conflict and mutiny in Kokang during the Cold War era.

Between 1947, when Myanmar gained independence, and 1959, when the Kokang hereditary chieftain system was abolished under Ne Win's caretaker government, the Kokang leaders co-opted anti-KMT activities to maximise its autonomy rights when merging with the federal government. This scenario altered drastically post-1962 following Ne Win's military coup, which resulted in the dissolution of parliament and the loss of Kokang's parliamentary representation. This event signalled the end of the earlier "deal" that had allowed Kokang to merge into the federal structure while retaining a degree of autonomy, leading to the power vacuum regarding who should (or could) govern Kokang. Starting in 1962, Kokang's continuous mutinies were a competition for leadership, with legitimacy conferred by both the chieftain and the federal systems. And, this competition was no longer confined to one family. Instead, it transformed into multiple rising factions within Kokang, with each faction aiming to leverage either the incumbent or a neighbouring state to enhance their power.

Pro-KMT and Anti-KMT Factions in the 1950s

After their defeat in the Chinese Civil War, remnants of the KMT retreated to the China–Myanmar borderland as part of their continued resistance against the communist forces. These KMT forces sought refuge and strategic positions in this remote region to regroup and plan further operations (Lintner 1994, 125; MMOI 1953, 10). By April 1951, the KMT's General Li Mi commanded over 4,000 men. In Mong Hsat, Southern Shan State about 80 miles from the Thai border, he established the Yunnan Anti-Communist National Salvation Army, appealing to all nationalist survivors to participate in the organisation (CIA 1951).[2] The KMT forces had support from the USA's CIA. During its first attack on the Yunnan border in May 1951, the KMT army seized several Chinese border counties along the Yunnan border, including Lan Cang, Meng Lian, Xi Meng, and Nan San (Cui 2022, 180). However, in July of the same year, the People's Liberation Army inflicted heavy losses on the KMT army and pushed it back across the border. After the failure of the Yunnan attack, the CIA redoubled its support. Additional assistance came from Thailand, which helped the KMT build a large airstrip at Mong Hsat (Kaufman 2001, 442). By 1952, the KMT army had reached the Wa and Kokang areas, and with approximately 12,000 soldiers, prepared to attack the People's Liberation Army (Kaufman 2001, 445).

The KMT army's retreat to the border in 1951 had been facilitated by the collaboration of Yang Wenbing's daughter, Yang Jingxiu, also known as Yang Kyin Hsui or Olive Yang, who later became an influential drug warlord in the Golden Triangle (see, for example, *The Irrawaddy*, March 9, 2015). This collaboration led to the establishment of the Xincheng Refresher military training school in Kokang,[3] which shaped future Kokang leaders like Peng Jiasheng (Pheung Kya-shin) and Luo Xinghan (Lo Hsing Han), who would later command armed factions (Lu 2012, 479 and 481).

The early alliance of the Kokang and KMT was more of a transitional strategy than a sustainable long-term affiliation. Recognising the emergence of the federal state of Myanmar, Yang's family in Kokang later showed a keen interest in integrating with this reorganised state. Following his pivotal role in aligning Kokang with the emerging Myanmar state, Yang Zhencai subsequently became a member of parliament and in 1950 was selected as a member of the Myanmar government's delegation to the 5th session of the United Nations General Assembly (Cai 1989, 17; Lu 2012, 92). In November 1952, Yang Zhencai, following a covert directive from the federal government, returned to Kokang (Cai 1989, 18). He organised joint defence forces with the Myanmar military, tasked with the formidable challenge of deterring and expelling the KMT exiles who had infiltrated Kokang, ostensibly to instigate rebellion. This action was a strategic response to the escalating tensions and unrest brought about by the presence of these exile forces. Since November 1952, Yang Zhencai had taken decisive steps to secure the region. He implemented a blockade of the ferry crossing along the Salween River, a critical move to restrict the movement of KMT forces. He issued a stern proclamation alongside this tactical measure: all KMT exiles were to be expelled from Kokang (Lu 2012, 14). However, he also stipulated that those who voluntarily disarmed would be permitted to remain. In a display of resolve, he made it clear that any resistance would be met with lethal force, underscoring his commitment to restoring order and stability in the region. Yang Zhencai's stance and actions proved effective. By March 1953, the KMT remnants that had permeated Kokang were successfully neutralised.

Following the successful expulsion of KMT forces, Kokang entered a period of relative harmony with the Myanmar government, navigating a political landscape characterised by federal and traditional chieftain systems. However, this co-existence was challenged in

1959 when the Myanmar government sought to centralise authority, requesting that chieftains cede their powers. Yang Zhencai's initial rejection of this proposal created tensions, but a subsequent compromise in 1960 was reached and established the Kokang Council (*Guogan yishihui*) to replace the chieftain system but also maintained Kokang's autonomy as the council was responsible for autonomous administration, policing, judiciary, and education (Lu 2012,15).

Meanwhile, the KMT's activities, which included recruiting local youths and mobilising them for combat, raised concerns not only in China but also in Myanmar (CIA 1955). For its part, the Myanmar government feared that these actions might prompt the People's Republic of China (PRC) to have the military intervene on the Myanmar border, an area only symbolically under Myanmar's control (Pettman 1973, 13). Thus, Kokang's defeat of the KMT showed its willingness to be part of Myanmar and protect its borders.

In summary, this period spanning the late 1940s to the early 1960s was defined by a transitional phase characterised by competition between the traditional hereditary chiefdom system in Kokang and Myanmar's emerging federal system of government. When external actors, particularly the remnants of the KMT, arrived at the China–Myanmar border, the Kokang's Yang family was split into pro-KMT and anti-KMT factions, each seeking to strengthen their positions.

Rising Factions: Leveraging Incumbent and Neighbouring States, 1960 and the 1980s

The compromise struck between Kokang leaders and the Myanmar government was shattered by Ne Win's 1962 coup, leading to a renewed rebellion in Shan State that rapidly spread to Kachin and other regions inhabited by ethnic minorities. In the wake of these developments, Yang Zhensheng (Jimmy Yang Kyein Sein), the younger brother of Yang Zhencai, returned to Kokang in 1963, quickly assembling a force of 3,000 soldiers to form the Kokang Autonomy Army (KAA) (Cai 1989, 35; Lu 2012,16). The KAA engaged in nearly 20 months of armed conflict with the Myanmar government, culminating in March 1963 when the Tatmadaw advanced into Da Shui Tang in northwest Laukkai. This forced Yang and his forces to retreat southwards, eventually leading them to Thailand (Cai 1989, 129).

Subsequently, Yang Zhensheng collaborated with Peng Jiasheng, who formed the Kokang People Revolutionary Army (KPRA) in June 1965, comprising primarily Kokang youth, to counter the Tatmadaw (Cai 1989, 129). However, the KAA and the KPRA had different objectives, and their alliance was brief. Within a month of KPRA's formation, Luo Xinghan established a defence force aligned with the Myanmar government, which granted his force benefits and privileges akin to those enjoyed by Burmese police officers, such as governmental support and legal authority. Luo's force thus became the official representative of the Myanmar government in Kokang, assisting the Tatmadaw in Shan State with local guidance, translation, and logistics (Cai 1989, 130).

By the mid-1960s, Kokang had three distinct military forces: Yang's force, embodying traditional chieftain authority; Luo's force, representing the Myanmar government; and Peng's force, signifying the rise of Kokang's younger generation who did not want to be governed under the chieftainship or by the Myanmar government. But this arrangement was short-lived, as the Myanmar government manoeuvred to consolidate power by proposing that Yang and Luo collaborate against Peng's forces, leading to Luo's army effectively absorbing Yang's force (Cai 1989,132). Although the Yang family had long influenced Kokang's history, their direct involvement in military affairs was brief

compared to Luo's more advanced and government-backed force. The result was two primary factions in Kokang since the mid-1960s: those co-opted by the Myanmar government and those staunchly opposed to it.

From the late 1960s, factional politics in Kokang was significantly influenced by the retreat of the CPB to the China–Myanmar borderland. Originally established in 1939 in Burma, the CPB lost its central base in Bago and subsequently regrouped in Northeast Myanmar. This shift occurred around the same time as the anti-Chinese riots in 1967 in Yangon, which led to a deterioration of China–Myanmar relations and coincided with the PRC adopting a dual-track diplomacy approach (see Fan 2012; Tin Maung Maung Than 2003, 192–193). This strategy involved formally fostering party-to-party ties and supporting the CPB in the borderlands, a process distinct from state-to-state diplomatic relations (Steinberg and Fan 2012, 93–119). This period was critical for Peng's force, which was in dire need of support. Prior to the CPB's arrival, Peng's force was weak as it faced Luo and Yang's formidable coalition. Peng's decision to ally with the CPB can be considered a mutually beneficial choice (see below). After half a year of training in the Zhenkang border county in Yunnan, in January 1968, Peng and his forces re-entered Kokang under the banner of the CPB and successfully ousted the Myanmar military stationed there (Lu 2012, 17). From the mid-1960s, the Kokang conflict, initially rooted in internal political competition, evolved into a complex struggle that symbolised the broader ideological competition between China and Myanmar in the borderland region.

Peng's alliance with the CPB provided the CPB with a much-needed grassroots force, and a leader committed to opposing the Myanmar government, while Peng required material to support his young followers and reclaim control over Kokang. Supported by China and under Peng's leadership, the Kokang force emerged as one of the CPB's most formidable units in its struggle against the Myanmar government. Between March and April 1969, Kokang's forces achieved a decisive victory, expelling the Tatmadaw, with Ne Win's forces sustaining heavy casualties, with the retreating Tatmadaw abandoning a large stock of weapons for the victorious Kokang.[4] Following this victory, Kokang officially came under CPB control, marking the beginning of what is known as the Kokang CPB era.

From the late 1960s, conflicts in the China–Myanmar borderland were predominantly framed within the context of the international communist movement, with this narrative shaping the political climate. In this context, the Yunnan border county government sharply distinguished between allies and adversaries: those not supporting Maoism or cooperating with the Myanmar government were often labelled "capitalists" (Zhenkang Revolutionary Committee 1969). For instance, the Yang family, who chose a more neutral stance between various parties, was criticised by the Yunnan border counties for being "three openings" – open to the KMT, Tatmadaw, and bandits. Despite their Han Chinese ethnic ties with many in the region, political ideology and allegiances became the primary criteria for distinguishing friends from foes. This ideological divide underscores the complexity of the conflicts in the borderland, where political affiliations and ideologies overshadow ethnic similarities.

Kokang's history does not follow a linear path, transitioning directly from British colonial rule to federal Myanmar, the CPB, and the post-CPB era. Instead, since the disintegration of the chieftain system, the region has been characterised by continuous competition among various forces. The collapse of the chieftain system marked Kokang's integration into the modern political framework of Myanmar; however, the instability of this federal system resulted in power vacuums in the formerly chieftain-led areas. Although the KMT had a brief presence in these regions, it was the communists who

exerted greater power and had a more profound impact, both ideologically and through infrastructure development.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that the CPB was the sole significant political power in the region; instead, as the counter-communist strategy, the Myanmar government implemented the Ka Kwe Ye (KKY) – government-sponsored militias – in the 1960s to recruit ethnic armies to combat communist insurgents in Shan State, offering them incentives to control cross-border trade. The KKY aimed to weaken communist forces by taking over their primary revenue source – the drug trade. With official permission from the Myanmar government, the KKY engaged in the drug trade, acquiring advanced weaponry from the black markets in Thailand and Laos (Lintner 1994, 232). However, the development of the KKY had the unintended consequence of promoting and indirectly financing other armed groups (Priamarizki 2020, 50–52). This further militarisation of the region exacerbated and exploited existing internal conflicts among the various insurgent groups in Kokang, such as Peng's and Luo's forces. For example, Luo Xing Han exemplified the KKY's approach to combating the CPB in Kokang. Intelligence indicated that he led a substantial private army of at least 1,000 members, euphemistically termed a self-defence force and assembled with the tacit approval of the Myanmar government to counter CPB guerrillas in Kokang (Cai 1989, 134). However, despite being equipped with M16 rifles, grenade launchers, and mortars from the black market, Luo's forces could not match the CPB in Kokang (see *The Daily Olympian*, August 7, 1972). Luo's forces were decisively defeated after the CPB's relentless advance through Kokang's rugged mountains. Bridges were destroyed, roads were mined, and poorly armed government garrisons were overwhelmed, leading to widespread disarray across the region (Cai 1989, 135).

These proxy wars, essentially representing Myanmar and China, subsided largely due to a reconciliation in the bilateral relationship since the 1970s between the two protagonists (Steinberg and Fan 2012, 119–128). To repair relations, China had to significantly reduce its official party-to-party aid to the CPB and advocate self-reliance for the CPB. One result of this was that the CPB came to rely more on the illicit economy. By the late 1970s, the impact of the increasing reliance on the narcotics trade was evident, and by the early 1980s, news reports indicated that CPB soldiers participated in the drug trade in Southeast Asia (Lintner 1993, 11).

Other insurgent groups in the China–Myanmar borderland also heavily participated in the drug trade from the end of the 1970s, including the Kachin Independence Army, the Shan State Revolutionary Army, and groups from the Lahu, Kokang, and Wa tribes. These groups operated factories and moved narcotics across a region that had become an important centre for heroin production (DEA 1992, 5–7 Lintner 1993, 19–20). Groups on all sides, both pro- and anti-communist, increasingly adopted self-reliance strategies in drug production and trafficking, drawing international attention. Concurrently, the escalation of the war on drugs campaign in Southeast Asia saw states intensifying efforts to tackle drug issues, often resulting in extensive violence, as evidenced by operations in Thailand and the Philippines (Kenny 2019).

In the context of the war on drugs in Southeast Asia, the Kokang leaders faced increasing challenges in financing their operations. Remaining within the CPB appeared to offer diminishing benefits, prompting them to reassess their affiliations. In the late 1980s, they recognised that aligning with the incumbent state – the Myanmar government – might better support their survival. Thus, on March 11, 1989, Peng Jiasheng initiated a mutiny within the CPB, that resulted in the fragmentation of the CPB into various independent ethnic minority groups. As the leader of the Kokang forces and the first to split from the CPB, Peng's alignment with the Myanmar government led to Kokang being designated as

Special Region 1 in Shan State. This status granted significant autonomy and substantial economic support from the Myanmar government (Lu 2012, 89).

It should be noted that Luo's faction in Kokang, once a competitor of Peng's faction, played a mediating role in the 1989 CPB mutiny between Peng's faction, the Myanmar government, and the Chinese government (Lintner 1993, 27). For example, following Ne Win's resignation amid the 1988 Uprising and General Saw Maung's subsequent military coup on September 18, 1988, Luo, representing the Myanmar government, assured the MNDAA that they would receive economic support from the Myanmar government as long as they did not criticise Saw Maung's administration. In 1989, a year after these assurances and just one week the CPB mutiny, the Myanmar government designated Luo to formally congratulate Peng on his "new start" (Lincang City FAO 1992a). It was also Luo who conveyed information to Yunnan border counties that Peng would guarantee peace even after withdrawing from the CPB (Zhenkang County FAO 1989).

In summary, the abolition of Kokang's chiefdom system in the 1950s marked a shift in leadership criteria, moving from hereditary rights to a focus on leadership capacity. This transition was marked by internal mutinies, underlining the tension between claims of legitimate rule and actual capacity for governance. Historically operating under an "Imperial shadow" – either Imperial China or British colonial Burma – Kokang leaders pragmatically shifted allegiances, often aligning with more dominant powers. Since the mid-1960s, increasing aid from Myanmar and China transformed the factional dynamics in Kokang, shifting from a three-sided to a two-sided competition. This change was distinctly embodied by the alignment of the Yangs and Luo, supported by the Myanmar government, against Peng, who was backed by China. As a result, Peng's forces, operating under the name of the CPB, eventually took control of Kokang. However, in March of 1989, they decided to withdraw from the CPB, recognising a better opportunity to reintegrate with the Myanmar state rather than remaining an insurgent group. By securing recognition as a highly autonomous region in northern Shan State, they positioned themselves as a legitimate political entity under the Myanmar government. In return, the Myanmar government gained a "peaceful" supporter for its new military regime, which was grappling with the crisis sparked by the 1988 democratic movement. As noted by Lintner (1994), this alliance was part of a broader manoeuvre by the Myanmar government to consolidate power and stabilise the country during a period of significant political upheaval and transformation.

Kokang Disputes in the 1990s

During the 1990s, Kokang re-engaged with state-building efforts in Myanmar by administratively integrating itself into the Myanmar government. Although the Cold War-era proxy wars had eased, Kokang continued to experience mutinies. These ongoing disturbances, manifesting as cycles of mutinies and power shifts, derived from an internal governance vacuum that resembled a similar situation in the 1950s to 1960s following the abolition of the pre-existing governance system – the chieftain system – and before the transition to a federal system. Thus, the driving force behind the mutinies during this transition period was more internal dynamics rather than involvement from external states.

Notably, a significant conflict erupted between Peng Jiasheng and his deputy, Yang Maoliang, a high-ranking member of the MNDAA. Yang harboured grievances against Peng, resenting his subordinate position and he opposed Peng's aggressive drug elimination policy (MNDAA HQ 1992a, 1992b). Yang initiated a power struggle within the MNDAA, leading to a coup against Peng Jiasheng with the assistance of Wei Chaoren,

another high-ranking member of the MNDAA who later became a powerful warlord in Kokang from 2009 to 2023. This collaboration sparked a mutiny. On November 28, 1992, forces loyal to Yang and Wei attacked Peng, resulting in approximately 60 casualties for Peng's faction. After a few days of clashes, there were around 6,500 refugees who entered China for help. Peng also moved into Yunnan, surrendering his forces' weapons as soon as they arrived (Zhenkang County FAO 1993). For humanitarian reasons, Zhenkang County, located along China's border, provided medical assistance to Peng's injured forces. After that, officers from the Zhenkang County Foreign Affairs Office urged Peng to leave China immediately to prevent a further escalation of the conflict (Lincang City FAO 1992c). He re-crossed the border shortly after this.

Yet the conflict escalated on December 19, 1992, when approximately 400 UWSA soldiers initially reinforced Yang's forces. This development transformed the Kokang internal mutiny into a broader conflict involving external actors (MNDAA HQ 1992c). By this time, Yang Maoliang had 2,000 of his own soldiers and UWSA support had risen to about 1,000 (Zhenkang County FAO 1994). Despite being outnumbered by Peng's 4,000 soldiers, Yang launched an attack on Peng's forces in Kokang (Zhenkang County FAO 1993). This offensive again forced Peng into exile from Kokang's central area in early 1993. After Peng's departure, Yang assumed the chairmanship in Kokang, appointing Bai Suocheng (Bai Xuoqian) and Wei Chaoren to key military positions, laying a foundation for future factional divisions in 2009.

Yang's consolidation of power was short-lived after the 1992 uprising; by August 1995, Kokang was embroiled in renewed conflicts, leading to Peng's return in December 1995 (Xiao and Peng 2003, 30).[5] With assistance from the UWSA and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), which had emerged from the 1989 CPB mutiny as one of four EAOs, Peng regained control of Kokang in November 1995. During the first Kokang mutiny (1992–1993), the UWSA had supported Yang because Wa leaders believed Peng maintained close relations with Khun Sa (Zhang Qifu), who was at odds with the Wa over the drugs trade (Lincang City FAO 1992b). However, they switched allegiance to Peng after becoming dissatisfied with Yang Maoliang. His public and lax approach to drug eradication threatened the UWSA's effort to reform their image as drug warlords (Zhong and Li 2004, 228). The NDAA also supported Peng due to their close ties with other ex-CPB forces and shared concerns over Yang's role in the drug trade, which was at odds with peace agreements negotiated with the Myanmar government.

Anticipating a loss of control over Kokang, Yang sought to transfer his authority to the Myanmar government rather than cede it to Peng. This action led to Myanmar's first official intervention in Kokang in the post-1989 CPB mutiny period, with the government dispatching 15 battalions, or approximately 3,000 soldiers, to the region's suburban areas (Zhenkang County FAO 1995).

These conflicts in the 1990s, distinct from the Cold War-era mutinies, more closely mirrored mutinies from the chieftain period, characterised mainly by internal strife and a less prominent role of external state interventions. Unlike previous eras, the involvement of the Myanmar state was less significant in the factional divisions within Kokang. Instead, the factions within Kokang primarily sought support from EAOs, particularly the UWSA, indicating a shift in how Kokang factions leveraged alliances.

Twenty-first Century Kokang Mutinies: Family-based Factional Conflicts

This section explores Kokang's mutinies in the twenty-first century. These have been characterised by a complex interplay of familial faction conflicts and broader geo-political

influences. Through an examination of incidents in 2009, 2015, and 2023, it analyses how various Kokang factions competed for leadership, leveraging the involvement of both Myanmar and China.

In the twenty-first century, the narrative of Kokang's mutinies took a significant global turn. Following Peng and the MNDAA's return to Kokang in November 1995, there was a marked shift towards economic development, with a notable focus on the burgeoning illicit economy and especially the gambling industry. This focus was shaped by broader regional dynamics. Following the establishment of the first official welfare lottery in 1987 in mainland China and subsequent regulatory tightening on uncontrolled gambling practices by the Chinese government during the 1990s, Kokang, like other EAO-controlled regions such as Wa State, found itself uniquely positioned to capitalise on these restrictions to attract gamblers from China (Liu 2012, 7–8; Wang and Antonopoulos 2015). China's stringent gambling regulations drove both investors and gamblers to seek alternatives in the borderlands, with the influx of capital and visitors to entertainment complexes that included casinos turning Kokang and its capital Laukkai into a vibrant economic hub (Peng 2024, 138). These developments positioned Kokang as "the next Macau" (see, for example, *Frontier Myanmar*, July 23, 2020).

However, August 2009 saw renewed clashes, notably between the MNDAA and the Myanmar government, ignited by an incident during a factory inspection by Burmese police, where several of them were killed. While superficially a conflict between the MNDAA and the Myanmar government, at its core, it was a mutiny against Peng, orchestrated by the Bai family with backing from the Myanmar government. In the aftermath, Bai ascended to the chairmanship of Kokang, transitioning his soldiers into a Border Guard Force (BGF) under Myanmar's command, thereby sidelining the MNDAA (Kokang Preliminary Government 2009). After the 2009 incident, Peng was labelled a wanted criminal by the Myanmar government due to his involvement with a private weapons factory (Zhenkang County FAO, 2009). Between late 2009 and 2015, the MNDAA fought with the Kokang BGF to regain their territory and "return home." Despite these efforts, they failed to secure control and clashes continued in 2016 and 2017 (Zhenkang County BSM 2015a, 2017; PRC MFA 2016).

These clashes were no longer local affairs; they rippled through Myanmar's domestic politics and garnered increasing attention from China and Western countries. On the one hand, the 2009 clashes signified the Myanmar government's formal assertion of control in Kokang, with the BGF positioned not just along the China–Myanmar border but also adjacent to other EAOs, serving as a warning to these groups against potential anti-government activities. On the other hand, with Myanmar's democratic transition starting in 2010, Kokang's place in Sino-USA relations gained prominence. For China, how it handled the situation in Kokang, especially concerning border security, placed it in a challenging position concerning its policy of non-intervention (see, for example, *The Irrawaddy*, November 11, 2023).

While the Kokang BGF received support from the Myanmar government, the MNDAA sought to leverage a narrative of being "descendants of the Chinese" to draw attention and support from both the general populace and the Chinese government. Monitoring records from the Zhenkang County administration reveal that Chinese citizens were volunteering for the MNDAA online, driven by a sense of empathy for these "forgotten Chinese" in northern Myanmar (Zhenkang County BSM 2015b). This move prompted considerable internal criticism from Chinese officials.[6] Nevertheless, the MNDAA remained highly active on Chinese social media platforms. Through its official WeChat

account, it disseminated daily updates on battlefield developments in Chinese, targeting Chinese citizens as its primary audience.

Compared to the Myanmar government-supported Kokang BGF, the Kokang MNDAA primarily depended on its close – and familial – ties with the NDAA. Notably, a significant bond had been formed when Peng Jiasheng's daughter married Lin Mingxian (U Sai Lin), the leader of the NDAA, in the 1980s (Rippa and Saxer 2016). From 2009 to 2023, the strategic aims of the MNDAA were focused on preserving and augmenting their forces, biding their time for the situation to evolve, and seizing opportunities to counter-attack the Kokang BGF (Lincang FAO 2012). With assistance from the NDAA, MNDAA soldiers undertook military training and engaged in agricultural activities around Mong La, the NDAA's capital. Furthermore, the MNDAA endeavoured to forge alliances with other EAOs, culminating in the formation of the Three Brotherhood Alliance in June 2019 (see, for example, *The Irrawaddy*, June 13, 2023). This tripartite military coalition composed of the Arakan Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and the MNDAA, set the stage for a confrontation between the MNDAA and the Kokang BGF, each with a different set of supporters.

Although reminiscent of the Cold War era's Kokang dichotomy between the CPB and the KKY, this new dynamic showcased varied interactions between EAOs and incumbent and neighbouring states in the post-Cold War landscape. The MNDAA's strategies included forming alliances with other EAOs after being denied assistance by China. This denial was rooted in the PRC's "Three Nos" policy – No Intervention, No Involvement, and No Assistance – which was in effect from the 1990s. This policy precluded any form of assistance to the MNDAA, particularly in response to the Kokang mutinies (Zhenkang County FAO 1993). Concurrently, pro-Myanmar government militias, such as the Kokang BGF, not only collaborated closely with the Myanmar state but also maintained amicable relations with China. The diverse strategies employed by these two factions demonstrate that the situation was not the binary choice between aligning with the CPB or opposing it during the Cold War.

Despite enduring conflicts in Kokang between the MNDAA and the BGF since 2009, the former did not reclaim its territory until the "1027 Operation" in 2023. This operation was initially perceived as another attempt by Peng's MNDAA to "return home" (see, for example, *The Diplomat*, January 5, 2024). Yet it transcends this interpretation. Especially since the 2021 Myanmar military coup, the fight has evolved into a more significant movement, garnering support from various armed groups such as Bamar People's Liberation Army. This support has injected new energy into Myanmar's anti-coup movement, known as the Spring Revolution, which is collectively striving to overthrow the military regime and establish a federal democratic union (*Al Jazeera*, November 3, 2023). The objective has shifted beyond defeating the Kokang BGF to challenging the Myanmar State Administration Council. The 1027 Operation was against the backdrop of the coup and a context where China was seeking to combat online scams (Sun 2024). Since 2021, the Chinese government has been targeting the burgeoning online scam sector along its border, a region under the control of the Kokang BGF and notorious for housing numerous scam operations and particularly those targeting Chinese citizens. Despite joint efforts by the Myanmar military government and China to curb this illicit economy, eradicating the Kokang BGF proved challenging (see, for example, *BBC*, November 23, 2023). The BGF's status as a pro-Myanmar militia has, of course, reduced the Myanmar military's motivation and incentives for decisive action (*CNN*, December 19, 2023).

The BGF and the illicit activities were predominantly overseen by the "four families" headed by Bai Suocheng, Wei Chaoren, Liu Guoxi, and Liu Zhengxiang, all local Kokang.

They control the mining, commerce, and real estate business in Laukkai, the capital of the Kokang Self-Administered Zone. Concurrently, China's policy of non-intervention made it untenable to engage militarily with a group outside its direct jurisdiction. The MNDAA's decisive action on October 23, 2023, to dismantle the "four families" garnered support from other EAOs, as the BGF symbolised the Myanmar military's influence at the borders. This action also meant that China could maintain its less interventionist position. The swift military campaign, lasting approximately 40 days, claimed to eliminate the "four families" involved in the online scams, enabling the MNDAA to regain control of Laikkai (*The Diplomat*, January 5, 2024).

Clearly, even if particular family-based factions were targeted, the 2023 conflicts transcended family-based factional mutinies, illustrating how the MNDAA has enhanced its negotiating leverage with neighbouring China. In a strategic manoeuvre, the MNDAA had pledged to tackle the online scam industry in Kokang, aiming for recognition or cooperation from the Chinese government (Peng 2024,18). By addressing mutual cybersecurity threats, the MNDAA potentially secured a non-intervention stance from China, which could have intervened under the pretext of maintaining border security but chose not to, thereby impacting the dynamics of the conflict.

The ramifications of these internal conflicts have significantly broadened in scope. According to an analysis conducted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the "1027 Operation" has dramatically reshaped the dynamics of Myanmar's post-coup warfare, being a catalyst for synchronised military offensives across various regions in Myanmar (Michaels 2023). This development suggests that the Kokang conflicts have evolved from being isolated regional issues to playing a pivotal role in influencing Myanmar's broader domestic political landscape, notably bolstering the anti-coup movement. This shift became particularly evident when the MNDAA ousted the Kokang BGF and reclaimed its territory in December 2023, marking a significant milestone in the ongoing conflict. Following this territorial reclamation, the MNDAA's closer economic ties with China are expected to deepen, surpassing the levels seen during the Kokang BGF period (*BBC News Myanmar*, January 13, 2024). This enhanced economic relationship will likely grant China greater leverage in its negotiations with Myanmar's current regime. As a result, China's influence in Myanmar's political and economic spheres is set to increase, shaping the future interactions between the two countries.

The repercussions of this shift are particularly evident as external pressures, resulting from China's crackdown, reshape the landscape of illicit activities in the region. Due to the increased scrutiny and regulatory environment established by the Chinese government, many scam centres operated by Chinese-speaking criminal gangs were forced to close. Some of these criminal operations have since relocated, primarily to Karen State along the Thai border, adapting to new geo-political pressures. As these scamming operations move, they complicate the regional security landscape. The Karen militia forces, previously aligned with the Myanmar military, have begun to distance themselves from the junta as a means to better securing their criminal enterprises. This has escalated the conflict along the Thailand border, where various armed groups now view the coup regime more as a liability than a protector for their illicit business (Tower and Clapp 2024).

Conclusion

Kokang's history of mutiny significantly challenges the notion of temporality in Zomia as proposed by Scott (2009, xii). Scott argued that the agency of Zomia's peoples diminished after World War II due to state technological advances that overcame distance and

terrain. However, Kokang's experience suggests a different narrative regarding how Zomia responded to the modern state's arrival. Contrary to the view that they were completely subjugated post-World War II, these communities adapted to the arrival of various states and retained a significant capacity for resistance. This enduring influence is evident in their internal power struggles and their active participation in the state-building processes of neighbouring and incumbent states. Moreover, these communities have adeptly adjusted to state governance in the borderland, leveraging this oversight to bolster their internal power dynamics or to diminish their opponents. This adaptability challenges the notion that the friction of terrain is a significant constraint on state control and highlights the people's resilience in the former Zomia region.

Examining the history of Kokang's mutinies, from their origins to the present day, is key in understanding the transformation of internal clashes into multifaceted factional conflicts increasingly influenced by external political forces. The power structure in Kokang, initially centralised within the Yang family, exemplified narrow, lineage-based governance. Since the onset of the Cold War and with the growing influence of Myanmar, the incumbent state, and China, the neighbouring state, the Kokang region has become increasingly embroiled in the broader geo-political arena. As a result, power shifted from a centralised structure to various clans and factions. This dispersion of power has intertwined Kokang's internal power struggles with the wider geo-political struggle, thereby broadening the scope of power dynamics and conflict agendas, employing strategies such as alliances, co-option, and rejection between incumbent and neighbouring states. The transformation of family-based clashes into regional conflicts can be attributed to recurring power vacuums during Kokang's political transitions within the Myanmar state and geo-political competition during and after the Cold War. This competition has motivated more actors in a complicated pattern of engagement and disengagement with Kokang's affairs, highlighting the complex interplay between local dynamics and broader geo-political influences.

Despite these developments, the essence of the Kokang conflict remains a familial power struggle. Over time, this has evolved, with a long-standing pattern of involving external actors in its internal conflicts – from inviting British and Chinese interventions during the colonial period to the recent "1027 Operation" in 2023. In that operation, Kokang leaders leveraged China's security agenda in the borderland in exchange for recognition, illustrating how the region consistently seeks external involvement in its internal power struggles. This study further illuminates the ongoing conflict dynamics between China and Myanmar, indicating that persistent regional conflicts are not solely attributable to the weakness of Myanmar's state capacity. Instead, they are often influenced by internal factors such as clan and faction politics within the ethnic armed groups. Historical research reveals that a deep-seated pattern of relying on external forces to intervene in these internal politics continues to shape the Kokang conflict.

Notes

1. Myanmar is used in this article to refer to the nation-state that was officially known as Burma during certain periods covered in this analysis.
2. This appeal was aimed not only at nationalist survivors, but also "all Chinese" in Burma. That led to the establishment of a new organisation called the "Union of Burma Chinese Societies" by anti-communist and pro-KMT groups in 1951.
3. Bertil Lintner (1993, 17) has also indicated Olive's relationship with the KMT, yet it was described as Olive's private army.
4. The successful outcome of this operation greatly extended the area of liberated territory, marking a crucial turning point in the conflict (as detailed in the Zhenkang Revolutionary Committee (1969).

5. Between 1993 and 1995, Peng Jiasheng's movements were difficult to trace due to his exile from the central area of Kokang. It is believed that when he left China he moved to either the suburban areas surrounding Kokang or a remote location in northern Shan State. During this period, his exact activities and locations remain largely undocumented.
6. These Chinese who aimed to cross the border to join the MNDAA were persuaded to return to China by Chinese border patrol officials and did not manage to join the MNDAA.

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ORCID

Xu Peng http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1635-3743

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