

Obstacles to Conflict Transformation in Myanmar: A Case Study of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army¹

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Abstract

This article addresses the problem of ethnic conflict transformation in Myanmar by considering why the civil government could not convince all Ethnic Armed Groups (EAOs) to participate in the peace process and sign the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). These dynamics are examined through a comparison of the political life cycle of the Ta'ang, drawing from documentary data and ethnographic research. It argues that the problem of the current peace negotiations between the government and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) is rooted in the civil government's inability to control the Myanmar army, especially its operations regarding the control of ethnic groups, which led to a lack of trust among all concerned. More importantly, it shows how civil-military relations in the domestic politics of Myanmar affect the resolution to the ethnic conflict. While the government is attempting to use political means, the army focuses only on military operations. It could be said then that this unfinished democratization changes the pattern of ethnic conflict to something akin to "talking while fighting."

Keywords: ethnic conflict, border, civil-military relations, peace process

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งตอบคำถามปัญหาการเปลี่ยนผ่านความขัดแย้งทางด้านชาติพันธุ์ในเมียนมา โดยการพิจารณาว่าทำไมรัฐบาลพลเรือนไม่สามารถชักจูงให้กองกำลังติดอาวุธกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ทุกกลุ่มเข้ามามีส่วนร่วมในกระบวนการสันติภาพและลงนามในข้อตกลงหยุดยิงทั้งประเทศได้ พลวัตดังกล่าวถูกศึกษาผ่านการวิเคราะห์เปรียบเทียบวงจรชีวิตทางการเมืองของกลุ่มต่างๆ จากข้อมูลเอกสารและการวิจัยเชิงชาติพันธุ์วรรณา โดยบทความเสนอว่าปัญหาของการเจรจาสันติภาพระหว่างรัฐบาลกับกองทัพปลดปล่อยแห่งชาติเตออัง (the Ta'ang National Liberation Army-TNLA) นั้นมีสาเหตุมาจากการที่รัฐบาลพลเรือนไม่สามารถควบคุมกองทัพได้ โดยเฉพาะการปฏิบัติการของกองทัพเมียนมาที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการควบคุมกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์จนนำไปสู่การสร้าง ความไม่ไว้วางใจกัน ยิ่งไปกว่านั้น สถานการณ์ดังกล่าวยังแสดงให้เห็นถึงสถานการณ์ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างพลเรือนกับทหารจากการภายใน ส่งผลกระทบต่อการแก้ไขปัญห ความขัดแย้งทางด้านชาติพันธุ์ นั่นคือ ในขณะที่รัฐบาลพยายามจะใช้วิธีการทางการเมือง แต่กองทัพกลับให้ความสนใจเฉพาะปฏิบัติการทางทหารเท่านั้น กล่าวได้ว่า กระบวนการเปลี่ยนผ่านประชาธิปไตยที่ไม่เสร็จสมบูรณ์ได้ส่งผลให้เกิดการเปลี่ยนรูปแบบความขัดแย้งทางด้านชาติพันธุ์ในลักษณะที่เรียกว่า “คุ้ยไปด้วย รบไปด้วย”

คำสำคัญ: ความขัดแย้งทางด้านชาติพันธุ์ ชายแดน ความสัมพันธ์พลเรือน-ทหาร กระบวนการสันติภาพ

Introduction

After the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the 2015 general election, most Ethnic Armed Groups (EOs) hoped that the civil government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, would bring peace and an end to the civil war in Myanmar. The 21st Century Panglong Conference officially began by inviting all ethnic armed groups to participate. However, there are complex problems with the current peace process, as many ethnic armed groups, including the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), have refused to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). This article aims to answer the question why civil government could not convince all EOs to participate in the peace process and sign

the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Theoretically, there are many models of ethnic conflict resolution, but democracy is the most famous and appropriate model, and typically the most successful in many cases. The reason for its success is that democracy guarantees the rights of the people involved in all political dimensions, especially those who assume the right of self-determination.

In addition, democracy also supports peaceful negotiation, in particular, consociationalism, which emphasizes that all ethnic groups in the state must be recognized as political players (Lijphart, 1969; O'Leary, 1989; Coakley, 1994; Lemarchand, 2006; Lustick, 1979). The explicit mechanism of such a democratic form is the establishment of a political institution, one that distributes political power among ethnic groups, namely through "power sharing," guaranteeing appropriate representation in parliament (McGarry and O'Leary, 2013; Jinadu, 1985). An important question is whether the current Myanmar civil government holds real state power to support this form of democracy as the Myanmar army, known as Tatmadaw, has always declared itself as having supreme and ultimate power to ensure national security and unity. This position means that the army sees itself as having a legitimate role in intervening as much as it can in the peace process.

In doing so, the army can make the situation more complex. On the one hand, it shows that democratization in Myanmar is not fully realized, as the military still holds state power, politically, in the case of policy decisions in peace making. On the other hand, the role of the military in the stabilization process during peace negotiations could lead to further breakdown in the peace process. As Dennys (2014) states, in order to end insurgency, a military means must be legitimized in order to bring about such stability. However, if it fails, it would bring about a return to armed conflict. Thus, one must view an appropriate intervention in terms of three phases: pre-conflict, during conflict, and post-conflict.

Specifically, the calculation and interpretation of the ongoing situation must suit the characteristics of the conflict, especially while there are peace negotiations taking place during the conflict.

Dudouet (2014) argues that, during the conflict, resistance strategies could emerge with unexpected factors; for example, an ethnic group could take collective action to fight against the political regime or political policies that do not bring about equal rights and justice for them. Such non-cooperation and civil disobedience strategies can break down political dialogue and negotiations, leading to guerilla insurgency and terrorist attacks.

This article deals with the phenomenon of ethnic conflict and peace negotiations in the case of the TNLA through a comparison of the political life cycle of the Ta'ang, drawing from documentary data and ethnographic research. It argues that the root causes of the current peace negotiation problems are rooted in the civil government's inability to control the military's operation against ethnic groups, which has led to a lack of trust among all concerned. More importantly, this situation demonstrates how civil-military relations in the domestic politics of Myanmar affect the resolution to the ethnic conflict. While the government is attempting to use political means, the army focuses only on military operations. The result is "talking while fighting." There are three crucial sub-sections in this article: 1) the Ta'ang in civil war, 2) imbalanced power in peace negotiations, and 3) changing strategies.

The Ta'ang in Civil War

The Ta'ang (Paluang) are a Mon-Khmer ethnic group located in various areas of Myanmar, including Nam Sam, Man Ton, Man Kham, and Lashio. In the past, the Ta'ang considered signing the Pang Long agreement in order to collaborate with other ethnic groups and the ethnic Burman people to negotiate with the British for independence. This agreement paved the way for ethnic groups to gain the right of self-determination after staying within the Union of Burma for ten years. However, while other groups signed the agreement, the Ta'ang did not; and it was abolished after the Myanmar army took power in 1962. This situation led to the longest civil war in the world in recent history.

The political life cycle of the Ta'ang began in January 1963 when the Paluang national force was formed, dramatically growing into a full liberation army– the Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA) - by 1976. The pressure exerted by the Myanmar government through military operations and diplomacy meant that the PSLA had to sign a ceasefire agreement in 1991. In the meantime, most of the members of the PSLA decided to use political means to achieve their goals by forming a political party, the Palaung National League for Democracy. It participated in elections in 1990, but the military government rejected the results of the election, leading to more political turmoil.

After the democratic transition in Myanmar, the ethno-nationalist movement of the Ta'ang was reorganized again into the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), with the military at the 3rd congress of the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) acting as its political wing. At this time, they strongly emphasized fighting the Myanmar state in order to protect their people and dignity. They had five aims:

1. To obtain freedom from oppression for all Ta'ang Nationals,
2. To establish Ta'ang autonomy that has a guarantee for democracy and human rights,
3. To oppose and fight against dictatorship and any form of racial discrimination,
4. To attain national equality and self-determination,
5. To establish a genuine federal union that guarantees autonomy (Burmalink, 2012).

At present, the TNLA plays an active role in the northern Shan, where it controls at least 40,000 troops in 21 battalions. Even though the Myanmar government, through Thein Sein and the leader of the TNLA, attempted to negotiate a ceasefire and bring about political dialogue, militarization was on the rise. Known as “Operation of PyiThar-Yar,” it was fraught with concern in this era of democratic transition. Indeed, there were also other operations aimed at making ethnic groups surrender and sign a ceasefire agreement. Thus, there was no balance of power in the peace negotiations in Myanmar, including the case of the TNLA. However, an unofficial meeting on November 9,

2012 used the UWPC (Union Peace-making Work Committee) as a means to collaborate further, in July 2013. In 2014, the leader of the TNLA sent two letters to the Myanmar president and commander-in-chief, but there was no reply. Thus, the clash between the two sides is ongoing, causing large numbers of civilian casualties, with widespread human rights abuses, including torture, unlawful arrests, killings, rape and forced marriage.



Figure 1 The Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA)

Source: Burmalink (2017)

Imbalance of Power in Peace Negotiations

The peace process in Myanmar was restarted when President Thein Sein signed the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) on October 15, 2015. However, not all Ethnic Armed Groups signed the agreement. According to information from the Pyidaungsu Institute (PI) (2017), the ethnic groups are divided into two: Signatories and Non-signatories.

Table 1 Ethnic Armed Groups

Signatory groups	Non-signatory groups
1. All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF)	1. Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/KIA)
2. Arakan Liberation Party/Army (ALP/ALA)	2. New Mon State Party/Mon National Liberation Army (NMSP/MNLA)
3. Chin National Front/Army (CNF/CNA)	3. Karenni National Progressive Party/Karenni Army (KNPP/KA)
4. Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA)	4. Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA)
5. Karen National Union/ Liberation Army (KNU/ KNLA)	5. Arakan National Council (ANC)
6. Karen Peace Council (KPC)	6. Wa National Organization (WNC)
7. PaO National Liberation Organization (PNLO)	7. Lahu Democratic Union (LDU)
8. Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army (RCSS/ SSA)	8. Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta-ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA)
	9. Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)
	10. Arakan Army (AA)
	11. National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)
	12. United Wa State Army (UWSA)
	13. National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA)

Source: PyidaungsuInstitute (PI) (2017)

The problem centers on ideological conflicts over concepts of negotiation, particularly whether the Myanmar army, rather than the civil military, holds power in the decision process of peace negotiations. This sub-section will discuss these points. The ongoing peace negotiations prioritize two political objectives: the right of self-determination and federalism. The problem is that before all agreements can be implemented, the 2008 constitution has to be amended, which is not likely to happen, as the Myanmar army always prevents any changes to the constitution, since they are the ones who wrote it. Thus, although the army may accept a peace negotiation, everything must be referred back to the six-point guiding principles of the army:

1. To have a keen desire to reach eternal peace,
2. To keep promises agreed to in peace deals,
3. To avoid capitalizing on the peace agreement,
4. To avoid placing a heavy burden on local people,

5. To strictly abide by existing laws, and
6. To strive towards becoming a democratic country in accord with the 2008 Constitution (Keenan, 2015).

Furthermore, the progress of peace negotiation was incorporated at every stage of the political dialogue, as the commanders of the Myanmar army always emphasized the six principles listed above. For example, as Lieutenant General U Myint Soe, of the commander-in-chief's office, states:

Our Tatmadaw (Myanmar army) has already declared that genuine peace will happen if [ethnic armed forces] adhere to our six principles. (Myanmar Times, 2015: 1)

Importantly, the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, revealed his view explicitly in the National Ceasefire Agreement at the 72nd anniversary of Armed Forces Day, by stating:

In transparent democracy, the disagreement of political doctrine must only be solved by political means. Our Tatmadaw participated with might and main in establishing peace throughout the previous governments. On August 18, 2011, the former government started the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and offered ethnic armed groups a peace settlement. Eight ethnic armed groups with the same view entered into agreement to achieve peace. The government invites and urges the remaining ethnic armed organizations to sign in the NCA for peace.

I would like to say that our Tatmadaw will participate in establishing everlasting peace accordingly with the six peace principles laid down by the Tatmadaw under supervision of the government.” (Myanmar Times, 2015: 1)

From the statements above, it can be seen that amending the 2008 Constitution is difficult for the civil government. The reason is that, although the National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a

margin of 80 percent in the parliamentary elections, the parliamentary system still guarantees 25 percent for military appointees (without election), in both the lower and upper houses. Most importantly, military representatives have the power to veto any attempts to change the constitution. Hence, it is impossible to amend the constitution; as Lintner (2017) notes, the 2008 constitution represents the Myanmar army's political ideology.

The conflict between the government and the army in the amendment of the constitution emerged when the advisor, Ko Ni of the NLD, was assassinated at Yangon International Airport on January 29, 2015 (Euro-Burma Office, 2017). After the incident, the police arrested the suspect and concluded that religious discrimination had motivated the tragedy. However, most of the NLD supporters did not find any truth in this conclusion because Ko Ni was an active NLD lawyer who strongly advocated changing the 2008 constitution. In the past, other members of the NLD were killed when they took this position. All of these incidents led to further suspicion surrounding the role of the army in the assassination of Ko Ni.

There is another assumption which shows that even though the government is involved in the peace negotiations, it has decided to remain silent and take no action. This way it can continue to hold state power by avoiding any conflict with the army. Important evidence could be found on its position on two relevant acts. The first is the Unlawful Association Act. This law is quite important for peace negotiations, as it is used as a classification system for the position of ethnic groups and whether these groups were accepted by the government or not. In other words, this act can punish someone if they are suspected of being involved with ethnic armed groups, technically identifying them as terrorist groups. The act is used in a negative way in peace negotiations by pressuring ethnic groups to accept the government's conditions regarding the peace proposal before delisting them from the Unlawful Association Act. For instance, according to the government's announcement no. (2/2015), three Ethnic Armed Groups were delisted from the act when they achieved a negotiation in 2015 - the Karen

National Union (KNU), All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), and Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army (RCSS/SSA) (Monnews, 2015: 1).

The second law is the Telecommunications Act, which aims to prosecute government critics for online defamation (VOA News, 2017). This act poses potential dangers, as it may bring about an end to freedom of speech for both the ethnic Myanmar people and smaller ethnic groups. The impact of this act on the peace negotiations is that it could limit the political voice of those ethnic groups that have always criticized the performance of the government. More evidence that the government does not fully support the peace process is the banning of the visa of Harn Yawngnhe, a key person in the peace negotiation of ethnic groups and the founder of the Euro-Burma Organization. As he stated,

After hearing various reports last year that the state counsellor and Dr. Tin Myo Win, her chief negotiator, were not happy with my advice to ethnic armed organizations, I requested a meeting with both of them. Dr. TMW refused and she did not respond.

After returning from exile in 2011, I tried to meet DASSK [Daw Aung San Suu Kyi], and met with the late U Win Tin from the NLD and it was agreed that I should meet DASSK. She was too busy. Next, Minister Aung Min in 2012 requested that I brief DASSK about the peace process. He personally called her spokesperson. The meeting did not happen. In 2014, the current Tourism Minister U Ohn Maung, who was the 1990 Member of Parliament from Yawngnhe (Nyaung Shwe), tried to arrange for me to meet DASSK. U Tin Oo, the NLD patron, assisted but the meeting did not take place. I finally met her twice in 2015 as an advisor to KNU Chair Saw Mutu Sae Poe.

After the elections in 2015, we offered to conduct a review of U Thein Sein's peace process for the NLD in preparation for its coming to power. It was not accepted. But we are continuing to informally assist government, political party and ethnic negotiators. (Mizzima, 2017; 1)

From the incident mentioned above, it can be seen that Aung San Suu Kyi is the real leader of the civil government and as state counsellor she faces serious problems in peace negotiations. On the one hand, there is evidence that the civil government lacks power, particularly in security administration, in the process of decision making if the 2008 constitution has to be amended. On the other hand, there is also evidence that the government actually has power in various areas of public administration, especially in establishing laws to support the peace process. Ultimately, the government did not honor the peace agreement, when it kept the Unlawful Association Act and passed the Telecommunications Act. It could be said then that the conflict between the army and the government affected the peace process directly. Moreover, the government's actions seem to support the position of the army in various ways. That is why 13 ethnic armed groups have not decided to sign the National Ceasefire Agreement yet, even though they have already engaged in political dialogue. The question of how the TNLA positions itself in such situations will now be discussed.

Changing Strategies

The TNLA is an ethnic armed group that has long been fighting for liberation. The crucial turning point for reorganizing the liberation movement is that although the TNLA is not a big group and did not sign in the Panglong agreement, in the era of General Ne Win's dictatorship, it pushed the ethnic groups to fight back. This is because there were many actions which violated the rights of ethnic groups. It could be said that the root of the formation of the TNLA stemmed from their need to defend themselves from the Myanmar soldiers and government. At present, the TNLA is quite active in the peace negotiations, though they have not yet signed the NCA because they cannot trust the way the Myanmar army operates, especially regarding the request to put down their arms before signing the agreement or disarming in the future. Generally speaking, the proposal of the army is different when used to negotiate with other groups. For example, the process of disarming

before signing the NCA has been used in negotiations with the KIA, the AA, the MNDAA, and the TNLA, even though all of them participated in the Panglong conference in August 17, 2016. Brigadier General, Tar Bone Kyaw, general secretary of the TNLA, emphasized the current situation,

If there is no dialogue and the Tatmadaw does not change its attitude, fighting will not end no matter what kind of [ceasefire] agreement has been signed. The situation is very bad. It's very difficult to stop the civil war. (Mon News, 2015)

A well-known tactic of the Myanmar army is to take advantage of the peace negotiations by ceasing to fight with one group while starting up with another group. This tactic allows them to avoid having to fight two different sides at the same time. In the view of the TNLA, this action cannot lead to sustainable peace because it leads to “a vicious cycle of peace negotiation,” consisting of negotiation - ceasefire agreement - violating agreement - resuming fighting. At this point, the TNLA realized that in order to have the negotiations go their way, every group would have to change its strategy in order to pressure the government to make peace real and viable. This strategy, “Changing the fighting from the jungle to the city,” also moves the TNLA from a defensive position to an offensive one. In previous fighting situations, the TNLA had to stay at their position in the jungle, where it was quite easy for the Myanmar army to fire their cannons at them. At present, however, the ethnic groups have formed a new alliance, the Northern Alliance (also known as Northern Brotherhood Allies), which consists of the KIA, the MNDAA, the AA and the TNLA. Subsequently, clashes have been occurring in the city center, with terrorist attack tactics evident through the setting of explosions. Importantly, the war has expanded extensively into large parts of the northern Shan state and Kachin state (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 The Northern Brotherhood Alliance Army Area

Source: Thu (2016)

It is important to point out that the implication of this new alliance is related to the meaning of this formation for other groups, particularly the Myanmar army's classification of rebellion groups into Ceasefire and Non-ceasefire groups. Interestingly, the Myanmar army and government called the first an ethnic armed group, while the second

group was dubbed a terrorist group. The terrorist moniker was used to refer to three groups consisting of the AA, the MNDAA and the TNLA. The KIA were not included because the Myanmar army may have a positive view of them. At this stage it can be found in the statement of TNLA from Figure 3.

The released statement of Northern Alliance (Burma) in order to end civil war in Myanmar

4 December 2016

Until now the intensive fights continue since our Northern Alliance (Burma) has launched unavoidable joint operations against the Burma Army's offensive attacks that have ever been intensified in the ethnic territories of Kachin, Kokang, Ta'ang and Arakan.

Notwithstanding the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been attempting to install peace, the Burma Army has been launching their offensive attacks by non-stop shelling artilleries targeted at innocent civilians whilst the Burma Army helicopters and Fighter Jets have been bombing everyday in the ethnic territories.

In order to end the flame of the civil war of Myanmar genuine political dialogues must be conducted after nationwide ceasefire. Thus, political problem solved by the means of political dialogues must be implemented to end the current flame of the civil war of Myanmar forever. For the ending of the current civil war of Myanmar, We, Northern Alliance (Burma), therefore, call for the following demands:

1. To announce a nationwide ceasefire by the Government of Myanmar
2. To retreat their troops from the ethnic territories after stopping the Burma Army's offensive attacks
3. To immediately start the means of political dialogue to terminate armed conflicts
4. To urgently negotiate and mediate by the Republic of China since most of the current fights are breaking out along the Myanmar-China border
5. We, Northern Alliance (Burma), are ready for a genuine and equal political dialogue to end these fights.



Figure 3 Statement of Northern Alliance

Source: Palaung State Liberation Front (2016)

Moreover, there have also been clashes between some of the ethnic groups. According to interviews with key informants of the

TNLA, in the case of the conflict between the TNLA and the SSA-S north, the cause stems from the long-standing fight between ethnic groups and the Myanmar army. Thus, it results in huge casualties and there are no break times or down times for the soldiers. A better way to solve this problem would be to find a means other than fighting to let the Myanmar soldiers take a rest. The current means has led to the emergence of a proxy war as the Myanmar army supports the SSA in fighting against the TNLA in order to let them take a rest. It should be noted that there were 80-100 personnel in the SSA at the conflict area in the past; however, since May 15, 2015, the number has risen to 1,000. The question is, what is the SSA's motivation in this movement? If we take a look at the map, we can see that the military base of the SSA at the Thai-Myanmar border is quite a distance from the conflict zone, approximately 1,000 miles.

Another strategy of the TNLA can be found in the formation of the second Union Peace Conference - the 21st Century Panglong (UPC-21CP) May from 24-29, 2017. The seven EAOs formed a new alliance, the so-called Pangkham Alliance (also known as FPNCC - Federal Political Negotiation Consultative Committee aka Union Political Negotiation Committee). It consisted of the United Wa State Party/Army (UWSP/UWSA), the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), the Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/KIA), the Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA), the Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party/Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNTJP/MNDAA), the Peace and Solidarity Committee/National Democratic Alliance Army (PSC/NDAA), and the Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA). The political aspiration of this group was to reject the NCA of the government in order to make a new ceasefire proposal. It emphasized that the current ceasefire agreement could not end the war in the northern Shan state (Myanmar Times, 2015).

It should be noted that the role of China emerged in the peace conference at this time. The reason is that, before the conference, the TNLA refused to join the conference because the government invited

them to be a ‘special guest.’ This status meant that there were no full rights in the conference, including the right of discussion and vote. In the meantime, there was no precise sign as to whether the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA - Kokang group) and the Arakan Army (AA) would participate in the conference or not, including large groups like the Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP), the United Wa State Party/Army (UWSP/UWSA), and the Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/KIA) (Myanmar Times, 2015).

In the end, all of these groups decided to join the conference although three groups –the MNDAA, the TNLA and the AA - had a sideline meeting and attended only a few days because China pressured them by sending its Foreign Ministry’s Asian Affairs Committee Special Envoy, Sun Guoxiang, to meet them many times. China also met Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services Senior General, Min Aung Hlaing, and the State Counsellor to exchange views. The crucial reason for the intervention of China was to end the war in the northern Shan state, close to the China-Myanmar border, which sometimes threatened China’s sovereignty. Interestingly, the northern Shan state is a relevant strategic area of importance in China’s current plan for global trade, known as the One Belt One Road initiative.

Conclusion

Although the elected civil government is led by State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the conflict is being transformed by the complex relations between the army and the government. The 2008 Constitution calls for the disciplined control of a system of state power, allowing the army to intervene in politics for security reasons. Thus, in the view of the TNLA, the ongoing peace process does not really aim to achieve real conflict resolution and is merely a political game by which the army stops fighting with specific groups in order to start with another group, known as “talking while fighting.”

The negative impact of such strategies not only leads to mistrust among all participants in the peace process, but also affects the formation

of strategies of fighting in the civil war. The changing strategies of the TNLA and the northern alliance have led to battles in the city in which terrorist-type tactics operate precisely in order to put pressure on the Myanmar army. In other words, the strategies of the TNLA are flexible, based on the context of the relationship between the civil government and the army in order to establish a real peace process. At this point, the TNLA knows that the more pressure the government feels, the more it needs to encounter the leaders of the army. However, there are many other actions that the government and army can attempt in working together to delegitimize the status of ethnic armed groups. In short, the ongoing peace negotiations in Myanmar are a crucial testing point of whether the democratic process can resolve ethnic conflict and civil war in the contemporary world.

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