Common Threats, Flexibility, and Internal Constraints: A New Framework to Understand the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee in Myanmar

Yaolong Xian

Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict,
Ruhr University Bochum, Germany
Email: yaolong2006@gmail.com

Abstract

How should we understand the relationship between the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and members of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) in Myanmar? The two entities are not allies in a strict sense, although their relationship obviously goes beyond that of ordinary peers. This article recognizes a gap between the existing analytical framework and the phenomena, and therefore suggests a new concept, which I call quasi-alliance, to understand this puzzle. Systematically examining the dynamics among them through empirical data, this article argues that the FPNCC is best described as a quasi-alliance of the UWSA, with its members and the UWSA as quasi-allies based on common threats, flexibility, and internal constraints.

Introduction

Controlled by the United Wa State Army (UWSA), Wa Special Region Two of Shan State, also known as Wa State, is a nominally autonomous region within the Shan State of Myanmar and was once the base of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). It has two separate territories on the

Chinese and Thai borders, namely North Wa and South Wa, with approximately 450,000 people, of whom an estimated 75 percent are ethnic Wa (Ong, 2018). Despite the fact that the UWSA has been concentrating on its economic development and has seldom been involved in any conflict, tensions around Wa State continue to exist and are even intensifying. Some Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), such as the Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA), Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/KIA), Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army-North (SSPP/SSA-N), and Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party/Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNTJP/MNDAA), that initially signed ceasefire agreements with the Tatmadaw (the official name of the armed forces of Myanmar), have rekindled fighting. In addition, the Restoration Council for Shan State/Shan State Army-South (RCSS/SSA-S) and the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) have recently been formed.

Before the Second 21st Century Panglong Conference in May 2017, seven EAOs that had not signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) formed the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) in Pangkham, the capital of Wa State. The FPNCC consists of the UWSA, AA, TNLA, MNDAA, KIA, Peace and Solidarity Committee/National Democratic Alliance Army (PSC/NDAA), and SSPP (Table 1). The UWSA is taking the leadership of the FPNCC and holds the authority; its chairman Bao Youxiang is also the chairman of the FPNCC, while the KIA's vice-chairman, N'Ban La, is the second chairman. According to the FPNCC's announcement for the Second 21st Century Panglong conference, the seven members would not accept separate invitations and would only attend the conference jointly in the name of the FPNCC (FPNCC, 2017). The initial aim of the FPNCC was to negotiate changes in NCA, as only the NCA signatories were accepted as full participants in the new Panglong Conference (Tonnesson, Ne, and Marte, 2019). In addition, the formation of the FPNCC also sent a signal that the UWSA had changed its usual low profile and started to take a leadership role in organizing EAOs'

summits and formulating political organizations. As Lintner (2017) correctly noted, the UWSA is the new collective leader of Myanmar's ethnic armed resistance.

Table 1 Members of the FPNCC

Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO)	Political Organization
United Wa State Army (UWSP/UWSA),	United Wa State Party (UWSP)
Kachin Independence Army (KIA)	Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)
Shan State Army-North (SSA-N)	Shan State Progress Party (SSPP)
Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)	Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party (MNTJP)
Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)	Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF)
Arakan Army (ULA/AA)	United League of Arakan (ULA)
National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA)	Peace and Solidarity Committee (PSC)

Regarding the nature of the FPNCC, the official narrative and external views are inconsistent. In May 2017, at the first media conference of the FPNCC, its chairman Bao Youxiang said that the FPNCC is not an alliance for military confrontation, but an organization of seven members to negotiate with the government, hoping that the outside world would not misunderstand it (Bao, 2017a). Zhao Guoan, the FPNCC's executive deputy secretary and vice-chairman of Wa State, made a similar statement two years later at the press conference on Wa State's 30th anniversary in 2019. According to him, the FPNCC is not an alliance that brings EAOs together to fight, but is primarily for political negotiation (Zhao, 2019). However, the UWSA often addresses FPNCC organizations as brothers in its official wording and issues the first denunciations when they are bullied. Not surprisingly, scholars and Myanmar observers tend to use terms such as "Wa's allies" and "alliance" when referring to FPNCC members and FPNCC (Ganesan, 2017, 2018; Lintner, 2019; Ong, 2018, 2020; Sithu, 2019; Boonyawongwiwat, 2018; Tonnesson et al., 2019). Lintner (2019) used "The UWSP, UWSA, and Their Allies" as the title of a section in his analysis of the peace process in Myanmar, exploring the close ties between the UWSA and its

4 **Journal of Mekong Societies**

Common Threats, Flexibility, and Internal Constraints: A New Framework to Understand the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee in Myanmar 5

committee partners. Boonyawongwiwat (2018:15) referred to the FPNCC as the "Pangkham Alliance" in his analysis of the TNLA and conflict transformation. What is more, Ganesan (2018: 381) even abandoned the term FPNCC and instead coined the term "Northern Alliance" to refer to the organization that the seven EAOs formed. It is worth noting that there is another, early-formed Northern Alliance in northern Myanmar, which will be mentioned later in this article.

However, the publications mentioned above have failed to provide an alliance framework with objective criteria as to whether the FPNCC is an alliance and whether those EAOs are allies of the UWSA. Their conclusions have been implicitly assumed instead of being examined rigorously through an analytic framework. Consequently, we still do not know what the exact relationship between the UWSA and other FPNCC members is. Aside from these Myanmar-focused studies, the literature on the theoretical framework of inter-EAOs relations is still in its infancy, although a handful of studies have used large-N analysis to look at what factors can influence rebels' cooperation and the decision to ally (Bapat and Bond, 2012; Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012; Popovic, 2018; Gade et al., 2019; Balcells, Chen and Pischedda, 2020; Ives, 2021). These analyses of inter-rebel interactions, likewise, are not based on alliance theory. Obviously, there is a different understanding of the concept of alliance in different works. For example, alliances were identified as armed groups that share resources or tactical coordination (Bapat and Bond, 2012: 811). Yet, Balcells, Chen, and Pischedda (2020: 17) assumed that a formal alliance should be publicly announced and have a specific name when coding it as a variable. Thus, terms such as ally and alliance have appeared frequently in research on the UWSA's relationship with other FPNCC members, but there have been no attempts to untangle the inter-EAO's dynamics using a systematic analytical framework.

In order to clarify ongoing discussions about inter-EAO relations, this study proposes a new alliance framework, which I call "quasi-alliance," logically structured by the existing literature on alliance and the context of civil war. This study follows an application of this proposed framework to FPNCC members to test its utility. Therefore, the present article can make a three-fold contribution. First, introducing a new alliance framework greatly enhances our understanding of the relationship between the rebel groups. Second, because a significant number of firsthand materials were used, this study provides detailed dynamics of the rebel groups. Finally, through examining the case of Myanmar, a country long plagued by civil war, it is possible to see if this analytical tool could be applied to follow-up studies.

Theoretical Framework: From Alliance to Quasi-alliance

As there is a paucity of specific literature on alliance in the context of civil wars, it is helpful to start with literature in the realm of international relations (IR), where the definition of an alliance has been widely discussed, as we can reasonably assume that non-state actors in civil wars behave similarly to nation-states in the international system. Osgood (1968: 17) defined an alliance as "a formal agreement that pledges states to cooperate in using their military resources against a specific state or states and usually obligates one or more of the signatories to use force, or to consider (unilaterally or in consultation with allies) the use of force, in specified circumstances." An alliance, according to Snyder (1990: 104), is a "formal association" of several countries regarding the use or (non-use) of military force for security or protection of its members against specific states. Walt (2013: 12) argued that "an alliance is a formal or informal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states." While these definitions differ in some ways, the focus is primarily on a treaty-based formality. For some that do not have alliance treaties, scholars may use the term "alignment" to describe their relationship. Snyder defined alignment as "a set of mutual expectations between two or more states that they will have each other's support in disputes or wars" (Snyder, 1990). The entities being described by researchers in this term, for example, are the Nordic countries with signed documents similar to military treaties or countries like the United States and Japan that are de facto allies (Saxi,

6 **Journal of Mekong Societies**

Common Threats, Flexibility, and Internal Constraints: A New Framework to Understand the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee in Myanmar 7

2022; Wilkins, 2007). Hence, this framework describes relationships that are almost identical to the alliance or intermingle with it.

On the other hand, researchers also observe the existence of a relationship that is far looser and less binding, and call it a quasi-alliance. Yet, its meaning varies in different works. According to Cha (2000), Japan and South Korea have formed a quasi-alliance despite the fact that they are not allies but share a major sponsor, the United States. Sun (2009) conceptualized Syria–Iran informal cooperative relations as a quasi-alliance as the two countries share security interests but are unable to meet the requirements of a formal alliance. Tziarras (2016) described the partnership of Israel, Greece, and Cyprus as having developed into a quasi-alliance that is less formal and more flexible than the traditional one.

Based on the synthetization of these works, this study generates a new quasi-alliance framework (Table 2). When attempting to define an alliance or quasi-alliance, one point stands out in the present literature: common threat. One classic proposition in political science is that external threat promotes group solidarity and cooperation (Boulding, 1962; Kaplan, 2005; Walt, 2013). With this in mind, one could see alliances as vehicles for collecting capabilities against a threat in order to increase their security (Morrow, 1991: 904; Walt, 2013: 168). Although those who face a common threat do not have to establish an alliance, members of an alliance cannot come together without confronting a common threat, and this holds true for quasi-alliances as well. According to Tziarras's research (2016), the quasi-alliance of Israel, Greece, and Cyprus was formed mostly due to shared assessments of Turkey as a security concern.

The second feature of a quasi-alliance is its flexibility, which could come from dual sources. First, the flexibility due to the absence of binding treaties distinguishes a quasi-alliance from an alliance. For a formal alliance, its agreement is a mutual promise to act in a specified way in specified future contingencies (Snyder, 1990: 107). Therefore, if members of an alliance doubt that their allies are truly devoted to supporting them, the alliance is likely to collapse (Walt, 1997: 160).

Yet, this does not threaten the relationship between quasi-allies because there is no commitment to offer security guarantees, either direct intervention or provision of military assistance, to members in crisis. Instead, the response of quasi-allies can be flexible, from remaining silent, speaking out in condemnation, and providing non-military assistance to public or secret military assistance. Furthermore, quasi-allies would be tolerant of individual interactions with those defined as a common threat. For example, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus's quasi-alliance permits the three countries to develop bilateral relations with their potential enemy, Turkey (Tziarras, 2016). Additionally, the asymmetric relationship generates another aspect of flexibility. As Morrow (2000) argues, asymmetric alliances are created in practice between entities with asymmetric powers, with the larger providing protection to the smaller in exchange for increased autonomy. In Sun's analysis, Iran is a "senior brother" and Syria a "junior brother" in terms of their comprehensive national power, and this contributes to the asymmetric attribute of the Syria-Iran quasi-alliance (Sun, 2009: 75). Also, in the context of multi-party civil war, powerful non-state actors are able to afford enhanced autonomy through allying with weaker peers (Gade et al., 2019: 2077). Thus, in the theoretical framework of this article, if a quasi-alliance composed of EAOs is asymmetric, then the more powerful one will have the flexibility of both sources, which means its decision-making will be more flexible.

The third feature is that of the internal constraints within a quasi-alliance. While an EAO is unlikely to provide military assistance to its quasi-allies in the event of a conflict with a common external threat, what actions would it take in the case of a conflict between its quasi-allies? In fact, the end is the same regardless of intervention or not, which is the collapse of the quasi-alliance. For a formal alliance, its members could minimize defection using formalized treaties with protective clauses and mechanisms under international law (Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel, 2009). When it comes to quasi-alliances, the bottom line is that the likelihood of conflict between quasi-allies should be extremely low, which can result from an implicit constraint mechanism

8 **Journal of Mekong Societies**

Common Threats, Flexibility, and Internal Constraints: A New Framework to
Understand the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee in Myanmar 9

or empirical evidence of friendly relations. There has been some research on the factors that can curb conflict and promote cooperation among rebels. For example, having a common external patron provide them with arms, money, supplies, or sanctuary could be seen as a constraint mechanism because the sponsor could encourage cooperation between their agents and credibly threaten to punish them for non-compliance by withdrawing support (Popovic, 2018; Salehyan, 2010). Sun (2009) observed the existence of a large number of mutual visits between Iran and Syria, from which he deduced the stability of their quasi-alliance. Additionally, Gade et al. (2019) found that ideologically similar rebel factions in Syria's civil conflict are more willing to support each other. However, this invisible mechanism varies in different contexts or when researchers give the variables different definitions. For instance, in contrast to the conclusions of earlier research based on ideology, Hafez (2020) stated that rebel groups with similar identities often clash as they compete for the same community base. To sum up, implicit mechanisms or empirical evidence are necessary to reflect the internal constraints which can decrease the risk for fragmentation, but their specific form may vary from context to context.

Table 2 Three characteristics of a quasi-alliance

Common threat	Face at least one common external threat to promote group solidarity and cooperation
Flexibility	No military assistance is guaranteed; the forms in which help is offered are flexible; tolerance of individual interactions with those defined as a common threat
Internal constraints	Implicit mechanism or empirical evidence of friendly relations to limit the likelihood of conflict between members

Assessing the UWSA- FPNCC Members' Relations

Common Threats
The FPNCC members have at least one common threat with the UWSA (Table 3). Not surprisingly, the Tatmadaw is the first common threat

because the FPNCC is a group of EAOs that have not signed the NCA and therefore are outside the union government's planned national peace framework. Among the FPNCC members, except for the UWSA and NDAA, all are non-ceasefire groups belligerent with the Tatmadaw, although sometimes there are temporary ceasefires. From 1994 to 2011, the KIA and the Tatmadaw had a formal ceasefire agreement, but armed warfare erupted between the two sides again in June 2011 and has been ongoing since then. The MNDAA used to be highly autonomous under the name, Shan State Special Region 1, but it has been fighting the Tatmadaw since its overthrow in 2009, with the former hoping to regain control of the Kokang region and the latter trying to obliterate them completely. The TNLA's predecessor, the Palaung National Force, signed a ceasefire agreement in 1991 and was disarmed in 2005, but in 2009 a new force, the TNLA, was formed and began fighting with the Tatmadaw in 2011 (PSLF, 2012). In 1989, the SSPP accepted a ceasefire deal, but in 2011 it rejected disarmament and has been in conflict with the Tatmadaw since 2014. Established in 2009, the AA has not had a formal ceasefire agreement with the Tatmadaw, but has already become a significant force fighting the Tatmadaw in northern Myanmar even though it is originally from the western part of Myanmar.

Although the UWSA and NDAA's ceasefire with Tatmadaw in 1989 and 1991 has never been broken (Tonnesson et al., 2019), the Tatmadaw remains a menace mainly due to the impact of the Kokang incident in 2009. That year, the Tatmadaw ousted the Kokang-based MNDAA after it refused to convert its army into the Border Guard Forces (BGF) aligned with the Tatmadaw (Kramer, 2021). After this conflict, the MNDAA's former leader, Peng Jiasheng, led the remaining troops to retreat to a hideout in the mountains, while at the same time, Kokang became an autonomous region under the central authority's supervision. The Kokang incident not only ended 20 years of peace between the MNDAA and the Tatmadaw but also set off an alarm bell for the UWSA and NDAA, who keep a bilateral ceasefire agreement but refused to convert their forces into the BGF. Following that, the UWSA expressed skepticism about the value of signing a peace pact

10 **Journal of Mekong Societies**

Common Threats, Flexibility, and Internal Constraints: A New Framework to
Understand the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee in Myanmar 11

while beefing up its army (Zhao, 2019; Tonnesson, Zaw Oo, and Aung, 2021). Zhao Guoan, the vice-chairman of the UWSA, said, "The Tatmadaw wanted us to reform and disarm at once, so the relationship between us was quite cold, especially after the Kokang 88 incident in 2009 until 2011, basically we had no communication" (Zhao, 2019). At times, the Tatmadaw also has shown a more direct threat to the UWSA. In 2016, the Tatmadaw forcefully threatened the SSPP to withdraw its troops based east of the Salween River in northern Shan State, leaving UWSA's military strongholds to be directly exposed to Tatmadaw artillery fire (Kokang News, 2016).

Furthermore, the RCSS is another common threat the UWSA shares with FPNCC members. The RCSS, as a leading ethnic Shan EAO with a strong nationalist ideology, considers Shan State as well as a part of Kachin State, to be its homeland. According to its narrative, some of the Kachin State lands were originally settled by "the ancient king of Tai/Dai," and it was only after the establishment of the Union of Burma that the Union government included them in the Kachin State region (Shan State News, 2016). Yawd Serk, the leader of the RCSS, stated at a press conference in October 2021 that the territory owned by all Mong-Tai Shan people comprises 62,500 square miles, which is larger than the area of the current Shan State (Serk, 2021). This is evident from the full name of the RCSS's political wing, the Restoration Council for Shan State, which reflects its goal to reclaim a Shan state that fits its political vision. As a result, the RCSS sees the UWSA, NDAA, MNDAA, KIA, and TNLA as its rivals who control parts of what it considers as the Shan homeland. After the RCSS launched the march northward to recover Northern Shan State in 2008, it has been clashing with the SSPP and TNLA, which have unclear borders with it, and the latter two formed the Anti-RCSS alliance against the RCSS in 2018 with joint military operations, despite the fact that the SSPP is also an ethnic Shan organization. Although the land that the AA claims it wants to achieve autonomy is in Rakhine State, which is far away from Shan State, it has been operating in Kachin and Shan State with close ties with EAOs mentioned above during the past 10 years (Boonyawongwiwat, 2022), so there is also a high level of hostility from the RCSS toward it.

The longstanding animosity between the UWSA and the RCSS, in addition to the RCSS's territorial claims, is likely to heighten the threat level. Wa State's southern territory came as a tacit reward from the Tatmadaw for its participation in the 1990s against the Mong Tai Army (MTA), which was established in 1985 after the continuous merging of Shan groups and became one of the largest EAOs at that time. After the MTA surrendered to the government in 1996, Yawd Serk, a subordinate of MTA leader Khun Sa, founded the RCSS, which was made up of soldiers willing to fight (Jirattikorn, 2011). Until now, the RCSS has referred to its army as the Mong Tai army, not the Shan State Army South, which it is called geographically by outsiders for convenience. The UWSA and RCSS clashed near the Thai border from 2003 to 2005, with one clash in April 2005 resulting in more than 100 deaths (UCDP, 2021). In April 2022, the UWSA and RCSS crashed directly in the southern Shan State after more than a decade of overt peace, resulting in the death of five soldiers (The Irrawaddy, 2022). It is safe to say that RCSS's claim to the territory and historical grievances compel the UWSA and relevant FPNCC members to see it as a threat.

Table 3 Common threats of FPNCC members

EAO	Threat	
UWSA	Tatmadaw	RCSS
MNDAA	Tatmadaw	RCSS
NDAA	Tatmadaw	RCSS
AA	Tatmadaw	
KIA	Tatmadaw	RCSS
TNLA	Tatmadaw	RCSS
SSPP	Tatmadaw	RCSS

Flexibility

The FPNCC is an asymmetric organization in which UWSA, the most militarily capable, is the leader, followed by KIA, and then the remaining members. During the 2017 Pangkhang Conference, KIO Vice-Chairman

12 *Journal of Mekong Societies*

Common Threats, Flexibility, and Internal Constraints: A New Framework to Understand the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee in Myanmar 13

N'Ban La made it clear that the UWSA has the important responsibility of leading EAOs (Kokang News, 2017). In keeping with the analytical framework proposed previously, this section investigates whether the UWSA has the flexibility that a quasi-alliance and asymmetrical nature should bring.

Although the UWSA is widely considered the backbone of other FPNCC members, it has not intervened directly after any quasi-ally has been threatened by an external force, as formal alliances typically do, at least on the surface. In 2017, UWSA Commander-in-Chief and Chairman Bao Youxiang was asked how the UWSA would help the MNDAA and KIA in a very critical situation. Bao did not respond directly at the time but said, "the Tatmadaw had not eliminated any EAOs," and that "even if the Tatmadaw's weapons were advanced, it would not be feasible to eliminate any EAOs by military methods in the future, which would only intensify inter-ethnic animosity" (Bao, 2017a). This ambiguous response most likely reflects the UWSA's attitude: it will not directly intervene militarily, but it will not sit on the sidelines either. When the Kokang incident occurred in 2009, the UWSA did not provide direct military assistance to Kokang, but instead put pressure on the Tatmadaw to release some top MNDAA generals. Similarly, during the 2015 Kokang offensive in which the MNDAA hoped to regain control of Kokang, the AA and TNLA admitted their military support, whereas UWSA denied providing arms and only called on all sides to use political means to resolve the conflict (The Irrawaddy, 2015). After the Tatmadaw started a series of strikes on the SSPP's headquarters in Wan Hai in 2015, the UWSA, jointly with NDAA, issued a statement condemning the offensive behavior of the Tatmadaw and demanding its immediate ceasefire (Wa State News, 2015). Likewise, after the Shan State Parliament passed a resolution on December 5, 2016, to label the KIA, AA, MNDAA, and TNLA as terrorist organizations (The Irrawaddy, 2016), the UWSA immediately issued a statement expressing strong opposition to this and the following year when Tatmadaw representatives visited Wa State, Xiao Mingliang, the vice chairman of the UWSA, again criticized the decision in front of Tatmadaw officials (UWSA/P,

2016; Wa State News, 2017). When it comes to the RCSS, in early 2022, the UWSA official media issued a statement warning the RCSS and informing it that the UWSA was ready to fight (Wa State News, 2022). This was in significant part a show of solidarity with the SSPP and TNLA which were bitterly fighting the RCSS. In the following months, the UWSA provided logistical and weapons assistance to the SSPP to push the RCSS back to southern Shan State, and it was even reported that the UWSA secretly dispatched troops for joint warfare (Wansai, 2022). Obviously, the UWSA showed a flexible stance in the face of FPNCC members who were in crisis.

Meanwhile, the UWSA has been able to have parallel relations with both the Tatmadaw and RCSS while its committee partners are battling with them. Although the Tatmadaw has been a significant threat to the UWSA, political ties have long existed between them (Ong, 2018: 463). In the mid-1990s, the Tatmadaw enlisted the UWSA's assistance in its military operations against the MTA, leading to the eventual surrender of the MTA, the largest armed organization in Shan State at that time. At the request of the Tatmadaw again, the UWSA attacked the RCSS bases along the Thailand-Myanmar border in the early years of the 21st century. This can explain why the UWSA invited Army Chief Min Aung Hlaing to celebrate its 30th anniversary in 2019, although he did not attend but sent other officials (Xinhua, 2019a). In May 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Min Aung Hlaing personally donated a supply of pandemic prevention and control materials to the UWSA, and the UWSA held a grand ceremony to receive those goods with the presence of Xiao Mingliang and Zhao Guoan, its vice general secretary and vice-chairman (Wa State News, 2020a). In October of the same year, the UWSA offered 200 million kyats to the representative of the Tatmadaw for the government and the military to fight the pandemic (Wa State News, 2020b). Moreover, the UWSA and RCSS also maintain a certain level of interaction. The full participation of the RCSS in the 2015 Pangkham Summit on EAOs was at the invitation of the UWSA (Tay, 2020). In 2017, representatives from the UWSA attended the Shan New Year celebrations at the RCSS headquarters Loi Tai Leng (BNI, 2017).

14 **Journal of Mekong Societies**

Common Threats, Flexibility, and Internal Constraints: A New Framework to Understand the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee in Myanmar 15

Internal Constraints

Although the UWSA does not form alliances with any EAOs, formal alliances with overlapping membership exist among its committee members (Table 4), with the only exception being the NDAA. Because of the binding nature of formal alliances, internal fragmentation among these FPNCC members is exceedingly unlikely.

In 2016, the KIA, AA, TNLA, and MNDAA announced the formation of the Northern Alliance (NA) after a joint offensive on one Tatmadaw's military outpost in Shan State (Walton, 2018). In fact, before the NA was officially declared, KIA had been providing training and support to the AA, TNLA, and MNDAA for a long time (Bynum, 2018). Even though the AA with its homeland in the west is not from the northern part of Myanmar, it has been recruiting fighters among Rakhine migrant workers in Kachin State and set its headquarters at Laiza, where it is within the territory controlled by the KIA. Moreover, the NA is highly institutionalized, with frequent joint statements, military operations, and even a website. The website known as Northern Alliance is run by the Kachin news department and it updates the military news of the members of the Northern Alliance as well as introduces their local culture. The second alliance was formed by the AA, TNLA, and MNDAA. On August 12, 2019, the three EAOs issued a joint statement condemning the Tatmadaw's military operations in Shan State and calling themselves the Three Organizations Alliance. They launched coordinated attacks against the Tatmadaw at five places in Shan State and Mandalay on August 15, killing 15 and injuring 13 (Xinhua, 2019b). On August 29, its name was changed from Three Organizations Alliance to Brotherhood Alliance, which is used to the present day. It is noteworthy that although the three EAOs had a only formal statement referring to them as an alliance in 2019, their joint military operations were conducted several years earlier. For example, in January 2015, the MNDAA launched a massive military operation with the military help of the AA and TNLA, aiming at regaining Kokang (MMTIMES, 2015).

Unlike the previous two alliances, which are primarily focused on fighting the Tatmadaw, the SSPP and TNLA formed an alliance to counter the RCSS. When the Tatmadaw attacked the Kokang-based MNDAA in 2009, the RCSS, originally based along the northern Thai border, arranged for more than 200 soldiers to move north to Kyaukme, Hsipaw, and Namtu districts (Shan State News, 2021a). As the RCSS's northward force increased, it started clashing with the TNLA and SSPP based in northern Shan State in May 2016 and September 2018, respectively. Against this backdrop, the SSPP and TNLA began joint military operations to fight their common enemy in 2018. In addition, the anti-RCSS alliance has a far less institutionalized level of alliances mentioned above. It does not have a formal name or regular joint statements like the Northern Alliance and the Brotherhood Alliance, but its military cooperation is very close to the high frequency and intensity of its military operations. In the second half of 2021, the conflict between the SSPP-TNLA combined forces and the RCSS caused over 1,000 locals to become homeless (Shan State News, 2021b).

Table 4 Internal alliances among FPNCC members

EAO	Alliance
KIA	Northern Alliance
SSPP	Anti-RCSS alliance
MNDAA	Northern Alliance, Brotherhood Alliance
TNLA	Northern Alliance, Brotherhood Alliance, Anti-RCSS Alliance
AA	Northern Alliance, Brotherhood Alliance

In addition to the high dependency of these organizations generated by intertwined alliances, it is worth noting that a number of factors could contribute to their intra-stability. First, collective memory and old friendship exist among some FPNCC members. During the 1970s and 1980s, the predecessors of the UWSA, MNDAA, NDAA, and the SSPP were under the leadership of the CPB, establishing control over more than 20,000 square kilometers of territory in northeastern and eastern Shan State. The UWSA, MNDAA, and NDAA were founded amidst the CPB's collapse in 1989 by people who had been the backbone

16 **Journal of Mekong Societies**

Common Threats, Flexibility, and Internal Constraints: A New Framework to
Understand the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee in Myanmar 17

(Lintner, 2019). Needless to say, the previous experience of fighting side by side during the CPB era had long established a bond and foundation of trust among their leaders. Moreover, the NDAA and MNDAA have kinship ties. Peng Xinchun, the only daughter of former MNDAA Chairman Peng Jiasheng, is the wife of NDAA Chairman U Sai Lin, and from the time of the Kokang Incident in 2008 until his death in 2022, Peng Jiasheng spent most of his time in NDAA's precinct.

Conclusion

The UWSA, one of the most powerful EAOs in Myanmar, and the FPNCC which it leads, are pivotal to the country's peace process. When addressing the nature of the FPNCC and the relationship between the UWSA and other FPNCC members, in both and academic articles and reports, authors often use the terms "alliance" and "ally." By contrast, the UWSA has repeatedly denied the military role of the FPNCC. Moreover, the FPNCC, lacking a formal alliance treaty, does not meet the threshold based on the alliance framework. Meanwhile, it is undeniable that the UWSA and other FPNCC members go beyond normal partnership, as overwhelming evidence shows their close ties. Therefore, how should we understand the relationship correctly? Recognizing the lack of a precise concept to identify the UWSA-FPNCC members' relations, a new quasi-alliance framework is proposed in this article. The framework has three characteristics—common threat perceptions, flexibility, and internal constraints—meaning quasi-allies have the foundation of cooperation, the flexibility from military treaty bindings, and a low probability of armed conflict among them.

This article, in the section on applying this framework to the FPNCC case, shows that the relationship between the UWSA and FPNCC members is characterized by these three features. First, the UWSA and FPNCC members have at least one common threat. As non-signatory members of the NCA, they are all outside the national peace framework, which makes the Tatmadaw the first common threat. Most of the FPNCC members are entangled with the RCSS due to

territorial and political goals, making it the second common threat. Especially since 2021, the conflict between the TNLA-SSPP and RCSS has been intensifying, and conflict has broken out between the UWSA and the RCSS after almost 20 years. Second, the UWSA enjoys great flexibility. When members are in crisis, the UWSA's responses range from indifference and issuing harsh statements, to providing military assistance. In the meantime, the UWSA continues to have dealings with the Tatmadaw and RCSS despite the fact that other members are at battle with them. Third, there are internal constraints including formal alliances, historical memories, and kinship ties within the FPNCC. These factors function as an implicit mechanism for limiting fragmentation among them.

To sum up, the new alliance framework creates a new space for inter-EAOs relations. The FPNCC is not an alliance nor are its members allies of the UWSA. By this new concept, the FPNCC can be best described as a quasi-alliance of the UWSA, where all members are its quasi-allies.

References

Balcells, L., Chen, C., and Pischedda, C. (2020). Do birds of a feather flock together? Rebel constituencies and civil war alliances. **SSRN Electronic Journal**. https://doi.org/ 10.2139/ssrn.3628832

Bapat, N. A. and Bond, K. D. (2012). Alliances between militant groups. **British Journal of Political Science, 42**(4), 793-824. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123412000075

Boonyawongwiwat, T. (2018). Obstacles to conflict transformation in Myanmar: A case study of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army. **Journal of Mekong Societies, 14**(3), 118. https://doi.org/10.14456/JMS.2018.19

Boonyawongwiwat, T. (2022). Asymmetric alliance formation by the Arakan Army during the civil war/peace process in Myanmar. **Journal of Mekong Societies, 18**(3), 1-18.

Boulding, K. E. (1962). **Conflict and defense: A general theory.** New York: Harper.

Cha, V. D. (2000). Abandonment, entrapment, and neoclassical realism in Asia: The United States, Japan, and Korea. **International Studies Quarterly, 44**(2), 261-291. https://doi.org/10.1111/0020-8833.00158

18 **Journal of Mekong Societies**

Common Threats, Flexibility, and Internal Constraints: A New Framework to
Understand the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee in Myanmar 19

Fjelde, H. and Nilsson, D. (2012). Rebels against rebels: Explaining violence between rebel groups. **Journal of Conflict Resolution, 56**(4), 604-628. https://doi.org/10.1177/ 0022002712439496

Gade, E. K., Gabbay, M., Hafez, M. M., and Kelly, Z. (2019). Networks of cooperation: Rebel alliances in fragmented civil wars. **Journal of Conflict Resolution, 63**(9), 2071-2097. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002719826234

Ganesan, N. (2017). Changing dynamics in Myanmar's ethnic peace process and the growing role of China. **Asian Journal of Peacebuilding, 5**(2), 325-339. https://doi.org/10.18588/201711.00a037

Ganesan, N. (2018). Taking stock of Myanmar's ethnic peace process and the Third Twenty-First Century Panglong Conference. **Asian Journal of Peacebuilding, 6**(2), 379-392. https://doi.org/10.18588/201811.00a072

Hafez, M. M. (2020). Fratricidal rebels: Ideological extremity and warring factionalism in civil wars. **Terrorism and Political Violence, 32**(3), 604-629. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 09546553.2017.1389726

Ives, B. (2021). Ethnic external support and rebel group splintering. **Terrorism and Political Violence, 33**(7), 1546-1566. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546 553.2019.1636035

Jirattikorn, A. (2011). Shan virtual insurgency and the spectatorship of the nation. **Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 42**(1), 17-38. https://doi.org/10.1017/ S0022463410000524

Kaplan, M. A. (2005). **System and process in international politics.** Colchester: ECPR Press.

Kramer, T. (2021). 'Neither war nor peace': Failed ceasefires and dispossession in Myanmar's ethnic borderlands. **The Journal of Peasant Studies, 48**(3), 476-496. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2020.1834386

Leeds, B. A., Mattes, M., and Vogel, J. S. (2009). Interests, institutions, and the reliability of international vommitments. **American Journal of Political Science, 53**(2), 461-476. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2009.00381.x

Lintner, B. (2019). **The United Wa State Army and Burma's peace process.** Washington: United States Institute of Peace.

Morrow, J. D. (1991). Alliances and asymmetry: An alternative to the capability aggregation model of alliances. **American Journal of Political Science, 35**(4), 904. https://doi.org/10.2307/2111499

Morrow, J. D. (2000). Alliances: Why write them down? **Annual Review of Political Science, 3**(1), 63-83. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.63

Ong, A. (2018). Producing intransigence: (Mis)understanding the United Wa State Army in Myanmar. **Contemporary Southeast Asia, 40**(3), 449-474. https://doi.org/10.1355/cs40-3e

Ong, A. (2020). Tactical dissonance: Insurgent autonomy on the Myanmar-China border. **American Ethnologist, 47**(4), 369-386. https://doi.org/10.1111/ amet.12985

Osgood, R. E. (1968). **Alliances and American foreign policy**. Baltimore u.a.: Johns Hopkins Press.

Popovic, M. (2018). Inter-rebel alliances in the shadow of foreign sponsors. **International Interactions, 44**(4), 749-776. https://doi.org/10.1080/030 50629.2017.1414812

Salehyan, I. (2010). The delegation of war to rebel organizations. **Journal of Conflict Resolution, 54**(3), 493-515. https://doi.org/10.1177/002200 2709357890

Saxi, H. L. (2022). Alignment but not alliance: Nordic pperational military cooperation. **Arctic Review on Law and Politics, 13**(2022), 53. https:// doi.org/10.23865/arctic.v13.3380

Snyder, G. H. (1990). Alliance Theory: A Neorealist first cut. **Journal of International Affairs, 44**(1), 103-123.

Sun, D. (2009). Brothers indeed: Syria-Iran quasi-alliance revisited. **Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia), 3**(2), 67-80. https://doi. org/10.1080/ 19370679. 2009.12023132

Tay, S. S. C. (2020). **Shadows across the golden land: Myanmar's opening, foreign influence and investment.** WORLD SCIENTIFIC. https://doi. org/10.1142/11079

Tonnesson, S., Ne, L. A., and Marte, N. (2019). **Will Myanmar's Northern Alliance join the peace process?** Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo.

Tonnesson, S., Zaw Oo, M., and Aung, N. L. (2022). Non-inclusive ceasefires do not bring peace: Findings from Myanmar. **Small Wars & Insurgencies, 33**(3), 313-349. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1991141

Tziarras, Z. (2016). Israel-Cyprus-Greece: A 'comfortable' quasi-alliance. **Mediterranean Politics, 21**(3), 407-427. https://doi.org/10.1080/136293 95.2015.1131450

Walt, S. M. (1997). Why alliances endure or collapse. **Survival, 39**(1), 156-179. https://doi.org/10.1080/00396339708442901

Walt, S. M. (2013). **The origins of alliances.** Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Walton, M. (2018). 13. Reflections on Myanmar under the NLD so far. In J. Chambers, G. McCarthy, N. Farrelly, and C. Win (Eds.), **Myanmar transformed?** (pp. 311-318). ISEAS Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1355/ 9789814818551-017

Wilkins, T. S. (2007). Towards a "Trilateral Alliance?" Understanding the role of expediency and values in American–Japanese–Australian relations. **Asian Security, 3**(3), 251-278. https://doi.org/10.1080/14799850701530440

20 *Journal of Mekong Societies*

Common Threats, Flexibility, and Internal Constraints: A New Framework to Understand the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee in Myanmar 21

Websites

Bao, Y. (2017a). **Foreign media interview with the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee's Chairman Mr. Bao Youxiang**. Retrieved December 8, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Bk-nma8cvJ1ZkpNzqZhlCg

Bao, Y. (2017b). *Wa bang lian he jun zong si ling bao you xiang jiu ci ci bang kang feng hui hui da feng huang wei shi ji zhe ti wen.* (In Chinese) [UWSA Commander-in-Chief Bao Youxiang answers questions on the Pangkham Summit]. Retrieved December 21, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/hbdYx7bMpFfbYcsJb1MDYw

BNI. (2017). **UWSA sends representatives to Shan New Year's ceremony at RCSS headquarters.** Retrieved August 22, 2021, from https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/uwsa-sends-representatives-shan-new-years-ceremony-rcss-headquarters

Bynum, E. (2018). **Analysis of the FPNCC/Northern Alliance and Myanmar conflict dynamics.** Retrieved November 23, 2021, from https://acleddata.com/2018/07/21 /analysis-of-the-fpncc-northern-alliance-and-myanmar-conflict-dynamics/

FPNCC. (2017). *Lian bang zheng zhi tan pan xie shang wei yuan hui dui di er ci shi ji bin long hui yi de sheng min.* (In Chinese) [FPNCC's statement to the second 21st Century Panglong conference]. Retrieved December 8, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/682S222g8IT8AgcZr_6gWA

Kokang News. (2016). *Mian jun le ling bei shan bang jun che chu dang yang deng di, ci ju huo jian zhi wa bang.* (In Chinese) [Tatmadaw requires SSPP to withdraw from Dongyang township and other places, a move that may point to Wa State]. Retrieved December 10, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/kv9wbdeie1BKN_VNvbZ9-Q

Kokang News. (2017). *Di san ci bangkang hui yi jin ri zhao kai 12 jia min zu wu zhuang zu zhi chu xi hui yi.* (In Chinese) [The Third Pangkham Summit was held today 12 ethnic armed organizations attended the meeting]. Retrieved December 5, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/U92xeobMoDlM2sveZKc1eg

Lintner, B. (2017). **Wa rebel group torpedoes Suu Kyi's peace drive.** Retrieved July 12, 2021, from https://asiatimes.com/2017/02/wa-rebel-group-torpedoes-suu-kyis-peace-drive/

MMTIMES. (2015). **Ethnic allies join Kokang fight**. Retrieved November 25, 2021, from https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/13108-tnla-arakan-army-join-kokang-fight.html

PSLF. (2012). **Ta'ang people and the current conflict situation.** Retrieved December 20, 2021, from https://en.pslftnla.org/taang-people-and-the-current-conflict-situation-in-2012/

Serk, Y. (2021). *RCSS xuan bu dai tou cheng li meng tai lian bang zhi, 2022 nian nei ju xing shan bang lian bang hui yi.* (In Chinese) [RCSS announces to take the lead in the formation of the federal system of Shan State and to hold the Shan State Federation Conference within 2022]. Retrieved December 12, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/dT_pUS-0JWiLigb94XMy1MQ

Shan State News. (2016). *Meng guang dai zu min zhong kang yi ke qin du li jun.* (In Chinese) [Mengguang Dai people protest against the KIA]. Retrieved December 5, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Ml5a5Fu-GeymVdbVyyyOXrA

Shan State News. (2021a). *Li shi han jian, liang zhi meng dai shan bang wu zhuang ge kong han hua.* (In Chinese) [Rare in history, the two Mong-Dai Shan State armed forces shouted across the air]. Retrieved December 21, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/kZYW9OM-0pcOJ_jXn8Fh9g

Shan State News. (2021b). *SSPP he TNLA fan dong kong bu zu zhi fa dong zhan zheng dao zhi shang qian cun min tao nan.* (In Chinese) [SSPP and TNLA reactionary terrorist groups wage war causing thousands of villagers to flee]. Retrieved December 23, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/10Kp5kZUXGjxead59Hn6fA

Sithu, A. M. (2019). **The UWSA: 30 years of going its own way.** Retrieved November 16, 2021, from https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-uwsa-30-years-of-going-its-own-way/

The Irrawaddy. (2015). **Wa asked not to provide arms to Kokang rebels.** Retrieved December 1, 2021, from https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/wa-asked-not-to-provide-arms-to-kokang-rebels.html

The Irrawaddy. (2016). **Shan State Parliament approves branding of Northern Alliance as 'terrorists.'** Retrieved November 27, 2021, from https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/shan-state-parliament-approves-branding-of-northern-alliance-as-terrorists.html

The Irrawaddy. (2022). **Five Killed as Wa Army and RCSS clash over territory in Myanmar.** Retrieved August 8, 2022, from https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/five-killed-as-wa-army-and-rcss-clash-over-territory-in-myanmar.html

UCDP. (2021). **UCDP - Uppsala Conflict Data Program.** Retrieved November 21, 2021, from https://ucdp.uu.se/nonstate/5309

UWSA/P. (2016). **A statement issued by United Wa State Party/Army on strongly opposing labeling Kachin Independent Army, Myanmar National Democracy Alliance Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and Arakan Army as terrorist organizations passed by the Parliament of Shan State.** Retrieved November 8, 2021 from http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_9084449c0102x43a.html

Wa State News. (2015). ***Wa bang lian he jun shan dong min zu min zhu tong meng jun yao qiu zheng fu jun zai wan hai di qu li ji ting zhi zhan zheng de lian he sheng ming.*** (In Chinese) [Joint statement of the MNDAA and NDAA demanding immediate cessation of war by government forces in the Wan Hai region]. Retrieved December 21, 2021, from http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_9084449c0102wbe0.html

Wa State News. (2017*). **Mian dian lian bang yu wa bang shuang fang zheng fu gao gui ze dai biao tuan bang kang ju xing hui wu.*** (In Chinese) [High-profile delegations from the Union of Myanmar and Wa State governments meet in Pangkham]. Retrieved December 22, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Fh2J_7xA1C6B85oQjNb2xw

Wa State News. (2020a). ***Mian dian guo fang san jun zong si ling ming ang lai xiang wo bang zheng fu juan zhen yi pi fang yi wu zi.*** (In Chinese) [Myanmar Defense Force Tri-Services General Min Aung Hlaing donates a batch of epidemic prevention and control materials to our state government]. Retrieved December 6, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/wJGU5EnzuPmoNENZB7mlgQ

Wa State News. (2020b). ***Wa bang zheng fu xiang lian bang he ping wei yuan hui juan zheng kang yi zi jin 2 yi yuan.*** (In Chinese) [Wa State government donates $200 million]. Retrieved December 21, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/tPu7yKt8UnPubJ23180vcQ

Wa State News. (2022). ***Yan zheng sheng min.*** (In Chinese) [Serious statement]. Retrieved August 8, 2022, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/sMlRn9bY6-CBk5oC769pWg

Wansai, S. (2022). **Southward push escalation: Heightening proxy war in Shan State.** Retrieved August 9, 2022, from https://mizzima.com/article/southward-push-escalation-heightening-proxy-war-shan-state

Xinhua. (2019a). **Myanmar state counselor calls for genuine peace, emergence of federal union.** Retrieved August 22, 2021, from http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-04/18/c_137987437.htm

Xinhua. (2019b). **Myanmar's gov't, armed groups issue joint communique on ceasefire.** Retrieved November 25, 2021, from http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/01/c_138354906.htm

Zhao, G. (2019*). **Wa bang zheng fu fu zhu xi zhao guo an 4 yue 18 ri ji zhe zhao dai hui da wai mei ji zhe wen xian chang wen zi shiu.*** (In Chinese) [Written answers of Zhao Guoan, vice president of Wa State to the questions of journalists at the press conference on April 18]. Retrieved December 8, 2021, from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/ s/byL1a9PCtEHU-VMKh6LTFkA