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# Neighborhood effect of borderland state consolidation: evidence from Myanmar and its neighbors

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the process of state consolidation, or its failure, in a state's borderland area with neighboring states in upland Southeast Asia. It proposes that we should conceptualize state consolidation as an interactive process heavily influenced by a "neighborhood effect." It argues that we should look at how state consolidation in one country's borderland area can be influenced by the same process in the neighboring states. In particular, the article probes under what conditions the neighborhood effect of state consolidation might take place. It argues that the effect is more profound in situations where there is power asymmetry between neighboring states, and the extent of such effect is further conditioned upon the nature of relations among these states. Empirically, this article uses a set of comparative case studies Myanmar's modern history of state consolidation in its borderland area to illustrate the proposed theoretical framework. Differentiating between the country's eastern borders with China and Thailand vs. its western borders with Bangladesh and India, the article empirically examines Myanmar's state consolidation processes to illustrate the theoretical framework, focusing on variations of power balance and nature of relations between the country and its neighbors since the end of World War II.

**KEYWORDS** Myanmar; China; Thailand; Southeast Asian Borderland; State Building

## Introduction

The most prominent approach to the study of state formation and consolidation tends to look at it as a historical process that emerged symbiotically with war preparation and war making in Europe (Downing, 1992; Ertman, 1997; Kiser & Linton, 2002; Tilly, 1985). Where there was a historical lack of total interstate wars, the growth of bureaucratic states became stunted, as was the case in Latin America and Africa (Centeno, 2003; Herbst, 1990).

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Additionally, there are also approaches that look at how domestic factors might facilitate or hinder state capacity building. Factors such as geography (Buhaug & Rød, 2006; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Tollefsen & Buhaug, 2015), history of frontier consolidation (Foa & Nemirovskaya, 2016), demographic patterns, such as ethnic diversity (Alesina, Devleeschauwer, Easterly, Kurlat, & Wacziarg, 2003; Alesina & Ferrara, 2000; Fearon, 2003; Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2005), and even regimes types (Lacina, 2006; Vreeland, 2008; Wimmer, Cederman, & Min, 2009) have been theorized to explain variations in the level of state consolidation.

However, most such explanations tend to consider state consolidation as confined within the territorial boundaries of states. It seems that the reasons why some states are more successful than others in state consolidation have overall been contributed to the list of domestic factors mentioned above. Scholars have not paid enough attention to how state consolidation can be conditioned upon international relations among neighboring states, or factors outside the sovereign territorial confines (Sidaway, 2003). Indeed, rarely is there a state that can claim to be totally isolated from the international system, which is especially true for most of the countries in the world that have land borders with neighboring states.

This article specifically looks at the process of state consolidation, or its failure, in a state's borderland area with neighboring states. State consolidation is defined as a process where a state "establishes a more complete territorial presence, overcoming possible resistance to its order; as it develops sufficient administrative resources and a reasonable capacity to implement public policy; and as its authority and agencies are deemed legitimate by the country's populace and its politically significant groups" (Carbone & Memoli, 2015, p. 7). It proposes that we should conceptualize this state consolidation process as an interactive one heavily influenced by a "neighborhood effect." It argues that we should look at how the level of consolidation in one country's borderland area can be influenced by factors originated from neighboring states. In particular, the paper probes under what conditions the neighborhood effect of state consolidation might take place. It argues that the effect is more profound in situations where there is power asymmetry between neighboring states, and the extent of such effect is further conditioned upon the nature of relations among these states. When a state borders a much stronger neighbor that is also adversarial, then the latter would have the capacity and intention to politically and militarily meddle in the mutual borderland area, which would lead to the fragmentation of the former's state consolidation efforts in the area. Variations in power dynamic and nature of relations among neighboring states thus would produce different outcomes for borderland state consolidation.

This article uses a set of comparative case studies of one Southeast Asian country Myanmar/Burma's<sup>1</sup> modern history of state consolidation and its failures in its borderland area to illustrate the proposed theoretical framework. The conventional literature on Myanmar's prolonged state weakness and ethnic fragmentation often puts the blame on the profound British colonial legacies (Walton, 2008), unconstrained Bamar nationalism (Walton, 2013), as well as serious mismanagement of a series post-independence governments (Taylor, 2008). Departing from these conventional interpretations, this article directs its theoretical attention to the international level. Differentiating between the country's eastern borders with China and Thailand vs. its western borders with Bangladesh and India, the paper empirically examines the processes in the making of Myanmar's stateless borderlands, focusing on variations of power balance and nature of relations between the country and its neighbors since the end of World War II. The paper first looks at a situation where power asymmetry coexisted with adversarial neighbors. Here it discusses in detail of Thailand, Republic of China (ROC), and People's Republic of China's (PRC) active meddling of Burma's domestic politics by supporting insurgencies in its borderland area during the Cold War. The second case examines China and Thailand's economic dominance of the borderland when both countries' relation with Myanmar have become mostly amicable in the post-Cold War period. Finally, the paper offers a contrast case study of Myanmar's other two borderlands with Bangladesh and India, to demonstrate an alternative logic where power asymmetry across borders is less obvious. The paper concludes with some theoretical reflections on how existing theories on state consolidation should take the dynamic among neighboring states more seriously.

### **The neighborhood effect of borderland state consolidation**

Scholars have examined closely how factors spanning across national boundaries affect civil conflict. Using the terms "bad neighbors and bad neighborhoods," Weiner points out that for studies on refugee flows, there is a geographic cluster effect: "Regions with a number of countries in which violence and brutality impel large numbers of people to cross international borders in search for security" (Weiner, 1996, p. 26). Further studies have highlighted this contagion effect of civil war, in that conflict in one country easily spills over into neighboring states (Gleditsch, 2002, 2007; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006; Sambanis, 2001). Refugee inflows can increase the burden on the neighboring host state. Worse still, militants can easily cross the border to the neighboring states, which can significantly destabilize the latter's domestic politics, as observed in the aftermath of genocide in Rwanda,

when Hutu militants crossed over into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Autesserre, 2010; Perera, 2013).

Rebels also use neighboring states as sanctuaries, because “[e]xternal bases are tactically desirable for rebels because the state is better able to conduct counterinsurgency operations at home than abroad” (Salehyan, 2007, p. 223). Neighboring states can also intentionally offer support and provide sanctuary for rebels so as to undermine the other state. Aside from supporting and hosting rebels, neighboring states, if they are adversarial, commonly meddle in each other’s domestic affairs. Often, the intervening party would use its military and economic capacity to influence its neighbor’s internal conflicts so as to produce a favorable outcome (Kathman, 2010, p. 989). Meddling in the neighbor’s domestic affairs thus serves a variety of domestic and foreign policy purposes such as “ideological contestation, regime change, the protection of kin group, the pursuit of disputed territory, competition between rivals for regional status and influence, and so on” (Lee, 2018, p. 7). In addition to direct military and economic support, states can also use a variety of subversive measures to undermine their neighbors.

Therefore, we can conceptualize how state consolidation in one country can be heavily influenced by its neighbors. Variations in the level of state consolidation in the common borderland area should be treated as outcome of an interactive process between domestic politics in one state and the international dimension that relates to its neighboring states. Yet, we need to acknowledge that not every neighboring state is equally endowed in influencing state consolidation in other states, and thus this neighborhood effect would take on different shapes under various configurations of relations among neighboring states. Here I propose to examine two aspects of the international relations among neighboring states to theorize under what conditions different forms of neighborhood effect of state consolidation can take place.

The first aspect is power symmetry among neighboring states, for which we can broadly categorize a dyad of countries as asymmetrical or at parity with each other in terms of power capabilities.<sup>2</sup> The other aspect is the overall relation between two neighboring states, and they can be coarsely defined as adversarial or amicable to each other. By juxtaposing these two aspects, we have a rough projection of conditions under which different forms of the neighborhood effect can take shape (Table 1).<sup>3</sup>

When two neighboring states have an asymmetrical power balance, the more powerful one essentially has greater influence over the other. If they are adversarial to each other, either due to historical feud, territorial disputes, or ideological differences, then the more powerful state would intend to influence the other according to its own interest. Here we are

**Table 1.** Theories of neighborhood effect of borderland state consolidation: likelihood in sets of country Dyads.

	Asymmetrical	Parity
Adversarial	State A: political/military meddling; State B: fragmentation of state control of the borderland	State A & B: confrontation and militarization of the mutual borderland
Amicable	State A: economic domination; State B: diminished economic sovereignty over the borderland	State A & B: de-politicization of the borderland

more likely to observe a case of intense meddling by the more powerful state in its neighbor's borderland area. There are many historical examples, such as Germany's military aggression against Czechoslovakia regarding the Sudetenland before World War II (Steiner, 2013; Weinberg, 2005). If, on the other hand, these two states have a relatively amicable relationship, then the powerful state would have less incentive to change the other one according to its own liking. Yet due to power asymmetry between the two, the more powerful state would still be felt, although to a lesser extent and in a more benign way. Barring political meddling, the most likely dynamic in this scenario is the extensive economic influence of the more powerful state on the lesser one, whereby the latter loses much or part of its economic control over borderland area. For example, the relationship dynamic between the United States and Mexico fits well with this scenario, with the U.S. exerting significant dominance over the economy along the border (Andreas, 2009; Coleman, 2005; Vila, 2000).

If the two neighboring states are of similar power capabilities, then the dynamic between them would be different. An adversarial relationship would likely lead to heightened tensions, though their equal degree of power would make neither able to overpower the other in the common borderland. Therefore, the most likely outcome is militarization on both sides of the border and significant coercion and destruction. For example, during the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War, Iran and Iraq respectively supported the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the *Majahedin-e-Khalq* in Iran in order to undermine each other politically and along the border (Hiro, 1990; Salehyan, 2007, p. 225). On the other hand, two states friendly to each other will likely experience less politicization along the border. Here one can think of a peaceful border with free flow of goods and people, which is the case in many European states under the Schengen Agreement (Zaiotti, 2011). Or we might expect a scenario of a relatively neglected borderland area that remains distant from direct central control due to the low level of state capacity among neighboring states. In either situation, the neighborhood effect of borderland state consolidation should

be relatively minor, and the common borderland area between the two neighboring states would be far less politicized in comparison with the other three configurations.

### **State capacity variations between Myanmar and its neighbors**

The paper focuses on Myanmar as the empirical case to demonstrate the theoretical framework of the neighborhood effect of borderland state consolidation, because the country continues to be one of the weakest states in Southeast Asia. One of the standard indexes that measures state strength is the Fragile State Index. According to its ranking in 2017, Myanmar is ranked 25th of the world's most fragile states, the highest rank of all the countries in East and Southeast Asia. Although the new government under Aung San Suu Kyi has embarked on a series of domestic political reforms, the country is still plagued by one of the longest ongoing Civil Wars in the world where the central government forces have been battling with a variety of insurgencies ever since the country gained independence in 1948 (Smith, 2007; South, 2008).

Although Myanmar is such a weak state, its neighbors have distinctly different levels of state strength. The country shares borders with five countries in total – Bangladesh, China, India, Laos, and Thailand. Of them, Myanmar's two eastern neighboring states of China and Thailand are significantly stronger and more developed than Myanmar's two western neighbors of Bangladesh and India. Thus, power balance between Myanmar and its neighbors are more asymmetrical in its eastern borderland areas than the western ones. Such variations thus make Myanmar an ideal candidate to test our theoretical framework.

There are a few ways to measure such power balances across neighboring states. In the same Fragile State Index for example, Bangladesh is ranked 39th most fragile in the world, while India is ranked 72nd, which are both higher, meaning more fragile, than Thailand at the 82nd and China at the 85th ranks. Although it seems clear to see the contemporary power balance between countries, it is much harder to come up with historically comparable data. Here the paper uses three alternative indexes to look at how balances of state power between Myanmar and its neighbors have changed since the end of WWII.

The first index was the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) that measures national power on the basis of demographic, economic and military strength (Singer, 1988). This index measures the hard power of a country, and those with larger population and military are considered more powerful. Therefore, despite the fact that China and India were both very poor countries in 1950, they still had strong power capabilities. As we can

see in [Table 2](#), in 1950, China was significantly more powerful than all of Myanmar's neighbors, and that power balance has also increased significantly during the past century. Although Thailand according to this index is not as strong as China or India because of its much smaller population, it nonetheless has been far more economically developed than Myanmar's other neighbors. Similarly, although India has a large population and thus scores highly at the CINC, it remains a very underdeveloped country with an abysmal development record, and thus its power balance with Myanmar is not as striking as one would suppose otherwise. This is particularly so in India's northeast where it borders Myanmar, which remains difficult to reach from India proper and has a long history of insurrections against New Delhi's rule. As we can see in [Table 3](#), a conventional measurement of GDP per capita seems to suggest that the levels of economic development, which is highly correlated with state strength, are also much higher in China and Thailand than in India and Bangladesh. Similarly, in [Table 4](#) we can see in the Human Development Index composed by the United Nations Development Program since 1990, China and Thailand have scored significantly higher than Myanmar and its two western neighbors. Thus, it seems clear there are more power asymmetry between Myanmar and its two eastern neighbors of China and Thailand ever since the mid 20th century, while power relations with its two western neighbors have been much more similar.

## History of state consolidation in upland southeast Asia

Before we continue to the three comparative cases, some historical background of state consolidation in the common borderland area between Myanmar and its neighbors are necessary. In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, James Scott portrays an account of the stateless spaces spanning across upland Southeast Asia and Southwest China (Scott, 2009). As part of the Himalayan and Southeast Asian Massif, or *Zomia*, this stretch of territories is mountainous, sparsely populated, and ethnically diverse (van Schendel, 2002). The historical circumstances in which this stretch of highland areas

**Table 2.** Composite index of national capability between Myanmar and its neighbors.

	China	Thailand	Bangladesh	India	Myanmar
1950	0.1185	0.0032	n/a	0.0496	0.0022
1960	0.1193	0.0032	n/a	0.0461	0.0025
1970	0.1127	0.0039	n/a	0.0523	0.0031
1980	0.1195	0.0049	0.0052	0.0517	0.0034
1990	0.1119	0.0056	0.0059	0.0598	0.0038
2000	0.1624	0.0072	0.0065	0.0687	0.0050
2010	0.2070	0.0078	0.0074	0.0795	0.0055

Composite Index of National Capability, V5.

**Table 3.** GDP per capita between Myanmar and its neighbors, in constant 2010 US dollars.

	China	Thailand	Bangladesh	India	Myanmar
1960	191.9	570.9	370.6	304.2	158.8
1970	228.3	929.1	406.0	365.1	169.7
1980	347.9	1403.7	351.4	389.9	211.4
1990	730.8	2502.7	399.5	536.2	197.2
2000	1171.7	3458.1	509.3	762.3	346.8
2010	4560.5	5075.3	757.7	1345.8	987.7

**Table 4.** Human development index between Myanmar and its neighbors.

	China	Thailand	Bangladesh	India	Myanmar
1990	0.499	0.574	0.386	0.428	0.353
2000	0.592	0.649	0.468	0.494	0.427
2010	0.7	0.729	0.545	0.58	0.526

<http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>

became incorporated into the nation-state system varied slightly. Southwest China was significantly subjected to tight centralized control in the mid-18th century with the replacement of many local ethnic chieftains (*tusi*) by magistrates appointed by Beijing (Bello, 2005; Daniels, 2015; Giersch, 2006; Herman, 2007, 2014). However, in southern Yunnan, many chieftains coexisted with the Qing and republican bureaucracies well into the mid-1950s (Mackerras, 1994). Many of the chieftains in the Shan and Kachin states maintained dual tributary relations with the Konbaung Dynasty in Burma as well as Qing China (Fiskesjö, 2010; Zhang & Hlaing, 2013). After the British colonized the whole of Burma in 1885, the Kachin state and Shan states were ruled separately by the British as frontier areas, and Burma proper was ruled as ministerial Burma, while the country as a whole was incorporated as a province of British India (Lieberman, 1987; Taylor, 2008; Walton, 2008). When Burma achieved independence from Britain in 1948, the frontier areas were united with Burma proper, yet unification very quickly translated into a prolonged civil war that has lasted ever since (Smith, 1999; South, 2008).

For northern Thailand, the Nan kingdom used to pay tribute to both Burma and Kingdom of Siam. After the mid-18th century, it became a vassal of the Chakri Dynasty, based in Bangkok. Extraterritoriality was granted to European companies to exploit the profitable teak trade in northern Thailand. Eventually it was incorporated into Siam as part of the centralization during the reign of Rama V Chulalongkorn in 1899 (Ramsay, 1976). India's northeast states were ruled by the British as separate colonial territories from the rest of British India. After India's independence and partition, the northeast region became seven states, including Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, as well as Sikkim that was annexed by India in 1975 (Cline, 2006, p. 127). Bangladesh's

Chittagong Hill Tracts were administered by a representative of the Governor General-in-Council of India during the British colonial period, with local tribal people providing staffs for the colonial administration, which later was made a “totally excluded area” (Ahsan & Chakma, 1989, p. 962). After the partition of British India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts first became part of Pakistan, and the region’s excluded status was abolished in 1963.

Although these countries had different experiences with western colonialism or imperial influence, it suffices to say that before the mid 20th century, modern state consolidation has not yet been achieved. No direct centralization in the modern sense was possible in China in the first half of the 20th century, when the country was devastated by warlordism, the Japanese invasion and the civil war (Lin, 2010). In Thailand, European extra-territoriality was revoked in the early 20th century, and the modern bureaucratic state only started to increase its presence then. In India’s northeast, after India’s independence, the region has since experienced chronic insurgency in several of states, such as in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura where armed groups with different demands have been battling the central Indian government ever since (Singh, 2016, p. 118). After Bangladesh’s independence in 1971 from Pakistan, conflict between the tribal people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Bangladesh central government flared up because of the abolition of special rights for the tribal people, which eventually led to an insurgency from the mid 1970s onwards (Ahsan & Chakma, 1989, pp. 967–968). Even though their historical incorporation into these five states varies slightly in terms of the historical context, modern nation states only started to emerge after in the mid-20th century when the PRC was founded in 1949, Burma’s independence in 1948, the 1947 military coup in Thailand, and the partition of India and independence of both India and Pakistan in 1947.

At the same time, this borderland area covers a diverse set of ethnic groups that share strong linguistic and cultural ties across state borders. Indeed, ethnic and religious heterogeneity is the common characteristic across this vast borderland region, and has crucial implications for relations among neighboring states (Ullah & Kumpoh, 2018). China’s Yunnan province officially recognizes 25 ethnic groups, which account for 34% of its total population (Yang, 2009). Thailand officially does not recognize ethnic minority status, insisting everyone living within its borders is Thai, and many ethnic minority groups, especially the highlanders (hill tribes), remain stateless (Park, 2009). In Myanmar, most of its peripheral states are all designated as ethnic regions, such as the Shan, Kachin, and Chin States in the North, within which ethnic composition are extremely diverse as well.<sup>4</sup> India’s northeast is also extremely ethnically diverse with majority of the population share more common ethnic and cultural traits with Southeast

Asia than with the rest of India. Similarly, the Chittagong Hills in Bangladesh has high amount of ethnic diversity. Its inhabitants are comprised of 13 tribal groups, who are mostly of Sino-Tibetan descent, which differentiate them from the majority Muslim Bengali speaking population in the country (Ahsan & Chakma, 1989, p. 961). All in all, the common borderland area between Myanmar and its neighboring states share a lot of similarities in their historical incorporation and ethnic demography.

### **Asymmetrical and adversarial neighbors**

To illustrate the dynamics of borderland state consolidation as a result of power asymmetry during times of adversarial relations between neighboring states, two cases are examined. The first one is the Chinese nationalist troops (KMT) invasion of Burma and political meddling in Burma's borderland politics by the ROC and Thailand. The second case is the PRC's support of the communist insurgency in Burma. As a victim of great power politics during the Cold War, Burma's relations with the ROC, as well as Thailand, deteriorated substantially as Yangon accused Taipei of direct interference in its internal politics through various rounds of appeals at the UN General Assembly (Clymer, 2015, p. 119). Recognizing the PRC over the ROC, Yangon enjoyed a decade of relatively warm relations with Beijing in the 1950s, which nonetheless soured after the mid-1960s as a result of anti-Chinese riots in Burma and PRC government's direct support of the CPB insurgency (Steinberg & Fan, 2012). This section thus aims to demonstrate the fragmentation of Burmese state power in the borderland areas since the onset of the Cold War, to a significant extent, was due to political meddling by its more powerful and adversarial neighbors.

#### ***The KMT and spillover of the Chinese civil war***

The looming Cold War in East and Southeast Asia led to different domestic and international environments for these three states in their efforts to incorporate the peripheral borderland area into the emerging nation-states. In the early years of the Cold War, the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese civil war and its consolidation of power was the most consequential for its neighboring states in Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> The intrusion of the defeated Chinese KMT army into Burma paved the way for active meddling by the ROC in Taiwan, as well as Thailand, and their external patron, the United States.

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered Yunnan in early 1950. A section of the KMT army, numbering a few thousand, crossed the border into Burma, occupying part of the Shan

States (Taylor, 1973). The CCP victory in China, together with its military involvement in the Korean War, led the US to change its strategic priority in East Asia to preventing the further spread of communism in Southeast Asia and forestall the so-called domino effect (Ang, 2001; Bresnan, 1994; Olson & Roberts, 2013). After the ROC government relocated to Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek's goal was initially to retake the mainland. As a result, the Americans decided to help Chiang by supplying the KMT troops in Burma so they could harass the Chinese communists along China's southwestern border and divert their attention from Korea. Meanwhile, in Thailand, the new government of Phibun Songkram, who came to power in a 1947 coup, sought an alliance with the US, aiming to obtain American military assistance to strengthen the army on which his power depended (Chaloemtiarana, 2007; Fineman, 1997). In return, the Thai government provided logistical support for the CIA and ROC to send military supplies from Thailand into Burma (Gibson & Chen, 2011).

The presence of the KMT significantly militarized the borderland area. The thousands of soldiers, together with their active recruitment from various local ethnic groups in the Shan States, created a formidable military force, for which the Burmese national army was not a close match, at least not at the beginning. As a response, with martial law and military administration imposed over much of the Shan State in the name of fighting the KMT, the Burmese Army behaved brutally towards the local ethnic groups, becoming increasingly unpopular and resented (Callahan, 2005, p. 158). The KMT presence in the Shan State indirectly and directly paved the way for the nationalist reaction and mobilization among the ethnic groups such as the Shan against the Burmese central government's national consolidation efforts.

The Burmese government protested to the international community against the KMT and the US' covert support. After rounds of diplomatic maneuvering, the UN General Assembly in April 1953 almost unanimously adopted a resolution condemning "foreign forces" in Burma and declared that they "must be disarmed and either agree to internment or leave the Union of Burma forthwith" (Clymer, 2015, p. 126). In October of that year, the US, ROC, Thailand and Burma signed an agreement to evacuate some of the KMT soldiers and their families to Taiwan via Thailand. However, a few thousand KMT troops refused to leave, partly due to the intransigence from the ROC as well as the lucrative opium trade. It wasn't until 1960 and 1961 that joint military campaigns between the Burmese army and the Chinese PLA drove the remaining troops into Thailand (Clymer, 2014).

Additionally, in order to finance their military activities and support the troops, the KMT cultivated poppy plantation in the Shan States with the encouragement of the CIA (McCoy, 1991). The huge profits from opium

smuggling were one of the main reasons why thousands of remaining KMT troops refused to be repatriated to Taiwan. The KMT was the main force that led the Golden Triangle become a center for opium production for almost half a century (Chin, 2009; Jelsma, Kramer, & Vervest, 2005; Lintner, 1999). The astronomical growth of poppy plantation as a result of the war economy in the Shan States led to the KMT's near exclusive control of the opium smuggling trade between Burma and Thailand due to its military superiority and the porous nature of the borderland. By the early 1960s, Thailand became the world largest distributor of opium from Burma's Shan State, from which the KMT smuggled opium into Thailand before distributing it to the rest of the world.

The legacy of the KMT in Burma is multifaceted. First is the strengthening of the military against the civilian government, which paved the way for decades of military rule in the country (Callahan, 2005). From the time of Burma's independence to 1955, the army grew from a mere few thousand to more than 40,000 (Lintner, 1999, p. 153). In the name of expelling the KMT intrusion as well as anti-insurgency, a larger share of the country's budget was allocated to the military, which quickly empowered the military over the civilian wing of the Burmese government. Military coups since the late 1950s left a long history of military rule in Burma that persisted until the 21st century, one of the longest-lived military dictatorships in modern history. Yet, the empowerment of the military did not lead to increase in Burmese state capacity, rather it only meant the state became more predatory.

More directly relevant for the borderland is the militarization of many ethnic minority groups in the area. Caught in the crossfire between the Burmese military and the KMT, rising nationalist feeling and anger among these ethnic groups toward the Burmese government also grew, which led to the formation of many ethnic rebel groups fighting for independence or more autonomy from the Burmese government (Sai Aung Tun, 2009; Yawnghwe, 2010). Thus, the intrusion of the KMT in Burma played a sizable role in the fragmentation of the country along the border and also indirectly set in motion the militarized confrontation between the Burmese army and many of the estranged ethnic groups. As a result, the Burmese state's monopoly of the legitimate control of violence, one of the key Weberian definition of state capacity, became heavily contested in the borderland area.

### ***PRC support of the CPB insurgency***

Domestic political radicalization in China in the mid-1960s manifested internationally in Mao's push to support "People's War" in many Third World

countries, which was also part of the PRC's competition with the Soviet Union as leader of the international communist movement (Chen, 2001; Jie, 1994). In Burma's case, it meant the PRC ramped up its support for military insurrection by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in 1967. The support for the CPB came in various forms. The CCP provided military supplies, financial support for operations and personnel support. Military advisers as well as many Red Guards crossed the border to fight for the CPB (Maung Aung Myoe, 2011). PLA support helped the CPB troops consolidate their military success, and the CPB's base area in the northeast of Burma started to expand (Zhang, 2016, pp. 189–190). In a speech published in the Chinese newspaper *People's Daily* in March 1969, then-CPB Vice Chairman Thakin Ba Thein Tin said the year 1968 witnessed large-scale battles in the Burmese Shan State, and the Burma People's Army achieved a significant victory by defeating Burmese government troops.<sup>6</sup>

The CPB's battlefield success was also due to the logistical support that China provided across the border. Between 1968 and 1973, China supplied the CPB with enough arms and ammunition to equip 10,000 soldiers, along with 2 million Chinese Yuan per year for the CPB's general military expenditures. Chinese hospitals along the border were opened for the use by the CPB. In 1971 Beijing also set up a radio station called *People's Voice of Burma* for the CPB to disseminate propaganda (Maung Aung Myoe, 2011, pp. 80–82). It was located at first in Kunming and later moved to the Sino-Burmese border city of Mangshi before moving to Pangsang, the headquarters of the CPB, in 1979 (Htet, Thein, Min, & Pwint, 2015, p. 152). As a result of such generous support, the CPB first established four main bases – 101, 202, 303 and 404 – and from there its troops conquered several territories. In 6 years, it had managed to control over 20,000 square kilometers of “liberated” areas along the Chinese border, “stretching uninterruptedly from the Mekong River and the Lao border up to the border town of Panghsai (kyu-hkok) where the Burma Road crosses into Yunnan” (Lintner, 1990, p. 26).

Facing CPB advances along the Chinese border, the Burmese military was not used to guerilla tactics like surprise attack with human waves. The Ne Win government also understood clearly that its problems with the CPB were due mainly to Chinese support for the communists. In May 1975, Thakin Ba Thein Tin officially announced the reestablishment of the CPB headquarters at Pangsang, with himself as the chairman. Pangsang, a border town across from China's Menglian county, is in the Wa hills, which was conducive to recruiting Wa soldiers while at the same time far away from Burmese military pressure.

The legacies of the CPB insurgency are profound for Burma. For the Burmese state, it meant the fundamental failure of its state consolidation

over the borderland territories that it claims to be its own. The setup of the stable base area along the border area by the CPB also prevented the Burmese central government from accessing this area until the mid-1990s, after the collapse of the CPB in 1989, and the signing of a series of ceasefire agreements with various legacy ethnic rebel groups. The most significant legacy of the CPB is the further militarization of various ethnic minority groups along the border. Although the CPB leadership predominately comprised ethnic-majority Bamar, many of its foot soldiers were recruited from local ethnic minorities in the borderland area. Therefore, after the collapse of the CPB, ethnic insurgencies continued because various ethnic rebels formed their own military bases. As of today, the region along the Sino-Myanmar border remains dotted with pockets of ethnic rebel-controlled areas that are not directly ruled by the Burmese central government, such as those under the control of the Kachin Independence Army, United Wa State Army, and so forth, which indicates the battle for actual control in the area is still unresolved (Ganesan & Hlaing, 2007; Hlaing, 2014; Sadan, 2013, 2016).<sup>7</sup>

Relatedly, since the mid 1980s the financially strapped CPB also relied upon opium plantation and drug trafficking to finance itself, just as the KMT and other ethnic rebel groups had done to sustain themselves (Htet et al., 2015, p. chapter 44). However, the profit brought in by drug trafficking also led to corruption within the party. Many field commanders became heavily involved in the business and became drug warlords. Even though the CPB leadership later tried to reign in the scale of drug trafficking, its “rectification campaign” fell on deaf ears, and the leadership’s ability to control the CPB was in tatters (Lintner, 1990, p. 41). Indeed, after the collapse of the CPB, many of the legacy ethnic rebel groups continued the tradition of drug trafficking and prolonged the illicit economy of the Golden Triangle area.

### **Asymmetrical and amicable neighbors**

The end of Cold War brought with it significant improvement of relations between Myanmar and its two more powerful neighbors. The PRC’s decision to cut off support for the CPB since the early 1980s at least indirectly led to its final collapse (Lintner, 1990). Then since the late 1980s, the Myanmar military government started to increase its dependence on China because of its crackdown on its domestic democracy movement in 1988 and the nullification of the 1991 election results. China expressed its principle of non-interference in Myanmar’s domestic politics, in the context of its own suppression of the Tiananmen movement. Beijing offered diplomatic protection the Myanmar military government desperately needed to

prevent regime change (Han, 2018, p. 96). Meantime, the Thai government's overall foreign policy reorientation after the end of the Cold War, as Thai Prime Minister Chatichai put it to turn "battlefield into market place," meant an improvement of relations between Thailand and Myanmar (Snitwongse, 2001). Through "constructive engagement" with the Myanmar military government, Thailand supported its admission into ASEAN, in return for opportunities to exploit the latter's rich natural resources (Chachavalpongpun, 2010, p. 122). It is in this context this section examines resource development and trade over the borderland area, so as to illustrate the economic dynamics of borderland state consolidation as a result of economic asymmetry during times of relatively amicable bilateral relations. The purpose is to illustrate the centrifugal forces across the borderlands that reorient local economies toward northern Thailand and southwestern China and away from Myanmar.

As a country with a backward economy but abundant natural resources, Myanmar became the target for natural resource exploitation from its two economically more powerful neighbors to the east, particularly in mining, forestry, hydropower, and agribusiness, after its relations with both China and Thailand improved in the post-Cold War period. Since the collapse of the CPB, which also coincided with the general economic opening of China itself, the Chinese government has developed a strong interest in opening up its southwestern border areas for cross-border trade and investment. Despite its mistrust of the Chinese government, the Myanmar military government nonetheless relied upon Chinese diplomatic protection when the country was under economic sanction by the West. Although one might quibble that the relationship between China and Myanmar during the post-Cold War period as "amicable," and certainly there have been many frictions in the bilateral relations especially during the Thein Sein's administration, relationship between Beijing and Naypyidaw definitely was not adversarial as during parts of the Cold War. This overall amicable bilateral relationship has provided many opportunities for Chinese state-owned as well as private businesses, particularly from Yunnan, to be strategically and intimately involved in cross-border economic development, which involves pairing up with partners in Myanmar for infrastructure construction and resource extraction (Woods, 2011, p. 750). Chinese investments have poured into the mining sector as well hydropower development, and many of these projects, such as the Letpadaung copper mine and the Myitsone dam, became domestically contentious in Myanmar (Kiik, 2016). Furthermore, both countries agreed to construct a USD 1.5 billion crude oil pipeline and a USD 1.04 billion natural gas pipeline to connect the Kyaukphyu port in the Indian ocean to Kunming in Yunnan province (Han, 2016).

Because of the environmental destruction it caused, China banned logging in 1998 in the upper Yangtze River region, which includes Yunnan and

much of the Southwest. However, with the rising domestic demand for wood products, Chinese businesspeople began targeting the conflict-ridden Kachin and Shan states and securing logging rights directly from various ethnic rebels. For example, the timber trade provided handsome revenue to support the KIA in its military conflict with the Myanmar government. However, since the early 2000s, the Myanmar military has become involved in the timber trade as well. In order to consolidate its own control over the northern borderland area with China, as well as to cut off the financial supply for the KIA, the Myanmar government decreed that timber products can only enter China in two ways, either through Yangon and then by sea to China or through the Myanmar military-controlled border crossing with the Chinese city of Ruili.

Similar to the China story, Thailand also pressed for logging access with the Myanmar military since the late 1980s. After its own ban of logging in 1989, it was reported that Thai businesses rushed to Myanmar for logging concessions, and at least 20 such concessions were negotiated by the Thai military with its Myanmar counterpart in 1989 (Buszynski, 1998, p. 292). At the same time, Thailand concluded deals with the Myanmar government for gas exploitation in the Andaman Sea by constructing a pipeline linking the Yadana gas fields with Rachataburi province (Buszynski, 1998, p. 297).

Furthermore, the economic gaps between China and Myanmar across the border mean that Chinese business migrants have started to penetrate and dominate the Myanmar market. They are involved in mining, transportation, trading jade, land speculation, construction, crop transactions, hotels and restaurants, and many other businesses (Chang, 2013, p. 313). For example, the jade trade closely linked the Myanmar side of the border, with both the Myanmar government and several ethnic rebel groups, with the market in China. According to a report by Global Witness, "The value of official jade production in 2014 alone was well over the US\$12 billion indicated by Chinese import data, and appears likely to have been as much as US\$31 billion. To put it in perspective, this figure equates to 48% of Myanmar's official GDP and 46 times government expenditure on health" (Global Witness, 2015, p. 6).

The other sector in northern Myanmar in which the Chinese government and business as well as Thai business get involved is agribusiness. For example, the Thai agribusiness conglomerate CP has expanded tremendously its seed industry in parts of Myanmar (Woods, 2015). In the Chinese case, in order to prevent drug trafficking and convince ethnic minorities living in the mountains not to cultivate opium, the Chinese government started an opium substitution farming program, through which an Opium Replacement Special Fund was provided by the Chinese State Council to provide financial incentives for Chinese business to invest in substitutes for

opium such as rubber and bananas (Su, 2015). The Chinese companies involved in these schemes receive several state-sponsored benefits, such as cash, lowering of bureaucratic hurdles for investment, and quotas for imported tariff-free crops produced under the program (Woods, 2011, p. 764). For example, between 2005 and 2008, the Yunnan government approved such schemes worth a total 1.2 billion yuan, covering an area in the Kachin and Shan states of about 1 million mu.<sup>8</sup> However, these programs have not been effective at curtailing opium production. In fact, opium production in Myanmar increased significantly after 2006, although that was due to several reasons not directly related to this particular scheme (Meehan, 2015). Having said that, the scheme proved controversial in that it led to land confiscation and displacement for many ethnic minorities in Myanmar.

In addition to China's penetration of Myanmar's borderland area, Thailand serves as a magnet that reorients bilateral trade patterns (Chang, 2013), and also absorbs millions of legal or illegal migrants from Myanmar (Eberle & Holliday, 2011). Thus, the economic situation along Myanmar's borders with Thailand and China is such that the strong pull from China and Thailand exerts strong centrifugal forces over the borderland area in Myanmar. Lagging behind the two more economically powerful neighbors, resource development and trade patterns in the borderland area are effectively oriented away from Myanmar. This also manifests in the Chinese and Thai currencies' wider circulation on Myanmar's side of the border and unpopularity of the national currency. Although the Myanmar military in the recent past has undertaken measures, usually through military campaigns in conjunction with ceasefire agricultural development programs, trying to consolidate its control over the borderland. Yet the political economic logic of natural resource exploitation is still heavily conditioned on Myanmar's relations with its two more powerful neighbors.

### **The alternative: Relative parity among neighbors**

The story on Myanmar's western borders is quite different however. Here both of its neighbors of India and Bangladesh have had similar problems just like Myanmar in terms of the difficulties they all faced in consolidating their respective borderland area. Because of the relative power parity between the neighboring states, whether the mutual borderland became militarized or neglected, has overall been dependent on the changing nature of bilateral relations Myanmar has enjoyed with both India and Bangladesh during the past few decades.

Sharing some general weakness as the Myanmar state toward its peripheral regions, India has had substantial difficulty in consolidating its control

of its northeast region, which continue to pose a significant security challenge for the central government (Engh, 2016, p. 40). Indeed, the long border between Myanmar and India cuts across an ethnically diverse region in both countries, and both have witnessed insurgencies by these ethnic groups towards their respective central authorities (Engh, 2016, p. 41). In India's case, there are a plethora of insurgent groups operating in the northeast region, who demanded outright independence from India or more autonomy, especially in the states of Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, and Tripura (Singh, 2016, p. 118). In fact, the porous nature of the border as a result of the weak centralized control by both governments mean that ethnic rebel groups have managed to operate across this porous borderland area during the past half a century. One of the common complaints by India is that several of its insurgent groups have taken shelter within Myanmar's territory to take advantage of the lack of state consolidation by both states to man the common border properly (Singh, 2016, p. 119).

Because of the relatively friendly nature of bilateral relations, India and Myanmar have cooperated in some counter-insurgency efforts since the 1990s, and joint military operations against insurgent groups were also carried out in the early 2000s (Engh, 2016, p. 41). However these counter-insurgency operations only achieved some moderate success because Myanmar's willingness to cooperate with India faltered during the past few years because these ethnic rebels posed more threat to India's national security rather than to Myanmar's own (Egreteau, 2008, p. 941). Since the 1990s the Indian government has also proposed a "Look East Policy" to increase economic links with East and Southeast Asia (Das, 2010; Haokip, 2015). However, despite some of the official rhetoric, little substantial change has transpired in increasing economic cooperation across the common borderland between India and Myanmar, because neither had the capacity to consolidate their respective borderlands to actually improve infrastructure connectivity between the two (Egreteau, 2008, p. 948).

In the case of Bangladesh, ever since its independence from Pakistan in 1971, the country has battled insurgencies in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where it borders both India and Myanmar. Similar to its two neighbors, ethnic rebels have maintained their presence by taking advantage of the porous border and the weak state presence in the borderland area (Rashiduzzaman, 1998, p. 666). It was not until 1997 that the Bangladesh government signed a peace accord with the ethnic rebels that recognized the autonomous status of the hill tribes. On the other hand, the common borderland between the two continues to provide hiding space for separatist rebels from Myanmar's Rakhine State (Myint Maung Tun, 2016). Given the low state capacity of both countries, neither countries have managed to implement measures to make good use of the common border, and

economic relations between the two countries remain very limited, and little has been done to improve bilateral trade (Myint Maung Tun, 2016, p. 5).

More significantly, bilateral relations between the two countries have been soured by the Rohingya refugee crisis during the past decades. Accused by the Myanmar Buddhist nationalists as illegal migrants from Bangladesh, the Rohingya communities have become targets of sporadic communal violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State (Parnini, Othman, & Ghazali, 2013). Additionally, Myanmar government's anti-insurgency campaigns as well as its past and present human rights violations have directly caused waves of Rohingya refugees to cross into Bangladesh ever since the 1970s (Kingston, 2015; Ullah, 2011). The worst occurred recently in 2017 when a Myanmar military campaign targeted the Rohingya communities in the Rakhine State, which led to an estimated number of more than 600,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh. This has led Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights official, to denounce the Myanmar's military of committing a "textbook case of ethnic cleansing" (Barany, 2018). However, so far no solution has been found on how to resettle these refugees. Because of their stateless nature, these Rohingya refugees became a tug-of-war diplomatic battle between the two countries, because they cause huge burden on Bangladesh that is already overly crowded, while Myanmar does not recognize their citizenship status. Indeed, it is here we witness two equally weak states' bilateral relations have deteriorated to the extent that they might lead to direct confrontations between the two.

## Conclusion

In one popular book, *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson argue that some countries are more successful than others because they were founded on better political institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013). Yet they fail to comprehend that, in many instances, the failure of state consolidation is something that is beyond the control of individual states. There are many contingent factors, and sometimes the more successful states might in fact impede the state consolidation processes in their neighboring states. Laying out a specific theoretical framework on the neighborhood effect of state consolidation, this paper draws empirical evidence from a stretch of borderland area among several upland Southeast Asian countries that contains a great amount of similarity in geography and ethnic diversity, and argues that we should look at the neighborhood effect on state consolidation to explain the variations across borders. In the case studies of Myanmar's borderland areas, it demonstrates that due to their asymmetrical power dominance over Myanmar, both China and Thailand have meddled in Myanmar's borderland territories and

continue to dominate the borderland economy. Using India and Bangladesh as contrast cases, we also see that when such asymmetrical power relations are not present, the neighborhood effect of state consolidation is relatively minor.

In this way, the theoretical framework of the paper draws attention to the dynamics of relations among neighboring states. Instead of looking at the international system level or at the country level as many of the previous studies have done, perhaps it is fruitful to look at the relationships among neighboring states in their different approaches to managing their borderland area and how these can help us understand the variations in state consolidation across countries. The specific focus also has an additional advantage because it can easily help us understand the localized processes of state consolidation in the borderland that are detailed and nuanced, yet at the same time can contribute to the broader discussion of state consolidation at the national level. It calls for further comparative studies to test the applicability of this theoretical framework of neighborhood effect on state consolidation across the world.

## Notes

1. The country changed its name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. In this paper, I use Burma for the period before 1989, and Myanmar thereafter.
2. Here I treat power capabilities quite broadly to include military, economic, geographic, and demographic elements.
3. The caveat here is that the different scenarios discussed here are by no means overly determining. In fact, such interactive dynamics can create different types of responses from neighboring states, which might be correlated with other factors, some domestic and others international.
4. However, Myanmar has not released any census data about the states' ethnic compositions. Ethnic demographic data from the most recent census, in 2014, have not yet been released. However, it is generally understood that the ethnic-majority Bamar only account for about 68 percent of the whole population. This means ethnic minorities should account for a high percentage of the population in the borderland area, which can also be inferred from the persistence of ethnic rebel groups and inability of Myanmar's government to impose state-building projects there.
5. The victory of the Chinese communists significantly changed the international security dimension in Southeast Asia, as it boosted the morale of many of the local communist parties and also played a direct role in a series of wars in Indochina in which the U.S. was involved.
6. People's Daily (*renmin ribao*), "Dare to Sacrifice, Dare to Fight, and Dare to Succeed (*ganyu xisheng ganyu douzheng ganyu shengli*)," 21 March 1969.
7. However, we also note that although these ceasefire agreements did not lead to the cessation of militarization of the borderland area, they nonetheless did gradually increase the Myanmar state's presence in the borderland area. After passing the 2008 Constitution, the Myanmar government made it clear that it wants to incorporate all the existing ethnic armed groups into a singular border guard force. This indicates that the power balance between the central government and the ethnic armed groups have shifted in the favor of the former. However, after the breakdown of the ceasefire agreements, peace negotiations undertaken by Aung San Suu Kyi's government not made much progress.
8. 1 mu = 0.1647 acre.

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