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There are two sides to every COIN: On the balance between (economic) carrots and (military) sticks in confronting Myanmar's insurgencies

Introduction: democracy and insurgencies

In recent years, Myanmar has drawn renewed interest on the wake of the ongoing - and still partial - liberalization process, started by its military ruling elite. Even if the general elections held in 2010 reconfirmed the dominant role of the Burmese armed forces (the *Tatmadaw*) through a substantial victory of the Union Solidarity and Development Party - USDP (heir of the formerly-ruling junta-run State Peace and Development Council - SPDC) the same year also marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of the country, characterized by democratic openings of which the freeing first and the admission in parliament later of Aung San Suu Kyi is the most obvious example. But Myanmar is also home to the most long-lasting still active insurgencies: indeed the government's capacity to effectively rule and administer peripheral areas of the country has been challenged since independence by a vast array of non-state armed groups (NSAGs), mostly but not exclusively organized around ethnic identities. Unresolved insurgencies and the ways in which the government handles (and will handle) them is central to Myanmar's transition in more than one way.

In the first place, democratizations are statistically characterized by higher levels of violence due to greater political mobilization and to the use of potentially disruptive ethnic, nationalist or otherwise identitarian narratives as a way to build or hold on political capital.¹ Given the number of insurgencies already in the background in Myanmar, the mix with a political transition could indeed prove dangerous not only to democratization itself but also to hopes to reach a substantial national reconciliation. Effective conflict management, reduction - and hopefully resolution - are thus indispensable in order to mark for a successful regime change and for building a renewed and non-contentious national identity. On the top of this, the way in which the government handles Myanmar's internal struggles and deals with minorities has very tangible political consequences for the government itself, both domestically (as it influences the degree of political support the USDP can expect from the both the Bamar majority and from the various minorities) and internationally (as it plays on the believability of the ruling elite commitment toward liberalization, which in turn is essential to the international re-alignment of the country). Hence, in dealing with domestic insurgencies the USDP-*Tatmadaw* ruling elite has good motives for both not relinquishing on the use of force and yet to weigh it carefully, in order to keep the country together, hold their grasp on power and not jeopardize their international agenda: their chances of success depends on how well they manage to thread on this fine line.

¹ Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, 'Democratization and the Danger of War', *International Security*, 20(1), Summer 1995, pp. 5-38; Paul Collier, *War Guns and Votes* (London, The Bodley Head, 2009); Lars-Erik Cederman, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Simon Hug, 'Elections and Ethnic Civil War', *Comparative Political Studies*, 46(3), March 2013, pp. 387-417.

The core interest of this article rests on the strategy enacted by Myanmar's government to counter, contain and re-absorb insurgencies, something that is only partly inscribed in the so called "peace process". More specifically, the government activity *vis* the insurgencies is assessed in two core dimensions: economic and military. About the first, it is followed and further explored the approach suggested by Jake Sherman in 2003.² His study of the post-89 wave of ceasefires in Myanmar fits into the frame of the economic explanations of conflict that become popular in the early 2000.³ Starting from the now widely-accepted assumption that war can provide an "alternative system of profit and power" that advantages some groups at the expenses of others - and thus that for certain actors may be profitable to sustain war and evade peace⁴ - Sherman took one step further arguing that the same logic could also work in reverse, as economic self-interest can create incentives to cease hostilities. In this perspective, the State Law and Order Restoration Council - SLORC (name used by Myanmar's military junta from 1988 to 1997) was able to use economic incentives - or "carrots" - in order to propose palatable conditions to ethnic militias and agree ceasefires that, while not entailing any actual demobilization, managed to last for significant spans of time (in some cases up to today) and were a successful instrument of conflict reduction. At the same time, evaluating the economic aspect *per se* would be insufficient, as economic sweet-deals have not been universally offered by Myanmar's government. Its military tradition is also synonymous with the use of classic coercive counterinsurgency. For this reason - and also because conflict analysis should not be confined exclusively to issues related to resources only⁵ - economic "carrots" are evaluated along with military "sticks". This coupling of "sticks and carrots" is useful for two sets of reasons: it allows to better grasp the overall government strategy aimed at counter, contain and re-absorb insurgents on one hand and to account for cycles of conflict resurgence or reduction in the country on the other.

The analysis is developed in diachronic perspective, spanning over three key phases. The first one, meant to provide the needed historical background and benchmark, is the post-89 SLORC period, characterized by the dissolution of the Communist Part of Burma (CPB) and by the introduction of the practice of the ceasefires. The other two time-spans focus on the current transition, roughly splitting it into two halves as they refer to the years 2008-11 and 2011-15 respectively. The first starts from the coming into force of the new constitution and ends just short of the new peace plan proposed by the Thein Sein administration; the second one begins from where the first ends to run all the way up to the signing of new draft nationwide cease-fire agreement. While the first is significant in exposing patterns of continuity and change in the government policies addressed at facing insurgencies in the wake of the liberalization, the second highlights later policy adjustments, thus allowing to evaluate the depth and pervasiveness of change - if any - and the measure in which is real or cosmetic. For each of these three phases, the activities of the

²Jake Sherman, 'Burma: Lessons from the cease-fires', in Karen Ballentine and Jake Sherman (Eds.), *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed & Grievance* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2003), pp. 225-255.

³Mary Kaldor, *New and old wars: Organized violence in a global era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999); Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, 'Greed and grievance in civil war', *Policy Research Working Paper No. 2355* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2000); Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (Eds.), *Greed and grievance: Economic agendas in civil wars* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

⁴Mats Berdal, *Building peace after war* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); David Keen, *Useful enemies: When waging wars is more important than winning them* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press: 2012).

⁵Karen Ballentine and Heiko Nitzchke (Eds.), *Profiting from peace: Managing the Resource dimension of civil wars* (Boulder and London, Lynne Rienner, 2005); Martin Smith, *State of strife: The dynamics of ethnic conflict in Burma* (Washington DC, East-West Center, 2008).

government in face of three major insurgencies are considered: 1) those active in Shan state, with specific attention devoted to the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the United Wa State Army (UWSA); 2) that lead by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and; 3) the one conducted by Karen National Union (KNU).⁶ The rationale for case-selection is straightforward, as the cases represent the most significant insurgencies, with UWSA, KIO and KNU being (or having been) among the largest NSAGs. Although their fortunes had ups and downs through different times each managed to reach a strength of at least 10,000 men in arms at some point, and the largest of the three - the UWSA - currently fields about 20-30,000.⁷ The MNDAA, also known as Kokang Army, appears as an exception, as it cannot compare with the others in term of numbers or power (estimates putting it at roughly 1-2,000 men), yet it has to be included for three reasons: because historically it was the first NSAG to sign a ceasefire with the government; because it is central to the persistence of insurrectional violence in post-2010 Myanmar; and because there is a triangular relationship connecting the government, UWSA and MNDAA, and thus would be artificial to exclude it from the analysis. In sum, by moving through the three phases previously summarized (post-1989; 2008-11 and 2011-15) it is observed how Myanmar's government overall balanced between economic incentives and military pressure in the face of these three insurgencies (Shan state, KIO and KNU).

Historical precedents: the post-89 ceasefires

After the 8888 Uprising in August 1988 and the re-institution of martial law under the newly formed SLORC in September of the same year, Myanmar (at the time still officially designed as Burma) was in for one more historical twist. In Summer 1989 the oldest insurgent organization active in the country - the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), operating mostly in Shan state - dissolved out of waning support from its historical ally - China - and of increasing internal fragmentation. As a result, the ideological rebellion led by the CPB, capable to mobilize also the Bamar, was replaced by a number of smaller identitarian insurgencies: UWSA and MNDAA were among the newborn organizations (although they were not the only CPB spin-offs). The CPB meltdown posed an immediate danger for the freshly instituted SLORC, as it opened up the possibility of an alliance between the old ethno-nationalist insurgencies grouped in the National Democratic Front (NDF) - which included, among others, the KIO and the KNU - and the new ethno-nationalist insurgencies originated from the CPB dissolution. In a context where pushing back pro-democracy thrusts was also a priority, the SLORC decided to take the initiative in order to minimize the risks of a dangerous alliance between his enemies: it thus proposed attractive deals to some CPB spin-offs as alternatives to offers coming from the NDF. Major-General Khin Nyunt, at the time SLORC Secretary-1 and Head of military intelligence was the main architect behind the initiative. The deals proposed were quite simple as they basically included a cease-fire, the possibility for NSAGs to carry on their own economic activities along

⁶ Many insurgent organization in Myanmar sport a variety of denominations, often distinguishing between armed and political functions, and this applies also for the three considered here: UWSA is the armed force of the United Wa State Party (UWSP); KIO has his military branch in the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the KNU in the the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). To avoid to cramp the article with too many acronyms, only the single most used one is used to refer to any specific organization in both its military and political dimensions throughout the present article.

⁷ Figures for current strengths throughout the article are drawn from the Myanmar Peace Monitor: <http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

with a promise for economic development, and entailed no disarmament or demobilization.⁸ The economic dimension implied in the deals was particularly attractive also given the posture change of bordering countries - China and Thailand - that gradually became less supportive toward the insurgencies and their trade needs and more interested in closing business deals with Yangon's government instead. The SLORC summed up his new narrative in the "peace through development" motto, that had its tangible manifestation in the 1989 "Master Plan for the Development of Border Areas and National Races" (later updated in 1994), that postulated growing investment and development for peripheral regions. In 1989 the MNDAA led by Peng Jiasheng was the first NSAG to close a ceasefire with the SLORC, quickly followed by the UWSA in the same year. Given that one of the reasons behind CPB dissolution was divergence on the tolerability of drug-related revenues as a source of sustainment for the insurgency, it is easy to see how the ceasefire proposals appeared attractive for groups such as the MNDAA and the UWSA. Not surprisingly, in following years the Myanmar government has been more aggressive against narco-activities led by non-ceasefire groups, while MNDAA and UWSA enjoyed relatively relaxed deadlines for opium crop reduction (2003 and 2005 respectively). As a consequence, the overall volume of opium export from Myanmar grown steadily through the mid-90s, before starting to decline.⁹

The post-89 ceasefire offers shifted away from the more forceful approach up to then used by the Burmese government to tackle insurgencies, known as the "Four cuts" (*Pya Ley Pya*) strategy and aimed at cutting out rebel sources of recruitment, food, financing and information through the use of military might, forced resettlement and crop destruction.¹⁰ However, it was not a radically new move, since deals (albeit of a different kind) were closed with NSAGs the past as well. In the 60s and 70s, the government was used to co-opt militias (called *Ka Kway Yay* - KKY) in Shan state by allowing them to freely police and trade in their areas, in order to further government policies in zones where the *Tatmadaw* did not have easy access and to contrast other insurgent groups.¹¹ It could be said that the post-89 ceasefire strategy was a substantial refurbishment of the KKY approach, meant not only to decrease chances of alliances between different NSAGs but also to increase government penetration in areas in which Yangon had limited influence and, to some extent, even to initiate subtle forms of military cooperation. This renewed strategy had also significant military effects. It should be noted that after the CPB meltdown the largest active NSAG in Shan state was the Mong Tai Army (MTA) led by Khun Sa, counting around 15,000 men and previously involved in the KKY system under a different name. After the CPB dissolution UWSA clashes with the MTA were

⁸ On the CPB dissolution and the overall ceasefire architecture see: Sherman, 'Burma: Lessons from the cease-fires', pp. 230-232; Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999), pp. 374-383; Ashley South, *Ethnic politics in Burma: States of conflict* (London and New York: Routledge 2008), pp. 117-172.

⁹ Sherman, 'Burma: Lessons from the cease-fires', p. 139; South, *Ethnic politics in Burma*, pp. 144-149; UNODC, *Southeast Asia Opium Survey 2014*, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/sea/SE-ASIA-opium-popy-2014-web.pdf>, pp. 23-24

¹⁰ Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity*, pp.247-271; South, *Ethnic politics in Burma: States of conflict*, pp. 86-87.

¹¹ Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity*, p. 221; Martin Smith, 'Ethnic participation and national Reconciliation in Myanmar: Challenges in a transitional landscape', in Trevor Wilson (Ed.), *Myanmar's long road to national reconciliation* (Singapore, ISEAS: 2006), pp. 44-45; Jane M. Ferguson, 'Sovereignty in the Shan state: A case study of the United Wa State Army', in Nich Cheesman, Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (Eds.), *Ruling Myanmar: From cyclone Nargis to National elections* (Singapore, ISEAS: 2010), pp. 54-55.

frequent and this, along with the military pressure applied directly by the *Tatmadaw*, brought to the disbanding of the MTA, also eased by an attractive offer for surrender addressed personally at Khun Sa. More generally, the closing of ceasefires allowed to the government and to the *Tatmadaw* to increase their presence and influence in areas where they were previously barred, concentrate their strength and resources against a smaller number of adversaries, build up and enhance dual-use (civilian and military) infrastructures (above all roads), and improve the overall control of borders (in turn essential to put in check insurgent sources of revenues).

The logic that worked straightforwardly for UWSA and MNDA in Shan state affected also the KIO, albeit through a different path. Founded in 1961 in reaction to growing pro-Buddhist and anti-federalist stances in Yangon, the KIO conducted a steady campaign of insurgency up to 90s. After more than 30 years of armed struggle, KIO's Chairman Brang Seng saw the continuation of insurgency as a path that could lead to limited accomplishments and considered the option to conduct politics from within the "legal fold" in order to bring a change: hence, he agreed on ceasefire with SLORC in 1994. Before the ceasefire, the unrelenting pressure applied by the *Tatmadaw* made the KIO 4th brigade split from the main organization, negotiating a separate truce in 1991 and becoming then known as Kachin Defence Army (KDA). Several economic projects were then started in the newly formed Special Region-5 under KDA control, including schools, hospitals and hydropower plants. The KIO, on the other hand did not just lose one of his units, but also found itself in competition with its former brigade, as Special Region-5 was overlapping with areas still in its hands. The risk of facing economic underdevelopment and of having the Kachin nation falling piecemeal under the mix of military pressure and economic incentives coming from the SLORC were thus probable factors weighing on Brang Seng choice. As it happened in Shan state, the new ceasefire generated improvement in the region's economy, but also eased, enhanced and enlarged *Tatmadaw* penetration.¹²

Through the 90s, a tentative dialogue between the KNU and the SLORC took place as well. Differently from the other cases considered, the KNU held tight on his "politics first" agenda asking for nationwide political changes, thus not getting allured by the "peace through development" option. The KNU rigid stance, due to both preferences of its leadership and of the Karen diaspora, blocked any compromise with the SLORC.¹³ At about the same time, KNU internal grievances brought to the spinoff of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which quickly came to terms with the SLORC - also thanks to economic incentives¹⁴ - and started cooperating with the *Tatmadaw*, providing it with much needed information on Karen-controlled territory. In late 1994, a DKBA offensive logistically supported by the *Tatmadaw* brought to the fall of the KNU headquarters first (Manerplaw, January 1995) and of a KNU major base later (Kaw Moo Rah, March 1995). Since then, the KNU has been in substantial military decline and in early 2004 negotiations with the government started again, with an historical meeting between Bo Mya (by then no longer the KNU Chairman, but still an important figure in the movement) and Khin Nyunt (by then Myanmar Prime

¹² Sherman, 'Burma: Lessons from the cease-fires', pp. 243; South, *Ethnic politics in Burma*, pp. 151-159; Mary Callahan, *Political authority in Burma's ethnic minority states: Devolution, occupation and coexistence* (Washington DC: East-West Center, 2007), pp. 42-45; Tom Kramer, *Neither war nor peace: the future of the cease-fire agreements in Burma* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2009), pp. 24-29.

¹³ South, *Ethnic politics in Burma*, pp. 59-61.

¹⁴ Sherman, 'Burma: Lessons from the cease-fires', p. 235.

Minister). However, an unfortunate breaking of the informal ceasefire by some KNU troops froze the process, than then came to an halt after the political fall of Khin Nyunt later in the year.¹⁵

In the literature, the post-89 ceasefires have been presented mainly as an effective instrument of conflict management and reduction (although not of resolution) in the hands of the government,¹⁶ and the deals offered as differently attractive for the various NSAGs depending on the respective agendas (more or less business-oriented).¹⁷ However, along with the aims of each specific NSAG, it should also be observed that ceasefire offers have been more or less enticing on the base of the military pressure applied by the *Tatmadaw* and the degree of fragmentation of each NSAG. Spinoff groups from both the KIO and the KNU accepted ceasefires quickly after leaving their former organization, and while the KIO decided to follow suit the example coming from its KDA spinoff thus enjoying some "carrots", the hardliner preference of the KNU had it suffer by the "stick" instead.

The sour taste of liberalization: 2008-11

The year 2008 marked the beginning of Myanmar's transition with the coming into force of the new constitution. This latter, unfortunately, soon proved to be source of renewed contention with insurgent groups, as it hints at the opportunity to dissolve armed forces others than the *Tatmadaw*.¹⁸ In April 2009 the SPDC announced a plan aimed at transforming ceasefire militias into border guard forces (BGF) integrated into the *Tatmadaw*. While not entailing a complete demobilization of personnel, the plan mandated for the substantial dismantling of NSAGs, as it postulated to create small and separated units of 326 personnel each, of which 30 would be from the *Tatmadaw* (including one of the three majors in charge of the unit). This, along with the required divorce from the previous insurgent administration, basically meant NSAGs demobilization before any political demand was actually met. None of the major group accepted the plan, with DKBA being the only exception.¹⁹ Given the government interest to "normalize" NSAGs before the transition, the SPDC reacted to the BFG plan refusal with a renewed interest in coercive means, that could also be explained by a progressive loss of political palatability of Khin Nyunt ceasefire

¹⁵ South, *Ethnic politics in Burma*, pp. 52 and 57-64; Kramer, *Neither war nor peace: the future of the cease-fire agreements in Burma*, pp. 33-34; Ashley South, 'Governance and legitimacy in Karen state', in Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (Eds.), *Ruling Myanmar: From cyclone Nargis to National elections* (Singapore, ISEAS: 2010), pp. 63-65 and 76.

¹⁶ Sherman, 'Burma: Lessons from the cease-fires'; Tom Kramer, 'Ethnic conflict in Burma: The challenge of unity in a divided country', in Lowell Dittmer (Ed.), *Burma or Myanmar? The struggle for national identity* (Singapore, World Scientific Publishing: 2010), pp. 77-78; Transnational Institute, 'Ending Burma's Conflict Cycle? Prospects for Ethnic Peace', *Burma policy briefing Nr. 8* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2012), pp. 1-2.

¹⁷ Tom Kramer, *The United Wa State Party: Narco-army or nationalist party?* (Washington DC: East-West Center, 2007), pp. 46-48.

¹⁸ Nicholas Farrelly, 'Ceasing ceasefires? Kachin politics beyond the stalemates', in Nick Cheesman, Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (Eds.), *Myanmar's transitions: Openings, Obstacles and Opportunities* (Singapore, ISEAS: 2012), p. 59.

¹⁹ Tom Kramer, *Neither war nor peace: the future of the cease-fire agreements in Burma*, pp. 35-36; Kramer, 'Ethnic conflict in Burma: The challenge of unity in a divided country', pp. 78-81; Ferguson, 'Sovereignty in the Shan state: A case study of the United Wa State Army', p. 53.

heritage after his political fall in 2004 and by inspiration coming from the Sri Lankan military victory over the Tamil earlier in 2009.²⁰

With relations between SPDC and NSAGs in Shan state already declining²¹, the BFG plan refusal made them just worse. In August 2009, under the pretence of a drug-bust, the government started military operations in the Kokang region (an area part of Shan state) that eventually led to an escalation of hostilities and to the breakup of the ceasefire with the MNDAA. Even if it created some tension with bordering China, the military campaign was successful, at least for the time being: MNDAA leader, Peng Jiasheng, fled to China and his forces dispersed, while a spinoff led by his deputy Bai Suoqian accepted the BGF plan and declared the desire to take part into 2010 elections. It has been argued that the Kokang incident was not intended to deal just with small-sized MNDAA, but also to send a message to its massive neighbour, the UWSA, that nonetheless did not comply with the BGF plan even afterwards.²² Not even the 2010 elections and the coming into power of Thein Sein did bring a change of course. In early 2011 the *Zwe Man Hein* offensive was launched in Shan state against two other ceasefire groups: the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA, also known as Mongla) and the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP, also known as Shan State Army-North).²³ The offensive preceded by few months the new peace plan proposed by Thein Sein in August.

In Kachin state, the *Tatmadaw* has steadily strengthened his presence since agreeing a ceasefire with the KIO in 1994. In 2003 it deployed 50 battalions, a number that in 2011 has grown up to 80, with a fourfold increase from 1994 levels.²⁴ In 2009 the KIO rejected the BGF plan, while on its end the government refused to accept the Kachin State Progressive Party (KSPP) in the upcoming electoral contest. Achieving political representation has been a defining goal for the KIO, which then lamented not just the electoral exclusion but also the lack of any truly political dialogue with the government since the closing of the ceasefire.²⁵ On this background, conflict started anew after the national elections, on 9 June 2011, following a skirmish on

²⁰ About the first, see Ferguson, 'Sovereignty in the Shan state: A case study of the United Wa State Army', pp. 58-59; about the latter, see Ian Storey, 'Emerging Fault Lines in Sino-Burmese Relations: The Kokang Incident', *China Brief Volume: 9 Issue: 18*, (Washington DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2009), [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=35468?](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=35468?) (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

²¹ Ferguson, 'Sovereignty in the Shan state: A case study of the United Wa State Army', p. 58.

²² Kramer, 'Ethnic conflict in Burma: The challenge of unity in a divided country', pp. 77-78; Storey, 'Emerging Fault Lines in Sino-Burmese Relations: The Kokang Incident'; Reuters, *Analysis-Myanmar ethnic offensive tests vital China ties*, 1 September 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/09/01/idUSBKK494356> (last accessed on 18 April 2015); Mizzima, *Beginning of the end*, 2 September 2009, <http://archive-2.mizzima.com/edop/commentary/2713-beginning-of-the-end-.html> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

²³ Ko Htwe, 'Conflict in Shan State Spreading', *The Irrawaddy*, 8 April 2011, http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=21101 (last accessed on 18 April 2015); Transnational Institute, 'Ending Burma's Conflict Cycle? Prospects for Ethnic Peace', pp. 3-5.

²⁴ Sherman, 'Burma: Lessons from the cease-fires', p. 243; Seng Maw Lahpai, 'State terrorism and international compliance: The Kachin armed struggle for political self-determination', in Nick Cheesman, Nicholas Farrelly and Trevor Wilson (Eds.), *Debating democratization in Myanmar* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2014), p. 288.

²⁵ Smith, 'Ethnic participation and national Reconciliation in Myanmar: Challenges in a transitional landscape', p. 51; Kramer, 'Ethnic conflict in Burma: The challenge of unity in a divided country', p. 81; Farrelly, 'Ceasing ceasefires? Kachin politics beyond the stalemates', p. 60; Transnational Institute, 'Ending Burma's Conflict Cycle? Prospects for Ethnic Peace', pp. 9-10.

a site connected to a Chinese-funded hydroelectric project, the Myitsone dam. Hostilities quickly escalated, making the 1994 ceasefire void. The dam itself has been a contentious issue, as its expected consequences were the flooding of 447 square kilometres, implying the relocation of 47 villages near the construction site and about 11,800 people, along with the destruction of various sites connected to Kachin cultural heritage. The project further enhanced possibility for military penetration of the *Tatmadaw*, while planned economic returns were mainly directed to China and Myanmar governments, not the locals.²⁶ The suspension of the project - not his cancellation, as that would have carried massive economic penalties - that came on 30 September 2011 has been hailed as a great democratic success, also by US President Barack Obama. However, it should be noted that this result came only after the project became contentious on the national and international levels: nationally, with the appropriation of the issue in August by Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD); internationally, as both US and ASEAN made clear their cold feelings about the project.²⁷ These development were potentially dangerous for the USPD-military ruling elite, as they could have brought to a loss of political ground in favour of the NLD and damaged the international perception of Myanmar's commitment toward liberalization. Hence, it seems reasonable to assume these were the actual reasons behind the project suspension and that if opposition would have been exclusively on the Kachin state level, the government would have probably just attempted to roll over it militarily. Even after the suspension of the Myitsone project, violence keep escalating, with the KIO suffering significant loss of ground in the face of the *Tatmadaw*.²⁸

With the KNU, on the other hand, there was no ceasefire to dispute. As previously recalled, the organization has been in decline since the DKBA spinoff, and between 2005 and 2007 has been under the fire of several *Tatmadaw* offensives in northern Kayin state. It also lost one more piece (as a spinoff of its 7th Brigade, under Htein Maung accepted a deal with the government), and found Thai tolerance for its activities near the border getting scarcer by the day due to growing Thai business interests in Myanmar. By the late 2000s, the KNU was about 5,000 strong, displaced by the DKBA as the most economically and militarily significant NSAG in Karen politics.²⁹ To top things off, in 2008 KNU Secretary General, Pado Mahn Shar, was shot dead (allegedly by disguised DKBA militiamen),³⁰ while its historical chairman, Bo Mya, died

²⁶ Saw Yan Naing, 'Irrawaddy Dam Construction Begins, Human Rights Abuses Begin', *The Irrawaddy*, 29 January 2008, http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=10064 (last accessed on 18 April 2015); Kramer, 'Ethnic conflict in Burma: The challenge of unity in a divided country', p. 72; Farrelly, 'Ceasing ceasefires? Kachin politics beyond the stalemates', p. 63; Lahpai, 'State terrorism and international compliance: The Kachin armed struggle for political self-determination', pp. 287-289.

²⁷ U.S. Department of State, 'Burma's Foreign Minister Meeting at the Department of State', *Question Taken at the September 30, 2011 Daily Press Briefing*, 30 September 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/09/174872.htm> (last accessed on 18 April 2015); Sun Yun, 'China and the Changing Myanmar', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2012), pp. 51-77.

²⁸ Farrelly, 'Ceasing ceasefires? Kachin politics beyond the stalemates', p. 55.

²⁹ South, *Ethnic politics in Burma: States of conflict*, pp. 55-57 and 64-68; South, 'Governance and legitimacy in Karen state', pp. 63-65.

³⁰ BBC News, 'Burmese rebel leader is shot dead', 14 February 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7244684.stm> (last accessed on 18 April 2015); The Guardian, 'Burmese rebel leader shot dead', 14 February 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/feb/14/burma> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

of natural causes already in 2006.³¹ The 2009 BGF plan was rejected by the KNU but subscribed by the DKBA: as a consequence, the government encouraged the DKBA to increase its number to 9,000, and then to attack KNU bases while counting on *Tatmadaw* support.³² In August 2010 the DKBA was formally transformed into a border guard force integrated in the *Tatmadaw*.³³ Differently from the Kachin case, several Karen parties (namely the Karen People's Party, the Ploung-Sqaw Democracy Party and the Karen State Democracy and Development Party) were admitted to the 2010 national elections, managing to secure a few parliamentary seats.

In short, if compared with the post-89 phase, in the 2008-11 period the government leaned more toward the "stick" than the "carrot". Substantial military pressure has been applied in all the three cases considered, either directly or through proxies: a behaviour that disregarded long-lasting ceasefires and did not change even after the 2010 elections. It could be argued that hostilities launched in 2011 specifically (in Kachin and Shan state) show a distinct continuity between the Thein Sein administration and previous SPDC policy. While the BGF plan in itself did accomplish very little (with DKBA being the only real success story) the more general coercive strategy delivered some positive results as it actually generated a few compliant NSAG spinoffs and managed to progressively reduce the relative weight of the KNU (a traditional thorn in the side of the Burmese government) in Myanmar's politics.

A new beginning? 2011-15

On 18 August 2011, Thein Sein announced his new Peace Plan, dropping the requirement for NSAGs to transform into BGFs and publicly calling for peace negotiations to be held with all the ethnic groups. The new plan is structured on three-layers: 1) subscription and implementation of ceasefires at the regional (state) level; 2) confidence building measures, political dialogue, and plans for economic development conducted at the national (union) level; 3) stipulation of an "agreement for eternal peace" in front of the Parliament and other authorities. "Peacemaking committees" have been established at both national and regional levels and talks began almost immediately, with both ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups, with the stated aim of reaching a nationwide ceasefire.³⁴ A negotiating team led by Aung Min (Railway Minister until August 2012, then Minister of the President's Office of Myanmar) was in charge of dealing with the Chin National Front (CNF), the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS, also known as Shan State Army-South), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), the New Mon State Party (NMPS) and the KNU. With the only exception of NMSP none of these groups ever had a previous ceasefire with the government. Another

³¹ South, *Ethnic politics in Burma: States of conflict*, p. 64 and 64-68; South, 'Governance and legitimacy in Karen state', p. 66.

³² South, 'Governance and legitimacy in Karen state', pp. 63-65.

³³ Transnational Institute, 'Ending Burma's Conflict Cycle? Prospects for Ethnic Peace', p. 5. However, this transformation was not entirely uncontroversial, and generated a small DKBA spinoff (DKBA-5) about 1,500 strong. Myanmar Peace Monitor, *DKBA-5*, <http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/background/ethnic-grievances/159-dkba-5> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

³⁴ The New Light of Myanmar, 'Union Government offers olive branch to national race armed groups', 19 September 2011; Transnational Institute, 'Ending Burma's Conflict Cycle? Prospects for Ethnic Peace', pp. 3-7; Myanmar Peace Monitor, 'Government Peace Plan', <http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/peace-process/government-peace-plan> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

team, conducted by Aung Thaung (former Ministry of Industry-1 and then MP) and Thein Zaw (Former Ministry of Communication and then MP) was tasked with the UWSA, NDAA, KIO and SSPP.³⁵ Between September 2011 and February 2012 renewed ceasefires were signed with the UWSA, NDAA, SSPP and NMSP. Notable ceasefires were closed for the first time ever with the KNU, RCSS, CNF, KNPP, all of them between the end of 2011 and early 2012.³⁶ To sustain the process, in November 2012 the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC), a government-affiliated non-profit organization, was inaugurated in Yangon. More importantly, in late 2013 a conference bringing together many ethnic groups was held in Laiza, Kachin state, with the government approval. The results were the creation of a Nationwide Ceasefire Coordinating Team (NCCT), constituted of 16 members (including KIO, KNU and MNDA, but not UWSA) that signed a common document: the "11-point common position of ethnic resistance organisations on Nationwide Ceasefire" (or "Laiza agreement"). An important step forward along the road to reach a nationwide ceasefire.

Moving to Shan state, it is worthy to recall that between 2009 and 2011 hostilities conflict reopened with MNDA, NDAA and SSPP but not with UWSA, the largest NSAG active in the region. This latter, on the other hand, was the first to sign a renewed ceasefire, then imitated by NDAA and SSPP and also by RCSS, which never subscribed to a ceasefire before. Accounts remained open with the MNDA though, and violence erupted again in the Kokang region when Peng Jiasheng returned from China in February 2015. In less than two months, the number of refugees reached the 50,000 figure and at least 200 deaths have been confirmed among the combatants. The government imposed martial law over the Kokang region, while Thein Sein stated that "the army will not lose an inch of Myanmar territory".³⁷ If back in 2009 the government decision to use military might against the MNDA was made on the base of the Sri Lankan victory, that may have been a ill-fated example to follow, as the Kokang Army did not find itself with its back to the sea - differently from the Tamils - and could just return from China a few years later. In considering the role of economic factors in cycles of violence in the region, it is worthy to mention that Myanmar drug production has been on the rise again since 2006 with poppy cultivation reaching 57,600 hectares in 2014.³⁸ The director of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in Myanmar, John M. Whalen, declared in 2014 that the local government was just "turning a blind eye" on the issue³⁹, a statement that could indicate a return to the traditional way of leaving NSAGs free reign in their narcotic-related activities in order not to stir anti-government feelings and to secure compliance on more pressing matters. This could account for the numbers of deal closed by government with basically all the main

³⁵ Transnational Institute, 'Ending Burma's Conflict Cycle? Prospects for Ethnic Peace', pp. 4-5;

³⁶ Dates for new ceasefires are drawn from the Myanmar Peace Monitor: <http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

³⁷ All data concerning events related to the last Kokang crisis have been drawn starting on 13 February 2015 from BBC News: <http://www.bbc.co.uk> (last accessed on 18 April 2015). For the Thein Sein declaration see: The Global New Light of Myanmar, 'President U Thein Sein vows not to lose an inch of Myanmar's territory, honours military personnel who fight against Kokang renegades', 16 February 2015, <http://globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/president-u-thein-sein-vows-not-to-lose-an-inch-of-myanmars-territory-honours-military-personnel-who-fight-against-kokang-renegades/> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

³⁸ UNODC, *Southeast Asia Opium Survey 2014*, pp. 51-52.

³⁹ Thomas Fuller, 'Myanmar returns to what sells: Heroin', *The New York Times*, 3 January 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/world/myanmar-returns-to-what-sells-heroin.html?_r=0 (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

NSAGs active in Shan region from 2011 onward. Peng Jiasheng recent return from China, on the other hand, may be as well linked to a desire to get back into the business. At the moment of writing (April 2015) the MNDAA is still belligerent.

The launch of the new Peace Plan by Thein Sein did not bring any reduction of violence in Kachin state, were the situation remained tense. Several *Tatmadaw* offensives took place in the last years, reaching levels of scale and intensity defined as "inconsistent" with Thein Sein order to act only in self-defence.⁴⁰ In December 2012 a major operation that included the use of aircrafts (a quite rare occurrence) was conducted near the KIO's headquarter, in Laiza, and conflict dragged on in 2013. The chimera of a possible de-escalation and of a ceasefire timidly surface in mid-2013, also thanks to mediation from China, although the KIO insisted on requesting a formal political dialogue stating their unwillingness to appease to a simple ceasefire. Tensions quickly resurfaced and hostilities continued through 2014, dissolving all hopes for suspension of conflict.⁴¹ A heavy artillery attack conducted by the *Tatmadaw* against a KIO training camp in Laiza in late 2014 (leaving 23 cadets on the ground) was presented as a crackdown on illegal logging.⁴² It is interesting to notice that even if this explanation would be true, it would be nonetheless a source of serious contention with the KIO, as illegal logging and timber trade (through the Chinese border) are among KIO's main sources of revenue.⁴³ In short, not only the military friction between the government and the KIO remained high, but also appeasement on the economic front was of question. At the moment of writing the struggle in Kachin is ongoing as well.

In the wake of new Peace Plan announced by Thein Sein, a first informal ceasefire was finally agreed with the KNU in late 2011, followed in January 2012 by the real thing - the first ever to be accepted by the KNU, which has confronted the government uninterruptedly since 1949.⁴⁴ The military pressure applied on the KNU, along with the political concessions granted to it have been discussed already: it is now to time to turn attention to the economic dimension. The KNU managed to enjoy several benefits in consequence of its appeasement, and three in particular are known: "the grant of import-licences for cars (with number plates that limit them to movement within Kayin State); a site for a factory in a special economic zone outside Hpa'an; and a licence to open a tour company".⁴⁵ The first of these - the grant of import licences for

⁴⁰ International Crisis Group, 'A tentative Peace in Myanmar's Kachin Conflict', *Asia Briefing N° 140*, 12 June 2013, p. 10; International Crisis Group, 'Myanmar's Military: Back to the Barracks?', *Asia Briefing N° 143*, 22 April 2014, p. 12.

⁴¹ Zarni Madd, 'Fighting Dashes Hopes of Homecoming for Displaced in Kachin', *The Irrawaddy*, 20 February 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/fighting-dashes-hopes-homecoming-displaced-kachin.html> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

⁴² Hannah Beech, 'Inside the Kachin War Against Burma', *Time*, 21 November 2014, <http://time.com/3598969/kachin-independence-army-kia-burma-myanmar-laiza/> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

⁴³ Yun Sun, 'The Guilty and the Innocent: China and Illegal Logging in Myanmar', *The Irrawaddy*, 22 January 2015, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/contributor/guilty-innocent-china-illegal-logging-myanmar.html> (last accessed on 18 April 2015); Sherman, 'Burma: Lessons from the cease-fires'; pp. 232-235.

⁴⁴ The informal ceasefire has been reported by the KNU itself: <http://karennationalunion.net/index.php/burma/news-and-reports/news-stories/statement-on-initial-agreement-between-knu-and-burmese-government> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

⁴⁵ *The Economist*, 'If you're Karen and you know it', 15 November 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2013/11/myanmars-longest-war> (last accessed on 18 April 2014).

cars - has actually been a general policy not aimed exclusively at the KNU, but to all groups agreeing to a ceasefire with the government. The largest groups (KNU, UWSA, NMSP) were granted 120 licences each, while smaller NSAGs got progressively less, according to their size. Car-import licences has quickly become a contentious issue, as they were perceived as a way to bribe the group leaders into complacency for government's initiatives; nonetheless have been accepted by the KNU and by other groups (albeit some sold them in order to use the revenue for the organization purposes).⁴⁶ About the other two economic developments mentioned, in Hpa'an (capital city of Kayin state) a factory employing 150 local people was opened in November 2012,⁴⁷ while the "MoeKo San Travel and Tour Company Limited and Trading Company Limited" was registered in Naypyidaw (Myanmar's capital city since 2005) in 2013, starting its business in June of the same year, with plans to cooperate with analogous firms in Thailand, Japan and the United States.⁴⁸

From 2011 onward the process meant to reach a nationwide ceasefire moved through highs and lows. Six official rounds of talks have been held before a draft was agreed by the NCCT and the Union Peacemaking Work Committee (UPWC) in the seventh, on 31 March 2015. The draft was signed in the presence of president Thein Sein in the Myanmar Peace Center, Yangon.⁴⁹ It is a most welcome progress, as it paves the way to a nationwide peace agreement, given the large number of ethnic groups involved, and potentially opens the venue to deeper political dialogue. However, while the progress is substantial and there is room for optimism some caution is advisable as well. First, it is only a draft that needs to be formally accepted - and could possibly be amended - by both the government and each of the sixteen groups part of the NCCT. While changes coming from the government are unlikely (given Thein Sein blessing) things may vary on the other side, also given the large number of stakeholders. Second, reaching an agreement has been possible also because the more controversial issues has been postponed for the time being. Third, there is not a defined timetable and it is not clear when the actual nationwide ceasefire will eventually be signed (although this may prove to be a precious element of flexibility as well).⁵⁰ On the top of the technical details,

⁴⁶ Saw Yan Naing and Kyaw Kha, 'Govt Grants Car Licenses to KNU, Other Ethnic Rebels', *The Irrawaddy*, 27 May 2013, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/govt-grants-car-licenses-to-knu-other-ethnic-rebels.html> (last accessed on 18 April 2014); Refom and Saw Yan Naing, 'Peace Permit Bonanza Puts Ethnic Groups on Defensive', *The Irrawaddy*, 20 December 2013, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/peace-permit-bonanza-puts-ethnic-groups-defensive.html> (last accessed on 18 April 2014).

⁴⁷ Jonathan Head, 'Building new opportunities in Burma's Karen State', *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-20778610> (last accessed on 18 April 2014).

⁴⁸ Paul Keenan, 'Business opportunities and armed ethnic groups', Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies, Briefing Paper No. 17, September 2013, www.burmaethnicstudies.net/pdf/BCES-BP-17.docx (last accessed on 18 April 2014); S' PhanShaung, 'KNU 7th Brigade – open for business', *Karen News*, <http://karennews.org/2013/07/knu-7th-brigade-open-for-business.html/> (last accessed on 18 April 2014).

⁴⁹ *BBC News*, 'Myanmar army and rebels sign draft ceasefire agreement', 31 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32126918> (last accessed on 18 April 2014); Kyaw Myo Tun and Lwai Weng, 'President attends ceremony where govt, rebels signal support for draft nationwide ceasefire', *The Irrawaddy*, 31 March 2015, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/multimedia-burma/president-attends-ceremony-where-govt-rebels-signal-support-for-draft-nationwide-ceasefire.html> (last accessed on 18 April 2014); *Mizzima*, 'UN special adviser welcomes ceasefire agreement draft', 31 March 2015, <http://www.mizzima.com/news-domestic/un-special-adviser-welcomes-ceasefire-agreement-draft> (last accessed on 18 April 2014).

⁵⁰ These cautions have been expressed in publicly released interviews by Phuong Nguyen, Southeast Asia expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and by Sai Leik, coordinator of the Myanmar Peace Monitor (MPC),

it is also important to mention that there are relevant NSAGs - namely UWSA, RCSS and NDAA - which are not part of the NCCT, (albeit they currently have a ceasefire with the government) while KIO and MNDAA are part of the NCCT, but representatives from this latter group were not present at the signing ceremony in Yangon and hostilities are still running with both. Besides KIO and MNDAA, the struggle is open (at the moment of writing) also with the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and with the small Arakan Army (AA), both NCCT members. On his end, famous Myanmar expert Bertil Lintner had harsh word for the draft ceasefire, as he mentioned the fact it has been discussed while the most intense fighting since 1987 was taking place and denounced it as mean to pacify ethnic groups without making any substantial political change.⁵¹ Following on this argument, it could be added that if one or more NSAGs now rejects the ceasefire draft, that would allow to shift the blame for eluding peace on insurgents, and given that military pressure against the KIO or the MNDAA does not seem to be currently declining, it is easy to imagine reasons why these two groups specifically may be not in a ideal situation to rest their arms.

Conclusions: beyond the draft nationwide ceasefire

The three cases examined - Shan, KIO, KNU - are particularly interesting when arranged in a diachronic fashion. While the status of NSAGs in Shan state alternated frequently between ceasefire and non-ceasefire - with the notable exception of the most powerful NSAG active in the region, the UWSA - in the time period considered on a national scale there has been a significant switch of roles between the KIO and the KNU, with the first re-entering hostilities after a long pause and the second finally resting its arms after a protracted struggle. Former KNU vice-president, Saw David Tharckabaw, in 2013 stated: "17 years-ago they [government] isolated the Karen by making a quick ceasefire with the other armed groups, including the Kachin – now it's the Kachin's turn to be isolated."⁵² Indeed, the timeline of event suggest there may be a deliberate strategy, or at least some strategic preferences at play. 1994 was the year of the ceasefire with KIO and of the birth of the DKBA as a spinoff from KNU as well: these events allowed the government and the *Tatmadaw* to exercise substantial pressure on the KIO while the Kachin front was relatively quiet. Through the late 90s and the first decade of 2000s the KNU went through a steady decline, suffering militarily from both the DKBA and the *Tatmadaw*, losing men, leaders and even its headquarters. The DKBA, on the other hand, has been so compliant with government plans to be the only major NSAG to accept the BFG plan.⁵³ On this background, allowing political representation to Karen parties in the 2010 election has probably seen as unproblematic by Myanmar's ruling elite. Through this time the *Tatmadaw* also had the

respectively available on *Deutsche Welle*, 'Myanmar draft ceasefire - Reason to be cautiously optimistic', 1 April 2015, <http://www.dw.de/myanmar-draft-ceasefire-reason-to-be-cautiously-optimistic/a-18353458> (last accessed on 18 April 2014) and on Mark Inkey, 'Burma's new ceasefire agreement: The devil is in the detail', *Asian Correspondent*, 1 April 2015, <http://asiancorrespondent.com/131826/burmas-new-ceasefire-agreement-the-devil-is-in-the-detail/> (last accessed on 18 April 2014).

⁵¹ As published on Nathan Vanderklippe, 'A meeting of unity in war-torn Myanmar', *The Globe and Mail*, 30 March 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/a-meeting-of-unity-in-war-torn-myanmar/article23699780/?cmpid=rss1> (last accessed on 18 April 2014).

⁵² Saw Wei Thoo, 'Peace needs more than a ceasefire...', *Karen News*, 16 January 2013, <http://karennews.org/2013/01/peace-needs-more-than-a-ceasefire.html/> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

⁵³ As anticipated by South, 'Governance and legitimacy in Karen state', p. 67.

chance for a serious military build-up in Kachin, an occasion that was not wasted. The same privilege of political representation granted to the Karen was not given to the Kachin, and while in June 2011 hostilities started again in the North, in December of the same year an informal ceasefire was agreed with the KNU. In short, the "divide and rule" strategy often used by the government and by the *Tatmadaw* on a local scale (of which some examples mentioned here are the KKY system and the advantages provided to UWSA and DKBA to counter MTA and KNU respectively) is applied also on a national scale. This may also account for the lost-lasting ceasefire with the UWSA, as opening a second front with such a massive opponent would contrast with this overall strategy. In this perspective, Bertil Lintner may have been right when he pictured the UWSA as the next enemy in the aim of the government.⁵⁴ However, as it took about 15 years to bring the KNU to terms, the intention may be there, but possibly with regards to a more distant future, when accounts with the KIO are settled.

Given this background, the use of economic incentives as a tool of conflict management/reduction appears in a different light as it indeed reduces conflict, but in order to allow the government and the *Tatmadaw* to incentivise NSAGs spinoffs, absorb these latter or use them against less-compliant groups, contrast alliances between NSAGs, single-out enemies, and concentrate strength and resources against few at a time. In order to have a comprehensive view of Myanmar's model of illiberal peacebuilding and understand the overall strategy pursued by the ruling elite it is then mandatory to look at economic "carrots" along with military "sticks". It is also open to discussion if this overall strategy it is going to ultimately work. It may not have provided results quickly so far, but Myanmar's leaders do not appear to be in a hurry, and have already demonstrated that they can resort to the use of violence without generating a serious international outcry: something that fits well with their agenda, both domestically and internationally. On the side, this approach also has a legitimizing effect for both the *Tatmadaw* and for the persistent presence of the military in government, as it entails the persistent need to confront enemies. This co-dependence, however, may also be a reason not to push things to their bitter end.⁵⁵ All of this does mean that changes in the way Myanmar deals with its internal conflict are completely out of question, even if so far the impression is one of continuity with the past, at least with regard to this dimension. For substantial changes to occur, more time would be a necessary condition.

⁵⁴ Bertil Lintner, 'A 'Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement'—for What?', *The Irrawaddy*, 30 April 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/magazine/nationwide-ceasefire-agreement.html> (last accessed on 18 April 2015).

⁵⁵ For a similar argument, cfr. South 'Governance and legitimacy in Karen state', p. 80.