Understanding porous borders: China and Myanmar amid a Military Coup and COVID–19

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Abstract

Since the start of the COVID–19 pandemic, Myanmar has had multiple severe outbreaks of the virus, all of which have been exacerbated by rising following instability after the successful coup d'état launched by the military in February 2021. In response to this government takeover, China tightened its migratory controls and constructed border walls to enhance border security in Muse (Myanmar) and Ruili (China), the main border-crossing towns between the two countries. While there has been ample research on China–Myanmar bilateral relations, very little of it has explicitly focused on the changes in China–Myanmar border dynamics between 2020 and 2021. Based on both traditional and non-traditional approaches to security, this thesis delves deeper into this particular topic to achieve a new understanding of the less porous China–Myanmar border amid a turbulent period marked by a pandemic and a military coup. This qualitative research employs a single-case setup—with the unit being the China–Myanmar border—to explore the factors that drive border security from both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives. Traditional security threats include weapons, armament systems, and militaries, which can generally be addressed using diplomatic means. Non-traditional security threats cover the gamut of human security concerns, including climate change, infectious disease, and transnational crime. In this thesis, I use process tracing to plot independent variables elaborated in this study with the aim of understanding how and when they came to play a determinative role in shaping my dependent variable: the less porous China–Myanmar border between 2020 and 2021.

This thesis argues that geopolitical competition, the Belt and Road Initiative, and ideological infiltration interactively shaped the border between China and Myanmar during the period marked by the COVID–19 pandemic and the military takeover of Myanmar. China's desire for border control stems from its geostrategic objectives of guaranteeing domestic energy security and strengthening its regional dominance. Meanwhile, the security of the Belt and Road Initiative and ideological dynamics in the border area both stem from China's political claims to the Asia–Pacific. Overall, instead of merely consulting the dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional security paradigms, this thesis uses the case of the China–Myanmar border to achieve a greater understanding of the combination of traditional and non-traditional security-related scenarios and explain China's efforts on the China–Myanmar border—including its attempts to define border security. Furthermore, this study's findings will undoubtedly be useful for policymakers and decision-makers involved in homeland security initiatives, especially those pertaining to Southeast Asian countries on the Chinese border.

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List of Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BCP	Burmese Communist Party
BGF	Border Guard Forces
BOT	Build-Operate-Transfer
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CBECZ	Cross Border Economic Cooperation Zones
CCP	Chinese Community Party
CERP	COVID–19 Economic Relief Plan
CFAC	Central Foreign Affairs Commission
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CITIC	China International Trust and Investment Corporation
CMEC	China–Myanmar Economic Corridor
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
CPI	China Power Investment
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
EAOs	Ethnic Armed Organisations
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
Junta/Tatmadaw	Myanmar Military Government
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KMT	Kuomintang
KNU	Karen National Union
MICC	Myanmar International Convention Centre
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCAs	Negotiate Ceasefire Agreements
NLD	National League for Democracy
NORINCO	North Industries Corporation
NTBT	Nuclear Test Ban Treaty
NUG	National Unity Government
PLA	People's Liberation Army

PRC	People's Republic of China
SOEs	State-Owned Enterprises
SEZs	Special Economic Zones
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
UMEHL	Union of Myanmar Economic Holding Limited
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
UWSA	United Wa State Army
WHO	World Health Organisation

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis examines the China–Myanmar border from both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives. While there has been ample research on China–Myanmar bilateral relations, very little of it has explicitly focused on the changes in China–Myanmar border dynamics between 2020 and 2021. This thesis delves deeper into this particular topic to achieve a new understanding of the less porous China–Myanmar border amid a turbulent period marked by a pandemic and a military coup. This introductory chapter provides a contextual overview of the study and lays out the motivations behind the research. I begin with a brief introduction to the China–Myanmar border and the security issues surrounding it before detailing the problem statement, the aim of the study, the research question, and the thesis statement. After emphasising the significance of this research, I then outline the remainder of the thesis.

1.1   Study background: A brief introduction to the China–Myanmar border

The China–Myanmar border stretches for 2,186 kilometres through dense forest and mountainous terrain, making it a precarious and geopolitically sensitive boundary (Figure 1-1). Hundreds of dirt roads cross the border (Rippa, 2022). Families are often located on both sides of the border, and children from Myanmar often attend Chinese schools. Since Myanmar gained independence in 1948, the border has been the site of many conflicts between government troops, communist guerrillas, ethnic rebels, and a variety of militias, resulting in vast numbers of displaced people entering China (Han, 2020). According to Liao (2009), lawlessness on Myanmar's side of the border has resulted in insurgency, illicit drug flows, HIV transmission, sex work, and gambling, among other issues. In Yunnan, the Chinese province adjacent to northern Myanmar's Shan and Kachin states (Su & Li, 2021), law enforcement has long enforced rigorous border controls to prevent illegal drug trafficking and migratory flows from Myanmar.

Since the start of the COVID–19 pandemic, Myanmar has had severe outbreaks of COVID–19, compounded by escalating instability after the military government took over in February 2021. In response, China tightened migratory controls over the frontier to limit the pandemic spread in neighbouring districts, particularly in Muse (Myanmar) and Ruili (China), the main border crossing towns between the two countries. In October 2020, the Chinese government began constructing a two-layer border fence in Nawng Kham, a town in Myanmar, the two layers being 15 to 20 metres apart (Walsh, 2021). The fence, which is estimated to be seven metres high on the Chinese side and five metres high on the Myanmar side, splits fields that span across the border (Business Standard, 2022). With rising levels of strictness, the iron-wire walls in many Yunnan border cities have been lit up at night and guarded by 24-hour patrols, significantly increasing the difficulty of illicit border crossings (Lintner, 2020). In

this sense, the long and formerly porous China–Myanmar border was, at least in many locations and at certain points, highly fortified between 2020 and 2021; anyone crossing it would likely have been clearly identified and thoroughly monitored after entering China.
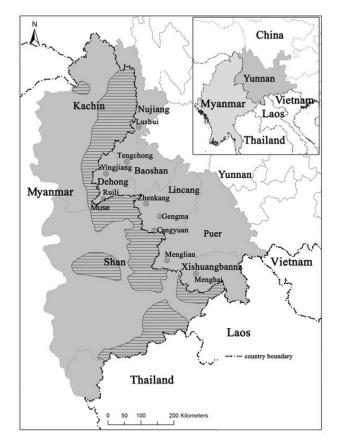
Figure 1-1. Map of China–Myanmar border
Source: Dong and He (2018)

Prior to the end of the Cold War, China viewed traditional security threats as its primary concern, perceiving them as threats to its national territory and sovereignty, especially in border regions. As Cold War-era tensions dissipated, China began to recognise that non-traditional security threats—including illegal trade, energy shortages, terrorism, irregular migration, disease, and natural disasters—constitute significant risks to its internal capabilities and identity both at home and abroad. Alongside China's rise, geostrategic and geopolitical competition between the US and China in Myanmar began to heat up, representing one of the critical security issues for the China–Myanmar border (Grinter et al., 2012). Chow and Easley (2021) argue that it is critical for China as a rising global power to seize regional control, especially around the Bay of Bengal, where Myanmar is located. According to Han (2017), geopolitical competition between the US and China has given Myanmar more leverage with which to reduce its dependence on China. Acknowledging this shift, the Chinese government proposed the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on 19 November 2017 (Vineles, 2019). Following the construction of gas and oil pipelines between 2013 and 2017, the corridor came to extend from Ruili in Yunnan province via Muse and Mandalay to Khyaukphyu in the

Rakhine state of Myanmar (Gangopadhyay & Jain, 2019). As Sun (2020) notes, Beijing views the mounting US presence in Myanmar as a potential threat to Chinese access to the Indian Ocean, access to oil and gas pipelines, and even the security of its borders. As a result, China is keen to maintain to maintain security and stability along its porous border with Myanmar. Beijing needs to either maintain its advantageous position within this strategically significant border area or prevent the further deterioration of its current interests in Myanmar.

1.2   Problem statement

The problems addressed in this study surrounding China–Myanmar border security are threefold:
- No precise definition of border security exists.
- Limited explanation for why the China–Myanmar border became less porous between 2020 and 2021.
- Need for enhancement and awareness of effective government operations for proper border security.

Border security is more of a crucial concern today than it has ever been. Chinese foreign relations have flourished in the post–Cold War era, and China's influence in neighbouring Asia has grown significantly. China's rise has coincided with massive investment plans in oil and gas, mining, port projects, and other infrastructure projects in its neighbours (Mannan, 2020). Myanmar is a prime example of this investment. Myanmar uses the term "Pauk-Phaw" (kinsfolk) exclusively to refer to its connections with China, which has enabled China to gain a foothold in Myanmar. The China–Myanmar friendship dates back to 1949, when Myanmar was the first non-socialist country to acknowledge and establish connections with Communist China. Due to its poverty and limited resources, China's economic statecraft was highly limited in the early 1950s (Noakes & Burton, 2019), though it did support some revolutionary movements in Myanmar. In fact, bilateral ties were strained between the late 1960s and the late 1980s due to explicit Chinese support for the armed uprising of the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) (Aoyama, 2016). The foundational "Pauk-Phaw" friendship between the two countries began to re-emerge after the Myanmar military seized power in 1988. After the BCP collapsed in 1989 and lost control over border towns (in a territorial sense), various armed groups filled the political vacuum, resulting in political fragmentation and continuous instability (Lawn, 2022). Thus, several protracted conflicts remain unresolved in the politically contested borderlands between China and Myanmar.

After the 1988 military coup, the West imposed harsh sanctions on Myanmar, prompting the junta to seek Chinese protection (Huang, 2015; James, 2004). China was pleased to support Myanmar, and the nations officially opened border commerce by the end of 1988. In addition to its political and diplomatic

support, China has constituted a profound economic presence in Myanmar, becoming one of Myanmar's largest trading partners. Notably, however, China has dominated local cross-border trade activities, resulting in significant asymmetries with Chinese economic parties and products. Crucially, the borderland has become more deeply incorporated into the region's China–centric economy due to increased resource extraction and cross-border business (Lawn, 2022). In the face of both domestic and international challenges, the relationship between China and Myanmar has evolved into a mutually beneficial alliance that serves both economic and geopolitical goals. Thus, China's considerable economic and political clout in the country is likely to persist for the foreseeable future despite Myanmar expanding its portfolio of partners to lessen its dependency on China. Nevertheless, the catastrophic COVID–19 pandemic and the social turmoil stemming from the February 2021 coup d'état have devastated border security between Myanmar and China (Su & Li, 2021). The influx of refugees, products, and services along the border has been severely affected by instability, altering the political and security landscape in the northern Shan and Kachin states. Consequently, the problem of interest and, in turn, the aims of this study are to investigate this area in greater depth to understand why China created rigorous border regulations and to explain the less porous China–Myanmar border amid a turbulent period marked by a pandemic and a military coup.

1.3   Purpose of the study

This qualitative single-case study with multiple units of analysis aims to identify the critical factors behind the less porous China–Myanmar border. While there has been ample research on China–Myanmar bilateral relations, very little of it has explicitly focused on the tightness of the China–Myanmar border between 2020 and 2021. Some non-academic sites, such as the Diplomat and the East Asia Forum, have argued that China is building a massive wall along the China–Myanmar border with the aim of preventing Chinese dissidents from escaping. After all, Yunnan (the Chinese province along the border) has historically been an outlet for ethnic Uyghurs and others—including refugees from North Korea— seeking asylum in the West due to the loosely policed border (Sparke, 2017). According to Johns Hopkins University & Kachin Women's Association of Thailand (2018), thousands of women and girls have been trafficked from Myanmar to China, where they were forced to marry and bear children. In four Myanmar districts across the states of Kachin and Northern Shan and one Chinese prefecture bordering Yunnan, approximately 7,400 women and girls have reportedly been coerced into marriage, with over 5,000 being forced to bear children with their Chinese husbands throughout history(Hung, 2021). In Myanmar, conflicts, forced relocation, land confiscation and human rights violations have spurred landlessness and unemployment on a massive scale, resulting in an increase in migration to China (Dholakia & Barr, 2020). At the same time, most scholars still emphasise the unstable mix of illicit cross-border interactions that leads to border regulation. For instance, law enforcement imposes rigorous border controls to combat

drug trafficking from Myanmar and discourage the movement of illegal goods into and out of Yunnan (Su & Li, 2021).

While this is undoubtedly a potential motivation, the true motivations behind China tightening its border with Myanmar are likely more complex. Border security has a significant impact on frontiers where people and commodities often succumb to severe pandemics, military conflicts, and political tensions—they are volatile areas (Su, 2020). Thus, the China–Myanmar border is a precarious and geopolitically sensitive boundary. As such, it can be assessed from both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives to explain China's approaches to the volatile China–Myanmar border. There are gaps in the literature on this matter, with most studies failing to consider the influence of geopolitical strategies, the BRI, and cultural penetration on border control. Researching this border's 2020–2021 dynamics may provide a fresh and illuminating look at the reasons behind its less porous modern nature.

1.4   Research question

My research posits a simple question: What explains the tightness of the China–Myanmar border between 2020 and 2021? The best method to answer this question is a case study to explore the factors affecting China–Myanmar border security and analyse how changes in the security realm influence China's border policies. Moreover, this study highlights the push-pull nature of the relationship between China and Myanmar from 1948 to 2021—tracing the change of the China–Myanmar border from porous to fortified—and examines the ramifications of this change from traditional and non-traditional security perspectives. In addition, it aims to answer a series of puzzling questions intersecting the study of border security: (1) How did China respond to Myanmar's 2021 military coup on the bilateral border? (2) How does China enhance the state's border security? (3) What alternative programmes and policies do China and Myanmar utilise to secure the border? While this series is far from comprehensive, it offers a glimpse into the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the study of borders and borderlands.

1.5   Thesis statement

My study responds to this imperative by examining what accounts for the rigorous actions of the People's Republic of China (PRC) government in the fragile and conflict-affected China–Myanmar border area. I consider both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives in my theoretical framework. Non-traditional security threats cover a gamut of human security concerns, including climate change, food and energy shortages, infectious diseases, natural disasters, transnational crime, human and drug trafficking, and mass migration. Traditional security threats comprise weapons, armament systems, and military offensives, though diplomatic strategies (e.g., coalitions and alliances aimed at forging healthy

relationships between states) are also used to achieve traditional security (Ikenberry & Mearsheimer, 2001). While some scholars highlight the usefulness of concepts from both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives, they largely ignore the fact that the fundamental goal of non-traditional security should be to overcome the dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional security paradigms.

Therefore, the main argument of this thesis centres on the entanglement of traditional and non-traditional security dynamics and its impact on shaping the China–Myanmar border amid a turbulent period marked by a pandemic and a military coup. My hypotheses in this study comprise three main elements: geostrategic competition with the U.S., the BRI, and ideological encroachment. Looking at all the hypotheses together, geostrategic competition greatly influences China's border control; meanwhile, the BRI and ideological infiltrations are attributes of geostrategic competition and great-power games, which contribute to border security. Overall, my research aims to achieve a greater understanding of border security with a specific focus on the shift of the China–Myanmar border from porous to fortified and how that shift has been characterised by interconnected traditional and non-traditional security dynamics.

1.6   Significance of the study

Above all, the single-case study investigates the factors that sustain border security from both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives. It also analyses how changes in the security realm influence China's policies on borderland disputes. While some scholars highlight the usefulness of concepts from both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives, they largely ignore the fact that the fundamental goal of non-traditional security should be to overcome the dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional security paradigms. Thus, this research uses the case of China–Myanmar border security to address this gap in the literature. My hypotheses, which aim to explain China's border policies while concretely defining border security, are based on a combination of traditional and non-traditional approaches to security.

Moreover, this thesis has a section about geopolitical studies on Indo–Pacific areas to detail how my research complements and expands on the existing literature. Geopolitical research on the region has mainly focused on the role of external actors in the region, especially the US. Therefore, my study contributes to the literature on China–Myanmar border relations by emphasising that the strict border, regardless of how much it contributes to illegal activities, can be subordinated to the geopolitical logic of national security threatened by political uncertainty—and, more recently, by COVID–19. Notably, Thailand is also geopolitically important to China, meaning that the findings of this research may be generalisable to China–Thailand relations.

Finally, this study will contribute to a wide variety of fields, including homeland security, management, criminal, justice, and intelligence. In fact, Beijing is concerned about maintaining peace and security along the border with Myanmar as well as ensuring that violence between Myanmar's military and armed ethnic groups does not force migrants into China (Gangopadhyay & Jain, 2019). In other words, Myanmar's political stability is critical to China's security, as any military conflict along the China–Myanmar border threatens the stability and security of China's border area. The research questions guide this study toward an outcome that will undoubtedly be useful to decision-makers and policymakers involved in homeland security in Southeast Asia, especially along the Chinese border, as the performance of associated organisations has been shown to be positively impacted by sharing best practices and valuable information (Giblin et al., 2012). Indicators of a less porous border and sharper definitions of security will undoubtedly be invaluable to those involved with national security.

1.7   Chapter outline

This section provides a brief overview of the remainder of the thesis.

Chapter Two analyses the existing literature on border security, traditional and non-traditional security perspectives, and China–Myanmar border security. It highlights the gaps in the literature and emphasises the need for further research. Researchers have largely taken a macro approach to the study of border security, focusing on both traditional and non-traditional security issues. While some scholars highlight the usefulness of concepts from both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives, they largely ignore the fact that the fundamental goal of non-traditional security should be to overcome the dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional security paradigms. Thus, in my research, I use the case of China–Myanmar border security to address this gap.

Chapter Three outlines my three hypotheses based on a comprehensive theoretical framework between traditional and non-traditional security fields. The interaction between traditional and non-traditional security helps to provide context for the link between my concepts and hypotheses. Before presenting the independent variables, I discuss how the China–Myanmar border became less porous during the period marked by the COVID–19 pandemic and the 2021 military takeover. Here, independent variables pertaining to geostrategic competition, the BRI, and ideological infiltration enable us to understand the stability of the border and, ultimately, the stability of the plural state.

Chapter Four presents and justifies the research design that guided the collection and analysis of the data. The research for this thesis is structured as an explanatory study in which the independent variables contained in the China–Myanmar relations are used to explain the reasons behind the less porous border.

Chapter Five traces the historical development of the China–Myanmar border since 1948. The empirical analysis is divided into different temporal phases of the push-pull relationship between China and Myanmar. It examines the bilateral relationship with an emphasis on potential strategies and hypotheses regarding important factors in shaping the less porous border.

Chapter Six examines the general dynamics of the China–Myanmar border from both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives. Looking at all the hypotheses together, geostrategic competition greatly influences China's border control; meanwhile, the BRI and ideological infiltrations are attributes of geostrategic competition and great-power games, which contribute to border security.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by presenting the main argument and discussing its implications for homeland security and peace along a precarious and geopolitically sensitive border. I argue that the three factors of geostrategic competition, the BRI, and ideological infiltration interact with and impact one another, meaning that studies that assess them in isolation may fail to capture the full picture. The research questions guide this study toward an outcome that will undoubtedly be useful to decision-makers and policymakers involved in homeland security in Southeast Asia, especially along the Chinese border. Indicators of a less porous border and sharper definitions of security and effectiveness will undoubtedly be invaluable to those involved with national security.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter examines the current body of literature on border security through both traditional and non-traditional lenses as well as the specific case China–Myanmar border security. The analysis highlights the shortcomings of the literature and explains the necessity of further research. Researchers have largely taken a macro approach to the study of border security while emphasising both traditional and non-traditional security issues in an attempt to truly explain border security. While some scholars highlight the usefulness of concepts from both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives, they largely ignore the fact that the fundamental goal of non-traditional security should be to overcome the dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional security paradigms. Thus, in my research, I use the case of China–Myanmar border security to address this gap and interactively use the paradigms of traditional and non-traditional security as my theoretical framework. I define non-traditional security threats as phenomena identified by nation-states as posing dangers to their internal capabilities and identity at home and abroad. I define traditional security threats as military threats against nation-states' territories (Ikenberry & Mearsheimer, 2001). Through the literature, I trace the changes in the China–Myanmar border from being porous to fortified and recognise the ramifications of both traditional and non-traditional security. Importantly, this chapter has a section about previous geopolitical studies on the Indo–Pacific areas to show how my research complements and expands on the existing literature. Geopolitical research has mainly focused on the role of external actors in the region, especially the U.S. In this literature review, most of the uncovered information relates to traditional and non-traditional security dynamics to explain the less porous China–Myanmar border during the turbulent period marked by the COVID–19 pandemic and the military coup in Myanmar.

2.1 Border studies

More recent attention has expanded our understanding of borders and boundaries, which has enhanced border studies but also still obscured the notion of a border. In quantitative investigations into global conflict during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, borders have been conceptualised as the physical boundaries on maps over which states either cooperate or engage in war (Starr, 2005). However, since the 1990s, international political economists have debated the consistent applicability of national borders in terms of the globalisation of finance, trade, and industry (Strange, 1996). Scholarly work on border studies in geography and beyond substantially increased and spread over the first decade of the twenty-first century. This may be understood as partially a response to the naive, post–Cold War "borderless" global narratives and partially a reaction to the late 1990s calls for more attention to boundaries as the total of political, social, and cultural processes instead of simply as fixed lines (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009). As Van Houtum (2017) argues, borders serve to demarcate what authorities

may legitimately exercise coercive power—that is, use force and levy taxes—within a certain territory. As an essential feature of human society for millennia, physical, legal, and cultural boundaries can be identified and regulated the movement of individuals, commodities, and ideas through a variety of practices, such as border policing, immigration controls, passport and visa requirements, and biometric identification (Andreas, 2003; Jones, 2012; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009; Salter, 2004). In normative political theory, researchers have examined the moral and political justifications that sovereign states may use to support their severe border control measures (Abizadeh, 2008). As a result, physical barriers like walls and fences were built, as well as security personnel and surveillance equipment, to safeguard state sovereignty and social stability.

At the same time, much of the bordering work has recognised that borders confront a wide range of challenges in the twenty-first century, including transnational threats like pandemics, climate change, and terrorism (Mandelbaum, 2016). Given the millions of people fleeing conflict, persecution, and poverty in pursuit of safety and opportunity, the worldwide refugee crisis has also put a strain on borders (Kuschminder & Koser, 2016). Additionally, the nature of border control has changed due to the speed of technological advancement, making it easier for products and individuals to cross borders covertly (Su & Li, 2021). Customs and immigration officials are currently required to strike a balance between security concerns and the need to facilitate legitimate trade and travel as a result of the expansion of e-commerce and the digital economy (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022). Alternatively put, a variety of factors, such as geopolitical realignments, digitalisation, and globalisation, are projected to impact how boundaries evolve over time.

Borders are nonetheless politically charged despite their fluidity, and researchers still need to be aware of and critical of the intricate nexus between state authority and space, which is probably most obvious at borders, wherever they may be situated. Examining how the state functions and is managed in this area is equally essential as considering the various situations in which borders and bordering practises are often used, particularly border security.

2.2   Border security

With the study of national security becoming an essential element of international relations (IR) theories in recent years, border security—as an element of national security—has become a hot topic. However, there is no universally recognised definition of "border security" in the literature. This lack of a common definition may stem from a lack of government-identified or measurable criteria for gauging the success of border security (United States Government Accountability Office, 2010). While the realities of law enforcement and law evasion at national borders have long constituted a significant concern for

policymakers, international arguments over border security have tended to focus on military and economic issues. Notably, research on border security is frequently inspired by discussions of significant policy problems and target phenomena that national leaders can influence (Schweller & Priess, 1997). As a result, academics tend to concentrate on manipulatable variables and relationships that could be influenced through purposeful policy. As Ackleson (1999) observes, regardless of its effectiveness as a tool of territorial exclusion, border control has a symbolic and perceptual appeal and, thus, will likely continue to be an important state activity in the future. Border regulation is a critical function for national security and a key component of national sovereignty (Andreas, 2003). Indeed, studies on border security remain interdisciplinary endeavours, though they have expanded beyond their initial focus on nuclear issues to embrace concerns like conventional warfare, geostrategy, terrorism, environmental problems, and transnational crimes.

2.2.1 Realism on border security

The literature on border security often intersects with more general works on international relations, and scholars broadly focus on two main conceptual paradigms: realism and globalism. As noted by Buzan (1983), security is a fundamentally controversial concept, as is border security. Some scholars argue that border security represents the traditional military aspect of security measures. According to Walt (1991), the primary emphasis of security studies is to identify the phenomenon of war; in turn, he defines security studies as the study of the threat, use, and control of armed forces in the prevailing context of interstate warfare. In the realist conception of security, borders are strategic boundaries that must be guarded against military violations, as the deterrent role of borders against military incursions by other states is essential for states to defend themselves (Walt, 1991). However, border security does not simply rely on military force, and risks to nations do not only come from military threats (though they are usually the most serious). As a result, research on border security also encompasses what is frequently referred to as "statecraft"—for instance, territory governance, diplomacy, and armaments control. These concerns are pertinent to the field's primary focus due to the direct bearing on the possibility and nature of conflicts. Biersteker (1989), an early geopolitical philosopher, highlights territorial struggle and acquisition, implying that his fundamental geopolitical analysis fits into a realist theoretical framework due to its emphasis on interstate conflict over territory. Unsurprisingly, the effect of realism is clearly visible in studies on border security, but the end of the Cold War saw a considerable downturn in the literature on studies of the use of force to modify interstate borders. This is partially due to the rising international acceptance of what Zacher (2001) refers to as the "territorial integrity norm". In addition, the presence of other dangers does not indicate that the threat of war has vanished; after all, organised violence has been a major aspect of human existence for millennia and is probably going to continue to be for the foreseeable future. The 2022 Russia–Ukraine war then once again provoked scholars to think about

border security from a military perspective. Evidently, well-informed research on the risks of war must still play a role in studies on border security and, in some cases, exhibit at least a trace of theoretical realism.

2.2.2   Globalism on border security

As non-military events also pose threats to nations and individuals, some researchers suggest expanding the scope of "security" to encompass subjects such as trade, environmental conditions, transnational crime, drug abuse, and illegal immigration. While the U.S.–Soviet detente reduced the importance of studying war, the U.S.'s diminishing hegemonic position has heightened interest in matters of international political economy. Accordingly, scholars have begun to doubt the overwhelming value of military force and begun to recognise the importance of economic considerations. As outlined by globalists Cooper (1968), Morse (1970), and Nye and Keohane (1972), in contrast to realism, the globalist view emphasises not just the fading military value of borders but also the border-blurring consequences of globalisation, which is commonly defined as a strengthening of interdependence and cross-border interactions. For example, much of the literature since the mid-1970s has argued that technological and economic advances have facilitated and encouraged the growth of cross-border links between social actors, reducing the importance of traditional security concerns (Brown, 1989; Diebold & Rosecrance, 1986). According to the liberal variety of this globalist worldview, as represented by Diebold and Rosecrance (1986), traditional "warfare states" are being replaced by more pacifist "trading states," with economic trade taking priority over territorial conquest. In this respect, borders represent a mere element in grander concerns—trade, economics, and globalisation. Singh (2013) highlights that the implementation of energy interconnections between neighbouring countries has become an urgent element of border security, as has the potential to increase economic efficiency in system operations, reduce negative environmental externalities, and lower consumer costs. In other words, border security is one of the most contentious political issues, but it must be re-evaluated on the basis of ecological science.

Furthermore, much of the available literature on border security also deals with matters of drug trafficking, corruption, transnational crime, and other law-and-order challenges. As Ackleson (2005) reminds us, fighting terrorism along national borders has become one of the most prominent national security goals and a key premise for continuing and expanding border security operations, especially since the early 2000s. Likewise, contemporary IR scholars have addressed border areas as regions in which state sovereignty is both affirmed and contested through a range of actions, including border patrols, immigration controls, passport and visa requirements, and biometric identification in pursuit of combatting human trafficking, drug smuggling, and terrorism (Andreas, 2003; Jones, 2012; Salter, 2004;

Vaughan-Williams, 2012). This important modern dynamic serves as a reminder that non-military issues require sustained attention from academics and policymakers and that military forces alone cannot always guarantee national security. However, this proposal poses the risk of overstretching the field of "security studies"; with this justification, concerns like disease, pollution, child abuse, or economic recessions might all be seen as threats to "security." Such a definition of the discipline would undermine its conceptual coherence and make it more challenging to identify solutions to any of these significant issues. To detail the factors affecting border security, the following sections provide a broad discussion of the current veins of research on border security with a focus on China and the U.S.

2.2.3   Border security studies in China

Studies on border security in China are rare, but those that do tend to concentrate on how local authorities and ethnic minorities interact with border control. Cartier (2016) argues that all specially designated administrative districts in Chinese territory are hierarchically ruled by the standard parallel structure of the Party work committee and local government or management committee, which can create flexible legal pathways for border residency and selectively legalise minority communities of migrants. In other words, although central security actors and local governments share responsibility for enforcement and implementation, localities that are adjacent to the border and host sizable cross-border ethnic groups have considerable negotiating leverage when it pertains to border politics. These local authorities can maintain direct communication with their cross-border counterparts, carry out border management in accordance with centralised guidelines, and control border crossings (Plümmer, 2022). Local officials facilitate cross-border mobility and foster good neighbourly connections, while the border patrol concentrates on curbing the smuggling of illegal drugs (Kaup, 2018). The perception of what poses a "threat" to border security therefore varies across governmental levels, indicating that the decentralisation of policies has not contributed to emancipating these people or integrating them into the national society. Instead, it may reveal how context-sensitive China's neo-socialist governmentality is and how the security system internalises spatialized power relations.

Meanwhile, Chinese border security studies are conducted in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities adjacent to national borders, with the primary research concerns being illegal smuggling, terrorism, separatism, cross-border ethnic identity, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. Zhou (2008), in an in-depth study of border regulation, argues that in national policy-making, border issues are often discussed alongside the topic of ethnic policy and that national leaders must talk about border governance in the context of ethnic issues. Due to China's ethnic geography as an empire state, the importance of frontier defence in Chinese military literature in the post-Cold War era is maintained. This linkage combines political turmoil on the frontiers with the defence against external threats (Jacka et al., 2013). This focus

on ethnic dissent is due to the fact that the frontiers, which make up more than half of the territory, are areas where the central government's legitimacy and authority have been weaker than in China proper and where neighbours could potentially meddle in internal affairs, endangering territorial integrity, ethnic stability, and regime security (Plümmer, 2022). For instance, based on current dynamics along China's borders with its Southeast Asian neighbours, Xing (1992) recognises the main factors affecting China's border security of China today as ethnic relations, religious issues, cross-border migratory flows, and infiltration by hostile forces.

Notably, ethnic conflicts or riots may result from the general marginalisation of ethnic communities, including their lack of access to Chinese infrastructure, unequal political engagement compared to Han Chinese, and unequal access to labour markets and public resources (Kaup, 2018). In this regard, various political campaigns have been devised to employ a combination of increased funding and preferential policies on infrastructure development in underdeveloped border areas to rejuvenate the area and enhance the well-being of ethnic minorities, such as the slogan of Develop the West and the Belt and Road Initiative. According to Ahlers and Schubert (2015), these investments substantially improve the quality of life for the "endangered" ethnically diverse border inhabitants while fostering social cohesion. In fact, this has enabled the central government to achieve its dual objectives of strengthening economic links with neighbouring nations and internally safeguarding the border region against potential secession movements (Jacka et al., 2013). In other words, the Chinese approach to border security prioritises maintaining a peaceful and stable border region. Accordingly, Beijing extends its control in this way by securing the border region against internal secession threats and instability by blending military control with development policies.

Although a number of scholars have studied the domestic and international influences that have threatened traditional and non-traditional security in China's border areas in the period from the end of the Cold War to the present, few writers have been able to draw on any systematic research into the intersection of traditional and non-traditional security. Research on border regulation has been mostly restricted to theoretical research rather than developing into a discipline that meets the requirements of the modern era to establish a complete research system and put research results into practice to solve border security issues. More importantly, the "dream of mastering the frontier "may not be practised by local Chinese officials, who may not even attempt to block the border effectively. Even though they have invested heavily in developing advanced border security technologies to enhance its surveillance capabilities, such as the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), it has been accused of violating the privacy and human rights of the Uighur minority population in Xinjiang (Peterson, 2021), raising concerns about the potential misuse of advanced border security technologies. Still, their responses mainly are the comprehensive monitoring and surveillance of border communities via traditional security

procedures such as border checkpoints, repatriation, as well as educational campaigns (Plümmer, 2022). In order to preserve social stability, it appears that local governments must address discrepancies between official discourses that laud both strengthened borders and the state's principal purpose of developing border areas.

2.2.4 Border security studies in the U.S.

Research on contemporary U.S. politics and policy indicates that border security is an essential and influential initiative in the country (Gravelle, 2018). Research on borders has experienced an interpretative shift from a boundary division and marker of heterogeneity to a region with different ethnic and cultural interactions; today, it focuses on the internal differences between spatial activities and state actors (Li et al., 2014). The introduction of new theoretical methods with which to analyse borders in the early 1980s revitalised the study of borders. Research on U.S. border security can be roughly divided into three phases.

First, during the Cold War, almost every paper written on border security included a section on traditional security, with the potential of nuclear strikes constituting the focus of the research alongside the demarcation and shifting of boundary lines. Unsurprisingly, the majority of border concerns during the Cold War were military-related, leading to the formation of a massive U.S. security system, as the existence of long-range bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles exacerbated the nation's perception of territorial vulnerability (Andreas, 2003). For instance, threats of a Soviet nuclear attack led to a boom in bomb shelters in the 1950s; in fact, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 brought the U.S.—and the world—to the brink of nuclear war. As geographers Cohen and Gottmann (1976) put it, the notion of mutually assured destruction illustrated the decline of the "shelter function" of borders. Similarly, Wolfers and Herz (1959) argue that nuclear weapons weakened the "hard shell" of the state.

Second, during the period between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, many scholars were more concerned with technical security, energy security, economic security, environmental security, and other issues relevant in border areas. According to Andreas (2003), the end of the Cold War changed the nature of threats to national security; national security risks were no longer exclusively or primarily military-based. Instead, terrorism, drug trafficking, immigrant smuggling, and the smuggling of nuclear material represented the most prominent transnational problems for U.S. policy. Since the 1990s, the U.S. federal government has devoted significant resources to strengthening the country's southern land and sea borders, primarily to combat drug trafficking and undocumented immigration (Mitchell, 2000). While the collapse of the Soviet Union lessened the U.S.'s feeling of territorial vulnerability, new worries over non-state transnational threats quickly emerged in its place.

Third, from the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the present, countless scholars, public commentators, and elected officials in the U.S. have contended that the country's borders are excessively porous and that appropriate security measures must be taken. In the context of global integration, the paradoxical relationship between conducting cross-border trade activities and effectively maintaining border security has become a key focus of scholarly research. This is due to international communication, global economic networks, and other mechanisms through which boundaries may be crossed more readily than in the past. According to Gravelle (2018), in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the U.S. closed its land borders and airspace, asserting control over U.S. territory but, at the same time, disrupting continental trade. Indeed, 9/11 brought about further inflated domestic anxieties about border security. Moreover, Keeble (2001) claims that immigration law has become a controversial new anti-terrorism weapon for law enforcement, increasing the rate of the imprisonment and expulsion of illegal immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries. As a result of the post–9/11 border crackdown, U.S. security has effectively evolved into a trade barrier. The process of North American economic integration was abruptly clogged by law enforcement squeezing on the continent's transportation arteries (Andreas, 2003). As Olney (2004) remarks, the post–9/11 security environment reshaped not only the practice of border controls but also the politics of cross-border relations. Consequently, the U.S.–Mexico and U.S.–Canada relationships have since been defined by border-control challenges and concerns over clandestine transnational actors, with Mexico and Canada recognising the dangers and vulnerabilities of asymmetric interdependence. While all three North American Free Trade Agreement partners profit from an interconnected regional economy, Mexico and Canada are far more reliant on trade with the U.S. than vice versa; thus, they are far more vulnerable to security-related border interruptions (Smith et al., 2018).

Previous studies have broadly analysed border security in terms of realism and globalism, which could help us to explain the factors that affect border security from various perspectives. However, both views of borders fail to explain how territorial restrictions are reconfiguring in the modern era, making them less important in certain policy sectors, such as preventing military invasions and taxing commerce. According to the literature, efforts to reconcile border security measures in China and the U.S. with the economic imperatives of globalisation and regional integration significantly influence border security and cross-border interactions. However, much of the existing literature on border security ignores the complexities of border security, resulting in excessive absolutism and certainty regarding the necessary solutions. According to Bailey (2014), states generally take an all-or-nothing approach to border security, with either no border security procedures in place or onerous restrictions on freedom of movement and commerce. In addition, most studies on border security have focused on aspects of military-related security during the Cold War, such as interstate wars and weapons proliferation (Andreas, 2003; Guild & Bigo, 2010; Walt, 1991). After the end of the Cold War, due to the significant changes in the international arena, non-military security threats (e.g., illegal immigration, illicit trade, human trafficking)

replaced traditional security threats, representing a new challenge to porous borders (Ackleson, 2005; Jones, 2012; Keohane & Nye, 2014; Salter, 2004). In this regard, scholars have observed that border security is a dynamic issue that evolves over time based on the economic, political, and social context. Nevertheless, few scholars have looked specifically at the intersection of traditional security and non-traditional security dynamics, which are closely interconnected. The aim of my research is to address this worrisome gap in the literature. The next section explores the concepts of traditional and non-traditional security in an increasingly globalised world.

2.3 Traditional and non-traditional security

2.3.1 The concept of security

The concept of security is crucial in IR research. Security is analysed as a concept and a policy outcome across all theoretical approaches to the study of interstate relations. Still, the definition of "security" is in flux. As a result, there have been heated academic debates over this definition, making security studies one of the most dynamic and contentious fields in IR theory. According to Smith and Yergin (1977), with the advent of the notion of national security in the 1940s, the contemporary concept of security as an attribute and aim of the state through military and diplomatic means became an essential component of IR. Similarly, Baldwin (1997) concurs with Smith and Yergin that security scholars were primarily interested in military statecraft during the Cold War. Accordingly, the theory of realism connected the concept to the defence of the state against military threats. The foundation of the realist argument has been described in a wide array of studies: sovereign nations pursue their self-interest through power-seeking and self-help in a decentralised anarchic international system in which war is endemic (Herz, 1950; Russell & Waltz, 1959; Tickner, 1988). The success of realism in describing and explaining the security dilemma and the relationship between the two superpowers made it the most influential paradigm during the Cold War, meaning that security has traditionally been defined with a focus on military protection of the state, its population, and resources.

However, as Cold War-era tensions dissipated, it became clear that both domestic and external risks constituted threats to national security. Meanwhile, new theoretical methods and schools of thought sought to redefine security in a less state- and military-centric manner. Thus, as "non-traditional security" threats (non-military threats) began to be discussed in the 1980s, clear-cut "traditional security" threats became more controversial. The term "non-traditional security"' first appeared in the Transnational Drug Trade and Regional Security article by Michael J. Dziedzic in 1989. Before that, however, Ullman (1983) indicated that poverty, disease, natural disasters, and environmental degradation had all been

incorporated into the context of security. While he did not use the term "non-traditional security" at the time, he is still recognised in Western academic circles as the one who initially proposed the concept.

Moreover, in distinguishing between traditional and modern conceptions of security, Stephen Walt, Mohammed Ayoob, Barry Buzan, Keith Krause, and Michael Williams, among others, have expressed diverse perspectives on how to define defence in order to adapt to a changing environment. Notably, the traditionalist perspective of Walt (1991) has aroused discussion in the field of security studies. As a realist, he connects security with peace and the use of military force to avert warfare. As noted by Ayoob (1997), national security is a function of nation-building that necessitates both "security hardware" (coercive force management) and "security software" (integration and legitimacy). In addition, Buzan (1991) broadens the definition of a threat from a military-based to a more general one by framing comprehensive security as a point of interconnection between five-factor categories: political, military, economic, sociological, and environmental. Krause and Williams (1997) support Buzan's argument by recognising the importance of non-military and non-territorial threats not previously connected with security, such as economic instability, demographic pressures, global warming, resource depletion, terrorism, population movements, and transnational crime. Broadly speaking, these shifts have led to the conceptual underpinnings of "security" being applied in novel ways and new areas as tools for understanding and addressing contemporary challenges.

The discussion above reveals that this formative period has marked the emergence of a slew of conflict-focused literature and policy proposals aimed at tackling the insecurity posed by non-traditional security threats. Since 11 September 2001, non-traditional security challenges have become more prevalent across nearly every aspect of society at both the domestic and international levels. Traditional security and non-traditional security are closely interlinked. However, it is necessary to classify security issues further, beyond the notions of traditional and non-traditional. The following sections detail four axes with which to classify traditional and non-traditional security threats.

2.3.2   Specifying security

Much of the literature explains "traditional security" as a variety of security issues that occupied a critical position in the security field up to the 1980s and "non-traditional security" as a variety of security issues that have occupied a critical position in the security field since the 1980s. According to Ayoob (1991), the post–Cold War world has seen the emergence of new kinds of security threats. He argues that non-traditional security threats are phenomena that states identify as posing a danger to their internal capabilities and identity both at home and abroad, whereas traditional security threats are simply military threats against a state's territories. In order to make this concept operational in empirical research,

security research has addressed the following concerns to provide some kind of framework: Whose values might be threatened? What are these values? Who might attack them? How can these values be threatened, and how can they be safeguarded? Ultimately, traditional and non-traditional security can be framed succinctly through the following four specifications: Security for whom? Security from what threats? Security for which values? Security by what means?

2.3.3 Security for whom?

With regard to the question of "security for whom?" the answer given by traditional security is the state. Realist scholars consider the state to be the only referent object of security. The security of an individual and the citizenry is identified with the state's security, and the state is charged with the duty of protecting them. As noted by Liu (2021), a specialist in China's national security studies, traditional security regards the state as the highest security subject or sometimes even the only security subject. He argues that the security of other actors, such as citizens, is subordinate to that of the state; rather, they constitute mere instruments, means, or conditions relative to the protection of national security. Previous theories of traditional security align with Liu's argument. For example, Scoot and Carr (1986) assert that states are "organisations" to which people go for assistance in performing essential activities that they cannot accomplish themselves. Meanwhile, the citizens accept the state's authority and obligations to contribute to national security, and the state gains legitimacy from this acknowledgment (Dyzenhaus, 2001). This objectification of the state implies that the collective good can be served under the interests and demands of the state. Undoubtedly, the security of the individual depends on the security of the state. Therefore, McSweeney (1984) asserts that it is morally wrong to make the state the referent of security, as the function and purpose of the state are to safeguard its people.

In contrast, some non-traditional security research proposes that the focus of security should be on either individual people and social groups or the international community as a whole. The Welsh School argues that the emancipation of people is necessary to achieve true security. As Byers and Booth (1982) point out, states are the means of security rather than the end. In their view, security should be based on emancipation—the freedom of individuals from physical and human restraints that prevent them from pursing their desires. In this view, individuals constitute the referent object of security because security and emancipation are virtually synonymous (Byers & Booth, 1982). Furthermore, Shaw (1993) asserts that social groups also constitute an acceptable level at which to understand the concept and effects of security. As a result, he suggests that society could be included as a security referent. As observed by Chinese scholar Wang (2004), issues such as the rights of "vulnerable groups" (e.g., women, children, immigrants, ethnic minorities), the public's right to appeal in disputes with the government, and the right to speak on behalf of different groups in the anti-globalisation movement have sparked growing concern

and in-depth research in international academic circles. Based on previous studies on non-traditional security research, Liu (2021) concludes that non-traditional security takes the state as a security object but does not exclude things beyond the state, such as the international community and individuals, from being security objects on par with or even prioritised above the state. Evidently, the referent of security is no longer just the state (on matters of state sovereignty and territorial integrity) but also the people (on matters of survival, well-being, and dignity).

2.3.4   Security from what threats?

All studies on traditional security have either explicitly or implicitly highlighted the importance of military threats as the main focus of security. In this view, security takes on a primarily national and military element, as it is practically tautological or related to the concept of power (Keohane & Nye, 1978). Meanwhile, security is used to achieve and protect the state's interests within a broad "balance of power" framework due to ongoing anarchy and power dilemmas (Waltz, 1997). According to Caballero-Anthony (2005), the threat of nuclear war involving great powers underpinned strategic competition between the world's two great powers from the end of World War II to the end of the Cold War. It established a bipolar framework that influenced the security priorities of states across the world. During the Cold War, the realist idea of "doing security" peaked when the two superpowers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, contended for security through military build-ups and arms races, validating the premise of realist theory (Ikenberry & Mearsheimer, 2001). Consequently, the supremacy of military power and military threats dominated security studies and was rarely challenged by researchers. Haldi (2002) argues that social, economic, and environmental issues only enter the traditional security agenda when they intrude into the military realm. Wuthrich (2015) concurs with Haldi, explaining that the environmental problem of water scarcity would be regarded as a traditional national security threat only when a state threatened to use military force against another state to obtain water. Similarly, a state's economic issues would only be relevant to security if they impact its strategic weight and war-fighting capacity (Kennedy, 1988). In this regard, the concept of traditional security and the practice of ranking threats evidently suffered from state centrism and militarism.

However, according to Katzenstein (1996), the end of the Cold War ushered in a new era of national security threats in addition to the potential for nuclear war and the superpowers' preparations for large-scale conventional wars. At this point, scholars began to take greater interest in either the social construction of threats (Buzan et al., 1997) or the context of conflicts (Homer–Dixon, 1991), while policymakers began to acknowledge the limitations of the traditional view of security. According to some studies, the biggest challenges in the world following the end of the Cold War came not from the potential for intrastate wars but from a wide range of new threats, many of which are not coordinated by state

actors. Notably, some researchers have indicated that 11 September 2001 served as a stark reminder that non-state actors can also constitute severe existential threats to the state and society. As noted by Wang (2004), there is an increasing number of non-traditional security threats at both the national and international levels across various fields, including financial turmoil, hacking, ecological degeneration, drug trafficking, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, illegal immigration, infectious diseases, and natural disasters. In a rapidly changing international environment powered by globalisation, security threats posed by shifting demographics, climate change, and growing food and energy demands have exacerbated these threats, leading to a significant increase in non-traditional security research during the late 2000s and early 2010s (Caballero-Anthony, 2015). While most of these threats are not new, they had long been underestimated by politicians and academics on account of being overshadowed by Cold War antagonism. New research indicates that non-traditional security threats, which primarily come from non-military sources, risk the survival and well-being of both people and states.

2.3.5   Security by what values?

The most significant value in traditional security research is the survival of the state. As Waltz (1979) argues, survival is a prerequisite for states to achieve any of their goals, and the motivation to survive—rather than realistic descriptions of state pursuits and priorities—acts as a basis for action in a world in which state security is uncertain. Krasner (1999) explains that, in order for a state to survive, it must defend its territory against overthrow or foreign acquisition, independently regulate its domestic affairs, and be diplomatically and politically autonomous. Furthermore, Liu (2021) argues that the seizure of power and the maintenance of regime security collectively serve the most fundamental purpose of national security—maintaining and guaranteeing the ruler's dominance, power, and security. Political security, territorial security, and military security have been important since the emergence of the state as a concept. Therefore, according to traditional security research, the critical values that must be secured are physical integrity, sovereignty, and political independence.

Nonetheless, Banerjee (2022) argues that non-traditional security does not stem from competition between states or shifts in the balance of power but is often defined in political and socio-economic terms. Some studies indicate that the values of non-traditional security should centre on the safety and well-being of all people everywhere—in their homes, streets, jobs, communities, and overall environment (Mahbubul, 1995). As Ağır (2018) explains, the crucial values for non-traditional security are the capacity to meet one's essential requirements, a guarantee of fundamental human rights, democracy, sustainable economic development, good governance, and the rule of law.

2.3.6 Security by what means?

As mentioned above, traditional security is obsessed with military actions in response to security threats. While some scholars recognise the importance of diplomacy (Morgenthau, 1968), pacific strategies (Herz, 2003), and the balance of power in maintaining state security, they all believe that military approaches are the most appropriate reaction to immediate security threats and, thus, emphasise the importance of armaments. Accordingly, amid the heightened tensions of the Cold War, threat calculations and great-power rivalries prompted most academics and policymakers to equate security studies with military strategy. As Caballero-Anthony (2005) points out, threat manipulations, force projections, and strategic balances were among the concepts and policy methods that emerged in this era, and security was generally defined in terms of external threats emanating from areas beyond a state's sovereign authority. In turn, military strategies and contingencies were established to tackle these threats, and these approaches ultimately dominated the security policies in that era.

Studies on non-traditional security approaches emphasise that many of the upgraded threats in the security agenda, such as environmental crises, infectious diseases, drugs, and illegal immigration, can no longer be confined within national boundaries (Scholte, 1997). In addition, the literature on non-traditional security approaches focuses on equity, multilateral action, and confidence-building instead of arms races, deterrence, and competition. Moller (1996) argues that these methods free states from the "security dilemma" through interdependence and cooperation. Non-traditional security is non-military, transnational, short-notice, swiftly transmitted, and is not always preventable, though it may be mitigated. It frequently necessitates regional and multilateral collaboration as well as a people-oriented and people-centred approach (Caballero-Anthony, 2005). Park (2018) explains that the term "multilateral" refers to communication and collaboration between governments and other lateral development agencies regardless of territorial boundaries. More importantly, Muguruza (2017) advocates for a non-traditional security approach that incorporates political, economic, diplomatic, legal, scientific, and technological elements. In 2002, China and other ASEAN members in Phnom Penh signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which detailed ways in which non-traditional security issues can be addressed: strengthening information exchange, personnel exchange and training, enhancing capacity-building practices, practical cooperation on non-traditional security issues, joint research on non-traditional security issues, and exploring other means of cooperation (Buszynski, 2003). As a result, soft power has been increasingly significant in dealing with security threats, especially following the end of the Cold War.

Overall, this section demonstrated that the notion of security is widely contested on various grounds. Traditional and non-traditional security may be divided into four specifications and approaches. While

the idea of non-traditional security has long been hotly debated, it still lacks conceptual coherence. The implementation of non-traditional security is complex and ambiguous due to its wide range of definitions. For this reason, scholars of security studies—even those beyond the realist school—are suspicious of its usage in international relations. As noted by Ayoob (1997), a universal definition of security runs the risk of making the term so nebulous that it loses its usefulness as an analytical tool. Moreover, a broad definition of security that encompasses a wide range of threats may not provide any worthwhile direction in policymaking and, thus, make setting priorities for action more difficult. More importantly, the existing literature largely ignores the fact that the fundamental goal of non-traditional security should be to overcome the dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional security paradigms. To address this gap, I assess the case of China–Myanmar border security. My theoretical framework for exploring border security incorporates both traditional and non-traditional levels to explain the 2020–2021 change of the China–Myanmar border from porous to fortified during a turbulent era marked by a pandemic and a military coup.

2.4   China–Myanmar border security

Most scholars still emphasise the unstable mix of illicit cross-border interactions that influence border security, such as the illicit drug trade, human trafficking, and terrorist activities. For instance, Sheng (2006) argues that drug mafias' practice of "drugs for the army and an army for drugs" has ramped up illicit drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle (i.e., the area where the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar meet), which has since spread into Myanmar's Shan and Kachin states, thus approaching the border with China's Yunnan province. Consequently, law enforcement could impose rigorous border controls to combat drug trafficking from Myanmar and discourage the movement of illegal goods into and out of Yunnan (Su & Li, 2021). At the same time, according to Mezzera (2021), China's problem with drug addiction is not limited to its border area with Myanmar. In fact, since the mid-1980s, China has become a primary consumer market for illicit drugs. In the late 1990s, the collapse of significant drug-trafficking networks along the Myanmar–Thailand border led to a considerable increase in strict law enforcement along the Chinese route (UNODC, 2020). By the early 2000s, harsh Chinese anti-heroin efforts dramatically reduced the volume of opium cultivation in Myanmar and helped to maintain border security (Sheng, 2006).

Su (2015) situates drug trafficking in the tension between the territorial logic of national sovereignty and the transnational logic of non-traditional security challenges to analyse the PRC's policy of narcotics control in the Golden Triangle. Through this analysis, he underscores the longstanding but underdeveloped theoretical recognition of illicit drugs as a global commodity and a non-traditional security issue. South and Jolliffe (2015) state that, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, ethnic highlanders

between China's Dehong province and Myanmar's Shan and Kachin states crossed the border into China to flee conflict, poverty, and hunger. More importantly, military conflicts have caused large-scale displacement. For instance, in Myanmar's Karen state, the fighting between the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) and the Karen National Union army directly led to internal displacement to such an extent that, in the 1990s, approximately 30% of Karen's rural population was displaced or relocated (Lanjouw et al., 2000). Thus, Zhou et al. (2022) conclude that the border between Yunnan and northern Myanmar is highly insecure and faces a wide variety of issues, including both human and drug trafficking.

Recently, significant attention has been paid to China's geostrategic and geopolitical competition with the U.S. in Myanmar, which constitutes one of the critical security issues with regard to the China–Myanmar border. Most studies simply list all of China's interests in Myanmar without evaluating their relative importance. Some geopolitical research compares China's growth after the collapse of the Soviet Union against the domination of the U.S. imperialist power in the current world system (Ahamed & Rahman, 2020). With the rise of China, competition between China and the U.S. for influence in East Asia and Southeast Asia has become inevitable (Chan, 2012; Grinter, 2006). Chow and Easley (2019) argue that it is critical for China, as a rising power, to establish its authority in the region, especially in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal. Given its location in the Bay of Bengal, Myanmar is valuable to both China and Western powers. According to Han (2017), the geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China has given Myanmar more leverage to reduce its sole reliance on China. As a Myanmar specialist, Myint-U (2016) suggests that the impact of China's rise is felt more strongly in Myanmar than anywhere elsewhere in the world. More significantly, Vineles (2019) remarks that the Maritime Silk Road, part of the BRI, aims to connect China's coast to South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. However, scholars have pointed to China's strategic vulnerability: its potential to be "choked" by the U.S. presence in the Strait of Malacca during times of tension or military conflict. Notably, China has consistently highlighted the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the main priorities of which are respect for Myanmar's sovereignty, respect for its territorial integrity, and non-interference in its internal affairs (Taylor, 2021). Beijing believes it has taken this stance to reassure Myanmar of its positive intentions and ensure that Myanmar would not feel intimidated by China's rising wealth and power and instead view China as an opportunity to reap mutual economic benefits. Beijing considers this approach to be the most effective way to prevent Myanmar from joining the U.S.-led coalition against China (Mannan, 2020). Hence, Sun (2020) claims that Beijing views the growing U.S. presence in Myanmar as a potential threat to its access to the Indian Ocean and to local oil and gas pipelines as well as a threat to its border security.

Furthermore, Beijing is concerned about maintaining peace and security along its border with Myanmar as well as ensuring that violence between Myanmar's military and armed ethnic groups does not push

migrants into China (Gangopadhyay & Jain, 2019). In other words, Myanmar's political stability is critical to China's security, as any military conflict along the China–Myanmar border would threaten China's the stability and security of China's own border area.

My research contributes to the literature on China–Myanmar border relations by emphasising that the strict border, no matter how much it contributes to illegal activities, can be subordinated to the geopolitical logic of national security threatened by political uncertainty, and more recently, by the COVID–19 pandemic. Similarly, Thailand is also geopolitically important to China, and this thesis's findings may be applicable to China–Thailand bilateral relations. Meanwhile, there may be gaps in the literature as a result of the limited examination of specific aspects rather than a complete analysis of issues influencing China–Myanmar border security. Digging deeper into this region could provide a new view of and explanation for the recent tightness of the China–Myanmar border.

In summary, at the time of writing, there has not been enough in-depth analysis of, in the context of a military coup and the COVID–19 pandemic in Myanmar, recent political change as well as COVID–19 in Myanmar, the tightened border between China and Myanmar. Therefore, this research hopes to offer a deeper, more comprehensive analysis of China–Myanmar border security that identifies the security issues behind the less porous border in 2020–2021. In doing so, I hope to address how traditional and non-traditional security issues have affected border security during this turbulent period. In doing so, this thesis will make a significant contribution to the literature on China and Myanmar and help us to achieve a deeper understanding of this important but underappreciated facet of the China–Myanmar border. The next chapter provides detailed hypotheses from both the traditional and non-traditional approaches to security, which could explain China's actions with regard to its border with Myanmar.

Chapter 3: Hypothesis

Based on a comprehensive theoretical framework comprising concepts from both traditional and non-traditional security, I propose three hypotheses. The interaction between traditional and non-traditional security provides valuable context for the linkage between my concepts and my three hypotheses. In this section, I discuss how the China–Myanmar border became less porous during the 2020–2021 period marked by the COVID–19 pandemic and the military takeover in Myanmar. Then, the independent variables of geostrategic competition, the BRI, and ideological infiltration enable us to understand the stability of the China–Myanmar border and, ultimately, the stability of the two states.

3.1   Conceptualisation of the dependent variable

The dependent variable in this thesis is the tightness of the China–Myanmar border from 2020 to 2021, meaning that a highly regulated border wall not only prevents COVID–19 but also will likely have long-lasting ramifications on bilateral trade and travel. For a long time, the Chinese government struggled to control Yunnan's 2,129-kilometre border with Myanmar, in no small part due to the armed ethnic groups and other rebel forces on Myanmar's side of the border. Since the start of the COVID–19 pandemic, Myanmar has consistently suffered severe outbreaks of COVID–19, which have been compounded by the state of instability stemming from the military coup d'état that occurred in February 2021. It is in this context that China has tightened its controls over its snaking border with Myanmar, aiming to limit the COVID–19 epidemic in neighbouring districts, especially Ruili, a Chinese town adjacent to Muse at the main border crossing between China and Myanmar.

As shown in Figure 3-1, China is building the "Great Southern Wall" to seal its 2,129-kilometre border with Myanmar. The wall stretches from the three-border area between India, Myanmar, and China in the north to the triple-border area between Myanmar, China, and Laos in the south (Introvigne, 2020). One area of the wall in Wanding and Ruili consists of reinforced steel fences topped with barbed wire at the border between Yunnan province and Shan state. Cameras are scattered across the wall to deter illicit crossings (Global Times, 2021). Moreover, China also arranges for security personnel to patrol the walls. With the implementation of stringent preventative measures and legal awareness among villagers, few individuals would take the risk, as illegally crossing the national border is severely punished. Stowaways—as well as those who organise, assist or shelter them—face severe consequences (Global Times, 2021). Alarmed by Ruili's COVID–19 outbreak, other Yunnan border cities have also rigorously implemented border-control measures. For example, Chinese troops are assembled in Jiegao, a key border town, during periods of elevated tension (Walsh, 2021). The iron-wire fences are illuminated at night with 24-hour patrols in many border cities in Yunnan, significantly increasing the difficulties of

illicit border crossings (Lintner, 2020). In attempting to bolster its national security, Beijing has made the China–Myanmar border far less porous by discouraging crossings and gaining the capacity to monitor those who illegally enter China.

Figure 3-1. A section of the Great Southern Wall erected by China in the town of Wanding, Yunnan at the China–Myanmar border
Source: Feng (2020)

Why is China building this wall? Its official explanation is that the wall, replete with high-voltage fencing, infrared sensors, and surveillance cameras, serves to prevent the spread of COVID–19 into China via illegal border crossings (Strangio, 2020). Beijing may also be building it to mitigate cross-border trade in wildlife products, drugs, and other illicit goods. The prevailing explanation in Western media is that China wants to prevent dissidents from escaping China through its border with Myanmar (Lintner, 2020). All of the above explanations have some truth to them. However, there are other discrete motivations behind China's construction of this border wall between 2020 and 2021 that warrant a more detailed explanation.

3.2   Conceptualisation of the independent variables

The literature review of academic sources, government reports, and primary publications in Chapter 2 revealed three key independent variables that must be investigated further: geostrategic competition, the Belt and Road Initiative, and ideological encroachment.

3.2.1 Geostrategic competition

Myanmar is located in Southeast Asia, bordering China to the north and northeast along approximately 2,129 kilometres. Unsurprisingly, China views Myanmar as a shield against the U.S. and its regional allies, such as Australia and India, who aim to achieve regional dominance (Mannan, 2020). Notably, Myanmar served as a vital overland supply route from India to China for the British and American military forces during World War II when China was struggling against the Japanese occupation (Jackson, 2006). Later, it operated as a buffer state between China and both the West and the Soviet Union. As Winston Churchill aptly remarked, Myanmar was an obstacle in the West's encirclement of China (Fan, 2012). In today's context, the U.S. "Pivot to Asia" is perceived by China as an attempt at the containment of China's rise. Against this background, Myanmar's geopolitical position once again constitutes that of a buffer for China's response to the U.S. (Friedberg, 2022). Myanmar offers China's landlocked inland provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan a trading outlet and a strategic presence in the Indian Ocean, enabling China to escape U.S. encirclement and mitigate India's regional influence (Tower & Clapp, 2021). Indeed, China has long viewed Myanmar as an essential strategic gateway to the Indian Ocean (Su & Li, 2021), as Myanmar not only has access to the Bay of Bengal but also lies at the juncture of South Asia and Southeast Asia. At the same time, Myanmar is a component of China's "Two-Ocean Strategy," which aims to secure access to both the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean to curb what Beijing regards as the encirclement of its frontiers (Nielsen, 2022).

Under the military governments of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (1988–1997) and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) (1997–2010), Myanmar had little wiggle room in negotiations with Beijing, which provided its smaller neighbour with much-needed diplomatic protection and economic investment (Han, 2017). Notably, this dependent relationship could lead Myanmar to see China's dominant position as harmful to its national interests. In fact, since 2011, Myanmar has made significant attempts to break away from its former reliance on China due to internal political liberalisation and its restoration of ties with the West, including the U.S. However, China regained dominance in Myanmar shortly after the Tatmadaw's crackdown on the Rohingya in 2017 (Nielsen, 2022). Still, Myanmar has considerably enhanced its negotiating position with China by reorienting its international relations, pushing back against China's economic and strategic penetration into the country (Han, 2017). Especially given the U.S.'s renewed strategic rebalance to the Indo–Pacific, China could soon be

confronted with intense competition in its dealings with Myanmar, making its commercial and geopolitical interests in the country far less certain.

Complicating matters further, the February 2021 military coup d'état came as an unpleasant surprise to China. Chinese diplomats clearly expressed that the coup was not in China's national interest. Still, China advocated for a policy of non-intervention, hoping to assist Myanmar's people in finding a way to solve their internal problems (Walsh, 2021). As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasised on several occasions to Southeast Asian leaders that an "Asian solution" must be reached—that "forces from outside" should not become involved (Nielsen, 2022). Still, Western actors, led by the U.S., imposed a series of targeted sanctions on the military junta and its key personnel (Walsh, 2021). Notably, many people in Myanmar suspect that the Chinese government backed the coup for political reasons or to sell more arms. Accordingly, China must balance its support for the new military government with some sympathy for the public in order to adequately confront this nationalist society with furious anti-Chinese sentiments (Palmer, 2022). Consequently, Beijing has adopted a proactive diplomatic stance towards Myanmar to normalise tense bilateral relations and convey its dissatisfaction while demonstrating its importance to the Myanmar administration.

Moreover, both governments cooperated to make their border less porous during the COVID–19 pandemic to reduce spread and boost safety in both countries. It is worth noting that their cooperation is not limited to bilateral trade; it extends to strategic cooperation without U.S. intervention (Su & Li, 2021). Notably, attacks and infrastructure sabotage by armed ethnic groups along the border could jeopardise China's strategic objective of gaining access to the Indian Ocean (Nielsen, 2022). For instance, Beijing views the growing U.S. presence in Myanmar as a potential threat to its access to the Indian Ocean and to local oil and gas pipelines as well as a threat to its border security (Sun, 2020). The situation has been exacerbated in Kachin state, with demonstrations contributing to renewed combat between Myanmar's military and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) (Strangio, 2020). The Kachin people have historically had a close relationship with the U.S., and independence may be the "hidden goal" of the Kachin insurgents. As a result, it is necessary for Chinese troops to assemble in critical border towns, tightening restrictions to sustain the country's geopolitical interests. In other words, China's priority is stabilising the border areas to ensure that they don't interfere with the attainment of its geopolitical goals. In contrast, the West has taken a value-based approach to Myanmar with a focus on democracy and human rights both before and after the COVID–19 pandemic and the 2021 military takeover. Were the border wall to be completed, it would give China another lever with which to reward or pressure both Myanmar's government and its insurgent ethnic groups.

3.2.2 Belt and Road Initiative

Launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, the BRI is a broad array of investment and development initiatives extending from East Asia to Europe aimed at significantly boosting China's economic and political clout. Given that the BRI is a Chinese initiative, it is crucial to consider how the PRC articulates and characterises its goals, as would be the case for policy pronouncements for any nation (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). The primary institutional base underpinning the BRI is provided by the three interlocking branches of political power in China: the CCP, the State Council, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The CCP exercises oversight of the BRI through the Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC). The State Council wields administrative authority over the BRI in China through cabinet-level organisations like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, which are in charge of foreign trade policy and agreements as well as foreign direct investment (Michael, 2020). In May 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi visited China to attend the first "Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation" in Beijing, where she met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang (The Irrawaddy, 2020). While the BRI is certainly a self-serving programme, China's grand strategy with the BRI will offer critical resources to Myanmar that it can use to tackle several of the most pressing obstacles to its economic development (Li et al., 2021).

On 19 November 2017, the Chinese government introduced the concept of the CMEC under the umbrella of China's BRI. The 1,700-kilometre corridor (Figure 3-2) is set to link Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province in China, with the main economic hubs of Myanmar: Mandalay in central Myanmar, Yangon in the east and Kyaukphyu in the west (Lwin, 2021). The CMEC aims to circumvent future conflicts in the South China Sea, which is increasingly being contested (Nielsen, 2022). The project is expected to spur growth in landlocked Yunnan and provide China with direct access to the Indian Ocean, enabling it to import oil without passing through the Strait of Malacca, where the U.S. has a solid military presence (Flintrop, 2018). An important element of the corridor will be the presence of three special economic zones (SEZs) along the China–Myanmar border. According to a 2019 policy plan released by the Myanmar Ministry of Commerce, these zones will be located in Muse and Chinshewehaw in the northern part of Shan state and Kan Pite Tee in Kachin state (Devonshire-Ellis, 2021). In this context, Myanmar has been formally incorporated into Chinese President Xi Jinping's BRI since 2018, influencing future bilateral relations between the neighbouring countries through planned SEZs, cross-border railway lines, and other mega development projects.

Nevertheless, the February 2021 military takeover in Myanmar heightened concerns among the Chinese leadership over the stability of Myanmar, leading some to oppose new development projects in the border areas. For example, the Tatmadaw searched particular Kachin churches, ostensibly looking for specific

individuals and even digging through trash cans for evidence. In retaliation, the KIA committed arson on a factory owned by a Myanmar businessman close to the former junta in Kachin state's Hpakant township (Strangio, 2021). These skirmishes turned into large-scale battles, with many people killed and wounded on both sides. Thus, the escalation of conflict, paired with mounting COVID–19 cases, prompted residents of Myanmar's border area to seek shelter across the border in Yunnan (The Diplomat, 2021). Beijing needed to initiate rapid-response protocols to strengthen its border protections, deeming it necessary to guard the Kyaukphyu pipelines (Walsh, 2021). Generally, China expects CMEC projects in Myanmar to connect the landlocked province of Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal in order to boost its military power and economic presence in the Indian Ocean (Aung, 2020). In 2020 and 2021, many of these projects were delayed on account of the COVID–19 pandemic and the military coup, meaning that the China–Myanmar border needed to be made more secure to facilitate the continuation of BRI projects.

Figure 3-2. A map of the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor
Source: Lwin (2018)

Ultimately, rigorous Chinese border management would likely accelerate the success of the CMEC in the long term given the depth of China's domestic and foreign policy interests in Myanmar and its enormous historical influence and engagement in the country. In a broad sense, the CMEC illustrates

how the BRI in Southeast Asia typically serves China's core interests, meaning that China will persist in its policy commitments even in the face of international opposition to and criticism of the initiative.

3.2.3 Ideological infiltration

Finally, the Kachin—the main ethnic group in northern Myanmar's Kachin state—is historically descended from the same origin point as China's Jingpo ethnic group. While ethnic armed groups such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the local force in the ethnically Chinese district of Kokang (all of which have close ties to China's security agencies) control the majority of the border between China and Myanmar's Shan state, the situation is quite different in Kachin state in northern Myanmar (Introvigne, 2020). However, the traditions of the Kachin seem to have been largely created by U.S. missionaries, who gave them their language, their identity, and even their name; in fact, 90% of the population of Kachin state is currently Christian (Macan–Markar, 2021). Subsequently, Kachin missionaries and scholars have found more compatriots in Dezhou, Baoshan, and Nujiang in China's Yunnan province—including those who speak the same language or a similar language and are ethnically Dulong and Nu—than in their own country. Intermittently, some Chinese ethnic minorities have crossed the border into Myanmar for Christian and Buddhist training, which potentially indicates that foreign religions are crossing the border into China (Lintner, 2019)—sometimes without the official permission of the Chinese government.

Even though several of the KIA's key leaders are communists with strong ties to China, China must also consider that the KIA has several wings and that espionage has been present in the region for decades. The PRC may think that dissidents are manipulating the Kachin to create an independent Christian Kachin state and export Christianity to the Chinese Community Party (CCP) in China (Song, 2018). Additionally, the UWSA, which has close ideological and military links to Beijing, has frequently evicted Protestant and Catholic priests and accused some teachers in Shan state of being "American agents" (Lintner, 2019). Therefore, the PRC may strictly control the border wall to prevent the smuggling of ideologies it perceives as dangerous—not just opium, jade, and prostitutes. This point is particularly relevant, as the severe COVID–19 pandemic and escalating political tensions could increase religious infiltration along the border.

Furthermore, China's security concerns in its border areas with Myanmar are also influenced by apprehensions about U.S. intervention in its immediate neighbourhood across a porous border open to easy infiltration (Sun, 2017). European and U.S. organisations are currently involved in sheltering Kachin state residents who have been displaced due to the conflict between the KIA and Myanmar's government forces (Feng, 2020). More worryingly, Kachins in Myanmar are believed to be continuously conducting

intelligence operations along the China–Myanmar border and covertly recruiting Jingpo Chinese citizens into their cadres (Lintner, 2020). It is far more plausible for China to impede potential flows of "anti-state operations" in the opposite direction, which is what is typically used to describe any attempt to topple the CCP (Introvigne, 2020). Beijing has reacted harshly to the idea that the U.S. would play a role in resolving the conflict in northern Myanmar. For instance, in 2013, China's top priority was to thwart the attempted "internationalisation of the Kachin issue" in response to a KIA request to allow the U.S., UK, UN, and China to act as observers of the negotiations between the KIA and Myanmar's central government (Sun, 2014). Evidently, China is severely hesitant to accept a Western presence in its immediate vicinity, especially during a turbulent period in Myanmar. Thus, while mitigating ideological infiltration is certainly not the only explanation behind China's robust wall on its border with Myanmar— but it is undeniably a critical factor.

3.3   Conceptualisation of the intervening variables

The usefulness of intervening variables as triggers or modifiers, to some extent, could have been applied to the onset of COVID–19 and the military coup as proximate causes of border fencing within the broader context of the independent variables. Hence, generalising the COVID–19 and the 2021 military coup to major disruptions could have enabled a similar connection to explain the less porous China–Myanmar border.

3.3.1   The COVID–19

Following the COVID–19 outbreak at the start of 2020, the swift and effective border lockdown was built on the extensive existing network of border security personnel. Chinese National Health Commission (2020) reports that despite the March 31, 2020, local border shutdown, Chinese nationals residing in Myanmar attempted to return to Yunnan. At the end of March, border police in border cities between China and Myanmar detained numerous individuals for illegal border crossings (China Daily, 2020). As it attempted to control a COVIc–19 epidemic in nearby areas, China has been enforcing more control over its convoluted border with Myanmar. With the application of increasingly potent technologies like drones and facial recognition systems, border control, and police attempted to prevent "imported" COVID–19 cases. Control also incorporated a grassroots component where voluntary neighbourhood committees patrolled the border and used informant boxes to report quarantine violators anonymously (Plümmer, 2022). Essentially speaking, establishing a fence along the China–Myanmar border became a political purpose (Radio Free Asia 2020). For border inhabitants, however, the abrupt militarisation of the frontier and quarantine restrictions might have induced hardship as their livelihoods depend on crossing the border.

Given the situation, the Chinese government would still build a tighter border barrier than before. The long-standing concerns about the porous frontier have been heightened by the threat of COVID–19 returning to China via a back door (The Diplomat, 2021). Notably, other perceived threats in the context of border mobility are administered by respective policy actors accordingly. The border fencing may have been a part of a larger CCP crackdown on economic entrepreneurship, including the illicit gambling, prostitution, and drug dealing that was prevalent in border towns, according to Xi Jinping, who was almost simultaneously curtailing the tech and educational leaders like Jack Ma (Peach, 2021). That said, not only would the border region be plagued by drug smuggling and human trafficking, but Chinese authorities would also face the additional challenge of dealing with thousands of people fleeing the threat of COVID–19.

3.3.2 The 2021 military coup

Since the start of the COVID–19 pandemic, Myanmar has consistently suffered severe outbreaks of COVID–19, which have been compounded by the instability stemming from the military coup d'état that occurred in February 2021. In this context, China has tightened its control over its snaking border with Myanmar to maintain crucial economic and strategic connections between both countries. With considerable investments in the country's infrastructure, energy, and natural resource sectors, China has been Myanmar's longstanding ally and business partner (Chan, 2021). However, the coup has disrupted China's economic interests in Myanmar and raised concerns over the security of its investments and cross-border trade. There have been reports of clashes between Myanmar's military and ethnic armed groups, as well as protests and civil unrest, all of them in the areas adjacent to China. Even more, pro-democracy protesters urged people to boycott Chinese projects, and Chinese factories were burned down (Reuters, 2021).

Additionally, many anti-junta protests took place in front of the Chinese Embassy in Yangon, with some furious demonstrators claiming that Beijing was exposing itself to attacks on vital Chinese–built infrastructure, such as the pipelines transporting gas and oil from the coastal Rakhine state into Yunnan (Strangio, 2021). Meanwhile, the border region has also seen an influx of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), with thousands of people fleeing to China for safety (Business Standard, 2022). This has put pressure on China's border security and prompted the Chinese government to take measures to manage the situation. Undoubtedly the military coup in Myanmar has posed significant uncertainties and threats to China's strategic interests and national security.

As shown above, this chapter developed a fully specified model of rational choices, institutions, and norms to demonstrate that the interaction between traditional and non-traditional security provides

valuable context for the linkage between my concepts and hypotheses. The independent variables of geostrategic competition, the BRI, and ideological infiltration could offer a solid explanation for the dependent variable—the robust, less porous China–Myanmar border in 2020–2021. On the one hand, a successful BRI/CMEC would boost China's overall geopolitical position in the region and further bring Southeast Asia into its orbit. On the other hand, two competing secular ideologies—communism and democratic liberalism—represent an emerging regional geopolitical conflict that China must ultimately confront. The beginning of COVID–19 and the 2021 military coup, as proximate causes of the border fence within the framework of the independent factors, may have been somewhat amenable to intervening variables acting as triggers or modifiers. With respect to the less porous China–Myanmar border, this chapter argues that geostrategic competition greatly influences China's control over its border with Myanmar when all of the hypotheses are considered. Meanwhile, the BRI and ideological infiltration are elements of geostrategic competition and great-power games that together contribute to border security between the two countries. In the next chapter, I detail the research method employed in this study.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

This chapter presents and justifies the research design that guided the collection and analysis of data. This thesis comprises an explanatory study in which variables pertaining to China–Myanmar border security are used to explain the reasons behind the less porous border in 2020 and 2021. This chapter is structured as follows. Before explaining why I use the case of the China–Myanmar border during a period marked by the COVID–19 pandemic and a military coup d'état, I discuss my choice of a single-case study design. Then, I discuss the use of process tracing to plot the independent variables elaborated in Chapter 3 and, in turn, determine when and how they become important in shaping my dependent variable: the less porous China–Myanmar border. Then, I explain my data-collection methods. Finally, I present the methodological challenges that I faced before closing the chapter with a brief summary.

4.1   Case selection

With a defined problem and purpose, the task now turns to the selection of an appropriate design and method to obtain precise, reliable information for the practical application of the study's data. This qualitative research employs a single-case study (n=1) design, that single case being the China–Myanmar border. In this way, I explore the reasons behind the border becoming less porous in 2020 and 2021. Qualitative studies in the social sciences serve to emphasise the social character of the real world (Yin, 2015). According to Seawright and Gerring (2008), multiple cases can be scrutinised simultaneously; however, I opted for a single-case study to apply the warranted amount of focus to the China–Myanmar case, as each case must be investigated holistically in its entirety (Yin, 2011). As Priya (2014) notes, the use of a case study involves the comparison of various approaches based on the focus of each initiative: (1) narrative research - the plot of an individual; (2) phenomenological studies - a specific phenomenon; (3) grounded theory - a theory from the field research; and (4) ethnography - the cultural perspective. Thus, the use of a single-case study is appropriate for the assessment of the China–Myanmar border. Indeed, the primary objective of the single-case approach is to examine the dependent variable, ideally in comparison to the presence and absence of the independent variables (Mills et al., 2009); sometimes, however, it is hard for us to generalise ideas beyond the unique setting due to the lack of scientific control.

I argue that the China–Myanmar border, which encompasses not just the physical demarcation but also the functions generally associated with national borders, is not exclusively the result of the relationship between China and Myanmar. To think that is the case would be to fall into what Agnew (1994) deemed the "territorial trap", which holds that the universe is made up only of territorial actors who control circumscribed space to further their objectives. In actuality, borders play a crucial part in the "territorial trap" idea by shaping and modifying state-to-state interactions, enabling cross-border connections, and

establishing territorial space (Paasi, 1999). The border crossing between Ruili (China) and Muse (Myanmar), which accounts for around 80% of border-crossers and 60% of land-based trade between China and Myanmar, is an important channel for both legal and illegal cross-border flows (Su & Li, 2021). This single-case study entails an in-depth analysis of the China–Myanmar border and explains why it is highly regulated by Chinese law enforcement through protective controls and rigorous deterrence, which may serve as a critical complement to the formulation of more comprehensive or encompassing empirical theories.

Border security is vital to national interests and homeland security. The research questions laid out in this thesis are meant to guide the research and ensure that the study design and data-collection methods align with the aim of the research (Priya, 2014). The study's research questions sought to discover answers to the problems facing border security practitioners. I argue that national borders can be defined as a territorial barrier that limits mobility into foreign countries to protect national interests and safety. As van Houtum and van Naerssen (2002) emphasise, territorial boundaries constantly fix and regulate flow mobility and thereby construct or reproduce locations in space. In particular, the interrelated national interests and security patterns create explicit spatial depictions of bordering processes. More specifically, since the start of the COVID–19 pandemic, Myanmar has had multiple severe outbreaks of the virus, all compounded by rising instability following the military coup d'état in February 2021. It is in this context that China has tightened its controls over its snaking border with Myanmar, aiming to limit the COVID–19 epidemic in neighbouring districts, especially Ruili, a Chinese town adjacent to Muse at the main border crossing between China and Myanmar. China is building the "Great Southern Wall" to seal its 2,129-kilometre border with Myanmar. To determine why the Chinese government is building a massive physical defensive structure along the border between it and its neighbour, I decided to conduct this single-case study and assess the validity of my hypotheses in a qualitative manner.

To test hypotheses derived from the connection between traditional and non-traditional security frameworks, this research employs process tracing to investigate the critical factors that have influenced China–Myanmar border security since 1948. Likewise, the application of traditional and non-traditional security theory in process tracing can provide insights into the decision-making process of key actors involved in addressing security threats on the bilateral border, whether they are military or non-military in nature. Process tracing is a fundamental tool of qualitative analysis. The method is often used by scholars conducting within-case analysis based on qualitative data; however, it is frequently understood and applied in an inadequate and insufficiently rigorous manner (Collier, 2011). Process tracing is described as the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence identified and analysed in light of specific research questions and hypotheses. It can significantly contribute to the description of political and social phenomena and the assessment of causal explanations (Collier, 2011). As a result, it can detail the whole

process behind the relationship between China and Myanmar, outlining the strategies and factors that have shaped it. This relationship's history can be split into five distinct phases: 1948–1961 was a period of ambivalent, peaceful coexistence; 1962–1988 was a period of temporary setback; 1989–2010 exhibited an improvement in bilateral ties; 2011–2015 entailed a populist rebalancing, and; 2016–2021 revealed the development of a closer relationship between the two countries. One of the purposes of process tracing is to integrate explicit and transparent reasoning on causal mechanisms with the temporal chain in which events occur. In other words, this analysis is structured by the temporal phases of the push-pull relationship between China and Myanmar.

Namely, process tracing is about timing and sequences, and borders constitute a reflection of the societies that they encompass, revealing social dynamics in a particular place at a particular point in time (Therborn, 2020). This thesis, based on my theoretical framework, uses process-tracing analysis to identify the main decision-makers engaged in the reaction to the threat, the evidence they evaluated to enable their decision, and the variables that shaped their preference. If my hypotheses are confirmed over the course of this thesis, then the independent variables have significance and are worth examining to determine whether they explain the tightness of the China–Myanmar border. Understanding the border as the culmination of processes driven and sustained by material, social, and discursive practices in conjunction with the state, sub-state actors, and the international system offers an understanding of borders that extends far beyond the notion of a fixed line (Ackleson, 2003). Therefore, it is clear why strictly controlled borders guide case selection and help to explain a single case over time through the examination of both Chinese and Burmese contexts. Nevertheless, process tracing is a single-case method, meaning that, as evidence for this is derived by tracing the case's process, only inferences about the operations of mechanisms within the investigated case may be generated (Beach, 2017).

4.2   Data source

The data considered in this research comes from both primary and secondary sources. I collected information pertaining to the subject from various research organisations, journals, magazines, newspapers, archives, documentaries, and online portals. I also gathered data from previous studies stored in libraries across the country, including online libraries.

The first source is archival research on cross-border activities between China and Myanmar, including policies, yearbooks, media reports, and political speeches. Since 1 May 2008, the State Council—China's highest administrative agency—has implemented multiple PRC regulations on open government information (Su & Li, 2021), as a result of which I can obtain official information. Subnational governments must comply with this law by immediately and properly disclosing all government

information, enabling me to gather much-needed information on border activities in Ruili and Muse from a Chinese perspective. Meanwhile, some official documents and political speeches from China reveal how the Chinese government regulates its border wall on the China–Myanmar border. For instance, the Global Times, an official Chinese media outlet, reported in 2020 that China was tightening controls along the China–Myanmar border to halt the spread of COVID–19, noting that the construction of a border wall could, in some cases, keep people from leaving the country (Global Times, 2020). In addition, I collected documentaries from China Global Television Network (CGTN) and the BBC about the introduction of the Ruili (China)–Muse (Myanmar) border and interviews with border residents to study the background of China–Myanmar relations and the strictness of regulations along the border.

On the other hand, from a Burmese perspective, I used local English-language news articles from outlets like Frontier Myanmar and the Myanmar Times to corroborate and supplement some of the information, both of which often mention that Chinese authorities and the local governments have overcome difficulties and spared no effort to stabilise border trade. These two independent English-language newspapers regularly report on state-related controversies in Myanmar that are sometimes neglected by the state-run Global New Light of Myanmar. Thus, these two English-language publications are well-received by both English-speaking locals and foreigners and often include opinion pieces by recognised Myanmar scholars. Additionally, I consulted the Irrawaddy, a leading journalistic publication covering political, social, economic, and cultural developments in Myanmar that was established in 1990 by Burmese exiles residing in Thailand. The Irrawaddy has a reputation for maintaining an impartial stance on politics in Myanmar since its inception. In addition to the news, it offers in-depth political analysis and interviews with prominent Myanmar specialists, business leaders, democracy advocates, and other influential characters.

Furthermore, some of my primary sources come from research organisations, including the Myanmar Peace Monitor, the Centre for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, the World Health Organization (WHO), the Health Commission of Yunnan Province, the United Nations Comtrade, the American Enterprise Institute, and the China Immigration Administration. The Myanmar Peace Monitor is a programme operated by Burma News International to strengthen communication and understanding in pursuit of reconciliation and peace in Myanmar (Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2021). It provides a figure representing the number of clashes between the military government and armed ethnic groups in Myanmar along the China–Myanmar border since the beginning of February 2021. According to the WHO, Myanmar has reported 458,154 confirmed COVID–19 cases and 17,527 deaths from COVID–19 between 3 January 2020 and 27 September 2021. Similarly, the Johns Hopkins University CSSE also provides precise data on confirmed COVID–19 cases during the tumultuous period surrounding the military coup. Notably, the Health Commission of Yunnan Province delivered speeches

ordering Yunnan residents to avoid travel to Ruili unless completely necessary and reported on COVID–19 cases in Ruili stemming from individuals who had crossed the border. United Nations Comtrade is a repository of official international trade statistics and relevant analytical tables (UN Comtrade, 2021), notably featuring data on import and export trade volumes between China and Myanmar. The American Enterprise Institute is a right-wing think tank based in Washington, D.C. (AEI, 2021) that provides some information on BRI fund distribution. According to the China Immigration Administration (2021), the number of people who exited and entered Ruili was 2,993,500 in 2020—down 83.70% from 2019. The range of techniques applied to analyse the data is detailed in the next section.

4.3   Research challenges

Moreover, it is challenging for me to do fieldwork through in-depth interviews with key primary sources, as the border checkpoints in Ruili and Muse (which serve as overland ports between China and Myanmar) are limited to passport holders. As Müller-Funk (2020) points out, conducting field research in politically sensitive settings requires researchers to deal with conflicting identities, commitments, and interests and sometimes to make implicit or explicit choices about divergent individual interests. At the same time, it is impossible for me to legally acquire a Border Inhabitant Card from the Ruili Police Department because I do not work and study in Ruili. Hence, I cannot legally cross the China–Myanmar border despite having a research visa from Myanmar's central government authorising me to conduct research in Muse. More importantly, Chinese citizens cannot securely conduct fieldwork in Muse under the current turbulent political situation, especially given the recent pandemic and military coup. Muse is, to an extent, an unsafe area for non-Burmese scholars to stay for long periods of time due to long-standing armed conflicts in Muse and other border cities in Shan and Kachin. It is worth acknowledging here that my reliance on Chinese-language information may have skewed or biased my findings.

Importantly, however, there is no need to interview or engage with people to complete this study, as it is based on existing data, government records, and previous research. Thus, there is no need to obtain ethical approval for this research. Still, this research has significant ethical implications for data transparency and obstacles to information access despite a lack of constraints on institutional ethics. In the field of political science, Elman and Kapiszewski (2013) assert that scholars must state their findings and provide evidence for them. In other words, data and analysis must be verifiable and replicable in order to ensure transparency and prevent unnecessary disputes.

Thus, my qualitative research must extensively refer to the sources of referenced information and recognise its own limitations brought about by obstacles to information access. Additionally, given the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the topic of this thesis, it would be difficult—if not impossible—to

develop a comprehensive theory about variables pertaining to China–Myanmar border security. The single-case study approach does not rely on a single coherent theory, but it does necessitate the development of an in-depth description of a specific person, place, or organisation that is accessible to experts and the public alike. This approach is particularly valuable when examining how China and Myanmar's relationship has evolved over time, which is more difficult to depict with a qualitative analysis focused on particular periods. Overall, a case study is highly effective when the author delivers unedited facts and allows readers to draw their own conclusions.

This chapter justified the research design, data-collection process, and analytical procedures that guided my research. The next chapter provides a detailed empirical analysis of the history of China–Myanmar border security from 1948 to 2021.

Chapter 5: The history of China–Myanmar border security

In this chapter, I use "Burma" to refer to the country now commonly known as Myanmar until 1989, when the military junta's SLORC government that took power a year earlier formally changed its name to the "Union of Myanmar".

Contemporary China-Myanmar Relations

1950 — The People's Republic of China and an independent Burma establish diplomatic relations.

1960 — China and Burma settle their border dispute.

1967 — Anti-Chinese riots in Burma lead to severed bilateral ties and China's overt support for the Burma Communist Party's armed struggle against the government.

2009 — Thein Sein's government and China agree to construct oil and gas pipelines connecting Kyaukphyu port to Kunming and develop the Myitsone Dam in Kachin State.

2007 — China vetoes a draft United Nations Security Council resolution calling for the Myanmar military to halt attacks on civilians in ethnic minority regions.

1989 — China ends support and assistance to the BCP, leading to the latter's collapse.

A new era of mutual collaboration with multi–sectoral linkages extend beyond the traditional sphere of political–diplomatic ties to military–security and deeper economic cooperation in the post–Cold War era.

1971 — China and Burma renormalise relations.

2011 — Thein Sein's government suspends the controversial Myitsone Dam project after widespread protests.

2013 — China hosts talks between the Kachin Independence Organization and the Myanmar government in Yunnan, marking Beijing's first formal role in the peace process.

2015 — Aung San Suu Kyi makes first visit to China as leader of the National League for Democracy and meets with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

China signs the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement as an official international witness, alongside the UN, EU, India, Japan, and Thailand.

2016 — China attends the "Union Peace Conference–21st Century Panglong" in Naypyidaw.

2017 — Aung San Suu Kyi attends Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. China attends second Panglong conference.

China proposes a three–point plan to address the Rohingya crisis.

China votes against a UN General Assembly resolution calling for the Tatmadaw to end its campaign against the Rohingya.

2021 — A military coup plunges Myanmar into political turmoil followed by a harsh and violent crackdown that causes thousands of deaths and an influx of refugees across the Chinese border.

Some democracy protesters in Myanmar encourage people to resist all Chinese projects and to boycott Chinese products when China and Russia block attempts by the UNSC to condemn the military takeover.

Beijing urges Naypyidaw to expedite work on BRI projects.

2020 — On the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Myanmar, Chinese President Xi Jinping pays his first visit abroad to Myanmar.

The Chinese Embassy reports that both sides talk about ways to forward the development of China's BRI projects in Myanmar based on the COVID–19 Economic Relief Plan.

2018 — China attends the third Panglong conference.

China and Myanmar renegotiate deal to develop the Kyaukphyu port.
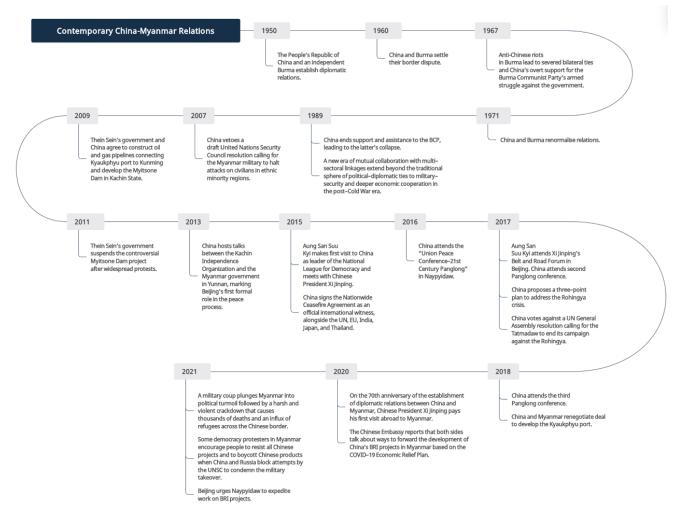
Figure 5-1. A timeline of China–Myanmar relations (created by myself)

This chapter traces the historical development of the China–Myanmar border since 1948 to understand why the Chinese government engages in robust border defence. Amid extensive external interference in both countries' political transition, the unresolved border grew increasingly troublesome for both post–colonial Burma (1948) and the newly founded PRC (1949). National boundaries are not only politically significant; they also have socio-cultural ramifications. Thus, using process tracing, this research examines the process behind the China–Myanmar relationship with an emphasis on the strategies and factors that have shaped it. This relationship's history can be split into five distinct phases: 1948–1961 was a period of ambivalent, peaceful coexistence; 1962–1988 was a period of temporary setback; 1989–2010 exhibited an improvement in bilateral ties; 2011–2015 entailed a populist rebalancing, and; 2016–2021 revealed the development of a closer relationship between the two countries. One of the purposes

of process tracing is to integrate explicit and transparent reasoning on causal mechanisms with the temporal chain in which events occur. In other words, this analysis is structured by the temporal phases of the push-pull relationship between China and Myanmar. To answer my research question, I concentrate on shifts in geopolitical competition, the BRI, and ideological infiltration based on relevant traditional and non-traditional security theories.

5.1 Ambivalent peaceful coexistence (1948–1961)

5.1.1 Regime survival

Since Burma gained independence from the United Kingdom in January 1948, it has been obsessed with its connections with China. When the PRC was established in 1949, it faced a hostile international environment and scarce diplomatic recognition from non-communist countries—but Burma was the first non-socialist country to formally recognise it (Myoe, 2011). At that time, the Burmese government believed that a neutral foreign policy with a high degree of flexibility in addressing international problems was in its best interests as a newly independent state. As U Nu (the first Prime Minister of Burma) declared at a rally in December 1949, "the only political programme we should pursue is the one we genuinely believe to be the most suitable for our Union, whatever course the British, the Americans, the Russians, and the Chinese Communists might follow […] Be friendly with all foreign countries" (Yangon: Ministry of Information, 1951). However, it was clear that China initially disapproved of Burma's neutral foreign policy. The PRC under Mao Zedong, an ideologically dedicated communist regime with a deep desire to advocate for revolutionary viewpoints worldwide, took the militant stance that the world was divided into only two camps: anti-imperialist democratic actors and anti-democratic imperialist actors (Steinberg & Fan, 2012). Mao Zedong had a grand plan to unite the world into a China–led international soviet that represents all of humanity, believing the Soviet Union to have abdicated this role upon Joseph Stalin's death by engaging in a hegemonistic revisionist betrayal of Marx and Lenin's scientific socialism (Noakes & Burton, 2019). In this regard, there was no "third road" in China, as Mao considered "neutrality" to merely be a camouflage. Countries with neutral policies—including Burma— were thus deemed to be in the Western camp and were not on the list of countries with which China initially sought to develop close ties.

As a state on the outskirts of the PRC, the Burmese leadership was inevitably circumspect in its interactions with Beijing. Given the geographical proximity and power disparity, Burmese authorities feared that the PRC could intervene in their country's domestic affairs. Due to its own poverty and limited resources, however, China's economic statecraft was limited at the time (Noakes & Burton, 2019), though it did support some revolutionary movements in Burma. In November 1949, Liu Shaoqi

condemned Burmese Prime Minister U Nu for being neutral and sitting on the fence. Then, Liu Shaoqi appealed to participants at the Beijing-sponsored World Federation of Trade Unions Conference of Asian Countries to assist the BCP in its purported "war of national liberation" against the Burmese government (Li & Lye, 2009). At the same time, he argued that the BCP should adopt the Maoist model of armed struggle in Burma. Thus, the BCP sought Chinese assistance in its political and military strategies; in fact, since 1950, it has established base camps along the Burma–China border (Scalapino, 1963). With guidance and support from the CCP, the BCP's revolt was able to genuinely threaten the stability of the Burmese government (Ghoshal, 1994), especially given its status as a newly independent state.

Against this background, U Nu visited China in 1954 and raised the issue of Chinese support for the BCP, but he did not receive a satisfactory response. In fact, the CCP remained silent about its support for the BCP; Chinese authorities routinely denied any awareness of the situation whenever their Burmese colleagues brought up the matter (Ghoshal, 1994). Still, Yangon authorities persuaded China that it would not take any actions detrimental to Beijing's strategic interests in Burma, instead opting to boost the PRC's diplomatic image regionally and internationally (Myoe, 2011). At the same time, Yangon convinced Chinese leaders, which had rigidly followed the "leftist strategy" supported by Communist Information Bureau (Healey, 1948), that Burma operated completely independent of capitalist-imperialist influence. In other words, it convinced China that Burma was neither an imperialist puppet nor a running dog—that it was truly neutral. In turn, Chinese policymakers began to take a more flexible approach to China–Burma relations, aiming to protect China's security interests.

Indeed, Yangon was inherently sympathetic to leftist countries, as Burma's foreign policy was similarly a consequence of its leaders' ideological positions—heavily moulded by socialist and leftist ideologies (Myoe, 2011). The Yangon government coined the term "Pauk-Phaw" (kinsfolk) in the early 1950s to direct and define its bilateral relationship with China. Additionally, Burma adhered to the "One-China" policy, meaning that it recognises Taiwan as the sovereign territory of the PRC (Steinberg & Fan, 2012). While Chinese rhetoric still portrayed Burma as an imperialist stooge, the Chinese authorities did not overstate its case. In a sense, Burma urgently needed consolidation given the civil strife and political upheaval that followed its independence. Likewise, the new Chinese communist government pursued the consolidation of power at home. Thus, the main objective of early China–Burma relations was to ensure regime survival—in other words, to maintain sovereignty through traditional security.

5.1.2   Territorial dispute

Unsurprisingly, addressing the largely unmarked and long-disputed boundary was a top priority for the CCP. In line with the post–WWII nationalist government of China, the communist government continued

to print maps of China depicting vast areas of northern Burma as Chinese territory (Myoe, 2011). Yangon suspected that PLA troops in Burmese territory between 1953 and 1956 posed a significant security threat to their newly independent nation. These suspicions were accurate; China stationed its forces in areas claimed by the PRC because China did not accept the borders created by the British in 1941 (Mitchell & Twining, 2018). In an exchange of notes with Kuomintang (KMT) leadership on 18 June 1941, the British government acquired some land along the China–Burma border area during China's war with Japan (Jones, 1953). The CCP argued that the British enforced the "1941 Line" while China was preoccupied with both Japanese aggression and civil war (Maizland, 2022), making the borders illegitimate. Thus, the PRC refused to recognise the British-imposed boundary conventions and treaties, describing them as "unequal treaties."

As early as 1953, the CCP sought tighter control of the Burmese territory it claimed as Chinese, resulting in an influx of additional PLA troops into the disputed border area, where they constructed roads and other infrastructure (Myoe, 2011). According to some Burmese media reports, around 1,500 PLA forces made it 60 kilometres into Burma's Wa state, deploying permanent outposts with extensive supplies of arms and ammunition (Watson, 1966). From January 1953 to October 1955, China established five "autonomous areas" for national minorities in Yunnan close to the Burmese border: (1) Xishuangbanna Thai Autonomous Area; (2) Lancan Lahu Autonomous Unit; (3) Thai–Shantou (Kachin) Autonomous Area; (4) Gengma Tai Kawa Autonomous County, and; (5) Nu–Jiang (Salween) Lisu Autonomous Area (Phadnis, 1959). Notably, some local residents received Chinese identity cards. Despite these allegations in the media of a PLA invasion, Burma did not publicly acknowledge its presence and refrained from acting on the issue.

A military conflict between the PLA and the Tatmadaw finally broke out in late 1955; the Burmese suffered one dead and three injured, while the Chinese suffered one dead and seven injured (Trager, 1964). This conflict was not made public until late July 1956, when reports began to surface in the Burmese press. *The Nation* (Yangon newspaper) used these reports to declare that the PLA had invaded Burma. Other publications quickly followed suit, and anti-Chinese sentiment spread rapidly throughout Burma (Tinker, 1967). Although official relations between the two nations—based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence—seemed to be smooth on the surface, local conflicts in the border areas continued. To obtain support in these conflicts, Yangon applied diplomatic pressure by successfully courting numerous Asian countries, including India, Pakistan, and Indonesia (Trager, 1964). As Watson (1966) explained, Burmese policy was to limit the exposure of the border conflict to preserve the country's positive regional relationships and achieve its aim of establishing a stable border. In this context, U Nu visited China to address the matter, ultimately reaching an agreement with the CCP to fully withdraw its troops by the end of 1956. The Chinese troops were to withdraw to the west of the Iselin

1941 Line, and Burmese troops would withdraw from Hpimaw, Kangfang, and Gawlum (Steinberg & Fan, 2012). Ultimately, this issue was settled when the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression with all of the aforementioned stipulations was signed in 1960, and the border was demarcated in 1961 (Myoe, 2011). For the first time in decades, the border was being formally demarcated, and border inhabitants were being offered the choice of whether to locate their homes and nationality in Burma or China.

Clearly, the fundamental aim of national security is to defend territorial integrity from traditional security threats. Due to its strong standing army, China has significantly more leverage in conflicts along its land borders, where it can most effectively project its military force. While control over the borderlands remains weak, China's relative power reduces the likelihood that other countries may interpret concessions in border disputes as a sign of weakness. In the past, if a country desired land in another country, it would typically launch a war and conquer it. However, China and Burma conducted negotiations in 1956 despite clashes between their border patrols. Even though China offered to exchange certain disputed territories, the negotiations were prompted by the fact that KMT forces from Taiwan seized refugees in Burma and regularly crossed the border through Yunnan.

5.1.3   U.S.-backed Kuomintang

In November 1949, just a month after the CCP rose to power in China, and Premier Zhou Enlai warned that "any administration that offers sanctuary to the KMT reactionary armed forces must face the burden for addressing this situation and all its following repercussions" (Colbert, 1977). The presence of the KMT in Burma, with its advanced weapon capabilities and financial assistance from Taipei and Washington, constituted a substantial threat to Chinese national territorial integrity (Li & Lye, 2009). The Chinese government was suspicious of the Burmese government's position on this matter and accused Burma of harbouring KMT forces (Scalapino, 1963).

At the same time, the new PRC administration was confronting significant issues with regard to border security, as the southwest part of China was undergoing a major socio-political transformation in the form of regional autonomy, land reform, and nationality identification while facing near-constant cross-border incursions by hostile forces (Myoe, 2011). Early in the 1950s, remnants of the KMT forces and their families, led by General Li Mi, escaped into northeast Burma via Yunnan and utilised the Burmese border area as a military base for strikes against the PRC after realising the strategic importance of this region (Jones, 1953). Additionally, the Chinese government was aware of U.S. involvement with the KMT, complicating things further (Johnstone, 1959), as some U.S.-owned companies were providing guns to the KMT, such as Bangkok Commercial Corporation and Sea Supply Co., Southeast Asia

Corporation. According to Thompson (1953), in the Council of Foreign Relations' Foreign Policy Bulletin, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) actively cooperated with the KMT. As for the KMT, Robert Taylor (1973) notes that Western forces appear to have viewed the KMT as a helpful tool to counter CCP encroachment in Southeast Asia. The CIA appears to have employed the KMT, located close to the border in Yunnan, as a deterrent to the Chinese government invading Burma, forcing Yangon into the Western capitalist camp (Ghoshal, 1994). Thus, the PRC informed Burma that accommodating KMT forces along their mutual border was unacceptable.

Beijing utilised a "carrot-and-stick" strategy to consolidate its power, co-opting local elites with the PLA while ruthlessly eradicating any resistance that it perceived as working with the KMT (Gibson & Chen, 2011). When Western military bases were erected across Chinese borders, including in Burma, PRC authorities were inclined to employ force against them to maintain political stability (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1958). Despite multiple instances in which the PLA crossed the border into Burma, claiming reasonable explanations, China did not push Burma to the point where it felt threatened and sought help from the global anti-communist coalition (Myoe, 2011). In time, the CCP recognised that a neutral Burma would protect their southern border better than a pro-Western and anti-communist Burma. If they had not, Burma might have been driven into joining the anti-communist alliance by continued Chinese excursions, making the PRC's difficulties much worse (Gibson & Chen, 2011). Thus, the Chinese left the KMT to the Burmese government, believing that approach to make the most sense. Otherwise, attacking the KMT in Burma would have been seen as an imperialist game (Johnstone, 1959). More importantly, the CCP had previously stated that they would never use the presence of KMT forces in Burma as a pretext to disrupt the peaceful relations between the two states. As a result, the CCP issued stern instructions to the Chinese in the border area to adopt strictly defensive measures (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC Literature Research Centre, 1998). Similarly, the governments of China and Burma agreed to close their respective borders to anybody entering or leaving without state authorisation, restricting not only customary movement but also large-scale illegal migratory and trafficking flows (Trager, 1964).

The KMT fled Burma in the late 1950s to Laos and Thailand but returned to Burma in the early 1960s, likely due to Taiwan's intention to exploit China's difficulties during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962). However, the Tatmadaw and the PLA agreed on synchronised military action against the KMT in 1962. The two countries began to exchange military intelligence and supplies, and both nations' troops were authorised to cross the border up to ten kilometres to pursue the KMT (Han, 2019). They captured several U.S.-made weapons and aid containers intended for the KMT in the final phases of this operation (Myoe, 2011). Furthermore, large-scale public protests were held in front of the U.S. embassies in Beijing and Yangon, ultimately forcing the U.S. to exert pressure on Taiwan to withdraw KMT troops from the

China–Burma border areas (Gibson & Chen, 2011). By August 1961, only roughly 700 KMT remained in the China–Burma border areas. In this case, the KMT issue—a prominent reason for Chinese concern in the China–Burma relationship—was eliminated as a point of contention in their bilateral relationship.

In summary, this period shows that internal conflicts over regime type and ideology within a new country—in this case, the PRC—should be handled by that country alone without external interference or exploitation. This may be an essential element of maintaining political security and sovereign stability.

5.2 A period of temporary setback (1962–1988)

On 2 March 1962, the Tatmadaw, led by General Ne Win (then Burma's commander-in-chief), conducted a military coup under the guise of the Revolutionary Council and seized control of Burma, and promptly released a declaration emphasising that it would not veer from Burma's avowed foreign policy of "positive neutrality" (Myoe, 2011). Two days after the takeover, the Chinese government granted diplomatic recognition to the Revolutionary Council. As the person who successfully negotiated the border-demarcation treaty and the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression with China, Ne Win had expected his administration to be treated favourably by Beijing. The relationship between China and Burma was still articulated within the framework of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence under the Revolutionary Council, leading to exchanges of high-level visits between the PRC and Burma. Both sides felt that China–Burma relations set a remarkable example of friendly co-existence and amicable cooperation among Asian countries. However, while they outwardly displayed amicable ties, there was evidence of tension and irritation beneath the surface.

5.2.1 Divergence on international issues

In August 1963, the partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (NTBT) was signed in Moscow (National Archives, 1963), which was seen as a significant step toward Burma's aim of prohibiting nuclear testing in both its atmosphere and waters. Thus, Burma ratified and signed the treaty. However, China viewed the treaty as a tactic by the existing nuclear powers to prevent the PRC from obtaining nuclear weapons, so Burma's signature perturbed Beijing. China sought to persuade Burma to back its position on several international issues between 1963 and 1966, including the Afro–Asian Conference, the China–Indian border dispute, the Indonesia–Malaysia confrontation, and the Vietnam War—all of which the Burmese government remained neutral on. Concerning the China–Indian border dispute and subsequent war, the Yangon administration declared in a joint communiqué published during Liu Shaoqi's visit in April 1963 that the matter should be handled through direct dialogue between the two sides based on the Colombo Conference proposals (Malik, 1994). Burma believed that this would result in an acceptable settlement

for both parties. Notably, the Burmese administration refused to support the PRC's request for an Afro–Asian Conference to discuss the boundary dispute (Pettman, 2013). After all, the Beijing government noted that Afro–Asian countries had waged an unrelieved struggle against imperialist interference and suppression in pursuit of national independence and sovereignty and that Afro–Asian countries must increase their vigilance, unite even more closely, and persevere in their struggle (Smith, 1991). This was a veiled indication that Ne Win should exhibit more anti-imperialist fervour (Erjing, 2001). Therefore, Zhou Enlai revisited Burma in February and July of 1964. During the February visit, Zhou Enlai tried once more to persuade Ne Win to back the Chinese stance on the China–Indian border dispute and arouse enthusiasm for the concept of an Afro–Asian Conference. Still, Ne Win refrained from commenting on the border dispute, asserting that the proposed Afro–Asian Conference would divide—rather than unite—non-aligned countries (Malik, 1994), recognising that Beijing could exploit the conference as a rallying point for Chinese support on the border dispute. While Ne Win ultimately promised to attend the conference if one was established, he refused to publicly support the concept of convening beforehand (Myoe, 2011).

Moreover, some Burmese observers considered Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi's visit in July 1964 as a way for the Soviet Union to recoup any gains earned by First Deputy Prime Minister Anastas Mikoyan's visit less than a week prior (Liang, 1991). In fact, Zhou sought to convince Ne Win to support China in the Vietnam War and the Indonesia–Malaysia confrontation. Additionally, Chinese leaders tried to persuade Ne Win to limit the Soviet's access to Burmese airspace. However, their efforts failed. Thus, in 1964, China began to express its dissatisfaction with Burmese leadership. Meanwhile, the war in Vietnam was escalating, with the U.S. committing to sending combat troops in February 1965. Against this background, Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi made three stopovers in Burma in April 1965 (Lüthi, 2013), during which Zhou Enlai is said to have given a three-hour lecture to Ne Win on the Vietnam War, urging him to display a spirit of socialist solidarity (Guan, 2009). This was a reasonable approach, as just two months after the military coup, the Revolutionary Council had declared the "Burmese Way to Socialism," influenced by Buddhist and Marxist ideologies. This later became the political and socioeconomic framework through which the Revolutionary Council developed and implemented its policies (Myoe, 2011). The Revolutionary Council also formed the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) to spearhead the socialist revolution in Burma. Consequently, Chinese leaders stressed socialist solidarity and internationalism to persuade the government to support the north in the Vietnam War. When a Burmese team led by General Ne Win visited China for six days at the request of Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi on 24 July 1965, during this visit, Chinese officials focused on progress in the Vietnam War, emphasising the global fight against imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. Regardless, General Ne Win remained indifferent and adopted a neutral attitude to refrain from commenting on the situation in Vietnam War.

By late 1965, China had grown increasingly dissatisfied with several areas of Burmese foreign policy, especially where Yangon's rigorous neutrality ran counter to Beijing's position. In essence, the Burmese attitude toward the Vietnam War and its reluctance to accept an anti-imperialist stance—along with its ratification of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and failure to sponsor a Chinese military-training programme for the Miso insurgents fighting against the Indian government on Burmese land—irritated the PRC.

5.2.2 External inference

Soon after the military takeover, the Burmese government introduced a nationalisation policy under Ne Win's leadership, encompassing Chinese enterprises, banks, schools, and newspapers, aiming to weaken China's political influence in Burma. However, General Ne Win openly conceded his government's failure to achieve economic progress through its extreme nationalisation policy and acknowledged the necessity for outside aid in October 1965 (Feng, 2012). He soon realised the ramifications of abandoning the self-defeating strategy of near-complete economic isolation that he had adopted to appease China and other socialist powers (Pettman, 2013). Regardless, General Ne Win began to experiment with a more diverse approach, visiting a wide range of countries, including India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Thailand, Romania, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, the U.S., and Japan (Myoe, 2011). Hundreds of Burmese students were enabled by the Soviet Union and other Eastern European nations to pursue their education (Myoe, 2011). During his visit to the U.S. in September 1966, General Ne Win remained silent on the Vietnam War, and the joint communiqué expressed that General Ne Win had emphasised Burma's desire for a political solution to the Vietnam War based on respect for its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity (Myoe, 2011). A few months earlier, Ne Win had warmly welcomed U.S. Senator Mike Mansfield—the first high-ranking U.S. political figure to visit Burma since the 1962 coup (Zaw, 2009)—whose political views and anti-Vietnam War remarks likely convinced Yangon that he was the most appropriate U.S. political figure to visit Burma. Additionally, the Burmese government purchased military hardware from the U.S., including airplanes and gunboats (Holmes, 1967). Furthermore, it procured West German weapons plants capable of producing weaponry and ammunition up to the standards of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (Holmes, 1967). All of these actions likely irritated Beijing.

By the mid-1960s, Beijing was displeased and frustrated with Ne Win's rigorous neutrality, as the Burmese government's shift in foreign policy towards the U.S. and the Soviet Union created a slew of military, political, and economic obstacles for China. Any overt gesture toward the Soviet Union or the U.S. may have involved China's interests in Burmese affairs. Beijing and Washington both attached strategic importance to Burma in their diplomatic approaches to Southeast Asia. When Beijing decided to support Ne Win in 1962 despite not ideologically favouring Burmese socialism, it explained that it did

so because of Burma's important geostrategic position, noting that changes in Burma's domestic situation could significantly impact China (Fan, 2012a). Similarly, Burma occupied an essential position in U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia. Thus, there were still tensions along the China–Burma border. However, relative to the 1950s and 1960s, the security environment along China's border with Burma was far more secure.

5.2.3   Anti-Chinese riots and the Cultural Revolution

Since early 1964, China has intensified its organisational and political initiatives among Chinese citizens in Burma. Despite adhering to a communist ideology, the Chinese government maintained intimate ties with Chinese business people living abroad who could benefit from promoting Chinese national interests. In fact, some wealthy Chinese merchants in Burma are said to have been working for the PRC during this period, with Beijing viewing such wealthy Chinese business people living abroad as high-profile persons (Bolesta, 2018). Nonetheless, with the nationalisation of Burmese banks and industries in 1964 (including two Chinese banks and several Chinese firms), Beijing recognised that it had lost much of its power over the Chinese community in Burma (Holmes, 1967). The Revolutionary Council, conscious of Beijing's influence on the Chinese community in Burma, closely monitored the political activities of its Chinese residents. This was partially based on suspicions that some Chinese residents were in touch with Burmese communist insurgents. By 1966, the Cultural Revolution had gained momentum in China and began spreading through Chinese foreign relations. For example, Lin Biao's "Long Live the People's War" clearly demonstrated Beijing's militancy, indicating that Beijing advocated for exporting revolution to other countries (Myoe, 2011). Ne Win effectively showed his ability to take defensive action as soon as shock waves from the cultural revolution that roared across China threatened Burmese stability and sovereignty (Pettman, 2013). The Revolutionary Council became conscious that certain private schools run by foreign communities—especially those run by Chinese residents—were providing political and ideological education (Fan, 2012), so it sought to subject them to strict supervision. By 1967, as the influence of the Cultural Revolution spilt over into Burma, Burmese authorities realised that these schools had developed into a hotspot of tension. Subsequently, as China attempted to spread the Cultural Revolution through Chinese residents in Burma, anti-Chinese riots erupted, and China–Burma ties worsened. Chinese diplomats and militants staged a series of incidents to demonstrate their dedication to the revolution. The tensions between the two nations gradually became more heated, and their relationship reached a low point in their post–war history. As Holmes (1967) remarks, the China–Burma relationship was a victim of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Since 1966, the PRC has actively urged Chinese citizens living abroad to profess allegiance to their homeland (Myoe, 2011). The PRC implemented various measures to persuade the Chinese in Burma to

endorse the Cultural Revolution. At one point, 12 Red Guards were dispatched to Yangon to build up Chinese support for the Cultural Revolution in 1967 (French, 2006). These Red Guards advocated for the Cultural Revolution from the Chinese embassy premises, spreading it to the Chinese community in Yangon. For instance, they invited Chinese students to watch Maoist films and plays about the Cultural Revolution, taught songs with lines like "Mao is the red sun in our hearts," and held cadre-training workshops nearly every morning on embassy grounds (Arnott, 2001). In addition, Chinese teachers, junior students, and senior students were formed into cadres as unit leaders and followers, mimicking the Maoist structure. In this context, the Burmese Ministry of Education published a regulation on 19 June 1967 prohibiting people from wearing any political insignia not approved by the ministry. In response to this regulation, the Chinese Teachers' Federation convened an emergency meeting to protest the decision and plan aggressive disobedience. Under instructions from their teachers, Chinese students disobeyed the regulation and established Red Guard-style organisations to stage the first protest against government regulations at two Chinese schools in downtown Yangon on 22 June 1967.

On 23 June 1967, the Chinese chargé d'affaires in Yangon filed a protest with the Burmese Foreign Ministry after school administrators took action against students who disobeyed the rule. The message maintained that Chinese citizens living abroad had the right to wear Mao badges and that no one should deprive them of that right, ultimately requesting that the Burmese government ensure that people wearing the badges would not be prosecuted (Fan, 2012). Even though the Ministry of Education commanded schoolmasters to inform students of the regulation and appeal to parents to observe the guidelines, tensions between school administrators and Chinese students intensified, and anti-Chinese riots broke out. As a result, many Burmese attacked Chinese-owned businesses, houses, and even the Chinese Embassy. Many Chinese in Burma were killed or had their properties destroyed. The Burmese government proclaimed martial law and imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew in Yangon, though it allowed anti-Chinese demonstrations and Chinese diplomatic activities to continue orderly (Erjing, 2001). In fact, the Revolutionary Council thoroughly leveraged public sentiment against Chinese who practised extreme Chinese chauvinism, giving it a chance to control the local Chinese community. Thus, Beijing accused the Burmese government of provoking and organising the protests and Ne Win of meticulously manipulating and exploiting xenophobia. Facing diplomatic pressure from China, Burmese officials appealed to the population for tolerance in pursuit of amicable bilateral relations. The riots, however, continued to escalate, with enraged crowds setting fire to the Overseas Chinese Teachers Federation offices and attacking the Chinese Embassy.

On 28 June 1967, the Chinese Foreign Ministry sent a letter of protest to the Burmese Embassy in China demanding that the Burmese government take immediate and urgent measures to prevent the situation from worsening and ensure the safety of Chinese Embassy personnel, employees sent by China to

undertake Chinese loan projects, and other Chinese citizens in Burma (Fan, 2012). The Chinese government reserved the right to claim compensation for all losses from the Burmese government and reminded Yangon that it must take full responsibility for the consequences of the anti-Chinese demonstrations. In addition, mass rallies were organised in front of the Burmese Embassy in Beijing to denounce the Revolutionary Council for its failure to follow China's lead in international affairs. Still, Burmese officials refused to concede that Burmese actions caused the conflict between China and Burma. Despite intense political pressure from China, the Revolutionary Council maintained rigorous neutrality in its foreign policy, though it still aimed to restore friendly relations with China (Trager, 1969).

On the other side, Yangon demanded the withdrawal from Burma of all Chinese technicians from PRC-funded projects. According to an official Burmese source, about 1,500 Chinese citizens left Burma during the first five months of 1968 (Taylor, 1974). Gradually, Beijing's assaults on the Yangon government became less frequent and more restrained. Despite both sides showing signs of reconciliation after 1968, no substantial measures were taken, and diplomatic relations were not restored until 1971.

5.2.4   Illegal border trade

As the bilateral relationship gradually normalised, Beijing resumed its provision of development aid to Yangon. In July 1979, China and Burma reached an agreement on technical and economic cooperation that provided Burma with US$64 million for development projects. In 1984, Beijing provided a further US$15 million in funding. During the visit of Vice Minister of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade Lu Xuejian to Yangon, China provided Burma with an interest-free loan of 80 million RMB to build the Yangon-Thanlyin Bridge (Arnott, 2001). However, illegal cross-border trade also began to flourish around this time. Illicit commerce had inundated the Burmese market with Chinese and Thai consumer goods. Every household in Burma depended on cheap Chinese goods, including toiletries, clothing, medications, and gadgets (De Jonge & Walker, 2001). In fact, most of the weapons in the border area came from Thailand or Laos during the Indochina War in the 1960s–70s. Most supplies come via two sources: the BCP, which relayed Chinese-made ammunition and arms to allied forces in the Kachin and Shan states, and arms dealers in Thailand, who sold various kinds of arms (Myoe, 2011).

Moreover, given the halt of Chinese aid following Deng Xiaoping's ascension in 1978, the BCP began to engage heavily in the opiate trade as one of the remaining ways it could acquire funds to maintain its territory and fight against the Burmese government. In addition, armed forces in Burma—including the BCP and other groups—all began to cultivate opium in pursuit of wealth, much like fellow armed groups in China (Guo, 2007). Notably, China's open-door policy and the revival of cross-border trade facilitated drug trafficking along the border. The drug-trafficking routes that had historically been concentrated in

the south along the border with Thailand and Laos were now largely in the north of Burma and across the border in Yunnan (Dehong and Lincang, in particular), which bore the brunt of the narcotics epidemic. The Shan state was a major poppy-growing region. After breaking with the BCP, the United Wa State Army became extensively involved in drug trafficking, with former BCP youngsters spearheading the trade (Guo, 2007). Indeed, as the internationalisation of production, trade liberalisation, financial mobility, and advances in transportation and communications technology have slowly become critical indicators of border erosion, the national security threat of illicit commerce manifested through the PCR in the form of customs and border regulations, foreign policy, and military posturing.

Evidently, this period was marked by underlying strain and irritation driven by divergence on international issues, external interference in bilateral relations, and anti-Chinese riots in Burma despite the countries' ostensibly cordial relations. Both Beijing and Washington attached strategic importance to Burma in their respective diplomacy. When Beijing decided to support Ne Win in 1962 despite not ideologically favouring Burmese socialism, it explained that it did so because of Burma's critical geostrategic position, noting that changes in Burma's domestic situation could significantly impact China. Similarly, Burma occupied an important position in U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia. After the restoration of state-to-state relations in 1971, the Burmese government learned to cope with China's "two-pronged" policy. However, in the post–Mao era, government-to-government relations between the two countries improved considerably at the expense of the party-to-party relationship between the CCP and the BCP. This meant that Burma's strategic value to China was that of a buffer state between China and both the West and the Soviet Union to maintain China's national interests.

5.3   An improvement in bilateral ties (1989–2010)

5.3.1   China–Myanmar relations after the Cold War

Following the Vice-Governor of Yunnan's signing of an agreement to legalise border trade, the collapse of the BCP in 1989, and additional arms transactions between China and Burma, the bilateral relationship between the two countries was back on track (Kudo, 2012). Notably, however, a military coup d'état conducted by the Burmese Armed Forces (the Tatmadaw) on 18 September 1988 resulted in the suspension of Chinese foreign aid to Burma, resulting in a US$9 million drop in Burma's foreign currency reserves by early 1989 (Watcher, 1989). The new military government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), in response to the widespread deterioration of the Burmese government's authority, changed the country's name from Burma to the Union of Myanmar on 18 June 1989 (Than, 2003). In November 1997, the SLORC was restructured as the SPDC, which would exercise increased executive authority over Myanmar.

Faced with its neighbour's turbulent political situation, the official spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that the Chinese government was deeply concerned about the recent developments in Myanmar and that it would still steadfastly adhere to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Myoe, 2011). This meant that China would not interfere in the domestic affairs of Myanmar and hoped that the country's new leaders would handle its internal issues properly, prevent violence, and quickly return to normalcy. Notably, trade links between the two countries were not interrupted following the coup (Ghoshal, 1994). Early in 1989, the Chinese government clearly expressed that it supported the new military regime in Myanmar. The Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 reinforced Beijing's stance on Myanmar. In the wake of its harsh suppression of pro-democracy movements in Beijing, the PRC began to receive the same condemnation and sanctions from the West as its neighbour, Myanmar (Myoe, 2011). In this sense, the military takeover in Myanmar and the Tiananmen Square massacre in China caused upheavals in domestic politics and foreign relations in both countries, leading both to be hit with significant international sanctions. Consequently, they increased the number of bilateral diplomatic and cultural visits to one another and boosted their economic, military and security cooperation, strengthening their bilateral relationship. These significant developments marked a new era of mutual collaboration across multiple sectors, extending beyond the traditional sphere of political-diplomatic ties into military-security and economic-cooperation ties in the post–Cold War era.

In the post–Cold War security context, some scholars and decision-makers began to view a rising China as a significant threat to U.S. hegemony. Chinese leadership also believed that the U.S. had a "containment policy" towards China and that, at least from a political and strategic standpoint, China had not benefited from the U.S. being the sole superpower in a unipolar world (Myoe, 2011). Still, China sought to maintain a stable, peaceful security atmosphere in the region and to reassure its neighbours that it posed no threat. This was partially motivated by its desire to prevent hostile forces from settling in its neighbourhood (Larus, 2005). Obviously, Myanmar had begun to play an important role in China's security considerations in terms of both geostrategy and geopolitics (Kyaw, 2019). Myanmar obtained explicit reassurances from China that it would not pose a security threat. In order to aid the Myanmar government in resolving its internal security issues, China pressured various armed rebel groups operating near the China–Myanmar border to sign ceasefire agreements (Larus, 2005) while at the same time helping to enhance the military might of the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF), enabling them to go on the offensive against the BCP and recapture the trade routes in the country's border area (Kudo, 2012). The Myanmar government was appreciative of these services and began to view China as a reliable friend. Notably one of the major elements that contributed to the development of the SLORC's amicable relationship with China was the latter's decision to abstain from backing the BCP and ethnic rebel groups along the China–Myanmar border (Myoe, 2011). On the contrary, the PRC actively encouraged insurgents to sign negotiated ceasefire agreements (NCAs) with the SLORC (Seekins, 1997), as it sought

to preserve peace and stability in the region—in no small part to facilitate trade between Yunnan and Myanmar.

5.3.2 China–Myanmar military cooperation

A closer partnership between the PLA and the Tatmadaw has been one of the most notable aspects of China–Myanmar relations since 1988. As Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Myanmar, Lieutenant General Than Shwe's visit to China in October 1989 marked the start of a new era of stronger military cooperation between the two countries' armed forces (Than, 2003). This partnership was crucial for Myanmar, as it lost access to traditional weapons suppliers due to Western sanctions following the 1988 military coup (Hadar, 1998). Thus, China has been a primary source of armaments for Myanmar since 1989. Between 1989 and 2011, China has provided Myanmar with an estimated US$4 billion worth of weapons, including combat aircraft, warships, armoured personnel carriers, main battle tanks, anti-aircraft guns, and small arms (Myoe, 2011). Moreover, China has provided a wide variety of vehicles in terms of both size and capacity as well as a programme for obtaining firearms alongside training materials. In addition to offering Myanmar spots at the PLA's Staff College and Defence College (Myoe, 2011), China has also sponsored weapons training programmes. Furthermore, Chinese technology transfers and technical support enabled the Tatmadaw to establish a domestic defence industry (Kudo, 2012). Clearly, military aid has been one of China's primary strategies to engage Myanmar.

In 2000, the Tatmadaw opted to diversify its arms-procurement models to avoid becoming overly dependent on and indebted to a single power (Clapp, 2015). Thus, Myanmar became increasingly interested in Eastern European and Russian weapons, leading to the acquisition of Bulgarian anti-aircraft missiles and Russian MiGs (Lutz–Auras, 2015). For example, 146 out of the 198 aircraft purchased by the Myanmar Air Force between 1990 and 2000 (74%) were made in China (Aeroflight, 2005), but only 50 were from China between 2000 and 2010, with the other 154 aircraft coming from Russia (Lutz–Auras, 2015). Additionally, the Tatmadaw has dispatched an increasing number of trainees to Russia, which has trained 4,185 Myanmar military officers in nuclear sciences (Myoe, 2011). Consequently, since 2000, bilateral military cooperation between the two countries has primarily consisted of cooperative training exercises and China opening its training facilities to Myanmar officers.

5.3.3 China–Myanmar economic relations

Another important aspect of the China–Myanmar relationship since 1988 has been the growing bilateral cooperation in the fields of trade, investment, and development aid. When the SLORC took over on 18 September 1998, China emerged as one of its most significant commercial partners and suppliers of

development assistance. As Myanmar geographically constitutes China's "back door," bilateral trade—particularly land-based trade—is crucial to China's strategy of developing its southwestern regions, particularly Yunnan (Yhome, 2015). Given that Kunming is far closer to Yangon than it is to Beijing, the PCR viewed it as imperative to foster amicable relations between local Yunnan administrations and Myanmar (Haacke, 2011). Additionally, cooperation with Myanmar facilitates trade between China and other countries in Southeast Asia (Yoshikawa, 2022). According to Chinese statistics, China had a trade surplus of US$10,046.62 million with Myanmar between 1989 and 2008 (Han, 2018). Just from 2009 to 2010, China amassed a trade surplus of US$3,684 million with Myanmar (Han, 2018). Notably, however, this trade surplus may benefit Myanmar too, through investment in real estate and other assets.

In addition, China has inundated Myanmar's market with low-cost goods ranging from groceries to electronics, while Myanmar mainly exports agricultural products, raw materials, fishery products, livestock, and forest products to China (Bolesta, 2018). More crucially, there have been significant illicit logging and timber flows to China at several points along the China–Myanmar border (Environmental Investigation Agency, 2015). Chinese customs data from 2004 and 2005 reveal that timber accounted for 70% and 71%, respectively, of all imports from Myanmar to China—and almost 90% of this timber was imported through the province of Yunnan (UNODC, 2015). Similarly, the Wa, Mong La, and Kokang states, where Chinese is the primary language and trade can be conducted in Chinese money, were more likely to be economically and geographically linked to Yunnan than they were to Naypyidaw, Myanmar's capital (Clapp, 2015), which was developed in the central basin of Myanmar in the early 21st century to serve as the country's new administrative centre. More specifically, the armed ethnic groups imposed their own tariffs and tolls on cross-border trade in these regions. As a result, items that entered these special districts often never left them and never made it to the two countries' major consumption centres, hindering logistical progress (Kudo, 2006). In this regard, China–Myanmar trade has been marked by the growing importance of sub-state entities. While China–Myanmar cross-border trade may continue to be a lifeline for the Myanmar economy, a firm reliance on the exports of primary goods to China would seriously complicate the two countries' long-term bilateral trade ties.

Chinese investment in Myanmar has been characterised by its intense concentration in a select few strategic sectors, including power, oil and gas, and mining (Bolesta, 2018), due to their relevance to China's energy security strategy and pursuit of economic cooperation with Myanmar. This indicates that both geopolitical and economic considerations have influenced Chinese investment in Myanmar. At the same time, there were a lot of undisclosed private investments and commercial enterprises by Chinese residents, most of whom were registered under the names of relatives of Chinese ethnicity who were citizens of Myanmar citizens (Myoe, 2011). According to figures from the Myanmar government, China ranked second among foreign investors in the nickel- and copper-mining sectors, having spent

US$6,415.058 million on 32 projects by the end of July 2010 (Zhao, 2011). Additionally, Myanmar and China reached an agreement to establish two pipelines: one for natural gas at the cost of US$1.04 billion and another for crude oil at the cost of US$1.5 billion in November 2008 (Sun, 2013). The pipelines would later be extended from Kyaukphyu to Kunming, and the Kyaukphyu port would later come to serve as a deep-water seaport (Yoshikawa, 2022), part of the so-called Kyaukphyu-Kunming Corridor. One billion cubic feet of gas per day was supplied via the gas pipeline, up from its initial capacity of 600 million cubic feet (Sun, 2013). The oil pipeline's capacity increased to 20 million metric tons per year, mainly imported from the Middle East and Africa (Haacke, 2011). The oil pipeline can make China's oil imports from the Middle East and Africa more secure by decreasing the country's sole reliance on the Malacca Straits, while the gas pipeline can expedite China's ambitions to access gas reserves in Myanmar to fulfil rising domestic demand.

China has also worked to establish at least two industrial zones in Myanmar: Yangon-Thanlyin and Kyaukphyu. The Yangon-Thanlyin special industrial zone was established on 1,000 acres with 100% foreign investment and a focus on exports after the Myanmar government leased the land to Chinese investors (Hilton, 2013). The zone's proximity to the Thilawa seaport and links to the Irrawaddy Transportation Project facilitates convenient international trade. The Kyaukphyu special industrial zone, located on the west coast of Myanmar, is another ambitious project conducive to international trade. Indeed, these industrial zone developments could be advantageous to Beijing's strategic goals, with China potentially aiming to promote Myanmar as a trade hub for Chinese products throughout South Asia and Southeast Asia (Sun, 2013). Myanmar also benefits from these technological transfers and infrastructure projects, especially in its impoverished regions in its western and southern regions (Yhome, 2015). In this regard, China effectively exploited its role as a provider of development aid to gain allies and exert influence.

Since 1988, all forms of international aid for Myanmar's development have been suspended—except for Chinese aid (Tun, 2015). Economic sanctions on Myanmar have been put in place by Western powers, led by the U.S. In light of this, Chinese development aid has historically been the primary source of foreign aid. Typically, Chinese aid for development has taken the form of grants, concessional loans, interest-free loans and debt relief for the procurement of passenger aircraft or the construction of hydroelectric power plants, highways, railways, and information technology infrastructure, among other projects (Han, 2018). For example, a build-operate-transfer (BOT) agreement on the construction of a hydroelectric power plant on the Shweli River (a river on the China–Myanmar border) was signed on 31 December 2006 by the Ministry of Electric Power No. 1 of Myanmar and Yunnan United Power Development of China (International Crisis Group, 2010). This was the first hydroelectric BOT project in Myanmar, and it began transmitting electricity to Yunnan in 2010 (Kudo, 2012). The company will

operate the power plant until 2050, at which point it will hand it over to the Myanmar government (Bolesta, 2018).

The transport sector is another crucial area of development engagement between China and Myanmar. The Lashio-Muse railway project was an infrastructure-improvement initiative enabled by Chinese financial and technical support (Sun, 2013). The Chinese government has already completed the Kunming–Muse railway, which is 690 kilometres long and is part of China's plan for the Kunming–Singapore railroad network (Haacke, 2011). Additionally, Yunnan authorities invested US$23.2 million in the construction of the 95-kilometre Tengchong-Myitkyina road via Kanpeikti and US$3.38 million in the improvement of the Zhangfeng-Bhamo road (Sun, 2013). Similarly, Chinese companies were set to play a heightened role in fixed and wireless telecommunication through the provision of auto-exchanges, fibre optics, and mobile telecommunication systems to the Myanmar's telecommunication sector, including its state-owned Myanmar Post (Yoshikawa, 2022).

Furthermore, the Chinese government assisted the Myanmar government in obtaining private loans from Chinese banks and corporations. The majority of development initiatives have been connected to Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Lin et al., 2020). Despite charging either no interest or very little interest on commercial loans and supplier credits, the Chinese government and Chinese SOEs increased the price of the plants and components that they exported to Myanmar (Qi & Kotz, 2019). Additionally, there has often been corruption in the loan-negotiating process. Nevertheless, affordable machinery, equipment, and services, long-term loans with low-interest rates, and export credits provided by Chinese financial institutions have enabled Chinese firms to have a significant impact on Myanmar's economy (Myoe, 2011). However, in 2011, the Myanmar government adjusted how loans were handled for joint-venture projects with Chinese companies, ensuring that Chinese companies could not only own shares in the plants but also provide high-quality products and maintenance services for Myanmar (Myint, 2018). Clearly, China has provided such extensive development assistance to Myanmar to advance its own commercial interests and energy security. This strategy has served Beijing's geopolitical goals by guaranteeing access to the Indian Ocean without crossing the Malacca Strait and has secured China a supply of commodities for its expansion into overseas markets.

5.3.4   China–Myanmar political connections

Politically, the 1988 military takeover in Myanmar and the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in China caused upheavals in domestic politics and foreign relations in both countries, leading both to be hit with significant international sanctions. China–Myanmar relations have experienced the development of ever-closer bilateral ties since the Chinese government offered to provide the political-diplomatic support that

the Myanmar government needed. The PRC has reaffirmed its adherence to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence with Myanmar and stressed the significance of the concept of non-interference in a foreign country's internal affairs; rarely does the Chinese government express public criticism of Myanmar's domestic matters (Myoe, 2011). More importantly, the reciprocal state visits between the two countries leaders attest to the close ties between them. For example, then-Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt referred to the China–Myanmar relationship as a "Nyi-Ako" (sibling) connection in 2004, elevating it above the standard "Pauk-Phaw" (kinsfolk) relationship (Yue, 2014). Around the same time, Hu Jintao claimed that China and Myanmar are excellent neighbouring countries linked by common mountains and rivers and that the two peoples enjoy a profound "Pauk-Phaw" friendship in a message that he sent to Myanmar's head of state on 4 January 2007 (Myoe, 2011). Evidently, both parties value the "Pauk-Phaw" relationship.

In late 2003, the Chinese government started to take a more aggressive attitude towards Myanmar, pressuring Yangon to enact political change while continuing to defend the nation on regional and international platforms and offering development aid (Sun, 2012a). In reality, Beijing provided much-needed diplomatic support to Myanmar. When the country's ASEAN chairmanship was scrutinised due to military-ruled Myanmar's harsh suppression of pro-democracy movements and imprisonment of pro-democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi, the Chinese government supported Yangon's position (Myoe, 2011), calling on the international community to positively and constructively support Yangon while respecting Myanmar's sovereignty (Chalk, 2013). China worked to ensure that Myanmar can maintain its political stability, economic growth, and national harmony, with its people able to live and work together in peace. In response, Myanmar has consistently embraced the One-China policy and favoured China's inalienable rights to protect its territorial integrity and sovereignty (Cook, 2012). For instance, the Myanmar government has sided with PRC on the Taiwan dispute, the attack on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and the incident involving the U.S. Air Force's spy plane off the coast of Hainan Island (Cook, 2012).

Notably, the SPDC leadership decided to transfer Myanmar's capital from Yangon to Naypyidaw in November 2005 with security considerations, among several other factors, in mind (Myoe, 2006). However, some ASEAN members publicly voiced their discontent that Myanmar had not consulted them before making this decision. Although some asserted that the PRC was similarly frustrated by the failure to signal the capital change (Chalk, 2013), it nevertheless provided funding for the establishment of the Myanmar International Convention Centre (MICC) in Naypyidaw. While the Chinese contribution to the MICC was financially negligible (Myoe, 2011), it was politically significant, as it reflected China's support for the new capital.

One of the most important historical indicators of the China–Myanmar political friendship was the Chinese position on Myanmar in the UN. John Bolton, the U.S. Ambassador to the UN under President Bush, made repeated attempts to bring the Myanmar issue to the UN (VOA, 2009). On 1 September 2006, Ambassador Bolton submitted a resolution to get Myanmar on the Security Council's agenda, claiming that the country's internal unrest threatened regional and global security and peace (U.S. Department of State, 2006). While a draft resolution on Myanmar was presented to the UNSC and approved by a vote of 10 to 4, China, Qatar, Russia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo opposed the proposal (Myoe, 2011). In that same meeting, the Chinese Ambassador to the UN, Wang Guangya, asserted that neither Myanmar's neighbours nor the majority of Asian countries saw any threat to regional peace and security stemming from the situation in Myanmar (Myoe, 2011). China actively backed Myanmar's leadership through both political and diplomatic means. Similarly, when China had to deal with the Tibetan uprising in March 2008, Naypyidaw released a statement supporting Beijing (Holliday, 2009).

However, it appears that the China–Myanmar bilateral relationship entered a challenging phase in early 2008 when Naypyidaw became unsatisfied with Beijing's growing links to anti-government actors in Myanmar. The SPDC discovered that Chinese officials, primarily from Yunnan, held a series of meetings with Myanmar's dissidents in Maesot and Chiang Mai (Thailand) and Ruili (Yunnan), some of whom were given the opportunity to tour Kunming and Beijing (Myoe, 2011). Thus, Naypyidaw began to lose interest in the planned construction of oil and gas pipelines from the port of Kyaukphyu in Myanmar to Kunming, where China intended to establish refineries. These pipelines were of strategic importance to energy-hungry China on account of China's worries over its vulnerability in the Malacca Straits region and the fact that these pipelines could transport nearly 85% of its energy imports from the Middle East and Africa (Kudo, 2012). In this context, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi paid a two-day visit to Naypyidaw in December 2008 with the aim of strengthening bilateral ties and resolving any misunderstandings that may have developed between the two sides. During his meeting with Myanmar Foreign Minister Nyan Win, Yang Jiechi emphasised that the Chinese government placed a high value on its relationship with Myanmar and would continuously work to enhance its neighbourly and friendly connections with the country based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2008).

Myanmar's goal was to carry out these BRI projects with Chinese assistance and to strengthen cooperation with China in jointly combating cross-border criminal activities. When Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Myanmar in 2010 to mark the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the leaders from both sides came to a mutual understanding of their border issues and decided to work together to maintain peace and tranquillity along their shared border, turning their borders into a platform for friendly cooperation (China Daily, 2010). Consequently, China attached even

greater importance to maintaining a friendly relationship with Myanmar from a purely strategic perspective.

Indeed, during this period, both China and Myanmar acknowledged the mutual rules of the game and the emerging framework of China–Myanmar bilateral ties. The Yangon route held a geostrategic status for China with the radical changes in the international situation and Asian geopolitics. Beijing also seemed to be aware of the limits to its power over Myanmar. Naypyidaw also began to view China's international obligations as indicative of a major responsible power (Myoe, 2011) that could provide genuine diplomatic support and protection. In this context, Beijing would continue to pressure the Myanmar government to promote effective governance, national reconciliation, and political transition and privately offer helpful advice and constructive criticism. However, China would still defend and protect Myanmar's legitimate interests to prevent western interference in Myanmar's domestic affairs at various bilateral meetings, as China has an undeniable strategic interest in this region.

5.3.5   China–Myanmar cultural interactions

Political relations between China and Myanmar have been moulded in large part by China's cultural diplomacy, including frequent visits between members of journalists' and writers' associations, athletic teams, and cultural ensembles. China sent formal invitations through official channels because all social organisations were either supported by the state or under its supervision to prevent any misunderstandings between the two countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 1997). China sent five journalists' and writers' delegations and nine cultural delegations between 1991 and 1994, while Myanmar sent four journalists' and writers' delegations and eight cultural delegations. During that same period, China and Myanmar each exchanged two educational delegations (Than, 2003). The most significant and heavily publicised cultural events between the two countries were the journeys of the Buddha Tooth Relic from China—the "Dethasari" (sacred journeys) (Myoe, 2011). However, on 5 December 1996, there was an explosion at the site of the Buddha Tooth Relic at Kaba Aita in Yangon, killing four people but leaving the relic untouched. Myanmar attributed the blast to Karen insurgents and other rebel forces (Chalk, 2013), though the accused parties promptly refuted this. Despite this tragedy, the "Dethasari"—and China's "Tooth Relic diplomacy"—constituted a huge success.

Meanwhile, the Myanmar government was cautious to avoid portraying a negative view of China through its state-owned media outlets. It also forbade local private media outlets from reporting about China in a negative light or in a way that was detrimental to China's national interests (Than, 2003). For instance, in August 2007, news on "Made in China" products was strictly censored in Myanmar despite issues of contaminated food and toiletries, fake products, pirated items, and hazardous toys and clothing

dominating international headlines at that time (Myoe, 2011). Undoubtedly, the Chinese government was sensitive to the deteriorating reputation and unfavourable press surrounding Chinese-made goods. In fact, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Vietnamese Ambassador to China to lecture him about how the Chinese government disapproved of Vietnamese media coverage of the issue (Vuving, 2008). Immediately, Beijing asserted that Vietnam should urge its state-owned media outlets to downplay the issue, warning that continued refusal could result in actions being taken against Vietnamese exports to China (Vuving, 2008). Understanding China's commitment to bury this bad press, Naypyidaw censored coverage of the issue to protect China's interests.

Notably, there has been an influx of Chinese migrants in northern Myanmar during the 1980s. In fact, two significant fires—one on 21 May 1981 and another on 24 March 1984—drastically altered the physical character, social landscape, and ethnic composition of Mandalay. The former left 36,000 people homeless and destroyed roughly 6,000 buildings (The New York Times, 1981), while the latter left 23,000 homeless and destroyed 2,700 buildings (The New York Times, 1984). Vast tracts of property were incinerated and left vacant by residents who were unable to afford the cost of reconstruction, only to be purchased later by ethnic Chinese residing in Myanmar (Than & Kyi, 1997). It is important to note that, while illegal immigration had essentially stopped after 1968 as a result of the conflict between the Burmese government and the BCP in Myanmar's border area, several cities in the Shan state had already been densely populated with people from Yunnan by that point (Lubeigt, 2010). With the expanding Chinese influence in Myanmar and the rising wealth of many ethnic Chinese residents, the rise of anti-Chinese sentiments in the early 1990s may have contributed to social tension between ethnic Burmese and Chinese citizens living in Myanmar (Sadan, 2013). It was widely believed at the time that the vast wealth of ethnic Chinese residents stemmed from involvement in drug trafficking and other illicit businesses in the border areas (Chang, 2014). This hostility was particularly pronounced in Mandalay, where Chinese immigrants spent enormous sums of money to purchase properties in the city centre, forcing Burmese people to relocate (Myoe, 2011). The government's initiative to relocate the resultant squatter communities to new satellite towns hastened the trend of wealthy Chinese families and recent immigrants moving into the city centre (Lubeigt, 2010). Nevertheless, anti-Chinese sentiment did not materialise into actual racial animosity, as the issue of the illegality of some new migrants was largely settled when the Myanmar government took intense action against illegal Chinese residents in the late 1990s.

5.3.6   China–Myanmar border security operations

Since both governments have long been concerned about security along their mutual porous border, security cooperation could clearly be a crucial element of China–Myanmar bilateral relations (Figure 5-

2). Non-traditional security issues (e.g., drug trafficking, human trafficking, illegal gambling) are notorious in the China–Myanmar border areas (Han, 2018). The unstable nature of their mutual border—especially on Myanmar's side—has been a notable security concern (Myoe, 2011). This partially stems from the lack of a national security apparatus on the part of Myanmar (Sadan, 2013). However, in 1989, Beijing pressured the Kokang, Kachin, Wa, and Mong La rebel groups to sign ceasefire agreements with the SLORC after withdrawing its support for the communist insurgency in Myanmar (Clapp, 2015). As part of these agreements, the groups were permitted to retain their weapons and wield full administrative control over their designated territories along the China–Myanmar border (Haacke, 2011).

In addition, in preparation for the 2010 general elections, the Myanmar government pressured these previously insurgent groups to comply with the constitutional provision that all troops in the country be under the command of Myanmar's Defence Services (Yoshikawa, 2022), implying that these groups should all either subdue or convert themselves into relatively small, lightly armoured Border Guard Forces (BGF) battalions under the command of the Tatmadaw. In actuality, this put China in a precarious position (Kudo, 2010). Many of the groups that signed the NCAs were from Myanmar's eastern and western borders with Thailand, India, and Bangladesh, while most of the non-signatory groups were from Myanmar's northern border with China, including the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and United Wa State Army (UWSA) (Crisis Group, 2010).

Figure 5-2. A sign on a bridge on the China–Myanmar border warns people not to cross
Source: Blanchard (2009)

According to the Myanmar authorities, the Tatmadaw's lack of control over these armed groups that did not sign NCAs made it impossible to ensure the security and safety of the proposed cross-border oil and gas pipelines and, in turn, China's strategic interests (Hilton, 2013). An estimated 37,000 Kokang refugees fled to China after the Kokang incident in August 2009, which resulted in an unknown number of fatalities and injuries on both sides (Sun, 2013). On this matter, China made an uncommon public statement following the event, urging the Myanmar government to tackle domestic issues appropriately, maintain peace on its side of their mutual border, and protect the safety and rights of Chinese nationals living in Myanmar. Meanwhile, PCR offered refugees temporary accommodation and food while urging them to return to Myanmar (Sadan, 2013). The episode made it clear to other ceasefire parties that the Tatmadaw was prepared to use military force to enforce its demands. Naypyidaw watched Beijing's response carefully, and the SPDC seemed to gain confidence in handling the ceasefire groups. Even the Wa and the Kachin, who had been stern opponents of the government's plan BGF plan in the aftermath of the incident, adopted a more accommodating tone, and some ethnic groups simply opted to accept the transition (Myoe, 2011). In September 2010, Senior General Than Shwe visited China and, in speaking with Chinese officials on the issue, sought support for the Myanmar government's decision to convert ceasefire units into BGF units (Swanstrom, 2012).

Crucially, drug trafficking, human trafficking, illegal gambling, and other elements of transnational crime constitute significant destabilising factors in the border areas (Crisis Group, 2019). At that time, about 95% of the heroin sold in China came from Myanmar's border area, and some ceasefire groups were notorious for their involvement in the illicit drug trade (Emmers, 2007). By the middle of the 2000s, Yunnan province already had more than a million drug users, triggering a severe rise in transnational crime and social concerns (Keefer & Loayza, 2010). At the same time, China's border area has experienced an increase in encounters between police and drug dealers bearing automatic rifles and grenades (Han, 2018). In addition, drug abuse in Yunnan made HIV/AIDS the province's leading cause of death (Haacke, 2011). Yunnan was estimated to have about 85,000 cases of HIV, prompting China to request Myanmar's involvement in controlling this epidemic on its soil (Xiao et al., 2007). Given the severity of these circumstances, both sides needed to work together to address the narcotics trade.

Human trafficking, especially the flow of women and children into China, was another significant issue along the border. Many Myanmar girls were transported into China and forced to marry men there, as there were insufficient potential brides in the rural parts of China in the early 2000s (Emmers, 2007). For instance, in 2006, there were 173 reported cases of human trafficking in total; Chinese officials rescued 74 girls from Myanmar, and a joint task force between the two countries saved 18 more (Chuang, 2014). Gambling is another concern that Beijing has sought to tackle along its border with Myanmar. On Myanmar's side of the border, ceasefire groups often operated their own casinos or permitted Chinese

merchants to operate gambling houses (Rippa & Saxer, 2014). This is problematic because illicit gambling often results in the abduction, torture, and death of gamblers who are unable to pay off their debts, including businesspeople and the sons of senior government officials (Myoe, 2011). Yunnan retaliated to such acts of violence by cutting off telecommunications, water, power, and roads to Myanmar's town of Maijayang, forcing local authorities to shut down the gambling operations there (Swanstrom, 2012). Additionally, the Chinese military sealed off border crossings to border towns with casinos, sometimes even storming them across the border, making arrests, and interrogating every Chinese person they found, including casino owners and gamblers (Su & Li, 2021). More significantly, the Chinese Foreign Ministry released a statement warning Chinese citizens against heading to Myanmar to gamble due to the risk of theft and kidnapping (Crisis Group, 2009). However, Beijing's efforts to shut them down entirely were ineffective. Thus, China requested stronger cooperation with Myanmar to address these cross-border issues.

Beijing has a strong interest in maintaining stability along its mutual border with Myanmar; thus, it often works with Myanmar's military and police to rein in illicit cross-border activities (Clapp, 2015). Regrettably, their cooperation has yielded only sporadic success. Overall, China appeared to be dissatisfied with the Myanmar government's delayed responses to problems that jeopardised the stability of its Yunnan province. However, Naypyidaw believed it could not successfully address these problems without exerting genuine control over the ceasefire groups and other ethnic organisations, which would require active cooperation from Chinese authorities. In other words, the case of Myanmar demonstrated that lesser powers could benefit from a major power's security without necessarily suffering a significant loss of political autonomy, especially when the former has valuable natural resources and plays a significant geostrategic role for the latter.

In general, this period revealed that regional operations, such as diplomatic and cultural visits as well as economic, military, and security cooperative efforts, can effectively strengthen China–Myanmar relations, especially when both sides are facing international sanctions. In the post–Cold War security context, China sought to maintain a stable, peaceful security atmosphere in the Indo–Pacific and to reassure its neighbours that it posed no threat. Obviously, Myanmar has begun to play an important role in China's security considerations from both geostrategic and geopolitical perspectives.

5.4   Populist rebalancing (2011–2015)

5.4.1   Subtle changes in bilateral relations

In March 2011, the transition from military rule to quasi-civilian rule was realised for the first time in 23 years when Thein Sein's administration prepared to run for elections under the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which meant that the relationship between China and Myanmar was at a crossroads (Cook, 2012). Myanmar's new policy towards China was characterised by the government's desire to reincorporate Myanmar into the international through normalised relations with the U.S. This necessarily involved both domestic political reforms and foreign policy reconfigurations—including a need to lessen its reliance on China (Marco & Dosch, 2012). In other words, the newly nationalistic Myanmar would not allow itself to be brought exclusively into China's orbit to the point where it could be viewed as a "satellite" or "client". (Myoe, 2015). The bilateral government-to-government relations between the two countries started to drop steadily in late 2011, especially after the Myitsone dam project was suspended, the Letpadaung copper mine project was renegotiated, and, most importantly, armed conflict in the Kokang region began to spill over into China in 2015. Thus, China carefully designed its dual-track diplomacy to avoid undermining or compromising its relations with the military-backed government or other state institutions with a significant interest in Myanmar's political process (Haacke, 2015).

5.4.2   China–U.S. geopolitical competition in Myanmar

Amid the U.S.'s "Pivot to Asia," Washington's expanding influence on and presence in Myanmar threatened China's regional strategic interests (Clapp, 2015). Thus, the U.S. began to re-engage with Myanmar after a period of sanctions to counteract Chinese influence. In early December 2011, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton became the first in her position to visit Myanmar in over 50 years. She announced that "at the direction of President Obama, the U.S. would start the process of exchanging ambassadors with Myanmar" (Clinton, 2011). Just under a year later, on 19 November 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama made a historic trip to Myanmar in pursuit of his "Pivot to Asia" policy, making him the first U.S. president ever to visit Myanmar (Spetalnick & Mason, 2012). While he received some criticism from so-called democracy advocates and Washington political circles, especially those in the U.S. Senate, the Obama administration retained its sense of cautious optimism and its support for the Myanmar government (Myoe, 2015). As shown above, Myanmar may serve as a geopolitical lever in the geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China for strategic influence in Southeast Asia.

Clearly, Beijing was concerned by the improving relationship between Myanmar and the U.S., especially when the new Myanmar regime began to address U.S. concerns over its civil liberties and human rights in pursuit of the relaxation of economic sanctions (Clapp, 2015). Political experts in China also express worries that U.S. involvement in Myanmar was part of a strategy to encircle China and halt its rise (Li & Char, 2015). Moreover, Beijing was concerned about the growing influence of Western political systems

and values, especially in its immediate neighbourhood. These concerns became even more prominent as Burmese media and civil society began to gravitate toward the West, and intellectuals who studied abroad in the West began returning to advise Myanmar's new leaders (Li et al., 2016). From China's perspective, official declarations by Myanmar emphasising the continuation of its bilateral relations with China were also toned down (Sun, 2013). Thus, Naypyidaw carefully maintained its relations with Beijing while still exploring opportunities with the U.S. and other Western countries. Notably, senior government officials in Naypyidaw occasionally voiced concerns that Myanmar could end up as a battleground for the China–U.S. rivalry, offering the idea that the two powers could work together to promote economic growth in Myanmar (Zaw, 2020). However, there seemed to be minimal overlap between Chinese and U.S. interests in Myanmar (Clapp, 2015). In general, China could tolerate Myanmar's foreign policy realignment so long as it did not compromise the essential strategic interests of China in Myanmar. Similarly, it was still more pragmatic for Myanmar to cooperate with China to achieve security than to rebel against it.

5.4.3 Anti-Chinese sentiment

In September 2011, just six months after taking office, President Thein Sein abruptly suspended construction on the Myitsone Dam in response to mounting public opposition to the project and worries over its detrimental environmental impacts on the Irrawaddy River—the main lifeline in Myanmar (Hilton, 2013). The Myitsone Dam was a joint venture between the major Chinese state-owned company China Power Investment (CPI) and the Myanmar crony company Asia World, which likely had the support of some leading Myanmar generals (Clapp, 2015). The project was built in the middle of the Kachin state on an earthquake fault line and was intended to transmit more than 90% of its electricity output to China (Sun, 2013). Since the Myitsone Dam would also physically drown significant historical, ecological, and cultural legacies, it attracted the attention and opposition of many environmental and cultural organisations and activists. In addition, the Burmese people fiercely condemned the enormous number of Chinese workers employed on the project site, who were thought to disturb Myanmar's cultural landscape (Myoe, 2015). In this context, President Thein Sein suddenly halted the project, shocking Beijing and initiating a period of hostility between the two administrations.

Later, in 2012, a long-running low-level protest by local villagers against the expansion of the Letpadaung mine expanded into a national movement drawing people from multiple urban centres—even those in Thailand (Hilton, 2013). The expansion's lack of a good relocation plan, inadequate compensation, environmental and public health hazards, and forcible evacuation of an important religious site prompted people to call for the project to be terminated. The Letpadaung copper mine project, situated on the west bank of the Chindwin River in the Sagaing Region, was to be a joint venture between Myanmar Wanbao Mining Copper Limited, Myanmar's military-owned Union of Myanmar Economic

Holding Limited, the Ministry of Mines of the Government of Myanmar, and a subsidiary of China's military-owned China North Industries Corporation (Myoe, 2015). The deal, like that underlying the Myitsone Dam, had been finalised in the last years of the SPDC without any consideration of its environmental and social consequences. Following catastrophic injuries caused by police violence against demonstrators in 2012, the new government established a parliamentary commission presided over by NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi to conduct a thorough analysis of the project from all angles and provide recommendations for how to move forward (Clapp, 2015). Ultimately, the SPDC and NLD made substantial modifications to the original agreement and agreed to abide by the commission's recommendations. While the core of protestors who would accept nothing less than the cancellation of the project continued to advocate against the project, the majority of locals gradually came to believe that the benefits of the project outweighed its negatives; thus, construction was finally allowed to commence in 2014 (Li & Char, 2015).

Meanwhile, the dual oil and gas pipelines, stretching from the Bay of Bengal in Burma to Kunming in Yunnan Province, also sparked significant protests both within and beyond Myanmar after the original agreement was reached in 2009 (Sun, 2013). Since construction began in 2010, the China National Petroleum Corporation has been accused of various offences, including human rights abuses, failure to provide proper compensation for land expropriation, and environmental devastation (Hilton, 2013). Local people were also concerned about the influx of a large number—about 17,000—of migrant Chinese workers (Myoe, 2015). Given the transition to a new government in Naypyidaw, the Chinese contractor was able to address local complaints by tackling the concerns of those impacted by the pipeline construction and offering welfare services and accompanying infrastructure projects, such as bridges, schools, roads, clinics, and power supplies, among others (Clapp, 2015). Eventually, local resistance to the pipeline dissipated, construction was finished, and the oil and gas began to flow in late 2013.

In response to the public resistance to these significant infrastructure projects, the governing civilian administration in Myanmar demanded the renegotiation of all of the agreements that had been signed by the previous SPDC government to ensure that they met certain environmental and social criteria (Mark & Zhang, 2017). Ultimately, China's changes to other major infrastructure projects were significantly influenced by the environmental and social adjustments the Chinese corporations made to the dual-pipeline and Letpadaung mine projects (Clapp, 2015). While Beijing initially expressed outrage over President Thein Sein's suspension of the construction of the Myitsone Dam, CPI still pushed for the dam to be built following its implementation of some modifications (Li et al., 2016). However, undue Chinese pressure to move through with this project could have triggered more severe anti-Chinese sentiments throughout Myanmar, as the dam was not only widely unpopular with the public but also within the leadership. Myanmar ultimately declined to go through with the deal. Therefore, anti-Chinese sentiments

and hostile attitudes toward China once again began to adversely affect the bilateral relationship between China and Myanmar in 2011.

5.4.4 Border security issues

Since 2011, China–Myanmar bilateral relations have faced two main types of issues. The first comprises China's mega-project investments in Myanmar, while the second covers border security management (Myoe, 2015). Chief among the mega projects was the giant Myitsone Dam at the headwaters of the Irrawaddy River in the Kachin state, the expansion of the Letpadaung copper and gold mine just north of Mandalay, and the oil and gas pipelines extending across Myanmar from the port of Kyaukphyu on the Bay of Bengal to China's Yunnan province. All three of these projects, intended to inject energy and resources into the rapidly growing Chinese economy—especially in Yunnan—encountered significant political obstacles in the form of public opposition after the executive administration under Thein Sein's leadership (Clapp, 2015).

The second issue type faced was the abundance of non-traditional security threats along the China–Myanmar border, including drug trafficking, illegal gambling, and other transnational crimes. The border areas in northern Myanmar and Yunan are notorious, with police forces from both countries sometimes crossing the border to handle criminal activity (Myoe, 2015). There is one prominent region known as the Golden Triangle at the intersection of the borders of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, in which notorious drug trafficker Sai Naw Kham conducted his large-scale drug-trafficking operations (Marshall, 2012). In October 2011, 13 Chinese sailors on Chinese cargo ships were killed by Naw Kham and his gang, who then dumped their remains in the Mekong River (Head, 2012). Lao security forces apprehended Naw Kham in late April 2012 and, despite him being a Shan native and a citizen of Myanmar who committed the murders in Myanmar's seas, deported him to China in May (South China Morning Post, 2012). Due to pressure from China, the Laotian government only gave him night-time informal consular access to the personnel at the Myanmar Embassy in Vientiane (Myoe, 2015). Ultimately, China imposed the death penalty, and he was executed in 2013 (China Daily, 2013). This strongly demonstrates the PRC's aggressiveness in achieving border security.

Of course, it is worth noting that several conflicts with major armed ethnic groups conflicts along the China–Myanmar border between 2011 and 2015 directly involved the militaries of both countries: the PLA and the Tatmadaw. During this period, the Myanmar government started a peace-negotiation process to broker ceasefire agreements with armed ethnic groups, a map of which is presented in Figure 5-3, and China grew concerned over the escalation and internationalisation of the conflicts (Clapp, 2015). The conflict that broke out in the Kokang region in 2015 serves as a good illustration of Naypyidaw's

dilemma in maintaining its border security with China. The 2015 Kokang conflict sparked massive resentment against Myanmar in China. Kokang has close ties to China, as evidenced by the fact that residents use the Chinese Yuan as their primary currency and speak a dialect of Chinese (BBC News, 2017). The escalating conflict in the borderlands has increased the tension between Myanmar and China, in no small part to the 40,000 to 50,000 individuals who fled to China from the Kokang area (Han, 2017). In one tragic incident, five Chinese individuals were killed, and eight others were injured when a Myanmar jet dropped bombs across the Chinese border. In the face of this public outrage, China responded with harsh rhetoric and insistent appeals to restore peace in the region along their mutual border. According to the Diplomat (2015), the enormous numbers of refugees crossing the border and citizens being injured or killed meant that the conflict could not be resolved through traditional diplomatic channels. Chinese citizens called for a tougher response, but China avoided military engagement in favour of tighter border restrictions, dialogue with the Myanmar government, and participation in the seventh round of ceasefire negotiations (The Diplomat, 2015). In fact, China had a significant security interest at stake in the armed conflict in northern Myanmar. The turbulence highlighted China's primary concerns over the ethnic groups along their mutual border (Sun, 2015a) and the prospects of peace and stability in the border areas.

In addition to security issues, the Kokang conflict generated heated debate in China. Peng's request for assistance for the "Chinese Kokang people" sparked a significant degree of compassion among the Chinese populace (Sun, 2014). Peng continued by deftly framing the activities of the Tatmadaw as in service to U.S. strategic goals, which likely resonated strongly with Chinese citizens who were confused about recent improvements in U.S.–Myanmar relations (Sun, 2015a). In addition, his endorsement from other ethnic groups, such as the KIA, painted an image of unity among ethnic groups in their opposition to the Myanmar government, indicating the erosion of China's confidence in the peace process. Clearly, what transpired in Kokang did not align with Beijing's policy preferences, as it threatened the tranquil and stable atmosphere that China had been working for along the China–Myanmar border to facilitate healthy investments and strategic endeavours (Li, 2015). Furthermore, the Kokang conflict strained ties between China and Myanmar because Naypyidaw was perplexed as to why Beijing would permit such a serious conflict to erupt on its border. Some Chinese special interest groups and individuals were providing direct financial assistance to the armed ethnic groups in Myanmar complicated matters even further (Sun, 2017). Following this rise in tension between Beijing and Naypyidaw in February and March of 2015, Naypyidaw seemed to accept that Beijing did not have reliable control over the actions of border groups in the Yunnan province and was not involved with the outbreak in Kokang (Myoe, 2015). Eventually, a preliminary agreement was reached on a proposed NCA between MNDAA, an armed group based for years in the Kokang region in northern Shan, at the end of March 2015, potentially alleviating both countries' concerns about border security.
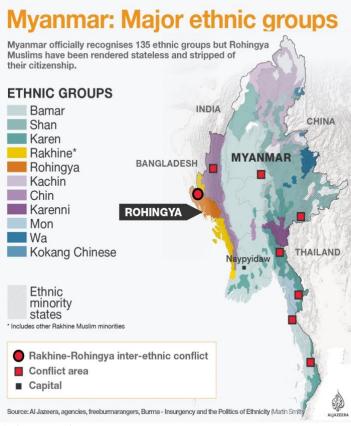
Myanmar: Major ethnic groups

Myanmar officially recognises 135 ethnic groups but Rohingya Muslims have been rendered stateless and stripped of their citizenship.

ETHNIC GROUPS
- Bamar
- Shan
- Karen
- Rakhine*
- Rohingya
- Kachin
- Chin
- Karenni
- Mon
- Wa
- Kokang Chinese

Ethnic minority states

* Includes other Rakhine Muslim minorities

- ● Rakhine-Rohingya inter-ethnic conflict
- ■ Conflict area
- ■ Capital

Source: Al Jazeera, agencies, freeburmarangers, Burma - Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity (Martin Smith)

Figure 5-3. A map of major ethnic groups in Myanmar
Source: Al Jazeera (2017)

In essence, this time period revealed that Myanmar might serve as a geopolitical lever in the competition between the U.S. and China for strategic influence in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, it demonstrated China's significant security interests and the degree to which they are threatened by non-traditional security threats, including drug trafficking, illegal gambling, and other transnational crimes, as well as ethnic conflicts.

5.5   A closer bond (2016–2021)

5.5.1   A new era under the NLD Government

In November 2015, Myanmar held its first multi-party national election since a purportedly civilian government was allowed to re-register and participate in elections in 2011. The NLD party won a landslide victory in the general elections, ushering in a new era of civilian governance after decades of military rule (BBC News, 2015). The new parliamentarians elected Htin Kyaw, a long-time confidant of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, to serve as president. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was also appointed to the newly created office of State Counsellor, making her the de facto head of the civilian government (Parameswaran, 2015). However, domestic security, most areas of foreign policy, and a slew of other domestic policy issues remained under the Tatmadaw's jurisdiction (Crispin, 2015). When the NLD took

office in March 2016, they inherited several problems with regard to China from the previous Thein Sein government. However, the inauguration of the new government also constituted an opportunity to start a new era in the two countries' bilateral relations (Sun, 2015b). On 5 April 2016, at the invitation of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi paid a goodwill visit to Myanmar. He was the first foreign minister to visit Myanmar since the NLD came to power. At the start of the transition to civilian administration in 2016, the international community widely believed that China–Myanmar relations would deteriorate; even the PRC had doubts about Myanmar's intention (Yoshikawa, 2022).

On the one hand, many believed that Kyi could have grudges against China for backing the military regime that had previously placed her under house arrest for 15 years (Blanchard & Lim, 2014). On the other hand, China could be apprehensive about her given her democratic credentials, reputation as a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and alleged ties to Western countries, including the U.S. (Sun, 2015b). In addition, Beijing worried that she would support the democratic movement in China. The PRC also suspected that she would, at the very least, empathise with and support her fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureates, the Dalai Lama and democracy activist Liu Xiaobo (Sun, 2015b). Thus, while China sought to preserve friendly ties with Myanmar, it did so cautiously after analysing the political transition in Myanmar to preserve friendly ties.

Ultimately, the political transition in Myanmar did not change China's strategic interests in the country. China still sought to progress with the construction of its infrastructure projects through peaceful and stable border areas (Verbiest & Naing, 2022). It would simply face the potential need to compete with the U.S. for influence in the country. Therefore, China established diplomatic ties with the NLD administration by expressing cooperative aspirations through cordial gestures, including funding for projects, aid, and even support for the peace process (Gong, 2020). Moreover, China endeavoured to establish new human networks, widening the countries' bilateral ties across various political and business spheres (Yoshikawa, 2022). Beijing often invited and welcomed NLD leaders and officials to China, fostering healthy interactions between the two sides (The Irrawaddy, 2020). Additionally, China reached out to Myanmar NGOs to forge positive connections, assist Chinese businesspeople residing in Myanmar, and expand the number of Myanmar students studying abroad in Beijing (Kurlantzick, 2022). Evidently, the PRC strove to cultivate positive relationships with the new actors in Myanmar.

However, during this time, Beijing also pressured Myanmar officials to offer some clarity on several issues that are crucial to China, such as a clear decision on the development of the Kyaukphyu SEZ, a final resolution for the frozen Myitsone dam project, and a potential agreement on a series of BRI projects including a highway programme and a land-water joint transportation programme on the Irrawaddy River (Sun, 2015). At the same time, Beijing was concerned about how the new government would handle the

peace process with the armed ethnic groups in northern Myanmar along its border with China. After all, Kyi had once pledged to lead the peace process, believing that her distinct pro-democracy background could inspire trust among the insurgent groups and, in turn, end the standoff (Sun, 2017). Clearly, China grasped how a peaceful and united Myanmar would benefit China's broader interests, as the conflicts in northern Myanmar constituted the greatest roadblock to China's economic and geopolitical plans in the country.

5.5.2   China's role in Myanmar's peace process

When Daw Aung San Suu Kyi launched his new administration in 2015, the Myanmar Peace Centre was replaced with the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee. During her 2016 visit to China, China pledged to assist Myanmar in realising domestic peace and securing national reconciliation through political dialogue. At the same time, Myanmar acknowledged that China's role and efforts in helping Myanmar to obtain national reconciliation and peace could be positive and constructive (Han, 2020). Following the outbreak of armed clashes in late 2016 between the Northern Alliance and the Tatmadaw, China held multiple rounds of dialogue in its Yunnan province (Han, 2019). China seemingly recognised the importance of stability on Myanmar's side of their mutual border to their own BRI-related pursuits. In July 2016, China's Special Envoy for Asian affairs, Sun Guoxiang, visited the UWSA and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army – Eastern Shan State (MNDAA–ESS) to encourage the two organisations to take part in the first session of the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference initiated by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Kumbun, 2017). Crucially, Chinese political and financial support for the Myanmar peace process has expanded substantially since 2017. For instance, China donated US$3 million to the Joint Monitoring Committee, which would not have even been conceivable under the Thein Sein administration (Han, 2020). Indeed, China has also extended more frequent invitations to Myanmar officials for regular state visits and struck more agreements on economic, political, and military cooperation in the border areas as part of its commitment to support the Myanmar peace process (Kumbun, 2017). However, some roadblocks are still apparent. The Tatmadaw insisted on the armed groups being incorporated into the national armed forces, but the groups generally wanted to retain control of their own individual armed forces (Kipgen, 2017). As a result of this disagreement, these dialogues have yet to produce a sufficient outcome, in large part due to the profoundly ingrained mistrust on both sides.

Notably, the NLD administration appealed to Beijing for stronger cooperation when Myanmar faced harsh criticism, condemnations, and sanctions by the international community over its crackdown on the Rohingya in 2017. In response, China offered to help resolve a diplomatic dispute between Bangladesh and Myanmar over the exodus of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar (Han, 2020). When the UK

requested a UNSC meeting on the Rohingya situation in Myanmar in August 2017, China was against international sanctions on Myanmar and employed its veto power in the UNSC to shield the Myanmar government from criticism (Nichols, 2018). Meanwhile, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Geng Shuang made the Chinese government's position on the Rohingya problem clear: "The Chinese side condemns the violent attacks that happened in the Rakhine State of Myanmar, supports Myanmar's efforts to safeguard the peace and stability of the Rakhine State, and sincerely hopes that the Rakhine State can restore stability as soon as possible and the local people can live a normal life again" (Xinhua, 2017). The declaration avoided placing blame on the Myanmar military. Instead, Beijing's longstanding hostility to domestic ethnic and religious dissent was reflected in its emphasis on the government working to uphold peace and stability. China then became actively involved in attempts to reach a negotiated settlement between the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh after Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Dhaka in November 2017 (Han, 2020). Clearly, the efforts of the Thein Sein government to distance Myanmar from economic domination by China seemed to have been largely reversed. At least on the Rakhine issue, China has managed to persuade Myanmar of the benefits that cordial bilateral relations would bring to the latter's image internationally.

5.5.3   Myanmar's crucial position for China's BRI

In May 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi visited China to attend the "Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation" in Beijing, where she met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang (The Irrawaddy, 2020). They signed five memoranda of understanding as part of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative and the Silk Road Economic Belt to establish SEZs along the China–Myanmar border (Yoshikawa, 2022). In 2018, the government of Myanmar established a new "Belt and Road Implementation Committee," of which Daw Aung San Suu Kyi served as chairperson to monitor the progress of the CMEC. The 1,700-kilometre corridor (Figure 3-2) is set to link Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province in China, with the main economic hubs of Myanmar: Mandalay in central Myanmar, Yangon in the east, and Kyaukphyu in the west (Lwin, 2021). In addition, the two countries signed a framework agreement in November 2018 on the development of the Kyaukphyu SEZ by the China International Trust and Investment Corporation (CITIC) and the Kyaukphyu SEZ Management Committee (The Irrawaddy, 2020). The project is expected to spur growth in landlocked Yunnan and allow China direct access to the Indian Ocean, enabling it to import oil without passing through the Strait of Malacca, in which the U.S. has a solid military presence (Flintrop, 2018). In this context, Myanmar has been formally incorporated into Chinese President Xi Jinping's BRI since 2018, influencing future bilateral relations between the neighbouring countries through planned SEZs, cross-border railway lines, and other mega development projects.

In January 2020, on the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Myanmar, Chinese President Xi Jinping paid his first visit abroad to Myanmar, as shown in Figure 5-4 (Xinhua, 2020). During Xi's visit, China and Myanmar committed to strengthening their political, economic, and sociocultural ties—especially their cooperation on the implementation of the BRI (Lwin, 2021). However, in large part due to the COVID–19 pandemic and the military coup d'état in Myanmar, the BRI has encountered many obstacles in the country. Project delays and suspensions were frequently caused by disruptions to global supply chains, lockdowns, and travel restrictions on foreign workers, especially Chinese workers who are normally employed on BRI projects (Wu et al., 2020). Notably, it is more difficult to achieve a proper recovery from the COVID–19 pandemic in Myanmar than it is in more developed countries (Kurlantzick, 2022). While the COVID–19 pandemic appears to be under control across much of China, Myanmar still has consistent spikes in the infection rate. According to the Chinese Embassy, the countries have discussed ways to move forward with the development of the BRI projects despite the pandemic-related setbacks based on the COVID–19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP) (Lwin, 2020). The CERP, launched in May 2020, aims to reduce the financial burden of the pandemic by putting innovative strategies into practice. Effectively, the CERP constitutes a roadmap for nations both during and in the aftermath of the COVID–19 pandemic (Lwin, 2020). Once the BRI projects are included in the CERP, they can move ahead (Aung, 2020). Thus, China may encourage the Myanmar government to gear up the implementation of Beijing's infrastructure projects in Myanmar despite both nations' economies experiencing a substantial downturn due to the COVID–19 pandemic.

Figure 5-4. Chinese President Xi Jinping delivers a speech at a state event to celebrate the 70th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic ties in Naypyidaw, Myanmar, 17 January 2020
Source: Xinhua (2020)

Since the military coup on 1 February 2021, Myanmar has been in a state of political turmoil, sparking nationwide protests and, in turn, a violent crackdown that has led to thousands of deaths and a significant flow of migrants across the China–Myanmar border. Thus, various foreign investors have withdrawn from, suspended, or reduced their operations in the country. However, Chinese SOEs have taken advantage of the opportunity to continue developing the BRI (Chan, 2021) without a worrisome U.S. presence in the country. In January 2021, shortly before the military coup, Beijing urged Naypyidaw to expedite work on the BRI projects, including the deep-sea port and the SEZs. However, the military regime pledged to honour the previously made BRI agreements despite the political turbulence (Lwin, 2021). In March, the junta replaced every member of the Joint Committee for the China CMEC with its own appointees despite the committee's essential role in implementing the BRI projects (The Irrawaddy, 2021a). One of the primary responsibilities of the committee under the NLD government was to encourage the participation of the Burmese people in the development of the CEMC. However, this initiative was done away with following the 2021 military takeover (Chan, 2021). Furthermore, the junta reformed the Central Committee for Executing the China–Myanmar Cross-Border Economic Cooperation Zones (CBECZ). After the reforms, the committee could be expected to manage the zones, accelerate project development, and develop efficient implementation strategies (The Irrawaddy, 2021b).

Therefore, Myanmar nationals accused Beijing of supporting the military junta. After all, China was one of the few nations still willing to conduct business with the leaders of the coup leaders, while most other international firms blacklisted the country (Xue, 2022). Even if Beijing did not formally endorse the junta, its continued economic partnership sparked anti-Chinese sentiments among the Burmese public. These sentiments became more intense after China and Russia vetoed a UNSC proposal to condemn the military takeover, with some pro-democracy protesters urging people to boycott Chinese projects. Additionally, some Chinese factories were burned down (Reuters, 2021).

Additionally, many anti-junta protests took place in front of the Chinese Embassy in Yangon, with some furious demonstrators claiming that Beijing was exposing itself to attacks on vital Chinese–built infrastructure, such as the pipelines transporting gas and oil from the coastal Rakhine state into Yunnan (Strangio, 2021). These anti-China sentiments posed a significant threat to China's strategic interests and national security. Thus, Beijing urged Myanmar to take practical steps to end all violence, punish offenders under the law, and guarantee the safety of the lives and property of Chinese businesspeople and personnel in Myanmar (Kurlantzick, 2022). On the international stage, Beijing stressed that any measures implemented by the international community should work to enhance political and social stability in Myanmar instead of interfering with the country's internal matters and escalating the conflict (Xinhua, 2021).

Around this time, the Chinese government implemented several BRI projects in Myanmar to strengthen the cooperative ties between the two countries despite the political change. Undoubtedly, Myanmar remains strategically and geopolitically significant to China despite its current turbulent political circumstances. Regardless of the COVID–19 pandemic and the military coup, the PRC still has two focuses in Myanmar: energy security (Flintrop, 2018) and economic cooperation. Both the PRC and local Yunnan officials value the continued development of cross-border trade with Myanmar, which represents a prime market for Chinese SOEs (Mark et al., 2020). In other words, China still regards Myanmar as a key partner within the BRI and a crucial focal point in the Indo–Pacific.

In conclusion, this chapter traced the historical development of the China–Myanmar border from 1948 to 2021 to examine the processes underlying the development of the bilateral relationship between China and Myanmar with a focus on the strategies and factors that may have driven their mutual border to be less porous in 2020–2021. China has significant security interests at the intersection of traditional and non-traditional security threats along its border with Myanmar. These threats pose a danger to the tranquil and stable atmosphere that China has worked to develop to be conducive to the success of its investments and strategic endeavours. These findings demonstrate that Myanmar remains strategically and geopolitically significant to China despite the recent political turmoil. In the next chapter, I discuss my hypotheses to explain the general situation surrounding security issues along the China–Myanmar border, and test variables that could have motivated the border fencing.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Having now traced the evolution of the China–Myanmar border, this section determines how and when the subjects of my hypotheses influenced highly rigorous border regulation and answers my research question. In this chapter, based on the lenses of both traditional and non-traditional security, I argue that geopolitical competition, the BRI, and ideological infiltration interactively shaped the less porous border between China and Myanmar. Plus, the turmoil of COVID–19 and the military coup as proximate causes of the border fence within the framework of the independent factors, could have enabled somewhat amenable to intervening variables acting as triggers or modifiers. I describe non-traditional security threats as the gamut of human security concerns, including climate change, food and energy shortages, infectious diseases, natural disasters, transnational crime, human and drug trafficking, and mass migration (Ayoob, 1997). Traditional security threats comprise weapons, armament systems, and military offensives, though diplomatic strategies (e.g., coalitions and alliances aimed at forging healthy relationships between states) are also used to achieve traditional security (Ikenberry & Mearsheimer, 2001). Instead of the dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional security paradigms, this thesis uses the case of China–Myanmar border security to assess the validity of my hypotheses in a variety of security-related scenarios that may explain China's approach to its border with Myanmar.

6.1   Geopolitical competition driving the tightness of the China–Myanmar border

The notion of a Cold War based on strategic competition with China has been discussed since at least the mid–1990s, indicating that the competitive-strategic interpretation of China's rise is a pattern of thinking that is both embedded and robust (Li, 2012). Thus, China's emergence disturbs the status quo and raises concerns among conventionally dominant powers. Inevitably, the clout of China–U.S. competition is rapidly emerging in East Asia and Southeast Asia. One example is China's expanding presence in Myanmar. Myanmar has been politically and economically affected by China's rise to a far greater degree than other countries in this region. After all, Myanmar has been the centrepiece of Beijing's long-term geostrategic goal to strengthen its maritime dominance by linking ports (Chatzky & McBride, 2020), particularly in the Asia–Pacific, into a "string of pearls." In response, the U.S. factored Myanmar into its "pivot to Asia" under former President Barack Obama. Myanmar, situated at the intersection of South Asia and Southeast Asia, is once again a core factor in the U.S. Indo–Pacific strategy under President Biden (Marston, 2020). To Washington, Myanmar represents both a member of the ASEAN partnership and yet another avenue for curtailing the regional dominance and influence enjoyed by China (Kundu, 2018). As shown above, Myanmar could serve as a geopolitical lever in the strategic competition between the U.S. and China. In this changing geostrategic context, long-standing militarised conflicts between

the Myanmar central government and ethnic rebel groups along the China–Myanmar border region still pose a security threat to both China and Myanmar.

Since the start of the pandemic, Myanmar has consistently suffered severe outbreaks of COVID–19, which the state of escalating instability has compounded following the military coup d'état in February 2021. Unsurprisingly, in this turbulent period, China's security concerns over its border areas have largely been driven by apprehensions about U.S. involvement in Myanmar across a previously porous border vulnerable to infiltration. For instance, the U.S. has taken the lead in the international campaign to exert pressure on the military regime to reverse course, prevent further violence, place the country back on the path to democracy, release those who have been unfairly detained, and hold accountable those who were responsible for the coup and other acts of violence against the populace (Lewis, 2022). For China, open U.S. participation in resolving local conflicts would not only increase U.S. political sway in Myanmar but also provide a pathway for an American presence on China's border. Myanmar's geopolitical position manifests itself as a buffer for the PRC's response to the U.S. and one of its regional allies, India (Friedberg, 2022). Still, Myanmar offers China's landlocked inland provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan a trading outlet and a strategic presence in the Indian Ocean, enabling China to escape U.S. encirclement and mitigate India's regional influence (Tower & Clapp, 2021). Consequently, Beijing would likely react harshly by tightening controls over its vulnerable border with Myanmar. China's actions with regard to border security and regulations seem to have been motivated by its sovereign and geopolitical objectives; thus, its desire to retain control over its border with Myanmar could concurrently serve its security interests.

6.2   The Belt and Road Initiative driving the tightness of the China–Myanmar border

Launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, the BRI—a broad array of investment and development initiatives extending from East Asia to Europe—serves to significantly enhance China's economic and political clout. The "Belt" is a planned network of overland road and rail routes, oil and natural gas pipelines, and other infrastructure projects, while the "Road" is a maritime network of planned ports, trade routes, and other coastal infrastructure projects (Kennedy, 2015). Given that the BRI is a Chinese initiative, it is crucial to consider how the Chinese government articulates and characterises its goals, as would be the case for policy pronouncements for any nation (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). In other words, Beijing is likely to adopt an institutional design that boosts China's influence and leadership at the regional and global levels, as countries in the Asia–Pacific have a high degree of economic and commercial interconnectedness and interdependence.

In 2018, the government of Myanmar established the "Belt and Road Implementation Committee", with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi serving as chairperson to monitor the CMEC (The Irrawaddy, 2020). Since then, Myanmar has been formally integrated into Chinese President Xi Jinping's BRI, greatly impacting the bilateral relationship between the two countries through planned special economic zones, cross-border railway lines, and other mega development projects (Flintrop, 2018). The BRI has led to increased economic activity and investment in Myanmar; as a result, there has been a stronger emphasis on border security, including extensive patrols, checkpoints, and surveillance technology (Yoshikawa, 2022). The CMEC—a key element of the BRI in Myanmar—is anticipated to stretch between Kunming in Yunnan and Kyaukphyu, a deep-sea port and a Chinese-run special economic zone in Rakhine state (Mark et al., 2020). With access to the Indian Ocean, Kyaukphyu is considered a crucial part of China's maritime "string of pearls" strategy, mitigating China's reliance on the current chokepoint in the Malacca straits, where the US has a solid military presence (Mohan Malik, 2017). Consequently, these projects have facilitated the flow of goods and people across the border, making it more critical to maintain tight security measures.

However, the outbreak of COVID–19 and the military coup have posed potential challenges to China's grand strategic ambition, especially its BRI projects on the border. When China and Russia blocked attempts by the UNSC to condemn the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, some pro-democracy protesters in Myanmar encouraged people to resist several infrastructure projects in the border areas; today, many of these initiatives face delays and even potential closure (Reuters, 2021). More notably, a single well-executed attack could inflict major economic loss on the countries' border areas and cripple numerous factories outside Kunming, Yunnan (Tower & Clapp, 2021). In such an event, the Chinese government would be forced to implement rigorous border-area engagements to restart these projects and protect investments in order to accelerate the success of the CMEC as well as guarantee long-term success given the depth of its domestic and foreign policy interests in Myanmar and its tremendous influence and history of engagement in the country. While the BRI has not directly influenced the border fence construction along the China–Myanmar border, it has contributed to the geopolitical context that has made the border more significant for both countries. After all, China seeks to expand its influence in Southeast Asia and its regional strategy, where Myanmar has become a key partner in this effort.

6.3   Ideological infiltration driving the tightness of the China–Myanmar border

Anti-Chinese sentiment has a long history in Myanmar at both the national and local levels due to persistent tensions among ethnic Chinese communities in the country. Recent major flashpoints have involved Chinese investment projects, such as the Myitsone Dam, which was suspended in 2011 after Myanmar moved toward democracy (Palmer, 2021). The locals criticised the project's environmental

implications and compelled relocations despite Beijing being keen to continue without any changes. The military coup of 1 February 2021 exacerbated the long-standing anti-Chinese sentiments in Myanmar, with many people suspecting Beijing of supporting the coup for political reasons and the pursuit of increased armament sales. With demonstrations taking place in front of the Chinese Embassy in Yangon, widespread protests against the military coup in Myanmar featured a decidedly anti-Chinese tone (Tower & Clapp, 2021). Accordingly, China must balance its support for the new military government with some sympathy for the public in order to adequately confront this nationalist society with furious anti-Chinese sentiments (Palmer, 2022). In the meantime, the Western community, led by the U.S., has been exploring potential avenues through which to assist pro-democracy forces in Myanmar in potentially overthrowing the military junta and establishing a genuinely democratic government (Walsh, 2021). For example, it could cooperate with the various armed ethnic groups and civil society organisations in the country to deliver humanitarian aid to the growing number of internally displaced persons in Myanmar. As these consequences of the military takeover and pandemic become more apparent, officials in Yunnan, as well as the government in Beijing, are growing increasingly concerned that such breakdowns could spur the rampant spread of dissidents across the China–Myanmar border.

This ethnic strife is a prime illustration of why China continues to be cautious about its border with Myanmar (Hu & Konrad, 2017). A crucial motivation concerns the "internationalisation" of the ethnic conflict in the country and the potential U.S. ideological encroachment along the China–Myanmar border. In 2013, China's top priority was to thwart the attempted "internationalisation of the Kachin issue," evidenced by a KIA request to allow the U.S., UK, UN, and China to be observers and witnesses of the discussion between the KIA and Myanmar's central government (Sun, 2014). As already mentioned, the Kachin—the main ethnic group in northern Myanmar's Kachin state—is historically descended from the same origin point as China's Jingpo ethnic group. However, the traditions of the Kachin seem to have been largely created by U.S. missionaries, who gave them their language, their identity, and even their name; in fact, 90% of the population of Kachin state is currently Christian (Diao, 2021). Intermittently, some Chinese ethnic minorities have crossed the border into Myanmar for Christian and Buddhist training, which potentially indicates that foreign religions are crossing the border into China (Lintner, 2019)—sometimes without the official permission of the Chinese government. The Chinese government may view such ideological dynamics as manipulative, encouraging the creation of an independent Christian Kachin state that aims to defy the CCP by exporting Christianity to China (Blanchard, 2019). In response to this influx of anti-Chinese sentiments and rebels into China, the PRC had to fortify fencing, establish new monitoring stations, and deploy more patrols along its border with Myanmar during the period marked by the COVID–19 pandemic and the military coup in Myanmar.

Overall, this qualitative single-case study with multiple units of analysis sought to identify the critical factors behind the less porous China–Myanmar border in a turbulent period marked by a pandemic and a military takeover. My hypotheses are derived from both traditional and non-traditional approaches to security, and they could interactively (at least partially) employ process-tracing analysis to identify the main decision-makers engaged in the reaction to the threat in border areas. My hypotheses in this study comprise three main elements: geostrategic competition with the U.S., the BRI, and ideological encroachment. Looking at all the hypotheses together, geostrategic competition greatly influences China's border control; meanwhile, the BRI and ideological infiltrations are attributes of geostrategic competition and great-power games, which contribute to border security. The COVID–19 outbreak and the turmoil brought about by the coup d'état have already made Chinese investors skittish, with anti-Chinese sentiments rising and expectations of a prosperous CMEC to the Indian Ocean. Most critically for China, these renewed tensions have shattered the precarious stability of its border province of Yunnan, both physically and ideologically. This is important, as Yunnan is a strategic location in China—it represents a gateway to Southeast Asia and, ultimately, the Indo–Pacific.

In Chapter 7, I discuss the implications of my findings for homeland security along the geopolitically sensitive China–Myanmar border and offer some appropriate policy recommendations. Additionally, I conclude the thesis by highlighting its contributions to the literature, its limitations, and some potential avenues for future research.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Through the lenses of both traditional and non-traditional security, this thesis employs process tracing to investigate the critical factors that have influenced China–Myanmar border security since 1948. Likewise, the application of traditional and non-traditional security theory in process tracing can provide insights into the decision-making process of key actors involved in addressing security threats on the bilateral border, whether they are military or non-military in nature. It argues that the intersection of geopolitical competition, the BRI, and ideological infiltration contributed to the less porous border between China and Myanmar amid a turbulent period marked by a pandemic and a military coup. Based on my findings, it is clear that China's foreign policy motivations extend far behind the China–Myanmar border. China envisages Myanmar as a shield against the U.S. and its local allies, such as Australia and India, which also strive for regional dominance (Mannan, 2020). Additionally, China's desire for border control stems from its strategic aim to guarantee energy security and develop a new trading system. Myanmar offers China's landlocked inland provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan a trading outlet and a strategic presence in the Indian Ocean, enabling China to escape U.S. encirclement and mitigate India's regional influence (Tower & Clapp, 2021). However, Beijing is also aware of how crucial existing institutions and norms are in upholding its policies. Chinese political leaders endeavour to establish China as a respectable global power while waiting for an opportunity to assume leadership at the regional level. In this sense, the security of the BRI and ideology in the China–Myanmar border areas is the result of China's political leverage for its claims in Asia–Pacific.

7.1   Implications and recommendations for border security

Border security has evolved from the early prevalence of interstate warfare and territorial military struggle to multi-faceted trafficking networks organised by transnational criminal and terrorist networks. In other words, problems surrounding border security have shifted from traditional to non-traditional paradigms. However, this thesis contends that approaches to border security should not be dichotomous; they should consider and assess the intersection of traditional and non-traditional security threats. Analysing the reasons for the less porous China–Myanmar border between 2020 and 2021 by evaluating national circumstances and policies can enable an effective definition of border security. The importance of a clear definition is consistent with the existing literature and the regional law enforcement's role in securing the border. After analysis, I achieved my results by tracing the history of China–Myanmar border security. More importantly, China–Myanmar border security is a complex, multi-layer issue with multiple stakeholders that requires effective solutions moving forward. This thesis proposes the following recommendations:

7.1.1 China's creative involvement in Myanmar's issues

Above all, Beijing should embrace "creative involvement"—a type of diplomatic thinking that advocates for innovative solutions and active participation in international affairs—for the peace process in Myanmar (Wang, 2017). Despite the chaos and destruction wreaked on Myanmar after the 2021 military takeover, China could become a credible partner of Myanmar's democratic forces promoting good governance, stability, and peace by adopting a more balanced policy response to the crisis. For instance, Beijing could accept requests for engagement from the National Unity Government, armed ethnic groups, and other political parties to share their viewpoints on the current situation. Most importantly, Beijing should act as a mediator in the peace talks in Myanmar and assist the Tatmadaw and major political groups involved in the conflict by creating a platform that facilitates dialogue and peaceful consultation.

In the meantime, through "creative involvement" with regional organisations like ASEAN, China should acquire leverage vis-à-vis the junta and reclaim its leadership position in initiatives to aid Myanmar in finding a genuine exit from the current crisis. China could use both party and government channels to encourage the Tatmadaw to adhere to ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus or other recommendations for a sustainable transition in Myanmar (Tower & Clapp, 2021). However, Western countries would likely be suspicious of China's intentions and work to gain some influence in the Myanmar crisis with the aid of international organisations. Consequently, China must walk a fine line through official channels, being careful not to point a finger or pick a side to maintain effective relations with the Tatmadaw and, in turn, protect its strategic interests while averting negative repercussions from regional allies and multilateral groups.

7.1.2 Myanmar's economic and political independence in Chinese involvement

On the one hand, hundreds of new deals are being made between the two countries, and hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens have moved to Myanmar in search of work annually. Over time, Myanmar's economy has been put under significant strain, in part from a credit crunch and in part from a real estate catastrophe. The Myanmar government has turned to Japan and others to boost investment, but no one can match China's muscles in terms of investment. Still, Myanmar must maintain its economic independence in negotiations with China and be wary of over-reliance in order to avoid a fatal weakness based on ambiguous dealings and strategic selfishness.

In contrast, as Western countries have moved away from Myanmar due to its rough political transition, the Myanmar government will increasingly try to emphasise the importance of Naypyidaw's diplomatic balance (Myint–U, 2020). In some cases, this could be a strategic mistake for Myanmar, making

Myanmar overly dependent on China, especially when dealing with ethnic militant groups along the China–Myanmar border. However, in actuality, Naypyidaw's diplomatic balance strategy limits the government's capacity to rely on goodwill from other countries to spur economic growth. As the West takes a harder line on Myanmar's internal disputes, Naypyidaw's reliance on China to handle ethnic conflicts is luring China into modifying its own strategic design. Despite China's history of active participation in Myanmar's ethnic conflicts, it has not been able to completely eliminate conflict between Myanmar's military and ethnic minority groups along the China–Myanmar border. In fact, there are mounting concerns over potential new military conflicts that could unfold as a result of evolving political or military alliances as well as new clashes between ethnic militant groups and Myanmar's military, driving renewed levels of ethnic conflict. To ensure China's support in these potential conflicts, Myanmar should leverage the image of Western governments playing a role in its peace process and border disputes.

7.2   Contributions to the literature

Having identified the critical factors behind the less porous border between China and Myanmar amid a turbulent period marked by a pandemic and a military coup, this thesis contributes to the existing literature in three major ways.

First, this single-case study enabled a comprehensive investigation of the factors that sustain border security from both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives. In the context of traditional and non-traditional security, process tracing can be used to identify the causal mechanisms between security threats, responses, and outcomes. It was also helpful to assess how changes in the security realm influenced China's foreign policies on borderland disputes. While some scholars highlight the usefulness of concepts from both traditional and non-traditional security perspectives, they largely ignore the fact that the fundamental goal of non-traditional security should be to overcome the dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional security paradigms. Thus, I used the case of China–Myanmar border security to address this gap with hypotheses based on a combination of traditional and non-traditional theories of security to explain China's engagement on China–Myanmar border issues and attempt to define border security.

Second, this thesis detailed the ways in which it complements the existing literature through a section about geopolitical studies on the Indo–Pacific. Geopolitical research has largely focused on the role of external actors in the region, especially the U.S. My study contributes to the literature on China–Myanmar border dynamics by emphasising that the strict border—no matter how much it contributes to illegal activities—can be subordinated to the geopolitical logic of national security threatened by political

uncertainty and, more recently, global pandemics. Similarly, Thailand is also geopolitically important to China, and this thesis's findings may be applicable to China–Thailand bilateral relations.

Third, this study contributes to a wide variety of fields, including homeland security, management, criminal justice, and intelligence. Myanmar's political stability is critical to China's security, as any military conflict along the China–Myanmar border would threaten stability along its border. Meanwhile, there is a need to gather intelligence and share information among the many law enforcement agencies—including local, provincial, and national-relevant to border security in the region. The research questions guided the study toward an outcome that will be useful for decision-makers and policymakers involved in homeland security initiatives in Southeast Asia, especially along China's borders. The performance of relevant national-security organisations can be significantly impacted by sharing best practices and valuable information (Giblin et al., 2012). Indicators of a less porous border and sharper definitions of security will undoubtedly be invaluable to those involved with national security.

7.3   Limitations of the thesis and potential avenues for future research

In this section, I examine the limitations of this thesis and suggest potential avenues for future investigations. First, this study used only a single case study to understand the reasons behind tightening borders in 2020 and 2021 based on traditional and non-traditional security frameworks. The most prominent critique of single-case study analysis is the lack of external validity or generalisability, raising the question of how one case can reliably offer anything beyond the dynamics of a specific situation. Thus, future research needs more observations to achieve greater generalisability (Lucas, 2021). A comparative analysis of various borders (e.g., the U.S.–Mexico border wall, the volatile Russia–Ukraine border) could reveal the relative importance and specific role of various hypotheses, providing us with more concrete examples to explore the factors that influence and define border security.

Moreover, it is challenging for me to do fieldwork through in-depth interviews with key primary sources, as the border checkpoints in Ruili and Muse (which serve as overland ports between China and Myanmar) are limited to passport holders. As Müller-Funk (2020) points out, conducting field research in politically sensitive settings requires researchers to deal with conflicting identities, commitments, and interests and sometimes to make implicit or explicit choices about divergent individual interests. More importantly, Chinese citizens cannot securely conduct fieldwork in Muse under the current turbulent political situation, especially given the recent pandemic and military coup. Muse is, to an extent, an unsafe area for non-Burmese scholars to stay for long periods of time due to long-standing armed conflicts in Muse and other border cities in Shan and Kachin. Plus, I primarily relied on translated materials in Chinese and English for this study because I lacked competence in the indigenous languages of Myanmar. It is worth

acknowledging here that my reliance on Chinese-language information may have skewed or biased my findings. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine how domestic Chinese variables, such as negotiations between various domestic leaders and interest groups, have impacted the PRC's foreign policy decisions, given the lack of reliable information on the government's internal workings. In order to produce a more valid and persuasive study, future research would greatly benefit from some fieldwork and interviews in the China–Myanmar border areas to obtain first-hand data.

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