MYANMAR 2025: THE MILITARY ESCHEWS OFF-RAMPING AND FIGHTS BACK, AS THE POLYCRISIS CARRIES ON*

*Matteo Fumagalli**

University of St Andrews, Scotland
mf29@st-andrews.ac.uk

Throughout 2025, Myanmar remained engulfed in overlapping crises of war, mass displacement, and severe humanitarian need. The 28 March earthquake and the abrupt reduction in US aid further compounded these conditions, reinforcing the view that the country was experiencing a protracted polycrisis, or multiple, simultaneous and interconnected crises that defy a single explanation or solution. The military improved its position over the course of the year. While still embattled, it regained part of the territory lost during Operation 1027 in 2023–2024 thanks to China-mediated ceasefires with key ethnic armed organizations in northern Shan State. These developments, alongside battlefield adaptations, left the junta in a more secure position. In the second part of the year, the military shifted toward organizing elections, lifting the state of emergency, dissolving the State Administration council, and establishing a new governing body (the State Security and Prosperity Commission) to oversee a staged, non-competitive electoral process due to begin on 28 December 2025.

The March earthquake highlighted both the scale of the crisis and the difficulty of delivering aid in a fragmented and conflict-affected environment. Meanwhile, illicit transnational economies continued to thrive, particularly in border regions where scam centres and the mining and trade of rare earths and other critical minerals flourished.

This article advances two main arguments. First, Myanmar's fragmentation is actively produced through strategies such as bilateral, non-inclusive ceasefires, which the military used effectively in 2025 to divide opposition forces. Second, China's clout has grown further through mediation and conflict-management and also a new security footprint in the form of Chinese private security companies tasked with protecting infrastructure and personnel. However, Beijing's approach was not guided by a single overarching strategy. Its involvement varied across regions, although it was broadly aligned with support for stability and the military-led electoral process. Overall, elections and ceasefires were not steps toward peace, but instruments to consolidate military control and restructure Myanmar's political order. Myanmar's immediate neighbours hoped for an off-ramp, but the military was not actively seeking or offering one.

KEYWORDS – earthquake; China; ceasefires; elections; polycrisis.

1. *Introduction*

Even against the backdrop of Myanmar's turbulent post-independence history, marked by multiple insurgencies and decades of authoritarian rule, the 2020s have been particularly devastating for its people, their lives, livelihoods, the economy, governance and infrastructure. More than five years after the 2021 military coup, the country remained trapped in overlapping crises of armed conflict, mass displacement, and acute humanitarian need. By 2025, Myanmar's challenges had become deeply entrenched and mutually reinforcing, exemplifying what can be described as a «polycrisis».

In this article, I use the concept of polycrisis as a generative lens for navigating and making sense of the turbulence and upheaval engulfing Myanmar. Although dating back to the early 1990s, the term was popularized in the early 2020s by the economic historian Adam Tooze in his book on the pandemic *Shutdown* [Tooze 2021], a piece in the Financial Times [Tooze 2022, 28 October] and his widely-read *Chartbook* newsletter on the platform *Substack* [Tooze 2023, 23 December].[1] Polycrisis, Tooze claimed back then, seemed an apt expression to capture the growing number of seemingly disparate shocks entangled in and engulfing the world [Tooze 2022, 28 October]. This seemed intuitively correct. Rapidly, the term became a buzzword [Delannoy et al. 2025; Henig and Knight 2023]. Despite the considerable risks of conceptual overstretch, I contend that the concept retains its analytical value and heuristic use to capture the intertwined and cascading crises in Myanmar and their protracted and seemingly intractable nature.

This is for two reasons. In a polycrisis the shocks are disparate. But they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts. Cooper argues that merit—in the concept—lies in the way it references the diversity and range of the shocks; their interconnected and cascading character and consequent loss of «bullish self-confidence about the future» [Cooper 2025, 11

*I am grateful to the Scottish Council on Global Affairs (Insight Award 'How inclusive is the revolution in Myanmar?'), the British Academy (SRG2526/261803) and the University of St Andrews' Impact and Innovation Fund for their support for this research. I am also very grateful to the reviewers for their valuable feedback to an earlier version of the manuscript.

[1] The philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin first coined the term [Morin 1993], referring to «the complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrollable processes, and the general crisis of the planet» [Morin and Kern 1999, p. 74]. The context for the use of the term was the ecological crisis, and the term has since been adopted and widely used in the fields of sustainability and environmental studies. The expression was later rediscovered by then President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker in 2016 [Juncker 2016, 21 June].

September]. Myanmar's crises are cumulative, interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Secondly, a key concern over the way in which polycrisis has been conceptualized and deployed is that empirical applications of the term, when they exist, tend to privilege structural drivers. Legacies, entrenched and long-lasting conditions surely matter and the point about the colonial and pre-colonial origins about many of Myanmar's challenges has been made clearly in the literature, but—as Tooze himself pointed out in more critical reflection on the term [Tooze 2025, 6 September]—intentional acts of disruptions are a defining aspect of our time. As I noted in earlier contributions on Myanmar's fragmented sovereignties, an understanding of the various forms of local multi-scalar agency matters is essential what is going on across Myanmar [Fumagalli 2023, 2024 and 2025]. Myanmar's polycrisis might have become normalized, but this is by design, not default: this is because of the intentional acts of a wide range of social forces, of which the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) are the oldest, largest and among the most consequential. Polycrises do not just happen. They are made.

Thus, I concur with Delannoy et al. [2025] when they note that, spilling across sectors and borders, the notion of polycrisis serves as «a generative lens for navigating the turbulence of planetary upheaval, and compass for steering pathways of transformation» [Delannoy et al. 2025].

Building on the framework briefly outlined above, the article advances two main arguments. First, while conflicts remained entrenched, protracted and increasingly intractable, the military managed to stage a comeback in some specific regions of the country, although this did not amount to an overall shift in realities on the ground. Embattled it may continue to be—and the end to war(s) was nowhere in sight—but the military felt it no longer faced an imminent collapse, or even the possibility of it. To be clear, the politics of ceasefires in 2025 reflected not an overall settlement, but a geographically specific and highly unequal strategy of fracturing the opposition.

Second, China's clout expanded significantly in 2025. Although Beijing's interests varied significantly, ranging from infrastructure projects such as the Kyaukphyu port in the Andaman Sea (Rakhine State) to resource extraction in Kachin State and the removal of scam centres from regions on its doorstep (Shan), it nonetheless emerged as the most consequential external player in Myanmar's evolving crisis. Private security companies tasked with protecting (Chinese) infrastructure and personnel greatly enhanced China's security footprint in the country.

This article is structured as follows. In the following section I focus on two key dynamics which significantly shaped domestic political outcomes: the well-practiced politics of ceasefires and the preparation for the elections due to take place in stages in December 2025 and January 2026. On 1 August, the state of emergency was formally lifted, the electoral system was revised, and the junta was dissolved and replaced by the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC). The

following section delves into the fallout of the March earthquake. Not all economic activities collapsed: the scam centres and the mining of rare earths continued to thrive. Lastly, I discuss the role of China, the only actor «willing and capable» of intervening and, crucially, making an impact on political outcomes in Myanmar [Lintner 2025, 21 January]. And yet, China did not have a single strategy to the country: it was effective in some contexts (Shan), but not others (Rakhine).

2. *Domestic politics*

Events from late 2024 through the end of 2025 marked a significant shift in the fortunes of Myanmar's military.[2] Operation 1027, first launched by the 3 Brotherhood Alliance (3BA) in late 2023 and renewed in Summer 2024, had made military defeat, if not likely, at least conceivable [Fumagalli 2024]. By the end of 2025, however, the armed forces had managed a partial comeback. This did not amount to a nationwide reversal of the war, but it was enough to alter political calculations in Nay Pyi Taw. In the eyes of the generals, regaining ground was essential to moving to the next phase of post-coup rule: the reordering of the country through a claimed restoration of constitutional order, meaning the political framework established by the 2008 constitution.[3]

Any assessment of Myanmar in 2025 needs to reckon with a situation that remained highly fluid and context-specific. The concept of fragmented sovereignty remains useful, but it is not sufficient on its own. Fragmentation is not simply a passive condition; it is actively produced. The notion of *fracturing* helps to capture the fact that actors are engaged in the making and remaking of Myanmar's warscapes which are constantly contested, negotiated and reshaped by actors operating on local, regional and global levels. Which actors prevail, and at what level, varies across the country. The military's long-standing strategy of dividing the opposition and pursuing bilateral ceasefires rather than inclusive settlement remained central in 2025. It was not strong enough to defeat all resistance forces across all fronts, but it retained the capacity to destroy, obstruct, and fragment them. In many places, this was enough to ensure its survival. As Nyar Na and Avila aptly put it, the MAF was «beaten, but not broken» [Nyar Na and Avila 2025].

[2] That said, this was not an entirely unexpected one, since in last year's contribution I wondered «whose tide» had turned [Fumagalli 2025].
[3] The 2008 constitution is of course a largely topic in itself. For a background see Crouch [2019].

2.1. *Ceasefires*

The clearest sign of the military's pushback came in northern Shan State.[4] Two ceasefires were pivotal: the agreement with the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in January [Reuters 2025, 20 January; Strangio 2025, 22 January] and the later agreement with the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) in October [Strangio 2025, 5 May]. Both were brokered by China in Kunming and both reflected Beijing's overriding concern with stability along its border rather than any broader commitment to peace in Myanmar.

The January 2025 ceasefire with the MNDAA was especially consequential. A previous Chinese-brokered agreement in early 2024 had collapsed within months, but this second arrangement appeared to hold in 2025 [Strangio 2025, 22 January]. Under its terms, the MNDAA withdrew from Lashio, the key strategic centre of northern Shan State and headquarters of the military's Northeastern Regional Military Command. Lashio had been captured at great cost during the 2024 phase of Operation 1027, so relinquishing it was a major concession for the MNDAA. China's pressure was decisive. Beijing used border closures, restrictions on electricity, fuel and communications, and even physical pressure (detention in China) on the MNDAA leadership to force it into compliance. In return, the military accepted the MNDAA's hold over the Kokang Self-Administered Zone, while the border with China reopened and trade resumed [Strangio 2025, 22 January]. The TNLA sought longer to resist both military pressure and Chinese mediation. It had signalled openness to a ceasefire in late 2024, just like the third member of the 3BA (the Arakan Army, AA) ostensibly did, but the TNLA tried to continue offensive operations into 2025. Eventually, however, after months of Chinese pressure, it too agreed to a ceasefire on 28 October [Strangio 2025, 5 May]. The terms required withdrawal from two significant towns, Mogok and Mongmit. Mogok was especially important: beyond its ruby mines, it lies close to Mandalay, and its fall to the TNLA had raised fears of a future march on Myanmar's second city.

These ceasefires had effects beyond the immediate cessation of fighting. Airstrikes in northern Shan were reduced, strategic roads and trade routes reopened, and the military was able to redeploy troops to other theatres. Perhaps even more importantly, the agreements fractured the 3BA, whose 2023–2024 offensive had been the single greatest challenge to the military since the coup. This greatly benefited the military. The recovery of the town of Nawnghkio in previously-captured TNLA territory in July symbolized this shift [*Al Jazeera* 2025, 18 July]. Previously held by the TNLA, its recapture showed that the military could still reverse opposition gains when battlefield learning, reinforcements, and air power

[4] The situation in Shan State is especially fractured and complex. For a useful background see Ferguson [2021] and International Crisis Group [2025, 27 November].

were combined [Nyar Na and Avila 2025]. More broadly, the military's partial comeback rested on a mixture of adaptation and external circumstance. Conscription, despite predictions of ineffectiveness, produced around 80,000 new troops [Nyar Na and Avila 2025]. Drones were increasingly integrated into operations, reportedly with training support from Russia [Wai Yan Phyo Naing 2025; Storey 2026], as discussed later in this article. Decision-making over tactical air support was decentralized, allowing regional commands to respond more quickly without waiting for authorization from the top in Nay Pyi Taw.

At the same time, these developments were not replicated nationwide. In Rakhine, where the Arakan Army controlled most of the state apart from Sittwe, Kyaukphyu and the remote Manaung Island, the military remained on the defensive. In Kayin, conflict was shaped by deep intra-Karen divisions involving the Karen National Union, the Karen National Army/Border Guard Force, and the military itself. In Chin, splits between the Chin Brotherhood and the Chin National Front weakened the resistance. In Karenni, the military made gains, but only in an extremely fragmented battlespace [International Crisis Group 2025, 19 March]. These cases confirm that the politics of ceasefires in 2025 reflected not an overall settlement, but a geographically specific and highly unequal strategy of fracturing the opposition. As demonstrated, among others, by Ruzza [2015] and Zaw Oo and Win Min [2007], this is line with the MAF's own approach to «conflict transformation» across the country's periphery, so this was not in itself an entirely novel development.

2.2. *Elections*

The other major development of 2025 was the military's move toward what were widely perceived as among Myanmar's most «unwanted elections» [Aung Naing Soe 2026]. Given the public's level of opposition to the military and its plans to hold what would be regarded as «sham elections», these were widely expected to be a distant cry from the previous two round of elections in 2015 [Kim 2016] and 2020 [Fumagalli 2021], which were widely regarded locally and internationally as free and fair. Since the coup, the generals had repeatedly justified their actions by alleging fraud in the November 2020 election and promising eventually to restore order through new polls. The state of emergency, initially meant to last six months, had been repeatedly extended. By mid-2025, the military judged that it had regained enough ground—and enough regional support—to proceed.

The ground for this had actually been prepared in the years preceding 2025. A hurried and deeply flawed census was conducted in 2024, though large parts of the country were inaccessible [Fumagalli 2025]. A new Party Registration Law passed in 2023 required that political parties re-register, which many anti-junta groups refused to do because doing so would imply recognition of the regime.

Initially, parties were required to have at least 100,000 members and open offices in a minimum of half of the country's 330 townships, although these were later relaxed in 2024, so that the party membership threshold was lowered to 50,000 and the number of townships in which to open offices was reduced to a third of the overall townships [Bawi Tha Thawng 2024, 26 March]. In 2024, as it refused to comply with the new law, the National League for Democracy (NLD) was dissolved [Fumagalli 2025]. Others complied, such as the military proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and a number (over fifty) minor parties. In all effects, though, the result was the systematic exclusion of the principal democratic force in the country. The absence of the NLD and most serious opposition groups rendered the exercise hollow. The «Peace Talk» held in March and the «Peace Forum» held in June produced no substantive outcomes and involved only a narrow set of participants, including the few minor ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) still formally attached to the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement [Mathieson 2025, 28 June]. Yet these events were part of a broader choreography aimed at projecting normality and preparing the ground for elections.

The key institutional change took place in July 2005 [Amara Thiha 2025, 20 August]. The military announced that the state of emergency would be lifted as of 1 August. The State Administration Council (SAC) was dissolved and replaced by the State Security and Prosperity Commission (SSPC), a transitional organ designed to oversee the electoral process until the formation of a new government in 2026. In practice, this did not reduce military power but added another layer to an already convoluted governance structure. Alongside the National Defence and Security Council and the cabinet, the SSPC became the dominant political organ. Administrative tasks lay with the cabinet, but political strategy and electoral management remained firmly under military control. On 15 August, the authorities formally announced the electoral process. Polls for national (Lower and Upper House) and regional legislatures, and for the lower and upper houses of parliament, were to be held in staggered phases beginning on 28 December 2025 and continuing into January 2026. Security conditions were invoked to justify the staged format. In reality, insecurity also provided the regime with a mechanism to hold limited voting while still claiming constitutional continuity. The electoral design made meaningful competition impossible. Under the 2008 constitution, 25 per cent of parliamentary seats remained reserved for the military. Of the elected seats, many in ethnic minority areas were to remain vacant because elections would not be held there. Entire swathes of territory, most notably in Rakhine, northern Shan, Chin, Kachin, Karenni, Sagaing and parts of Magway, were outside meaningful military control, yet the law allowed results to stand even if voting occurred only in a single secure location, even if this were a single barrack. A new electoral system replaced the first-past-the-post system used—for example—in the 2015 and 2020 parliamentary election with proportional representation. These elections were staged elections intended to institutionalize a

military-centred order, generate a veneer of legitimacy, and encourage external actors to normalize relations with Nay Pyi Taw.

Some international and regional actors—China and Thailand most notably—appeared willing to treat the elections as a possible off-ramp, de-escalating violence and favouring a return to stability. Within Myanmar, neither the military nor most opposition forces displayed any willingness to de-escalate first and consequently take steps to that effect. Elections, alongside economic controls and military reform, formed part of a coordinated strategy to secure continuity under constitutional cover. The objective was not peace, but the restoration of dominance.

3. *Economy*

Macroeconomic conditions remained extremely weak. According to the World Bank, economic activity in 2025 continued to be constrained by the combined effects of the March earthquake, ongoing conflict, subdued domestic demand, labour shortages, and persistent power outages [Bissinger 2025, 13 February; World Bank 2025]. Firms faced severe disruptions to electricity supply, manufacturing contracted, rice production fell, and tourism remained well below pre-pandemic levels.

3.1 *Earthquake*

If the ceasefires in northern Shan helped stabilize the military's position, the earthquake of 28 March 2025 exposed the very depth of Myanmar's wider humanitarian collapse. The disaster struck a country already broken by war, displacement, health-system collapse, and aid shortfalls. It compounded pre-existing crises rather than replacing them.

On 28 March, a 7.7 magnitude earthquake hit central Myanmar along the Sagaing Fault, followed ten minutes later by a 6.4 aftershock and then numerous further tremors [Shahzada et al. 2025]. The epicentre lay near the town of Sagaing and close to Mandalay, Myanmar's second-largest city, in central Myanmar. The earthquake was the largest to hit the country in over a century. Thousands were killed, thousands more injured, and vital infrastructure—roads, bridges, railways, religious sites, homes, power grids and communications systems—was badly damaged. Its impact was felt far beyond Myanmar, including in Bangkok, where a high-rise building under construction collapsed. The event resulted in at least 4,900 fatalities, 6,000 injuries, and widespread destruction of infrastructure, including residential, government and religious structures [Shahzada et al. 2025]. The earthquake highlighted systemic vulnerabilities in urban planning, historical preservation and disaster preparedness, exacerbated by rapid urbanization and inadequate seismic codes in an area that had undergone rapid urbanization and

urban migration in recent years, without infrastructure and services adequately being adjusted to meet growing demands and pressure [Kim 2018].

The earthquake became a textbook example of crisis entanglement [Latifi and Goldberg 2025, 2 April]: environmental disaster intersecting with war, displacement, aid cuts, and political obstruction. In many rural parts of Sagaing and Mandalay, some of the worst affected areas were also zones outside effective military control, where People's Defence Forces operated and fighting had been intense since the coup. This made both assessment and aid delivery extraordinarily difficult [Worley 2025, 16 May].

The military's response followed a familiar pattern seen after Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and Cyclone Mocha in 2023 [Fumagalli 2024]: suspicion of foreign interference, efforts to centralize control, and politicization of access. Aid delivery was constrained not only by damaged infrastructure and insecurity, but by military restrictions. The junta tightly controlled permissions and distribution routes, partly out of habit, partly out of paranoia, and partly as punishment against communities that had resisted its rule. Humanitarian agencies therefore confronted severe logistical, financial, and political obstacles at the very moment need surged. External conditions made matters worse. Funding was already stretched by crises elsewhere, including Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan. Then came the sharp reduction in US aid under the Trump administration, including the dismantling of USAID [Nash 2025, 14 April]. This was a major blow in a setting where the humanitarian system was already under severe strain [Kim et al. 2025, 2 December; Fumagalli 2022; Fumagalli and Kemmerling 2024]. In this sense, the earthquake laid bare the polycrisis at the heart of Myanmar's condition: military, environmental, economic and humanitarian crises were no longer separate but mutually reinforcing.

On paper, the earthquake created the first genuine opportunity for nationwide de-escalation since the coup [BBC 2025, 2 April; Michaels 2025]. The National Unity Government (NUG) announced a temporary pause in offensive operations, and several other actors, including the military, declared unilateral ceasefires. Yet these pauses were largely performative. The Arakan Army and the Kachin Independence Army continued offensives. Some of the NUG's closest allies, including the Chin National Front, Karen National Liberation Army and Karenni Nationalities Defence Forces, did not declare ceasefires at all. Many feared that a real pause would either slow their military momentum or channel international aid through the junta, thereby strengthening its legitimacy.

3.2. *Scam centres*

A particularly striking manifestation of Myanmar's war economy in 2025 was the proliferation of online scam centres, a phenomenon that has attracted considerable attention in recent years [IISS 2025; Beech 2025, 17 February; Franceschini et al. 2023; Han 2019, 5 September; Laungaramsri 2025; Petchkaew 2025, 10 November;

Ratcliffe 2025, 8 September; Ruser 2025]. In recent years, these have evolved from isolated criminal enclaves into a major pillar of the broader conflict economy, especially in the borderlands. They are not simply criminal enterprises operating alongside the war; they are embedded within the political economy of conflict itself, generating hard currency, financing armed actors, exploiting fragmented authority, and linking Myanmar's internal crisis to wider regional and global networks of organized crime. In practical terms, these centres are large, fortified compounds—often resembling business parks or private industrial zones—from which industrial-scale fraud operations are conducted. Their activities include cryptocurrency scams, romance fraud, impersonation, and extortion.

The spatial concentration of scam compounds in border zones—Shan first and Kayin more recently, due to China's pressure on the military and the EAOs to crack down on the scam hubs in northern Shan [Fumagalli 2024]—is no coincidence. These operations flourish in places where state authority is weak, contested, or collusive; where infrastructure such as electricity and telecommunications is accessible; and where porous borders enable the movement of people, money, and technology. Along the Thai-Myanmar frontier, especially in Myawaddy and other parts of Kayin State, centres such as Shwe Kokko and KK Park became emblematic of this «business model». Shwe Kokko was the most notorious case: originally framed as a special economic zone, it soon became synonymous with transnational crime [Han 2019, 5 September; Han 2025, 21 November]. It operates as a fortified enclave for Chinese-linked scam networks and is controlled by the Karen National Army, also known as the Karen Border Guard Force, an armed group aligned with the Myanmar military [Han 2019, 5 September; Laungaramsri 2025]. Local actors reportedly facilitated these operations by leasing land, providing security, ensuring utilities, and protecting the compounds from outside interference.

In an industry that generates profits of about $US75 billion a year, the profits are immense, and the risks are often lower than those associated with narcotics trafficking [Fong and McGowan 2024, 31 May; Sriyai 2025]. This explains both the scale and the resilience of the scam economy. Crackdowns by the Myanmar military on the compounds in KK Park and Shwe Kokko in late 2025, including high-profile raids, often appeared selective or performative [Associated Press 2025, 20 November; Viyas 2025; BBC 2025, 12 December]. Workers were detained, compounds partially dismantled, and devices seized, but the key organizers frequently escaped, and operations soon resurfaced elsewhere or under different names, raising suspicions that that anti-scam operations often served a public-relations function while leaving intact a criminal economy from which military-linked interests continued to benefit.

Scam centres also transformed Myanmar's regional relations. For neighbouring states, especially China and Thailand, Myanmar increasingly came to be seen as a source of transnational insecurity. As discussed in relation to

Operation 1027 in 2023 [Fumagalli 2024], Beijing, in particular, became more assertive in pressing both the junta and selected ethnic armed organizations to dismantle compounds that targeted Chinese nationals. Yet these interventions were highly selective, driven primarily by China's own security concerns rather than by a broader commitment to dismantling the underlying systems of trafficking, coercion, and armed protection. Scam centres therefore reveal the degree to which Myanmar's war economy is transnationalized, and it both feeds and is fuelled by other conflicts and collapse of legal governance.

3.3. *Rare earth mining*

If scam centres illustrate Myanmar's incorporation into transnational criminal economies, the extraction of rare earths and other critical minerals demonstrates its equally important integration into strategic global supply chains, although arguably—just like the scam centres—the illicit flows of trade were more economically significant than the legal ones. By 2025, rare earth mining had become one of the most consequential dimensions of Myanmar's wartime political economy, particularly in Kachin State, rich in dysprosium and terbium, along the Chinese border [Fishbein et al. 2024, 4 December; Poling 2024]. There are several reasons for this, but one important contextual aspect to bear in mind is that China dominates the rare earth elements (REE) supply chain, being home to just under 40% of the world's REE reserves, while providing some 80% of REE supply [Meehan et al. 2025]. The US, among others, depends for well over 80% of its REE imports on China, making the country vulnerable to wider geopolitical competition and tensions between the two countries [Aung and Berry 2025, 17 November]. What tends to be forgotten in such debates is that in recent years the action taken by the Chinese state to mitigate the effects of the environmental impacts of REE mining has meant that China has in practice outsourced much of its polluting mining to areas such as Kachin State in Myanmar, creating an extractive resource frontier on its doorstep [Meehan et al. 2025]. The much looser labour and environmental standards and even the lack of a regulatory framework as regards REE mining has made areas in Kachin, but also Shan State, especially appealing to Chinese investors. The size of the phenomenon is considerable: China's official trade data evidence a surge in REE imports from Myanmar, from US$ 1.5m in 2014 to US$ 812m in 2021, with Myanmar accounting for around 94% of China's REE imports [Meehan et al. 2025]. The 2021–2024 period has seen a spike in Myanmar's exports of REE to China. The period amounts to 84% of REE exports to China over the broader 2017–2024 period, with a peak in 2023 when exports reached US$ 1.4bn in that year [Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar 2025, p. 5). Myanmar's overall REE exports to China were extremely lucrative at well over US$ 4bn, of which US$ 3.6bn worth of REE was shipped during 2021–2024 [Institute for Strategy and Policy-Myanmar 2025, p. 5].

Since the 2021 coup, extraction has expanded rapidly. Mining sites have multiplied, exports have surged, and Myanmar has become China's largest external supplier of rare earth materials. These exports have been overwhelmingly directed across the border between Kachin State and Yunnan Province for processing, reinforcing a relationship of deep dependency on Chinese infrastructure, demand, and logistics. The political significance of this shift became particularly clear when the Kachin Independence Army seized control of key towns such as Chipwi and Pangwa, located near some of the world's most valuable deposits of heavy rare earth elements, in 2025 [Amara Thiha 2025, 24 June; Amara Thiba 2025, 1 August]. Importantly, these include dysprosium and terbium, both essential to electric vehicles, wind turbines, and advanced defence technologies. By taking these areas, the KIA acquired not just territory, but authority over a critical resource frontier. It was thereby transformed from a territorial insurgency into the de facto governor of a strategically significant export corridor.

China's response was pragmatic. Border gates were initially closed and pressure was applied [Strangio 2025, 22 January], but negotiations followed and trade eventually resumed under new terms. In effect, this formalized the role of a non-state armed group as regulator and tax collector over one of the region's most valuable mineral flows. Such arrangements underscore the extent to which sovereignty in Myanmar had become fragmented and functional rather than purely legal. In practice, control over rare earths depended less on Nay Pyi Taw than on armed actors and Chinese buyers.

In 2025, reports emerged that policymakers in Washington had considered whether the United States might engage either the junta or the KIA in order to secure access to Myanmar's rare earth reserves [Reuters 2025, 29 July]. Such proposals, however, rested on a fundamental misreading of the situation. Extraction sites lie overwhelmingly in KIA-controlled territory, transport routes lead toward China, processing infrastructure exists across the border, and there is no viable route to the sea independent of Chinese-controlled logistics. Any attempt to redirect these flows would face overwhelming logistical, legal, financial, and political obstacles [Amara Thiha 2025, 24 June; Amara Thiha 2025, 20 August].

4. *International Relations*

Overall, Myanmar's foreign policy environment in 2025 was characterized by fragmentation, pragmatism, and limited strategic coherence. The military's external engagement focused on securing legitimacy and sustaining its rule. The planned elections of 2025–2026 were central to this effort, framed as a step toward stability that could encourage renewed international engagement. Despite its long-standing siege mentality and distrust of foreign powers [Lintner 2025, 7 November; Lintner 2025, 2 December], the junta has engaged in extensive diplomatic activity.

After initial reluctance from external actors, especially ASEAN and China, to engage following the 2021 coup, this began to shift in 2023 and intensified in 2024. In 2025, this trend continued, with high-level meetings between Myanmar's leadership, including Min Aung Hlaing, and Chinese officials, including the first meetings between China's President Xi Jinping and junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in Moscow in May on the occasion of Russia's World War II celebrations and later in the summer at the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Tianjin (China) [Reuters 2025, 3 October; Strangio 2025 5 May].

The longstanding debate between diplomatic isolation and engagement has become increasingly irrelevant in Myanmar's context. Western actors faced significant constraints: they could easily engage with EAOs (non-state armed organizations, and some with very patchy records of human rights violations and engagement in all sorts of illicit activities, so not all offered promising models of alternative governance arrangements).

While Myanmar is often framed as a site of geopolitical competition, in practice there was only one major player shaping political outcomes in 2025: China. From 2024 onwards, China has shifted from a relatively cautious approach—focused on preventing spillover—to a more interventionist posture aimed at shaping conflict dynamics. This shift was driven by frustration with the fragmentation of authority and the instability it generated. However, China's efforts do not constitute a comprehensive peace strategy. Instead, they reflect a form of conflict management aimed at maintaining a degree of order conducive to its interests. Beijing's dominance represents a significant shift when viewed historically. Relations between Myanmar and China have long been marked by distrust, rooted in events dating back to independence in 1948, including Chinese support for the Communist Party of Burma and the spillover of the Chinese Civil War. These experiences contributed to the Myanmar military's enduring suspicion of foreign interference. Public perceptions in Myanmar often view China as propping up the junta, though in reality Beijing has pursued a more complex strategy, engaging with multiple actors across the conflict landscape. China's presence is particularly evident in border regions such as Shan State, where it maintains deep ties with various EAOs, particularly the United Wa State Army (UWSA), alongside the Arakan Army, the largest and most powerful ethnic armed organization which has been running its de facto state in Myanmar's east for decades. The UWSA has historically served as a key conduit for arms supplies to other EAOs. However, in 2025 it announced a halt to such support, a move with immediate consequences for groups operating in northern Shan State, particularly the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). These developments reflected China's capacity to shape conflict dynamics indirectly.

China's role in Myanmar is best understood not as peace-making in a conventional sense, but as a form of conflict management [Hodge et al. 2025].

Beijing's primary objectives are to prevent instability from spilling across its borders—whether through armed conflict or illicit economic activity—and to protect its strategic infrastructure and personnel. These interests are closely tied to major projects such as the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), part of the Belt and Road Initiative, which provides China with access to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar's networks of rails, roads and pipelines.

Although China's influence in Myanmar is unparalleled, it would be misleading to describe its approach as a coherent grand strategy. Instead, China's policies are fragmented and context-specific, reflecting both the diversity of conditions within Myanmar and the range of Beijing's own interests. In Shan State, China has been most effective, leveraging its relationships with EAOs and its influence over supply networks to shape outcomes. In Kachin State, its influence is more limited but still significant due to cross-border dependencies. In Rakhine State, however, China faces greater constraints. Yet, two priorities stand out: protecting infrastructure and personnel, and preventing systemic collapse in Myanmar. Although it has major strategic investments there—particularly in Kyaukphyu port and related energy infrastructure [Arakan Oil Watch 2025, April]—these assets are located in areas largely controlled by the Arakan Army, though not the port itself. While these projects have not been directly targeted, their security is precarious. In response, China has increasingly turned to private security companies (PSCs), enabled by Myanmar's 2024 law permitting foreign security providers [Abuza 2024, 21 November; Simpson 2024, 11 December]. These firms operate as non-combat actors focused on protecting infrastructure and ensuring project continuity, allowing China to expand its security footprint without direct military involvement, reflecting a broader trend in China's external engagement, combining economic investment with flexible security arrangements [Hu 2025]. While their presence in Myanmar remains limited, they signal a pragmatic approach to managing risk in a fragmented and conflict-affected environment. China's role was indispensable in bringing parties to the negotiating table, but its influence should not be overstated. Beijing did not create the military's recovery on its own. Rather, it enabled and consolidated a battlefield shift that the armed forces had already begun to produce through adaptation, coercion, and sheer attrition.

Beyond China, other external actors played relatively limited roles in 2025. ASEAN remained tied to the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) approach first outlined in 2021, inviting parties – among others - to reduce violence, compromise and pledge to engage with all relevant parties. This remained a laudable statement of intent, but the organization's lack of enforcement mechanisms and its internal divisions between those more and less reluctant to engage with the MAF (lack of consensus, that is), meant that the only act of significance was the ASEAN members re-affirming their commitment to the 5PC [ASEAN 2025, 26 October]. Russia continued to deepen its relationship with the junta, particularly in the areas

of defence and energy [Wai 2025, 17 December], but most of the cooperation boasted—ostensibly even about space—was more rhetorical than factual. Moscow provided arms, training, and diplomatic backing, including support in international forums [Myanmar Now 2025, 26 May; Selth 2025, 14 May; Storey 2026]. To the MAF, Russia offered an important counterbalance to dependence on China, but Moscow could not compete in terms of economic clout or security footprint. Once again, like in other regions of the world, Russia had to get used to being China's junior partner. While actual progress on space and nuclear energy was not imminent in 2025, there appeared to be some potential for Russia to develop a deep-sea port, a thermal power plant and an oil refinery in Dawei, in southeastern Myanmar (Thanintharyi Region) [Strangio 2025, 5 May]. However, while this could theoretically offer Russia the possibility to establish a strategic foothold in the Andaman Sea and the MAF to avoid over-dependence on China, this is precisely the kind of project that Beijing perceives as encroaching on its own area of interest. India's approach remained cautious and somewhat ineffective, shaped by competing priorities: maintaining border security, countering Chinese influence, and engaging with both the military and EAOs that control border regions [International Crisis Group 2025a, 18 June]. Bangladesh and Thailand adopted a pragmatic stance, also mired in ambiguity, with the former seeking to retain some level of engagement with the generals in Myanmar in the remote hope that at some point the Rohingya could return, while ensuring that the Rohingya militant organizations and criminal networks would not rule the camps in the Cox's Bazar area [International Crisis Group 2025b, 18 June]. None of what any actor on the ground did (the Bangladeshi authorities, the military, the Arakan Army or the Rohingya organisations) did anything to ameliorate the plight of the Rohingya communities on the ground [Latifi 2025, 2 September]. Bangkok had a similar approach, turning a blind eye to the millions of refugees and migrants from Myanmar living on its territory, dealing with the groups actually controlling its long border with Myanmar, while—to the dismay of many—failing to prevent the smuggling of humans and drugsalong its porous border and, crucially, supplying electricity to the scam centres in Kayin State, particularly the Myawaddy Township [Sriyai 2025]. However, its role was marked by ambiguity, as cross-border dynamics—including electricity supply and weak enforcement—facilitated the operation of illicit economies such as the scam centres.

5. *Conclusion*

In this article I have shown that in 2025 Myanmar remained home to an emergent configuration characterized by uncertainty, regulatory breakdowns, and the amplification of feedback loops that may be destructive or transformative. Each one interacted with and exacerbated the other, forming a complex systemic

entanglement, which I referred to as an example of a polycrisis. The March 2025 earthquake and China-mediated ceasefires between the military and the MNDAA and TNLA underscored the trans-national, multi-layered and interconnected nature of Myanmar's multiple crises. The significance of two key ceasefires with the two EAOs that had previously seized territory during Operation 1027 gave the military some respite. And yet these cases confirm that the politics of ceasefires in 2025 reflected not an overall settlement, but a geographically specific and highly unequal strategy of fracturing the opposition, an approach that the MAF have deployed before when trying to manage conflicts in the periphery. In 2025 China's more assertive role, enacted through diplomatic pressure, mediation, and the protection of its strategic interests, helped prevent the military's potential collapse and slowed the momentum gained by resistance forces. As the elections got under way in December 2025, neither the military nor resistance groups showed any interest in taking the first steps to compromise and de-escalate violence. Rather than offering an opportunity for an off-ramp (but for this there would have needed to be genuine elections), ceasefires and pre-election political manoeuvres further fragmented the opposition and should be understood as part of the military's strategy to create a narrative of reduced violence, so that interested international partners could re-engage the country, opening the door to a return to «business as usual». Far from being a localized and neglected crisis, Myanmar's polycrisis was actually a configuration of rapidly evolving and yet intractable ones.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abuza, Zachary, 2024, 21 November, 'Are Chinese private armies entering the fray in Myanmar?', *Radio Free Asia*.

Al Jazeera, 2025, 18 July, 'Myanmar military claims recapture of strategic town from rebel force'.

Amara Thiha, 2025, 24 June, 'Rare Earths and Realpolitik, Kachin Control, Chinese Calculus, and the Future of Mediation in Myanmar', *Stimson*.

Amara Thiha, 2025, 1 August, 'Four reasons why proposals to source rare earth minerals from Myanmar will not succeed', *Stimson*.

Amara Thiha, 2025, 20 August, 'Myanmar's December Election: Engineering Continuity Through Institutional Redesign', *Stimson*.

Arakan Oil Watch, 2025, April, 'Conflict re-ignites in Kyaukphyu'.

ASEAN, 2025, 26 October, 'ASEAN leader's review and decision on the implementation of the five-point consensus', Kuala Lumpur.

Associated Press, 2025, 20 November, ‘Myanmar’s military launches raid on second major online scam centre’.
Aung, Isabella, and Mehek Berry, 2025, 17 November, ‘Extracting rare earths, exploiting frontiers: the human cost of the international rare earths race in Myanmar’, *LSE Southeast Asia Blog*.
Aung Naing Soe, 2026, ‘The unwanted election’, *Mekong Review*, 11(2), February–April.
Bawi Tha Thawng, 2024, 26 March, ‘Challenges and perspectives of political parties on democracy and elections in Myanmar’, *Stimson*.
BBC, 2025, 2 April, ‘Myanmar military announces temporary ceasefire’, 2 April.
BBC, 2025, 12 December, ‘Myanmar’s army says it wants to eradicate scam compounds. Is it really doing that?’.
Beech, Hannah, 2025, 17 February, ‘On a lawless tropical border, the global scam industry thrives’, *New York Times*.
Bissinger, Jared, 2025, 13 February, ‘Challenges and priorities for Myanmar’s conflicted economy’, *ISEAS Perspective*, 11.
Cooper, Luke, 2025, 11 September, ‘Defining the «crisis» in polycrisis: between structural force and perception. Conflict and civicness research Blog, LSE Blogs.
Crouch, Melissa 2019, *The Constitution of Myanmar. A textual analysis.* Oxford: Hart.
Delannoy, Louis, Jean-Charles Leveugle, Sofia Maniatakou, and Peter Søgaard Jøergensen, 2025, ‘More than a buzzword? Mapping interpretations of the «polycrisis»’, Sustainability Science.
(https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-025-01790-9)
Ferguson, Jane M., 2021, *Repossessing Shanland, Myanmar, Thailand and a nation-state deferred.* Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
Fishbein, Emily, Jauman Naw, Jaw Tu Hkawng, and Hpan Ja Brang, 2024, 4 December, ‘A «new chapter»? The future of rare earth mining under KIO rule, *Frontier Myanmar*.
Fong, Clara, and Abi McGowan, 2024, 31 May, ‘How Myanmar became a global center for cyber scams’, *Council on Foreign Relations*.
Franceschini, Ivan, Ling Li, and Mark Bo, 2023, ‘Compound capitalism: A political economy of Southeast Asia’s online scam operations’, *Critical Asian Studies*, 55(4), pp. 575–603.
Fumagalli, Matteo, 2022, *The next swing of the pendulum? Cross-border aid and shifting aid paradigms in post-coup Myanmar*, Florence: European University Institute.
Fumagalli, Matteo, 2023, ‘Myanmar 2022: Fragmented sovereignties and the escalation of violence in multiple warscapes’, *Asia Maior*, XXXIII/2022, pp. 261–280.

Fumagalli, Matteo, 2024, 'Myanmar 2023: New conflicts and coalitions reshape war narrative, challenging an embattled junta', *Asia Maior*, XXXIV/2023, pp. 235–257.
Fumagalli, Matteo, 2025, 'Myanmar 2024: Whose tide has turned?', *Asia Maior*, XXXV/2024, pp. 251–266.
Fumagalli, Matteo, and Achim Kemmerling, 2024, 'Development aid and domestic regional inequality: The case of Myanmar', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 65(4), pp. 486–515.
Han, Naw Betty, 2019, 5 September, 'Shwe Kokko: A paradise for Chinese investment', *Frontier Myanmar*.
Han, Naw Betty, 2025, 21 November, 'Global pressure forces Myanmar junta to crack down on scam centres', *Reuters*.
Henig, David, and Daniel M. Knight, 2023, 'Polycrisis: prompts for an emerging worldview', *Anthropology Today* 39(2), pp. 3–6.
Hodge, Jennifer, Monalisa Adhikari, Christine Bell, and Zabra Siwa, 2025, 'Disaggregated mediation: the localisation of peace processes amid global and domestic fragmentation', *European Journal of International Relations*, 32(1), pp. 262–293.
Holliday, Ian, Aung Kaung Myat, and Alastair D. B. Cook, '2025, 'Humanitarian engagement with Myanmar in the wake of the 2021 coup', *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 19(1), pp. 89–104, (https://doi.org/10.1080/17516234.2024.2448035).
Hu, Xinyue, 2025, *Forays beyond home grounds: Challenges facing Chinese private security companies in Myanmar*, Singapore: RSIS.
IISS (International Institute for Strategic Studies), 2025, 'The geopolitics of Southeast Asia's cyber-scamming crisis', *Armed Conflict Survey 2025*, pp. 276–279.
Institute for Strategy and Policy-Myanmar, 2025, 'Unearthing the cost. Rare earth mining in Myanmar's war-torn regions', Chiang Mai, June.
International Crisis Group, 2025, 19 March, *Disquiet on the western front: a divided resistance in Myanmar's Chin State,* Brussels/Bangkok: Asia Pacific Briefing 181.
International Crisis Group, 2025a, 18 June, *A rebel border: India's evolving ties with Myanmar after the coup*, Brussels: Asia Briefing 182.
International Crisis Group, 2025b, 18 June, *Bangladesh/Myanmar: The dangers of a Rohingya insurgency,* Brussels: Asia Report 348.
International Crisis Group, 2025, 27 November, *Fractured heartland: Shan politics and conflict in post-coup Myanmar*, Bangkok/Brussels: Asia Briefing 186.
Juncker, Jean-Claude, 2016, 21 June, 'Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the Annual General Meeting of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises

(SEV)'.
(https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_16_2293)
Kim, Youngmi, 2016, 'The 2015 parliamentary and 2016 presidential elections in Myanmar', *Electoral Studies*, 44, pp. 419–422.
Kim, Youngmi, 2018. 'Mandalay, Myanmar: The remaking of a Southeast Asian hub in a country at the crossroads', *Cities. The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning*, 72B, pp. 274–286.
Kim, Youngmi, Aung Ko Ko, Naw Grace Thalay Pay, and Matteo Fumagalli, 2025, 2 December, 'UK Aid to Myanmar. London: UK Parliament', International Development Committee.
Latifi, Ali M., 2025, 2 September, 'Arakan Army denies Rohingya forced labour', *The New Humanitarian*.
Latifi, Ali M., and Jacob Goldberg, 2025, 2 April, 'Myanmar earthquake worsens one of the world's largest humanitarian crises', *The New Humanitarian*.
Laungaramsri, Pinkaew, 2025, 'Dark Zomia: Myanmar frontier and the Chinese enclosure', *Journal of Borderland Studies*, 40(6), pp. 1425–1440.
Lintner, Bertil, 2025, 21 January, 'China and the wars in Myanmar', *The Irrawaddy*.
Lintner, Bertil, 2025, 7 November, 'A look back at Myanmar's checkered election history', *The Irrawaddy*.
Lintner, Bertil, 2025, 2 December, 'Siege mentality: why Myanmar's generals still trust no one', *The Irrawaddy*.
Mathieson, David Scott, 2025, 28 June, Peace theatre of the absurd in Myanmar, *Asia Times*.
Meehan, Patrick, Mandy Sadan, and Dan Seng Lawn, 2025, 'The Myanmar borderlands as green energy transition «sacrifice zone»: a case study of rare earth mining in Kachin state', *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 22, 101579.
Michaels, Morgan, 2025, May, 'Assessing post-earthquake patterns of violence in Myanmar', IISS Myanmar Conflict Map.
Morin, Edgar, and Brigitte Kern, 1993, *Terre-Patrie*, Paris: Seuil.
Morin, Edgar, and Brigitte Kern, 1999, *Homeland Earth*, New York: Hampton Press.
Myanmar Now, 2025, 26 May, 'Myanmar, Russia sign pact of mutual protection from international prosecution'.
Nash, Carolyn, 2025, 14 April, 'The cost of US silence after Myanmar's earthquake', *The New Humanitarian*.
Nyar Na, and Drake Avila, 2025, 'Beaten but not broken: The Tatmadaw adapts after Operation 1027', *ISEAS Perspective*, 97.
Petchkaew, Kannikar, 2025, 10 November, 'The world's cyber scam hub in Myanmar gets even dirtier', *Mekong Eye*.

Poling, Gregory B., 2024, *The dangerous allure of Myanmar's rare earths*, Washington, DC: CSIS.
Ratcliffe, Rebecca, 2025, 8 September, 'The huge growth of Myanmar scam centres', *The Guardian*.
Reuters, 2025, 20 January, 'Myanmar military, minority armed group agree ceasefire'.
Reuters, 2025, 29 July, 'Trump team hears pitches on access to Myanmar's rare earths.'
Reuters, 2025, 3 October, 'Myanmar's reclusive general turns jet-setter in quest for election backing'.
Ruser, Nathan, 2025, *Scamland Myanmar, How conflict and crime syndicates built a global fraud industry*, Canberra: ASPI.
Ruzza, Stefano, 2015, 'There are two sides to every COIN: of economic and military means in Myanmar's comprehensive approach to illiberal peacebuilding', *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 14(1), pp. 76–97,
Selth, Andrew, 2025, 14 May, 'Russia to boost Myanmar's imagery intelligence', *Lowy Institute*.
Shahzada, Khan, Umar Ahmad Noor and Zhao-dong Xu, 2025, 'In the wake of the March 28, 2025 Myanmar earthquake: a detailed examination', *Journal of Dynamic Disasters* 1(2), 100017.
Simpson, Adam, 2024, 11 December, 'Chinese security companies are putting boots on the ground in Myanmar', *The Conversation*.
Storey, Ian, 2026, *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Strangio, Sebastian, 2025, 22 January, 'Trade resumes after Myanmar military and major rebel group agree to ceasefire', *The Diplomat*.
Strangio Sebastian, 2025, 5 May, 'In Moscow meeting, Myanmar junta chief praises King Putin', *The Diplomat*.
Strangio, Sebastian, 2025, 30 October, 'Myanmar rebel group agrees to ceasefire with military ahead of junta election', *The Diplomat*, 30 October.
Sriyai, Surachanee, 2025, 'Borderland scam centres and cyber threats', *ISEAS Perspective*, 60.
Tooze, Adam, 2021, *Shutdown, How Covid shut down the world's economy*, London: Allen Lane.
Tooze, Adam, 2022, 28 October, 'Welcome to the world of the polycrisis', *Financial Times*.
Tooze, Adam, 2023, 23 December, 'Myanmar's polycrisis', *Chartbook* 256.
Tooze, Adam, 2025, 6 September, 'Polycrisis – is this the sequel?', *Financial Times*.
Wai Yan Phyo Naing, 2025, 17 December, 'Symbolic Alignment: Why the Myanmar Junta Is Expanding Its Engagement with Russia', *Stimson*.

World Bank, 2025, *Myanmar economic monitor: Surviving not thriving*, Washington, DC.
Worley, Will, 2025, 16 May, 'Slow earthquake response underlines need to overhaul aid', *The New Humanitarian*.
Zaw Oo, and Win Min, 2007, *Assessing Burma's Ceasefire Accords,* Washington, DC: East-West Center, Policy Studies 39.