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How Myanmar's War Became the World's Second Biggest Drone Fight

MATTHEW B. ARNOLD

Democratic Resilience in a New Age of War

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew B. Arnold, PhD, is an academic and policy analyst specializing in politics and governance in conflict-affected countries. He is currently a Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science and has previously worked as a Senior Economist with the Irrawaddy Policy Exchange in Yangon, Myanmar. He formerly served as The Asia Foundation's Country Representative in Myanmar, after holding various roles with the Foundation in Yangon and Bangkok. Before his work in Myanmar, he conducted extensive research on conflict, governance, and state fragility in Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Sudan, and Thailand. Arnold has been a Senior Research Fellow at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand, focusing on foreign interventionism and post-conflict reconstruction in weak states, and has regularly taught on these topics at Tsukuba University in Japan. He also served as a U.S. Department of Defense civil servant in Afghanistan. Earlier in his career, he worked with the UN World Food Programme, managing refugee operations in Ethiopia and responding to humanitarian crises in Africa and Asia. Prior to that, and as a Fulbright Fellow, he worked as a wildlife economist for the Government of Namibia. Arnold is the co-author of two books – *Militias and the Challenges of Post-Conflict Peace* (Zed Books) and *South Sudan: From Revolution to Independence* (Oxford University Press). He has published in leading journals such as *Asian Survey*, *International Peacekeeping*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, and *Conflict, Security and Development*. He holds doctoral and master's degrees from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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How Myanmar's War Became the World's Second Biggest Drone Fight

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine War – the largest in Europe since World War II – has supercharged drone warfare, forcing militaries around the world to reassess their defence strategies. Despite its start using conventional means, the Russia-Ukraine War has seen relatively simple and inexpensive drones – generally built with commercially-available components – play innovative and increasingly decisive battlefield roles, deployed by the millions. As such, both Russia and Ukraine use drones to saturate and expand battlefronts as drone warfare drives the tempo and intensity of the war. Moreover, ensuring the availability of drones and their continuous adaptation is increasingly driving allied relations for both sides – China for Russia and NATO countries for Ukraine.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict is the most prominent conventional war fought in decades, with its adversaries both possessing large militaries and deep military-industrial complexes built over the course of the Soviet Union. Considering the war's scale and its combatants' historic capacities, it merits questioning whether drones can play similarly impactful roles in other contexts. Myanmar's war is quite unique globally, representing a national uprising following the military's ouster of an elected government in February 2021 that has seen armed rebellion sprawl, building off decades of insurgency by multiple ethnic minority groups. Tellingly for the future of warfare, drones have proven formative for the country's conflict.

This paper examines how Myanmar became the world's second most intensive drone war after the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Mon, 2025).[1] It examines the conditions that allowed widespread drone use across battlefronts, tracing three phases: resistance groups' early adoption to intensify rebellion, subsequent territorial offensives, and the military's counteroffensives aided by Chinese and Russian support. By focusing on developments through mid-2025, the paper argues that drones have become a critical weapons system impacting the trajectory of Myanmar's war and highlights why their proliferation offers vital lessons for understanding drone warfare's impact beyond the Russia-Ukraine war in low-intensity, protracted conflicts.

1 ACLED has noted this repeatedly in its methodical conflict statistics, which track drone incidents. To capture this, the author of this paper treats Russia and Ukraine not as separate conflicts but as a single theatre of Russia's fullscale invasion of Ukraine, and on that basis identifies Myanmar as the second most intense conflict for drone warfare.

Section 1: National Uprising, Entrenched Military Dictatorship

Myanmar is often dismissed as a 'forgotten war', yet its emergence as the world's second most intense conflict for drone warfare can only be understood by examining its political and geographic foundations. In terms of scale, the global conflict monitoring group ACLED now records Myanmar as the conflict with the second highest number of drone events worldwide, with over 2,100 distinct drone strikes by resistance groups alone since 2021 across more than 600 locations (Mon, 2025).[2] Many more are likely if underreporting, multiple drone sorties per recorded event (such as extended battles) and the military's own rapidly increasing use of drones are accounted for.

The scale of drone attacks in Myanmar needs to be situated within a context in which resistance has persisted and expanded nationwide, historically seizing large territories while maintaining public support despite the military's massive advantages in firepower, administration, and funding. Drones have not singularly determined Myanmar's trajectory, but they have played a structurally significant role in shaping the course of the war since 2021 in ways unimaginable over the preceding seven decades of insurgency, political turmoil, and entrenched military dictatorship.

"Drones have not singularly determined Myanmar's trajectory, but they have played a structurally significant role in shaping the course of the war since 2021 in ways unimaginable over the preceding seven decades."

Myanmar's military staged a coup d'état on 1 February 2021, ousting the elected government of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, thereby ending a historic decade of peaceful change known within the country as the 'transition'.[3] Under the guiding framework of the military-designed 2008 Constitution, the transition was a wide-ranging process of political and economic reforms, with a peace process tagged on, that ostensibly meant to reconcile the country (Jones, 2013).[4] Its rapid collapse caught the world by surprise. The new junta, the State Administration Council, argued

2 Mon noted that by July 2025, the resistance alone had undertaken over 2,100 drone attacks.

3 The 'transition' was never formalised as a term, either in Myanmar's legal structures or diplomatic recognition. Rather, it was the common vernacular for the decade, intoning change starting after the 2010 election but particularly after Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD came into parliament after by-elections in 2012.

4 This was across two major axes. The first was to introduce elections and civilian government, thereby bridging divides between the military and its main political opponents, particularly Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD). The second was the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), a peace process which sought to engage ethnic insurgent groups in political dialogue to allow for minority self-determination.

its actions were necessary to correct electoral fraud in the 2020 elections, which the Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a landslide in a vote deemed fair by international monitors (BBC, 2021). In taking power through force, the military acted under the premise that the transition, under the continued auspices of the 2008 Constitution, could still proceed once new elections were held without Aung San Suu Kyi and bristled when its seizure was rightly deemed illegal (Andrews, 2023).[5]

Mass protests erupted over February 2021 across the country followed by several months of barbaric regime violence to crush them, resulting in over 500 deaths (France 24, 2021). The public's anger with the military built on six decades of frustration marked by coups in 1962 and 1988. This fomented a sprawl of new armed groups that partnered with multiple long-running ethnic insurgencies seeking regional autonomy (Moe, 2024). The transition model was based on the military's historic dominance, allowing it to secure its constitutional placement in the country's governance underpinned by massive firepower entrenched across the country. By staging a coup and unleashing mass violence on protesters, the military reformulated opposition to it.

The Bamar majority, now freed up to fight after decades of NLD-led nonviolent campaigns, took up arms en masse, turning large swathes of the country's centre with no modern history of insurgency into new fronts against military dictatorship. New groups, which also included significant cadres of disenfranchised ethnic minority youth, interlinked with long established ethnic insurgencies.[6] As such, the military's grip over the country was challenged by rebellion not only in the mountainous peripheries of the country with long-running insurgencies but also across the vast flatlands that spread across either side of the Ayeyarwaddy River as it meanders southward, forming the spine of the country.[7]

Given these dynamics, the military was confronted with a 'multi-front war' (Bociaga, 2021). Rather than consolidating its control by ousting Aung San Suu Kyi, the military had lit a conflagration of nation-wide resistance. As such, rather than a free-for-all, the war pits an array of resistance groups against the military, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. Given this context, Myanmar's civil war is best understood as a national uprising, with armed rebellion occurring over large parts of the country with backing from a significant share of the population.

As the war stretched on, there was a 'sustained trend of resistance gains', starkly in terms of territorial control (Hein, 2024). By late 2024, the BBC estimated the military only had stable control over 21% of the country (Henschke *et al.*, 2024). However, the military – deeply entrenched across the country by decades of oppressive dictatorship – has proven resilient; by mid-2025 it regained some initiative through a series of counter-offensives, allowing it to halt resistance groups' advances as well as retake some key towns and highway corridors, but not the wide swathes already lost in bulk (Siow, 2024). Enabling this was China and Russia.

5 Despite the military's statements that its seizure was a temporary corrective step for a corrupt election enraged the public, and international analyses have consistently demonstrated its illegality.

6 This included major areas in Bamar-majority central regions, such as Sagaing and Magway, as well as ethnic minority areas in border states like Chin and Karenni.

7 For a detailing of territorial control by the end of 2024, and illustrative of these dynamics, see the map by Henschke et al. (2024).

As the next sections will detail, drones have been critical to these iterations in Myanmar's conflict trajectory. Vital to both sides of the war, and amongst all weapon technologies, 'drones have most significantly influenced the conduct of war in Myanmar' (Mon, 2025). The contextual factors enabling the significance of drones to Myanmar's conflict were born over decades of civil war but became pronounced through the coup and the reformulation of conflict actors and dynamics it provoked.

Resistance to a return of dictatorship confronted the brute reality of Myanmar's military as a fighting force. Comprised of 350,000 personnel, it was both larger and much better armed than its opponents ever would be combined. Heavily fortified across the country over decades of rule, it was battle hardened and completely willing to use mass violence on civilians. The military had control over the state apparatus and, crucially, of its significant oil and gas revenues. In reverting to full autocracy, the military returned to a form it knew well and was adept at using. In a world of failed uprisings, any resistance to it faced massive challenges.

A dispersed, low-intensity war emerged that combined guerilla tactics but grew into more conventional battles over fixed, contiguous terrain including towns and cities. With popular support, large numbers of guerilla units quickly emerged across central parts of the country while better armed ethnic insurgents steadily escalated or reengaged the military in battle. Foot soldiers would be definitive – armour playing no notable role, and mechanisation generally limited – together with artillery and airpower, in the form of close air support, benefiting the military. Long borders with China and Thailand allowed access to commercial technologies at scale. Within this context, the capabilities and accessibility of drones came to the fore, ensuring they would emerge as a ubiquitous weapons system for all combatants.

Section 2: Empowering Revolution, Taking Ground

> *It's a game-changing weapon. We don't have the fighter jet, we don't have the helicopter, so we rely on the drone for our airstrikes.*
>
> – A resistance fighter (Graceffo, 2025a).

The application of drones initially favoured the resistance, who quickly mainstreamed them into operations while the military dithered over habituated doctrine and stagnant centralised procurement, initially relying only on small numbers of military-grade drones procured from China, most notably CH-3As for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) roles (Funaiole, Bermudez and Kurata, 2021). Influencing this was the military's air force, comprised of an array of fighter jets – mostly Chinese and Russian suitable for ground attack, including some transport planes reconfigured for bombing runs. This meant the military already had uncontested air power across the country, a key strength deployed over decades of counterinsurgency, but which limited its initial consideration of more expansive drone use.

Drones empowered two phases of escalation for the resistance. The first, over 2021 and 2022, saw new resistance groups – generally referred to as People's Defense Forces (PDF) – formed and entrenched, particularly over wide swathes of north-central Myanmar that had little to no modern history of insurgency. Elsewhere, new groups formed on the Indian and Thai borders. The biggest challenge for them was the dearth, sometime nearly complete, of small arms and ammunition (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 2022). Conversely, boosting them was widespread public support, compelling the military to engage in battle across extensive new territories. While the military was formidable, it was not well positioned to face such a masse of resistance, testing the limits of its inherent advantages of conventional infantry, airpower, and artillery – especially given its weakness in mechanised infantry useful to fighting across large flatlands.

During this first phase of resistance escalation, drones were critical to enabling new armed resistance to emerge and gain traction, a daunting prospect that implodes a lot of would-be revolutions. Drone attacks, many shared as videos on social media, provided a crucial psychological fillip for uprising by encouraging emulation, fundraising, and bolstering public resolve (Sin, 2023). The decade of transition had exposed new generations to economic growth and global technological changes. Large numbers of youth felt empowered and worldly (Lintner, 2021). Access to global consumer technologies – from online videos to downloaded instruction manuals – provided a menu of training materials and production designs (Beech and Mozur, 2024). Facebook and TikTok became key mediums for new insurgents, many of whom were urban youths who fled protest crackdowns and joined large numbers of rural youth.

Without practicable access to small arms and ammunition, PDFs initially turned to fertiliser-based improvised explosive devices (IEDs) against military convoys and foot patrols but, within months of rebellion, started employing drones. Key to this was existing, pre-war access and experience using Chinese commercially available agriculture drones, mostly hexacopters. Simultaneously, a lot of experimentation was happening with other drones too – notable

smaller rotary ones, mostly from the Chinese firm DJI, and small fixed wings. Bought online through a wide array of retail platforms, they could be moved across the border from Thailand or China relatively easily while local reassembly was boosted through 3D printing technology (Banerjee, 2024). This swell of drones allowed resistance groups to start attacking fortified positions – checkpoints, outposts, and bases – that would otherwise be largely untouchable with IEDs and small arms alone.

Over time, resistance groups accrued enough small arms enabling more ambushes and ground assaults, but most of the casualties they inflicted on military units were through IEDs, while drones enabled a constant stream of air attacks. The military, unaccustomed to the reality of air assaults, increasingly adopted a defensive stance. By late 2022 and into 2023, with manpower declining through attrition, the military was spread thin through sheer geography, while its unpopularity limited recruitment. Military forces increasingly consolidated in fortified towns and along highways, relinquishing control of some rural areas in border regions and north-central parts of the country. Despite dedicated offensives over two preceding dry seasons, by mid 2023 the junta had clearly missed its chance to decisively break the uprising. A threshold had been crossed: an initial 'revolutionary' mood had consolidated into a broader social and armed resistance that the SAC could no longer collapse outright (Arnold, 2023).

Even with the clear utility of drones, many resistance groups, especially newer ones, still lacked the armaments, starting with adequate small-arms ammunition – necessary to overcome heavily fortified military positions in urban and periurban areas. Resistance forces had few heavy weapons such as mortars or artillery and, while drones proved effective in tactical strikes, they could not fully compensate for these material shortfalls. Compounding these limitations was the decentralised nature of the resistance itself: emerging from localised revolts, many units lacked the leadership and coordination required to mount sustained, largescale offensives. This was compounded by the inability of the opposition National Unity Government to aggregate smaller units into larger formations (Pederson, 2024). The military, meanwhile, remained entrenched and resilient, enjoying advantages in ammunition, artillery, and air power that enabled concentrated defensive operations. A more cohesive, forceful strategy by resistance groups was necessary.

The second, more significant phase of resistance escalation occurred over late 2023 and 2024. While the military had been losing rural control previously, it saw massive losses after three allied ethnic resistance organisations (EROs) – which had waged long-running insurgencies in the country's more mountainous border regions in northeast and west – launched a highly successful offensive known as 'Operation 1027' (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 2024). These groups – the Rakhine nationalist Arakan Army (AA), the ethnic Ta'ang Ta-ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the Kokang Chinese Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), which together formed the 'Three Brotherhood Alliance' (3BA) – were some of the most formidable, well-armed insurgent groups in the country but had been largely inactive after the coup because of ceasefires with the military (Al Jazeera, 2024a). In their home areas in Shan and Rakhine states, the core challenge facing them was straightforward: the fortified entrenchment of the military over decades of counterinsurgency in thousands of hard points, particularly in towns and hilltops, that saw multiple interlinked infantry and artillery fire bases.

Simply put, the military was systematically dug in, and the resistance lacked the conventional means – jets and artillery – to dig them out. The military was not formulated to fight a nationwide rebellion, but it was extensively fortified across the areas where it had been battling ethnic insurgents since independence. This simple reality became the fulcrum for the wider war. Namely, the possibility that ethnic insurgent groups in control over rural, mostly mountainous areas – even though battle proven over decades of war – could escalate to the semi-conventional tactics necessary to take and hold contiguous territories that were heavily defended. For the 3BA alliance, the wider war against the junta opened an historic opportunity to push harder against a weakened opponent.

> “Aside from intense battlegrounds, drones also enabled more targeted strategic attacks deep within the military’s more stable heartlands.”

Through Operation 1027, 3BA EROs succeeded in taking control of northern Shan State, including China’s border and with it, dozens of towns and cities. Large parts of Rakhine state then fell from military control. This success catalysed a continuing escalation by other resistance groups elsewhere in the country – parts of Mandalay, Magway, and Sagaing regions together with swathes of Kachin,
Karenni, and Karen states. Over the first eight months of 2024, resistance groups – particularly other EROs but also newer PDFs – seized nearly a hundred towns and large swaths of contiguous territory from a military that was increasingly reeling, including border areas with Bangladesh, India and Thailand. Given the scale of the military’s losses, its worst defeats since seizing power in 1962, resistance to it ‘reached a turning point in 2024, posing an existential threat to the regime’ (Hein, 2025). By the end of 2024, resistance groups had seized over 40% of the country’s territory (Henschke *et al.*, 2024).

Multiple factors drove these outcomes, particularly the military’s depletion over the previous years of war and well-executed preparation and offensive coordination between three of the most competent EROs, those of the 3BA alliance (Sun, 2024). The military had concentrated a lot of its combat power in the northeast and its losses there were impactful across its entire organisation. These EROS also successfully ‘snowballed’ their offensive campaigns – using captured heavy weapons, artillery, and mortars, to support further attacks, moving from guerilla tactics to semi-conventional offensives to take territory. The scale of defeats caused by the 3BA helped other resistance groups to achieve significant gains as the military struggled to deploy its airpower effectively against so many targets while its ground forces, already strained through three years of war, were increasingly dysfunctional through fatigue and combat losses.

Within that context, drones were essential – particularly for the 3BA's heavy campaigns in northeast Shan State in late 2023 and mid2024 that made up Operation 1027's two phases. They did not replace other weapon systems but added something disruptive and new: concentrated airborne strike capacity against layers of fortifications in towns, cities, and hilltop bases, including fortress garrisons like Lashio that contained over a dozen major military installations. The expanded use of drones enabled heavy aerial bombardment by resistance forces and helped overturn longstanding imbalances in firepower (Mon, 2025). These same drone dynamics supported the other successful resistance offensives during 2024 in Kachin, Rakhine, Chin and Karenni states – all areas where the military was deeply entrenched over decades of counterinsurgency.

Commercially available agricultural drones remained the dominant platform, wellsuited to carrying mortar rounds and improvised munitions over fortified positions to deplete manpower, suppress counterattacks, and allow bases to be isolated and overrun by infantry. Operation 1027 likely saw more than 20,000 bombs dropped on military positions, with large swarms of drones deployed simultaneously across multiple locations rather than the earlier pattern of oneoff strikes spread intermittently (Peter, 2025). The 3BA had been purchasing drones at scale from Chinese commercial outlets for months. They also drew on the tactical experience of PDFs who joined the offensives. Through Operation 1027, the ERO's capacity for organisation, manoeuvre, and financing turned cheap agricultural platforms into a massed air arm for insurgents, marking the moment when drone warfare in Myanmar escalated to a strategically decisive feature of the war.

Aside from intense battlegrounds, drones also enabled more targeted strategic attacks deep within the military's more stable heartlands; strikes on major airbases and regional command centres in the fortress capital of Nay Pyi Taw often used locally-assembled fixed-wing suicide drones (Al Jazeera, 2024b). There were also multiple assassination attempts on senior generals using drones, one of which reportedly severely injured the military's second-in-command, General Soe Win (Mohinga Matters, 2024). Through territorial losses and growing international coverage of drone attacks on bases in major cities, drone warfare became a defining reality for all combatants and increasingly shaped international perceptions of the war.

Section 3: The Military Emulates What Works, While China and Russia Enable

…air superiority, electronic warfare dominance, and the precision of modern weaponry.
– Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on winning future wars.(Kavi, 2025)

After the successes of Operation 1027 and subsequent offensives, the military's situation was clearly deteriorating – a weakening dictatorship with stable control over just a fifth of the country. Facing an escalating national uprising, the junta needed greater firepower at enough scale to saturate countless battlefronts and maximise other weapons systems. It also needed to compensate for its biggest weakness: rapidly degrading manpower.

Given the significance of drones to its historic loss of territory through Operation 1027, most pronounced over November and December 2023, the military now recognised the significance of drone warfare and moved quickly to adapt (Davis, 2025a). While it had invested in some jamming devices as rebellion sprawled from 2021 to 2023, it failed to achieve enough numbers and spread of these to hinder resistance gains in the war's early years. Military planners were also slow to see cheap commercial drones' utility for offensive operations, or even more generally. Operation 1027's ability to force the military out of heavily fortified areas like northern Shan State and Rakhine State was a massive reality check for the military – and, arguably, its biggest supporters China and Russia -- in terms of the importance of low-cost drones used at scale.

Over 2024 the military began reworking its drone strategy, shifting emphasis from small numbers of military-grade drones (mostly used for ISR) to a strategy that mimicked the resistance's (Reuters, 2024). The goal was not to replace conventional systems but to complement them – the combined arms of infantry, artillery, and close air support but now with enveloping drone saturation. By mid-2024, the military was using drones, sourced from China, in large numbers (Thura, 2025). This entailed the widespread use of commercially available drones and their mainstreaming into combat operations. The military purchased an initial batch of 2,000 to 3,000 agricultural drones over mid-2024 from China and refitted them while also adding more fixed wing and FPV drones to its arsenal (Economist, 2025a). At the same time, it invested further in military-grade drones to facilitate key capacities, such as infrared for nighttime operations (Janes, 2025), and began domestic production of drone-specific bombs (Chapman, Suster and Ahart, 2024).

As 2024 progressed, it was also clear that drone innovation and adaptation by resistance groups was plateauing. A certain complacency seemed to grip resistance groups, who continued to apply the same tactics, without escalating to newer technologies such as fibre optics.[8] Despite some successes in attacking airbases and major command facilities, such resistance attacks were never consistent enough to have strategic impact, such as hindering the deployment of fighter jets. Amidst the grind of battle elsewhere, where resistance drones had been effective, a major challenge steadily emerged. The military's new investments in more sophisticated jamming devices, now distributed in bulk and systematically, were consistently starting to block resistance drones – particularly an infusion of sophisticated Russian and Chinese jammers (Peter, 2025). It was not enough to end drone use by the resistance, but effective at protecting fortified positions and key logistics routes.

8 For instance, while FPV drones utilising fibre optics to avoid jamming were reshaping the war in Ukraine over late-2024, resistance in groups in Myanmar made no similar shift, even over 2025.

Compounding these dynamics were blockages newly placed on the resistance's key procurement methods. Aware of drones' significance for resistance attacks and following a specific request from the junta's Ministry of Home Affairs, China began clamping down in November 2024 on dual-use items – namely drones and key components for assembling them, crossing over its own border, and hindering resistance groups' access to drones (Abuza and Aung, 2025). Reliant on cross-border smuggling routes, the inputs needed to scale up resistance attacks were dwindling, and what remained was increasingly expensive. China's efforts against resistance drones were bolstered by its pressure on non-aligned EROs along its border to clamp down on small arms ammunition supplies to resistance groups – their key source.

Over the early months of 2025, the military started a range of counteroffensives to push back against resistance gains achieved since late-2023, particularly in Shan State close to the Chinese and Thai borders. The immediate results were limited but demonstrated that the military was regrouping. These counteroffensives were bolstered by a range of other actions taken by the military after Operation 1027 began, most significantly a national conscription drive initiated in February 2024 and a sharp increase in military support from China. After years of dwindling manpower caused by relentless resistance attacks, the military was increasingly stretched and ragged. Conscription replenished manpower while China's greater support enabled investments in the military's armaments and bolstered the consistent investments made by Russia. It also solidified resourcing of more basic necessities like fuel, foodstuffs, and uniforms to improve overall functionality. The military started to rapidly escalate air attacks using its planes and helicopters. Tellingly, drone attacks increased exponentially (Head, 2025).

The military's regrouping was compounded by a shift in resistance dynamics. Once the 3BA alliance EROs responsible for Operation 1027 had seized all or nearly all their ethnic home areas in the west and northeast by the end of 2024, they did not make major pushes further into central parts of the country. This reflected intense pressure from China and a desire to prioritise attempts at stabilising their home areas. Two of the groups continued to fight the military through mid-2025 but the lack of a wider push further into the country dampened overall momentum against the military (Reuters, 2025).[9] In turn, the military's political strategy focused on plans to hold elections in the areas where it had stable control in December 2025. Towards this, it sought to start reclaiming lost territories, signifying its stabilising political control over the country.

Over mid-2025, the military escalated its counteroffensives into a concerted 'surge' (Davis, 2025b). This surge, and the smaller offensives that preceded them, deployed upwards of 70,000 new conscripts (Pyae, 2025). Through its escalations, the military succeeded in retaking multiple strategic towns from June to August in Shan and Karenni states; this success reopened several key highways, including to Thailand, and compelled resistance forces back across a range of strategic rural areas. It also blocked further resistance gains despite major pushes by them on several key cities, Bhamo and Kyaukphyu. Importantly however, by August 2025 – after 20 months of conscription and with deepened external support – the military was still not retaking large swathes of rural territory or the vast bulk of towns it had lost the year previous.

9 The MNDAA signed a ceasefire with the military, brokered by China, in January 2025.

Two clear, inter-related changes were driving the military's surge. The first was the comprehensive integration of drones across field units. The second was the overall improvement of the military's combined arms operations – maximising the advantages of airpower and artillery with infantry assaults. Fresh conscripts and renewed weapons procurement allowed for combined arms offensives, with the military more effectively pairing artillery and airpower with infantry assaults, all strengthened through consistent drone attacks.

Gains from the military's surge of counter-offensives demonstrated that with investments, it could stabilise its position and regain some areas. Moreover, it was clear that the military now had the initiative in drone warfare (Davis, 2025a). However, though drones were now proven assets, their utility diminished outside of concentrated battles in urban and peri-urban areas. Their value in decisively pacifying vast rural areas remains open to question. Resistance groups pushed out of towns were still able to regroup, to once again emphasise guerilla tactics aimed at bleeding military units out through attrition and constricting military supplies moving along highways.

For the resistance, historic territorial gains achieved over 2024 contributed to its ongoing challenges. What began as a guerrilla war, spread over large areas in 2021 and 2022, morphed into a semi-conventional war fought in urban and peri-urban areas over 2023-24. This eventually played to the military's advantage: concentrating firepower. Facing grave ammunition shortfalls and unable to consistently use drones because of the military's now regularised use of jammers, resistance groups struggled to defend the fixed terrain of liberated areas, especially as the military's own drones increasingly saturated battlespaces (Graceffo, 2025a). Drones also significantly raised casualty rates for resistance groups as their room to manoeuvre diminished, fighting fixed defensive battles. While resistance groups, particularly the better organised EROs, did procure commercially available jammers, these were impossible to use comprehensively due to the military's access to better technology from China and Russia (Siow, 2025).

Within the broader context of the military's ongoing regrouping, one critical dynamic deserves closer scrutiny: its entrenched and deliberate use of violence against civilian populations. Historically, such brutality was institutionalised within the military's counter-insurgency doctrine, manifesting as routine practices of terror. However, following the historic setbacks inflicted by Operation 1027 and successive resistance offensives, the military intensified these methods to unprecedented levels. Central to this escalation has been the systematic raiding and burning of villages — tactics designed to induce fear and mass displacement. Since the February 2021 coup, over 100,000 homes have been destroyed, and the number of internally displaced persons has surpassed 3.5 million (OCHA, 2025; Andrews, 2025).

Aerial bombardment has become a central tactic to keep civilian populations dispersed, traumatised, and preoccupied with survival. By 2025, the military had conducted nearly 500 airstrikes on civilian communities, killing over 4,000 civilians (Action on Armed Violence, 2025). More than two hundred civilians were killed in July 2025 alone. While fixed-wing aircraft inflict the greatest destruction and casualties, drone strikes have become increasingly frequent, alongside unconventional bombing runs launched from paragliders – both regularly employing mortar rounds as munitions. Estimates are that a third of aerial attacks on civilians are from drones (Action on Armed Violence, 2025). These attacks systematically target civilian

infrastructure, including churches, monasteries, hospitals, schools, displacement camps, and residential areas. The result is the transformation of entire regions into terror zones marked by relentless bombardment and severe deprivation caused by ongoing commercial blockades by the military. These experiences highlight the perturbing capacities of drones to inflict grave human rights abuses and case population displacement at scale.

Section 4: Learning by Doing, China and Russia's Critical Role

China's role in Myanmar's protracted war is potentially decisive. After the coup, its actions denoted a generally neutral stance, balancing relations with the junta and its opponents, particularly various EROs. When Operation 1027 delivered major defeats to the military along the China–Myanmar border in late 2023, Beijing began to pivot more clearly toward shoring up the junta. By August 2024, as resistance forces were putting direct pressure on the country's second-largest city of Mandalay, that pivot had hardened into a more explicit alignment. A highprofile visit by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Nay Pyi Taw on 14 August 2024, where he met Min Aung Hlaing and other senior figures, marked an inflection point; China's military, economic, and diplomatic support to the regime subsequently deepened significantly (Myers, 2024).

> "Crucial to the military's reformulation of drone warfare was the establishment of a Directorate of Drone Warfare in July 2024."

The rationale for this shift was simple: the military was losing. It risked outright collapse if it were not stabilised through financial, diplomatic, and military support. China feared its economic investments would be lost if the military were to fall completely. Accordingly, China offered technical aid, supported military election plans, and worked to bring the junta back into the diplomatic fold while pressuring EROs to ignore the new Bamar-majority parts of the resistance as well as sign ceasefires with the military.[10] Despite Beijing's insistence that it is a non-

10 China's most significant efforts are its attempts to pressure northern EROs, those of the 3BA and the Kachin Independence Organisation, to engage in ceasefire negotiations with the military. In the decades prior to the coup, China routinely facilitated such agreements. However, despite placing strong pressure on EROs, it has struggled to regain momentum for new ceasefires. More significantly, that pressure failed to prevent EROs from seizing large contiguous areas from the military since late-2023. The only significant ceasefire it had secured by mid-2025 was with the MNDAA after that ERO, particularly susceptible to Chinese pressure, had already secured full control over northeastern Shan State.

interventionist neutral actor, it clearly is not. Its actions have been decisive for propping up the military at its weakest moment and allowing it to regain the initiative.

Crucial to the military's reformulation of drone warfare was the establishment of a Directorate of Drone Warfare in July 2024. With headquarters in Nay Pyi Taw, the directorate focuses on training based on reworked doctrine and tactics to mainstream drones across combat operations. Tellingly, it is commanded by an army general to emphasise tactical use by field units utilising large numbers of smaller commercially available drones but also military-grade drones (Mon, 2025). This directorate receives significant support from China and Russia; China is largely focused on systems acquisition, training, and production, while Russia contributes additional platforms and operational expertise. The directorate also leads in innovating drone designs, including prototype Shahed-like kamikaze drones (Graceffo, 2025b). The pairing of China's manufacturing expertise with Russia's battlefield knowledge is a powerful tool for Myanmar's military reassertion.

Since 2024, China has deepened cooperation to enable domestic manufacturing and adaptation of drones and dedicated munitions, building on relationships developed through targeted trade and defence delegations to China (Nation, 2024). A key element has been technical assistance to Myanmar defence factories, including onsite support by Chinese specialists and routine exchange programmes to China for training Myanmar factory staff. China's technology transfer spans a broad range of defence capabilities, but drones and aerial weapons have become a core focus (Mizzima, 2024). Chinese firms such as China South Industries Corporation have also provided technical expertise to improve the production of artillery shells and aerial bombs in Myanmar (Walker, 2025). In parallel, Chinese companies have reportedly entered discussions with the military over licensed drone production inside Myanmar, signalling Beijing's interest in building a long-term industrial footprint in this sector (Graceffo, 2025b). In sum, China has been essential to the military's largescale weaponisation of drone systems while it also supplements the military through extensive transfers of conventional weaponry and ammunition.

Myanmar has been a priority interest of China for decades given the access it provides to the Indian Ocean, especially for landlocked Yunnan Province, and is a key area of investment for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Opened in 2013-14, the most important economic interest of China are dual oil and gas pipelines from Rakhine State's Kyaukphyu to Yunnan, forming an essential entry point for fossil fuels. The pipelines are part of the wider China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which also includes other infrastructure networks, energy projects, and a range of technical assistance, such as human resource development and disaster prevention. Aside from official BRI projects, China is a major investor in Myanmar's economy, chiefly from Yunnan Province, and provides a vast range of consumer goods while investing in everything from solar power and tourism to agriculture.

Since the coup, Myanmar's formal economy has flatlined while illicit trades, especially online scamming, have skyrocketed. Particularly problematic for China, Operation 1027 saw the military lose control over three major border crossings to Yunnan as well as the main highways connecting them to central parts of the country, notably Mandalay; this collapsed border trade, aside from oil and gas coming via the pipelines (Strangio, 2024). Regardless, the military's –

and thus China's – control over the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor is under immense strain, with some stretches lost, even as rebel forces have shown notable restraint by avoiding damage to the oil and gas pipelines and allowing flows to continue through pumping stations under their control (Economist, 2025b). However, the situation is clearly not optimal for China, but it remains to be seen how much of the country the military can reclaim, and with it provide normalised security to China's core investments.

Another driving economic interest of China is Myanmar's rare earths. By contributing 57% of China's rare earths imports in 2024, Myanmar is essential to 'China's de facto monopoly over the global heavy rare earths supply chain — and much of the leverage it wields today' (Butts, 2025). Myanmar is a key source of two highly sought-after heavy rare earths: dysprosium and terbium. These are extracted relatively cheaply in Myanmar, but processed in China, allowing incredible profit margins for Chinese companies given their importance to defence, aerospace, and energy sectors globally (Butts, 2025). Despite Chinese pressure to desist, one ERO, the Kachin Independence Army, took control of a major production site in 2024, interrupting supplies to China. China has been able to partially adjust through other Myanmar sources to keep its imports at high levels (Han *et al.*, 2025). Regardless, the war's unpredictability is clearly a major concern for China regarding these vital resources.

“Drones have emerged as a key tool for China, offering relatively light engagement with plausible deniability.”

China clearly has strategic interests in Myanmar and an imperative to protect them. Anti-Chinese sentiments have been a major political dynamic in Myanmar for decades and China's tensions with Southeast Asian countries are heightened over the South China Sea territorial disputes. Hence, there is a delicate balancing act to its actions in Myanmar; the need for a measured touch that avoids appearing overly interventionist while still protecting vital interests (Aye, 2024). For this, drones have emerged as a key tool for China, offering relatively light engagement with plausible deniability. They also require minimal financial investment yet potentially alter battlefield dynamics significantly. Simply put, drones provide clear battlefield boosts at a discounted financial and political cost. Myanmar's military cannot afford large-scale procurement of China's flagship defence products in the manner Pakistan can, for instance, but through the provision of drones and technical expertise to use them, China can still deepen its military relationship with the junta expeditiously and to serious battlefield effect.

For Myanmar's cash-strapped military, comprised primarily of infantry units, drones provide force multiplication without the additional burden of aviation fuel or heavy maintenance that traditional air power demands – fewer foreign inputs are required after procurement. Their affordable costs and relative simplicity also mean they can be used relatively quickly by a military in need of immediate force multipliers.

Even with China's support and after gaining some battlefield initiative, Myanmar's military is unlikely to achieve the decisive results needed to end the war anytime soon. For the deeply unpopular military, drones ultimately cannot substitute for the boots-on-the-ground necessary to comprehensively recapture and hold the significant territories already lost. China has always been accepting of an unstable neighbour as long as its core strategic interests were protected. Even if the junta cannot retake large swathes of rural areas, drones have proven useful for seizing key urban areas and reasserting control over concentrated areas along logistics corridors, which is essentially what China is seeking in Myanmar.

Given its approach of swinging forcefully behind the military since late-2024, China will likely continue to invest in the drone warfare capabilities of the military. Together with its other support, the goal for this will be to push battlefronts away from its core economic interests rather than hope the military can achieve outright victory across the country. The sum takeaway for China is that it can effectively supply drones as a key asset for clientelist regimes, even when they face the massive challenge of holding off a national uprising that has succeeded in achieving historic territorial gains.

In the meantime, China's support for Myanmar's military extends beyond military hardware to the provision of mass surveillance technologies that strengthen authoritarian control. Through statelinked firms, Beijing has supplied Myanmar's junta with AI-enabled CCTV and facial recognition systems, data interception and locationtracking tools, and components for biometric identification platforms; this has created integrated surveillance networks capable of monitoring individuals across key urban centres and extending into wider regions (Justice for Myanmar, 2024). These tools – combined with internet and social media surveillance – enable the regime to identify, monitor, and suppress dissent more effectively than in previous eras, allowing the junta to fortify its grip even as it remains economically weak and internationally isolated. The combination of this with unknown future evolutions of drone capabilities is perturbing for Myanmar's democratic future.

While China is important, Russia's support to the military also merits attention, which has steadily deepened since the coup, including regular high-profile trips by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to Moscow. Historically, Russia has been a leading weapons provider to Myanmar's military regimes, and in the first two years after the coup alone it provided over 400 million dollars in arms transfers to the SAC regime (Lederer, 2025). This was followed by China with an estimated 267 million dollars in weaponry. Russia's support is particularly significant for the Myanmar air force, including a range of high-end systems received since the coup, such as SU-30 fighters, Mi-35 and Mi-17 helicopters, and Yak-130 light attack jets (EurAsian Times, 2025). Russian technicians are resident in Myanmar to provide direct maintenance support to these platforms, helping ensure a high tempo of use.

In 2024, Russia also provided upgraded Orlan-10E and larger Orion-2 (Helios) surveillance drones as well as jamming equipment (Priolon, 2025). A particular interest of the military regarding Russian defence technology is ISR capacities. A Russian drone developer, Albatross, has been engaging with the military to supply Albatross M5 systems and to develop drone schools and production facilities in Myanmar (Tan, Quinley and Naing, 2024). Crucially, Russian advisers have long been present in Myanmar. It is likely that they are providing advisory support on drone tactics, including increasing use of FPV suicide drones (Janes, 2025). After years of war in Ukraine, Russia clearly has a lot of tactical battle experience to share with the junta but the depths and methods of this remain murky. For now, China's role is more significant, particularly given its ability to ensure large numbers of commercial grade drones can be accessed while it concomitantly provides technical support for the military to build out its own production capabilities. As seen elsewhere in the world, escalating drone warfare drives an imperative to boost domestic capabilities, especially assembly. China's actions denote its support for that in Myanmar, just as it boosts Russian drone warfare through the provision of component parts *en masse*.

Conclusion: Context Matters, But Drones Are Critical Everywhere

From Myanmar's experiences with drone warfare, drones have been essential in three critical contexts. First, in bottom-up uprisings among populations previously unable to resist effectively, drones help initiate, sustain, and expand rebellion. Second, in long-standing insurgencies that have plateaued, drones help break stalemates and capture strategic hard points, including towns and cities once beyond their reach. Myanmar's case illustrates how drones can shift local power dynamics, even in low-intensity conflicts, highlighting technology's role in reshaping the balance between state and non-state actors. Third, however, the military has also achieved notable success using drones to regain the initiative. Chinese supply chains and technical support have allowed the regime to blanket the country with jammers while saturating battlefields with drones to enhance existing advantages in airpower and overall firepower.

Myanmar's war, nearing its fifth year, faces the possibility of turning into a protracted quagmire. Drones have allowed resistance forces to strike in ways the regime struggles to defend against; without them, the conflict may not have escalated to its current scale. Yet drones cannot resolve core strategic weaknesses for either side, raising the risk of a prolonged stalemate in which the military controls central regions while resistance forces hold rural and border strongholds. Battlefield gains risk being stunted without stronger political cohesion among resistance groups, while the military faces the stark reality of sprawling geography and a population determined to revolt.

Conversely, drones could shape the war's trajectory further if technological innovation and application intensify, upending the current military balance. Despite the challenges, resistance looks set to persist in Myanmar and the possibilities enabled by drones are a key aspect of that rationale. Resistance groups are likely to turn to using un-jammable fibreoptic FPV drones, helping target strategic assets such as airbases, fuel infrastructure, and defence factories of

a regime still historically weak. This could shift the war into a new iteration with the military pushed back on the defensive. On the other hand, Chinese and Russian support enables the military to increasingly saturate battlefields with its own drones and expand electronic warfare, reinforcing firepower advantages that could gradually collapse resistance, and particularly the public support it requires given the large-scale violence being meted out to civilian populations.

Whichever way Myanmar's war evolves, drones will continue to be a structurally significant weapon system for all sides. Though Myanmar's conditions are specific, its lessons travel widely: drones now operate across insurgent and state contexts as instruments of both empowerment and control. The country's experience reveals a troubling pattern in which authoritarian regimes, backed by powerful patrons, can gradually reclaim the initiative and harden their rule even after major setbacks. For democracies, Myanmar shows that bravery, innovation, and popular support cannot compensate indefinitely for fragmentation and abandonment. In the continued absence of meaningful Western support, Myanmar's pro-democracy movement faces prolonged attrition and shrinking space as China and Russia deepen their backing for military dictatorship. ■

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lse.ac.uk/ideas