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United Wa State Army

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In the aftermath of the tragic downing of MH17, the international community has appropriately expressed concern about Russophone Ukrainian separatists operating advanced weapon systems in their conflict with the Kiev-based government. While there are still questions about the details of the acquisition of the Buk missile system used to down the passenger jet, and the chain of decisions that led to that occurring, the proliferation of advanced weapon systems is understood by [the UN](#) and [international practice](#) to be an undesirable state of affairs.

As such, it is disturbing to hear of news that the United Wa State Army, an ethnic militia and former separatist group operating in Myanmar, may have also acquired some fairly sophisticated ballistic missile technology. According to Burmese intelligence officials [late last year](#), there was evidence of the UWSA constructing a “radar and missile base” in the region around Tanyang, in the Shan state, supported by a Chinese company. It is not clear what kind of missiles the base is meant to be housing, though they have been described as “long-distance”, a conclusion which is supported by the kind of infrastructure being constructed.

Pakistani and Taiwanese firms are also implicated in supporting the UWSA, however in the case of China this is part of an established pattern of support for the Wa army in Myanmar.

The UWSA, for those who have not come across them before, are the largest ethnic military force currently operating in Myanmar. With an estimated 20,000-30,000 soldiers, it is possible to [trace their origins](#) back to the Burmese Communist Party of the 1960s. The Wa, one of Burma’s many ethnic groups, formed the majority of the party and with aid from General Chiang Kai-shek’s Chinese Nationalists in Taiwan, waged an insurgency against the central Burmese government for decades, partially funding this conflict through the [sale of heroin](#).

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After the collapse of the Communist Party in 1989, the Wa kicked out the remaining party officials from their territory in the Shan State, formed the UWSA and signed a ceasefire with the Burmese Government. At least part of the motivation for the National Government to accept such an agreement was in order to allow the UWSA to concentrate on attacking and undermining the Shan insurgent leader Khun Sa and his ethnic Shan paramilitary group. The UWSA would take control of the drug trade from Khun Sa, and also present a sizeable military force on the Thai border in a region where the Burmese government was otherwise poorly represented.

For the 1990s and early 2000s, this ceasefire seemed to hold. However, the Burmese Government remains suspicious of the UWSA and in 2013, tried to make it relinquish some of its territory – an act that almost led to outright conflict. Fortunately, this was prevented by diplomacy between the Burmese Government and the Wa rebels, who signed [a five point agreement](#) in order to avoid future “misunderstandings”.

Furthermore, the presence of the UWSA and its drug trafficking activities have greatly antagonised the military of Thailand, who have in the past seemed on the brink of attacking the UWSA.

However, the UWSA has a powerful patron in the form of the People’s Republic of China. Due to their geographical location, the Wa people have long historical links with China, which is reinforced by a leadership that was born near the Chinese border and, in some cases, made up of former Chinese citizens (such as Li Zuru, chief aide to Pao Yu-Chang, the commander of the UWSA). While it is not clear that Beijing has officially sanctioned the support that is being given to the rebels, that there is support and it is significant cannot be denied.

In December of 2012, [Jane’s Intelligence Review](#) alleged that China had provided the UWSA with surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), attack helicopters and armoured “tank destroyers”. In addition to this, China has supplied them with [QBZ assault rifles](#), [anti-tank guided weapons](#) and anti-materiel rifles.

What then, is the intention of allowing the UWSA access to more sophisticated and dangerous equipment? In the past, China has struck a [delicate balancing act](#) between the

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central Burmese Government and the Wa, realising it is in everyone's best interests to perpetuate the existing status quo and not spark conflict.

However, that policy was conceived during a time when the relationship between Beijing and Rangoon was significantly better than it is currently. It would be impossible to pretend that Burma's surprising swing towards the United States would have engendered any Chinese response other than to re-evaluate and to use the UWSA to leverage Burma's Government in any future negotiation with China.

Furthermore, the situation in Thailand should be considered. While Thailand's military coup has not significantly altered its foreign policy, which remains in a staunchly pro-American direction, it has increased the role of the military in the country, and given them a freer hand to act. It is possible that China is attempting to deter future military operations by Thailand by arming the UWSA with more sophisticated weaponry now.

There is also an economic and criminal factor to consider. The UWSA are most infamous for their narcotics trafficking activities, but they also make considerable money by selling arms to other, more active groups in the region, such as the [Kachin Independence Army](#).

What is clear is that, regardless of motive, the proliferation of any weaponry, and especially advanced weaponry, to non-state groups is a dangerous policy that is likely to have unintended and difficult consequences down the line. One obvious example is that this move has made disarming the UWSA significantly more difficult. The more secure the UWSA are, the more arms they are likely to sell to other groups, exacerbating the already terrible ethnic tensions that exist in Burma. And any conflict between the UWSA and Thailand could easily become a conflict between Burma and Thailand, with the potential for drawing in surrounding countries.

One can only hope that the example of MH-17 in Ukraine has lead China to reconsider such a policy. Otherwise, they may just be storing up trouble for the future in South Asia.

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