

***Stalemate: Autonomy and Insurgency on the China-Myanmar Border.* By Andrew Ong. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2023. Softcover: 253pp.**

Months after Myanmar's February 2021 military coup, anti-junta resistance fighters left their urban confines for the jungles to secure military training and support from the country's various Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). At first, it appeared that the urban irregulars would secure the allegiance of the powerful United Wa State Army (UWSA), but the much-anticipated overthrow of the military junta—formally known as the State Administration Council (SAC)—has still not yet materialized and in 2022 the UWSA recommenced dialogue with the SAC, a process mediated by a Chinese envoy.

This turn of events elicits questions about the UWSA's current strategic orientation and decision-making mechanisms. However, there are no straightforward answers because of the intricate interplay between central government agencies, non-state entities and foreign interference. Nevertheless, Andrew Ong's *Stalemate*, published during this critical juncture in Myanmar's history, excels at dissecting the society and culture of the Wa State and how these shape the UWSA's strategic and political calculus, as well as offering critical insights into the perplexing behaviour of the ethnic group. Whereas earlier works on the Wa State and the UWSA have relied predominantly on retelling the history of the region, Ong examines how those past experiences impact the decision-making of UWSA leaders and the wider population in Wa State today, with a particular emphasis on the capacity of the region's populace to make independent choices, referred to as "autonomy". This fresh perspective provides a unique analytical lens through which to assess the UWSA.

*Stalemate* begins with a theoretically dense introductory chapter that serves as foundational scaffolding for the rest of the book. While potentially being an initial hurdle for non-academic readers, it makes the subsequent chapters considerably more accessible. Each of those chapters then adeptly strips away layers of sociopolitical complexity from the Wa State and from the UWSA's strategies that factor into the maintenance of the region's autonomy.

In Chapter One, for instance, Ong uses ethnographic approaches to conduct a nuanced, multifaceted exploration of what "autonomy" means for the Wa State's governing elites and its broader population. Chapter Two then provides an intricate examination of the Wa

State's political culture and how it deftly navigates a tenuous balance between Myanmar and China—which has considerable influence in the state—in its bid to preserve autonomy. Additionally, Ong elucidates the role of authority and social values in shaping not only intra-regional relations but also the Wa State's diplomatic engagements.

Chapter Three focuses on how the preservation of the status quo of the Wa State is achieved through a complex series of dynamic negotiations involving Myanmar, China and various other EAOs, while shining a light on different interpretations of political autonomy held by the Wa leadership and Myanmar's central government during the peace process negotiations in the 2010s. It also outlines the strategies employed by the UWSA leadership to sustain autonomy without sacrificing their broader sociopolitical objectives and without precipitating armed conflict. This chapter is the highlight of the book, particularly because of its insights into how a stalemate was maintained during the stalled peace dialogues. Indeed, the model presented of how to sustain autonomy and avoid conflict could be relevant to other EAOs, such as the Arakan Army.

Subsequent chapters delve into how capital accumulation and international engagements have been integral to the UWSA's strategy for preserving its autonomy. Ong masterfully weaves these elements into a comprehensive tapestry that provides a nuanced understanding of the intricate realities of the Wa State and the aspirations of the UWSA. These chapters are particularly useful for readers interested in economic and trade dynamics, as well as for those with an interest in the organization's relationships with the international community. All in all, Ong's *Stalemate* offers a profound and multilayered analysis of the UWSA's quest for autonomy that transcends a mere recounting of history and provides a nuanced understanding of the political and social complexities inherent in Myanmar's EAOs. It serves as an indispensable academic resource and as a window into Myanmar's evolving strategic landscape.

Although *Stalemate* only covers events up until the 2021 coup, the strategic approaches it discusses remain applicable in the post-coup context. Indeed, as a new generation assumes leadership roles within the UWSA, especially against the backdrop of the coup, it is paramount to understand how accumulated experiences and knowledge are transmitted generationally and inform decision-making. This is particularly salient in the context of China's growing assertiveness in world politics, the ongoing political crises

in Myanmar and the enduring quest of the UWSA for sustained autonomy. Although focused on the UWSA, *Stalemate* serves as an indispensable entry point to understanding the dynamics of EAOs in Myanmar more broadly. As the central government in Myanmar shows signs of weakening, many of these groups are now adopting the strategies that the UWSA has successfully employed. Moreover, as scholars, journalists and international politicians debate the anti-junta National Unity Government's roadmap to federalism and the SAC's negotiations with the EAOs, the UWSA's model could be a highly desirable example for future federal arrangements. This little acknowledged, yet palpable sentiment, amplifies *Stalemate's* relevance far beyond its primary interest in the UWSA. This is essential reading for scholars, policy analysts and anyone keen to understand the shifting political dynamics in Myanmar.

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AMARA THIHA is Doctoral Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Postal address: Hausmanns Gate 3, NO-0186, Oslo, Norway; email: amathi@prio.org.