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Beijing's Shadow Force: China's Wagner-like Private Security Company in Myanmar's Civil War

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines China's establishment of a joint private security company with Myanmar's military junta as an evolution in Beijing's power projection capabilities. It analyzes how China balances protecting strategic Belt and Road investments while maintaining its non-interventionist diplomatic posture through innovative hybrid security arrangements in conflict zones.
Study design/methodology/approach: The research employs multiple theoretical frameworks to analyze this emerging security paradigm, including securitization theory, graduated sovereignty, and strategic hedging. It synthesizes reports from Myanmar's military-controlled media with comparative analyses of private security companies across different geopolitical contexts, particularly focusing on October 2022-2024 developments in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.
Findings: The study reveals China's development of a sophisticated "Wagner with Chinese characteristics" model that differs significantly from Russia's approach to private military contracting. Unlike the Wagner Group's overt combat orientation, China's model emphasizes calibrated influence through corporate structures that provide legal distance while preserving operational control. This arrangement allows Beijing to deploy security elements in sovereign conflict zones without formal military commitment, strategically protecting the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor as an alternative to the vulnerable Malacca Strait.
Originality/value: This research identifies an emerging Chinese doctrine for protecting overseas interests that transcends traditional distinctions between private and state security actors. It demonstrates how China is recalibrating its foreign policy toolkit to include "informal forward deployment" capabilities that operate below the threshold of conventional military intervention. The findings provide a framework for understanding similar hybrid security arrangements that may emerge across Belt and Road territories facing persistent instability.

Keywords:
Belt and Road Initiative; China-Myanmar Economic Corridor; Private Security Companies; Wagner Group; Graduated Sovereignty; Strategic Hedging; Securitization.

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Throughout history, the ability to project power beyond national borders has distinguished rising powers from established empires. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) now transcends its original development framework, functioning as a sophisticated mechanism for strategic entrenchment across volatile regions (Rolland 2019). At the forefront of this evolution stands Beijing's establishment of a joint Chinese-Myanmar private security company amid Myanmar's civil conflict – a development that represents a calculated recalibration of China's power projection capabilities rather than merely an adaptive business response to instability (Arduino 2018).

On October 22, 2024, Myanmar's military junta established a 13-member committee to draft a memorandum of understanding for this joint security venture (Strangio 2024). This administrative action holds profound strategic significance, signaling China's departure from its established non-interference doctrine. The creation of this quasi-militarized security apparatus – tasked with protecting Chinese infrastructure and personnel – introduces what analysts call an "informal forward deployment" into Beijing's strategic toolkit. As Ghiselli (2021) notes, China's overseas security posture is undergoing a significant transformation as economic interests expand beyond traditional diplomatic frameworks.

This study examines how China has developed a distinctive security approach that differs fundamentally from both Western commercial paradigms and Russia's Wagner Group model. We analyze the strategic imperatives driving this evolution, particularly the critical importance of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) as an alternative to the vulnerable Malacca Strait (Small 2020). Furthermore, we investigate China's complex diplomatic balancing act in Myanmar - maintaining relationships with multiple actors while incrementally increasing security involvement to protect strategic investments.

The research makes several original contributions to the literature on international security, Chinese foreign policy, and private military contractors. First, it identifies and conceptualizes a distinct "China model" of private security operations characterized by sophisticated integration of commercial legitimacy with state direction (Arduino 2018; Ghiselli 2021). Second, it introduces the concept of "informal forward deployment" to describe China's evolving capability to project power in conflict zones without formal military commitments. Third, it develops a theoretical framework for understanding the "securitization of economic corridors" as infrastructure projects transition from purely commercial endeavors to objects of national security concern requiring protection mechanisms (Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde 1998).

Additionally, the study documents China's shift from traditional non-interference toward what might be termed "calibrated intervention" when core strategic interests are threatened. It provides one of the first comprehensive analyses of how China navigates Myanmar's complex security environment while maintaining relationships with multiple, sometimes opposing, actors (Kuik 2016). The research offers predictive insights into how similar security arrangements may evolve across other volatile regions where Chinese strategic investments face persistent threats and contributes to theoretical discussions about evolving forms of sovereignty in contemporary international relations (Ong 2006; Bach 2016).

This paper is structured as follows: we first outline the theoretical frameworks employed, then examine the emergence of China's military-commercial hybrid model in Myanmar. Subsequently, we analyze the strategic imperatives driving this development, particularly the importance of securing the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. We then explore China's diplomatic balancing act in Myanmar's complex conflict environment, compare China's approach with Russia's Wagner Group, and assess the broader implications for China's global security posture. We conclude with reflections on the future of China's power projection capabilities and their implications for international relations theory and practice.

1. Theoretical Framework

This study examines China's joint private security company with Myanmar's military junta through multiple theoretical lenses that collectively illuminate the complex interplay between state power, commercial interests, and security operations in contested environments. The primary theoretical foundation is the "securitization of economic corridors," a process in which strategically significant infrastructure projects shift from being purely commercial undertakings to matters of national security (Ghiselli 2021; Arduino 2018). Drawing on Copenhagen School securitization theory, this framework explains how economic assets become security concerns when exposed to non-traditional threats that jeopardize core strategic interests (Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde 1998). In Myanmar, China's Belt and Road investments—particularly the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor—have undergone this securitization, functioning not merely as economic assets but as strategic alternatives to maritime chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait.

The study also employs Ong's (2006) concept of "graduated sovereignty," which refers to differentiated modes of governance enabling states to exert varying degrees of control across territories without formal annexation. This framework helps explain Beijing's approach in Myanmar, where influence is exercised through a hybrid corporate-security entity that maintains legal distance while ensuring operational control. Related work by Jones and Johnson (2014) on borderland sovereignty and Duara (2006) on "sovereignty regimes" in Asia further contextualizes this phenomenon.

Another key lens is the scholarship on private military and security companies (PMSCs) as instruments of state power (Avant 2005; Kinsey 2006). While early studies viewed PMSCs as independent market actors, recent approaches emphasize their strategic incorporation into state foreign policy. Cusumano's (2021) "state-directed commercialized security" model provides insight into China's distinctive use of PMSCs, which differs from both Western commercial security models and Russia's Wagner Group paradigm. This framework highlights how states exploit the plausible deniability of private actors while retaining strategic direction.

Strategic hedging theory (Goh 2005; Kuik 2016) is used to analyze China's multifaceted engagement with Myanmar's civil conflict. Rather than strictly balancing or bandwagoning, strategic hedging entails cultivating relationships with multiple—sometimes opposing—parties to maintain flexibility and influence irrespective of conflict outcomes. This framework illuminates China's seemingly contradictory policy of supporting the military junta while simultaneously engaging with opposition forces and ethnic armed groups.
Mann's (1984) concept of "infrastructural power," referring to a state's capacity to penetrate civil society and implement decisions, further enriches the analysis. Bach's (2016) notion of "transnational territorialization" underscores how infrastructure projects such as the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor extend Chinese influence beyond its borders, granting strategic value to the protection of these physical assets.

Together, these frameworks portray China's evolving security approach in Myanmar as a systematic recalibration of power projection capabilities rather than a mere business response. The joint security company embodies a deliberate synthesis of commercial legitimacy and state direction—what this study terms "informal forward deployment"—allowing China to secure strategic corridors without formal military involvement. This model diverges significantly from both Western private security paradigms and the Wagner Group, reflecting China's strategic culture and preference for calibrated influence over overt intervention.

The research adopts a qualitative methodology to analyze China's security operations in Myanmar through these multiple theoretical lenses. Data are synthesized from diverse sources to construct a comprehensive understanding of China's emerging model of private security operations. Primary sources include official statements in Myanmar's military-controlled media, particularly the October 22, 2024, announcement of a 13-member committee tasked with drafting a memorandum of understanding for the joint security venture. These communications reveal how the arrangement is framed and legitimized domestically.

A comparative analysis contextualizes China's model by examining similarities and differences with Russia's Wagner Group, drawing on the framework developed by Badawi and Daabul (2024). Document analysis—of policy papers, official communications, and media reports—constitutes a core methodological approach, aligning with Ghiselli's (2021) method of integrating official discourse analysis with operational realities. Triangulation of multiple data points enables the construction of a coherent picture of China's strategic objectives and operational modalities in Myanmar.

The study employs a multi-theoretical framework bridging international relations, security studies, and political geography, as advocated by Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde (1998). Concepts such as graduated sovereignty (Ong 2006), strategic hedging (Kuik 2016), and infrastructural power (Mann 1984) collectively provide a multidimensional toolkit for understanding China's evolving security posture. Recognizing limitations in available data—especially regarding the company's operational parameters—the study employs theoretical inference based on China's established patterns of private security operations in other regions (Arduino 2018; Badawi 2024b). This approach facilitates reasoned extrapolation while acknowledging the uncertainties inherent in studying emerging security arrangements in contested environments.

2. The Emergence of China's Military-Commercial Hybrid

China's Belt and Road Initiative has evolved from its initial characterization as a development framework to function as a sophisticated mechanism for strategic entrenchment across volatile regions (Rolland 2019). At the forefront of this evolution stands Beijing's establishment of a joint Chinese-Myanmar private security company amid Myanmar's intractable civil conflict. This initiative represents a calculated recalibration of China's power projection capabilities rather than merely an adaptive business response to instability (Arduino 2018).

On October 22, 2024, Myanmar's military junta formally established a 13-member committee to draft a memorandum of understanding for this joint security venture. For China, long committed to non-interference in sovereign affairs, this maneuver signals an unmistakable departure from established doctrine. The creation of this quasi-militarized security apparatus introduces what analysts call an "informal forward deployment" into Beijing's strategic toolkit. The implications extend beyond Myanmar's borders: China appears poised to deploy security elements capable of operating with significant tactical autonomy in a sovereign conflict zone without formally committing People's Liberation Army forces.

This development invites comparisons to Russia's Wagner Group while highlighting the distinctive characteristics of China's approach to militarized commercial engagement. Where Wagner operates with theatrical deniability while maintaining close operational ties to the Kremlin, Beijing's security model embraces a more sophisticated synthesis of commercial legitimacy and state direction. As Badawi and Daabul (2024) observe in their analysis of the Wagner Group, Russia's approach to private military contracting emphasizes overt combat capabilities and direct engagement in conflict environments. China's model, by contrast, reflects what Ghiselli (2021) terms "securitization with Chinese characteristics"—a more nuanced approach that calibrates security involvement according to specific strategic imperatives while maintaining stricter operational discipline.

3. Wagner with Chinese Characteristics: The Evolving Model of Private Security

The parallels between China's emerging security apparatus in Myanmar and Russia's Wagner Group deserve careful examination, revealing both similarities in strategic function and divergences in operational approach. Russia's Wagner Group has operated as a barely concealed extension of state power, engaging directly in combat operations across Africa, the Middle East, and most prominently in Ukraine. As Badawi and Daabul (2024) note, Wagner has functioned as Moscow's "diplomatic special forces"—undertaking missions too sensitive for official military involvement while maintaining sufficient distance to provide the Kremlin with plausible deniability.

China's approach to private security reflects its distinctive strategic culture and foreign policy imperatives. Unlike Wagner's overt combat orientation, traditional Chinese private security companies (PSCs) have typically operated within narrower parameters - primarily focused on site security, risk assessment, personnel protection, and logistical support for BRI projects. Arduino (2018) observes that companies such as Frontier Services Group, China Overseas Security Group, and Hua Xin China Security have established substantial international footprints while generally avoiding direct combat engagements. These entities have operated as genuine commercial enterprises, albeit with close connections to Chinese state interests and security apparatus.

The proposed joint venture in Myanmar, however, represents a significant evolution in this model. By establishing a security company in partnership with Myanmar's military junta, Beijing creates a hybrid entity that transcends the traditional limitations of Chinese PSCs. This corporate structure provides critical advantages: it establishes a legal framework for the importation of weapons and security equipment; it circumvents Myanmar's constitutional prohibition on foreign military deployments; and it creates an operational entity capable of protecting Chinese assets while maintaining the fiction of arm's-length engagement.

This arrangement bears hallmarks of what might be termed "Wagner with Chinese characteristics"—a security force that blends commercial legitimacy with state-directed objectives. Unlike Russia's relatively unrestrained approach to foreign military contracting, China's model emphasizes disciplined integration with broader diplomatic and economic strategies. Badawi (2024a) identifies this distinctive approach as characteristic of China's expanding private security operations globally, which maintain tighter alignment with state objectives and stricter operational parameters than their Russian counterparts. Where Wagner has often operated as a blunt instrument of Russian foreign policy, China's security approach in Myanmar reflects Beijing's preference for calibrated influence and strategic patience.

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3.1. The Strategic Imperative: Securing the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor

The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) represents far more than a commercial venture; it constitutes a critical artery in China's grand strategic calculus (Zhao and Yang 2012). As a keystone of the broader Belt and Road Initiative, CMEC comprises an integrated network of highways, railways, pipelines, and economic zones connecting China's southwestern Yunnan province to the deep-sea Kyaukpyu Port in Myanmar's Rakhine State. This corridor offers Beijing a coveted strategic prize: direct access to the Indian Ocean that bypasses the vulnerable Malacca Strait—a maritime chokepoint through which approximately 80% of China's energy imports currently transit (Small 2020).

The strategic significance of this corridor cannot be overstated. In any potential conflict scenario involving the United States and its allies, the Malacca Strait would likely become effectively closed to Chinese shipping - a vulnerability that former Chinese President Hu Jintao famously described as the "Malacca Dilemma" (Wirth 2019). The CMEC represents China's most viable land-based solution to this dilemma, offering an alternative route for energy and trade flows that would remain viable even during maritime blockades or conflicts. As Yeh (2016) argues, China's geo-economic investments increasingly reflect geopolitical imperatives, with energy security and strategic access driving infrastructure development across the BRI footprint.

Yet this strategic corridor crosses some of Myanmar's most volatile regions, where decades of ethnic conflict have been marked by a nationwide civil war following the military coup of February 2021. Since opposition forces declared a "People's Defensive War" later that year, Chinese projects have faced mounting threats (Thuzar 2022). In January 2022, a local People's Defense Force attacked the $800 million Tagaung Taung nickel processing plant. More recently, on October 18, 2024, the Chinese consulate in Mandalay sustained damage in a bombing attack—an incident that occurred in broad daylight in Myanmar's second-largest city, dramatically illustrating the junta's inability to secure even high-priority diplomatic assets.

These security challenges have been exacerbated by the junta's deteriorating position in the civil conflict. The military's grip has become increasingly tenuous, with opposition forces demonstrating surprising resilience and battlefield capabilities. This military overextension has manifested in territorial losses across multiple regions, with opposition forces increasingly capable of operating not only in rural areas but also in urban centers where government control was once assumed.

The vulnerabilities facing the CMEC exemplify what Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde (1998) identify as the process of securitization, whereby economic assets become framed as security objectives when faced with persistent threats. China's incremental shift toward more direct security involvement reflects what Ghiselli (2021) terms the "securitization of overseas interests"—the gradual re-categorization of economic assets as objects requiring protection through security mechanisms rather than purely commercial arrangements. The joint security company represents the culmination of this securitization process, transforming the protection of infrastructure from a commercial concern to a strategic imperative requiring novel security solutions.

3.2. The Calculus of Intervention: When Economic Assets Become Security Liabilities

Beijing's decision to establish a joint security company reflects a fundamental recalculation of the risk-reward equation in Myanmar. China has historically pursued a policy of "strategic hedging" in Myanmar's internal conflicts - maintaining relationships with the military junta, ethnic armed organizations, and opposition groups simultaneously (Kobayashi and King 2022). As Kuik (2016) observes, strategic hedging allows states to preserve influence across multiple potential outcomes while avoiding firm commitment to any single party. In Table 1 are some of these recent actions.

TABLE NO. 1

China's Strategic Hedging Actions in Myanmar (2021-2025)

Action	Target Actor	Strategic Outcome
Supplying military equipment	Military junta	Strengthened the junta's combat capabilities
Diplomatic pressure on ethnic armed organizations	MNDAA and other groups allied with opposition forces	Protected key economic corridor nodes
Establishing a joint security company	Partnership with the military junta	Created a formal security presence to protect investments
House arrest of the MNDAA commander in Kunming	Pressure on the ethnic armed organization	Attempted to secure withdrawal from strategic Lashio hub
Maintaining communication channels with NUG	Opposition government	Preserved diplomatic flexibility

This approach allowed Beijing to preserve its influence regardless of political outcomes while adhering, at least nominally, to its principle of non-interference in sovereign affairs.

The deterioration of Myanmar's security environment, however, has rendered this balanced approach increasingly untenable. With billions of dollars in infrastructure investments at stake and the strategic imperative of securing an alternative to the Malacca Strait, China has gradually shifted toward more direct involvement in Myanmar's security dynamics. This shift has included supplying military equipment to the junta, utilizing diplomatic pressure on ethnic armed organizations allied with opposition forces, and now establishing a formalized security presence through the joint venture company.

China's intervention reflects a broader pattern observable across its Belt and Road footprint—what might be termed the "securitization of economic corridors" (Fukunaga 2020). In Pakistan, where the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has faced attacks from Baloch separatists and Islamist militants, Beijing has pressed for enhanced security arrangements, including discussions of joint security companies

(Small 2020). In Central Asia, Chinese private security companies have established growing presences in countries like Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, protecting BRI projects against potential threats (Badawi 2024a). This pattern suggests an emerging doctrine: where economic assets face persistent security threats, China will incrementally escalate its security involvement, calibrating its approach to the specific challenges of each environment.

The Myanmar case is particularly significant because it represents a more advanced form of this intervention. The proposed joint security company would not merely protect static assets but would operate in an active conflict zone where battle lines remain fluid and complex. Moreover, it would function in a political context where China maintains relationships with multiple armed actors—creating potential scenarios where Chinese security personnel might need to navigate engagements with forces that Beijing simultaneously engages with diplomatically.

This evolving approach to security provision represents what Avant (2005) identifies as the strategic use of private security actors to achieve state objectives while maintaining plausible deniability. China's joint security venture in Myanmar exemplifies this pattern, providing Beijing with capabilities to protect strategic assets while preserving diplomatic flexibility and avoiding overt military commitment. The arrangement reflects what Ong (2006) describes as "graduated sovereignty"—the selective application of state power through intermediary entities that allow for calibrated influence without formal territorial control.

3.3. The Mechanics of Deniable Intervention: Structure and Operations

The structure of the proposed joint security company reflects China's careful attention to both legal frameworks and diplomatic optics. By establishing a corporate entity under Myanmar law, with partial ownership by Myanmar interests, Beijing creates a legal foundation for activities that would otherwise violate Myanmar's constitutional prohibition on foreign military deployments. This arrangement provides China with what strategic analysts term as "graduated deniability" – sufficient distance to disavow direct control while maintaining effective influence over operations.

According to reports from Myanmar's military-controlled media, the 13-member committee established on October 22 was specifically tasked with evaluating logistical aspects of importing weapons and security equipment while "ensuring the plan does not undermine Myanmar's sovereignty." This carefully crafted language reflects the political sensitivities surrounding the arrangement, both within Myanmar's military establishment and among its citizens, where anti-Chinese sentiment has periodically erupted in response to perceived encroachments on national sovereignty.

The operational parameters of the joint security company remain officially undisclosed, but several aspects can be reasonably inferred from China's existing private security operations and the specific challenges of the Myanmar environment.

Unlike the Wagner Group's direct combat orientation, the joint venture will likely focus primarily on defensive security - protecting infrastructure, safeguarding personnel, securing transport routes, and conducting threat assessments. Arduino (2018) notes that Chinese PSCs typically emphasize these defensive functions rather than offensive combat operations, reflecting Beijing's preference for minimizing direct involvement in local conflicts while still protecting strategic assets.

The company will likely employ a hybrid staffing model, combining Chinese security specialists (primarily in management, training, and specialized roles) with Myanmar personnel (providing local knowledge, language capabilities, and broader manpower). This approach would mirror China's established patterns in other regions while addressing potential sensitivities around the visible presence of armed Chinese personnel in Myanmar. The command structure would presumably feature formal Myanmar leadership with substantial Chinese influence in strategic and operational decisions - a model that preserves appearances while ensuring Beijing's interests remain paramount.

This organizational arrangement exemplifies what Cusumano (2021) identifies as "state-directed commercialized security"—a model where private security entities maintain formal commercial independence while operating in close alignment with state objectives. The joint venture's hybrid structure provides China with what Jones and Johnson (2014) term "graduated sovereignty"—the ability to exercise influence over security operations in foreign territory without formal territorial control or military deployment. This approach reflects Beijing's sophisticated understanding of how commercial structures can serve strategic objectives while minimizing diplomatic costs and maintaining plausible deniability.

4. The Diplomatic Balancing Act: Multiple Players, Competing Interests

China's establishment of a security presence in Myanmar occurs within a complex diplomatic environment where Beijing maintains relationships with multiple actors. While providing increasing support to the military junta, China has simultaneously preserved channels of communication with the National Unity Government (NUG) and maintained longstanding ties with ethnic armed organizations along the China-Myanmar border.

This multifaceted engagement reflects China's pragmatic assessment that Myanmar's conflict defies simple resolution. The military junta, despite receiving arms and diplomatic support from both China and Russia, has failed to consolidate control over significant portions of the country. Meanwhile, opposition forces—including the NUG, affiliated People's Defense Forces, and allied ethnic armed organizations—have demonstrated surprising resilience but lack the capacity to achieve outright victory in the near term. The result is a protracted conflict with no clear resolution on the horizon.

China's actions suggest a strategic preference for the junta's survival, driven less by ideological alignment than by practical considerations. The NUG's democratic orientation and potential Western alignment represent uncertainties for Beijing, while the junta offers a familiar partner with established relationships. However, China's approach remains fundamentally adaptive - preserving sufficient flexibility to recalibrate should the battlefield dynamics shift decisively against the military regime.

This adaptability was demonstrated in late October 2024 when Chinese authorities reportedly placed Peng Daxun, commander of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), under house arrest in Kunming. This move aimed to pressure the MNDAA to withdraw from Lashio, a strategic hub in northern Shan State that serves as a gateway between China's Yunnan Province and central Myanmar along the CMEC. The MNDAA's capture of Lashio in August 2024 represented a major strategic setback for the junta, compromising a critical node in the economic corridor.

By intervening directly with the MNDAA, China demonstrated its willingness to leverage relationships with ethnic armed organizations to protect its strategic interests - even while simultaneously deepening security cooperation with the junta. This multidimensional approach reflects what Kuik (2016) identifies as strategic hedging - maintaining relationships with multiple actors to preserve influence regardless of conflict outcomes. China's engagement with both the junta and ethnic armed organizations allows Beijing to protect its core interests while maintaining flexibility to adapt to changing political circumstances.

This sophisticated balancing act exemplifies what Goh (2005) describes as the distinctive characteristics of Chinese strategic hedging in Southeast Asia - the maintenance of multiple, sometimes contradictory relationships that collectively advance core interests while avoiding firm commitment to any single actor. China's approach in Myanmar demonstrates a nuanced understanding of how to navigate complex conflict environments while preserving strategic flexibility and protecting critical infrastructure investments. As Bach (2016) observes, this model of engagement represents a form of "transnational territorialization" that extends influence without formal sovereignty - a pattern increasingly characteristic of China's approach to securing its expanding global footprint.

5. The Wagner Comparison: Shared Functions, Distinctive Approaches

The comparison between China's emerging security model and Russia's Wagner Group (see Table 2) illuminates both common strategic objectives and divergent operational approaches. Both represent mechanisms for extending state influence into contested environments while maintaining degrees of deniability. Both operate at the intersection of commercial interests and geopolitical objectives. And both reflect their parent nations' distinct strategic cultures and foreign policy imperatives.

TABLE NO. 2

Comparison between China's Security Model and Russia's Wagner Group

Characteristic	China's Security Model in Myanmar	Russia's Wagner Group
Legal Structure	Joint venture with the host country's military, emphasizing corporate legitimacy	Quasi-independent entity operating with a minimal legal framework
Operational Focus	Primarily defensive (protecting infrastructure, personnel, transport routes)	Combat-oriented (direct military engagement, training local forces)
Relationship to State	Maintaining disciplined alignment with the centralized strategic direction	Semi-autonomous with considerable operational freedom
Staffing Model	Hybrid staffing combining Chinese management with local personnel	Primarily Russian veterans supplemented by local recruits
Command Structure	Formal local leadership with substantial Chinese influence	Direct Russian military oversight with operational autonomy
Economic Integration	Security as an enabler of broader economic strategies	Securing economic concessions as payment for services
Public Profile	Low profile, emphasis on corporate professionalism	Sometimes flamboyant and deliberately visible
Strategic Emphasis	Calibrated influence and strategic patience	Flexible power projection below the conventional military threshold

Wagner's evolution provides valuable insights into China's potential security trajectory. Wagner initially focused on protecting Russian assets in conflict zones before expanding to direct combat roles, training local forces, securing resource extraction, and conducting political influence operations (Badawi and Daabul 2024). This functional expansion occurred as Moscow recognized Wagner's utility as a flexible instrument of power projection that operated below the threshold of conventional military deployment.

China's security model in Myanmar may follow a similar functional evolution while maintaining distinctive operational characteristics. Rather than Wagner's sometimes flamboyant and deliberately visible approach, Chinese security operations will likely maintain lower profiles, operating with greater discipline and tighter integration with broader diplomatic and economic strategies. As Arduino (2018) observes, Chinese PSCs typically emphasize corporate professionalism and operational restraint compared to their Russian counterparts, reflecting Beijing's preference for subtle influence rather than overt power projection.

The staffing models also differ significantly. Wagner has frequently recruited veterans from the Russian military and security services, supplemented by local forces in theaters of operation. Chinese PSCs have traditionally emphasized recruitment of retired PLA personnel, especially those with specialized skills or experience in overseas operations (Ghiselli 2021). The joint venture in Myanmar will likely follow this pattern while incorporating Myanmar personnel to address both practical and political considerations.

Perhaps most significantly, the integration with economic objectives differs between the two models. Wagner has operated as a quasi-independent actor that secures economic concessions as payment for services – effectively functioning as both security provider and economic exploiter (Badawi and Daabul 2024). China's model positions security as an enabler of broader economic strategies, with PSCs serving primarily to protect investments rather than to extract resources directly. This distinction reflects China's more systematic approach to economic statecraft, where security elements serve broader strategic objectives rather than functioning as independent profit centers.

These differences reflect what Avant (2005) identifies as distinctive national approaches to the integration of private security actors into foreign policy frameworks. Where Russia has employed private military companies as semi-autonomous instruments with considerable operational freedom, China has developed a more tightly controlled model that emphasizes disciplined alignment with centralized strategic direction. This distinction reflects fundamental differences in strategic culture and institutional organization between the two powers, with China's approach characterized by greater emphasis on coordinated policy implementation and strategic patience.

6. Economic Statecraft and Security Integration: China's Evolving Global Strategy

The establishment of a joint security venture in Myanmar reflects broader patterns in China's evolving global strategy, where traditional distinctions between economic statecraft, security provision, and governance are increasingly blurred. This integration of previously distinct domains represents what Wang and French (2014) identify as China's emerging approach to global economic governance - one that emphasizes institutional flexibility, pragmatic adaptation, and strategic coordination across multiple policy instruments.

The Myanmar case exemplifies what Tsui et al. (2017) describe as "China's strategy for a new global financial order," where infrastructure development serves not merely commercial objectives but functions as a mechanism for reshaping regional governance structures. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, like similar initiatives across the Belt and Road footprint, represents what these scholars call a "parallel institution-building" approach that creates alternative channels for Chinese influence while bypassing established Western-dominated frameworks. The securitization of these corridors through hybrid public-private arrangements demonstrates Beijing's recognition that economic entrenchment requires corresponding security capabilities—particularly in volatile regions where state capacity proves insufficient.

This evolution occurs against the backdrop of what Natsios (2020) identifies as a fundamental reconfiguration of foreign assistance in an era of great power competition. Traditional development aid increasingly incorporates security dimensions as donor nations recognize that economic investments remain vulnerable without corresponding protection mechanisms. China's approach in Myanmar—blending infrastructure development with innovative security arrangements—

represents a sophisticated synthesis that transcends conventional categories of foreign engagement. As Natsios observes, "contemporary aid programs increasingly reflect strategic priorities rather than purely humanitarian or developmental objectives" (2020), a clear pattern in China's multidimensional engagement with Myanmar's military junta.

The implications of this approach extend beyond immediate regional contexts to shape broader geopolitical competitions. Thornton (2020) notes striking parallels between China's strategy in Myanmar and its emerging approach in regions like the Sahel, where Beijing similarly confronts the challenge of protecting strategic investments amid persistent instability. In both contexts, China has developed what Thornton terms "calibrated intervention capabilities" that allow for security provision without formal military commitment—a model that has significant implications for European security interests as China's footprint expands across traditional European spheres of influence. The joint security company in Myanmar may thus serve as a prototype for similar arrangements in regions where Chinese economic interests face comparable threats, reflecting Beijing's increasingly sophisticated toolkit for operating in volatile environments.

What emerges from this analysis is a picture of China's Belt and Road Initiative as not merely an infrastructure development program but rather a comprehensive strategy for extending influence through integrated economic, security, and governance mechanisms (Badawi and Mimari 2025). The securitization of economic corridors through hybrid arrangements like the joint venture in Myanmar represents a critical innovation in how rising powers project influence in contested environments—one that may increasingly characterize China's global engagement as its strategic interests expand into regions of persistent instability.

7. Beyond Myanmar: Implications for China's Global Security Posture

The establishment of a joint security company in Myanmar represents more than an isolated response to a specific security challenge—it signals an evolution in China's approach to securing its expanding global interests even in Latin America and the Caribbean (Badawi 2024b). As Beijing's economic footprint has grown through the Belt and Road Initiative, the vulnerability of these investments to political instability, insurgency, terrorism, and criminal activity has become increasingly apparent. The Myanmar model, if successful, could provide a template for similar arrangements in other volatile regions where Chinese interests face persistent threats.

Pakistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) presents perhaps the most immediate parallel (Hilali 2019). Following attacks targeting Chinese personnel and projects in Balochistan and other regions, Beijing has pressed Islamabad for enhanced security arrangements. Small (2020) notes that despite Pakistan's establishment of a

Special Security Division of approximately 15,000 personnel dedicated to protecting CPEC projects, attacks have continued—most recently in March 2024, when five Chinese engineers were killed in a suicide bombing. The limitations of Pakistan's security guarantees have prompted discussions of joint security arrangements like those being implemented in Myanmar.

In Central Asia, where China has extensive energy and infrastructure investments, private security companies have already established significant presences. Badawi (2024a) documents how companies such as Frontier Services Group have secured contracts to protect Chinese assets in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and other regional states. These arrangements have thus far remained primarily commercial in nature, but the Myanmar model suggests potential for more formalized security partnerships in regions where state capacity proves insufficient to address persistent threats.

Africa represents perhaps the most expansive theater for the potential application of China's evolving security model. With investments exceeding $300 billion across the continent, China faces diverse security challenges—from jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel to political instability in mineral-rich Central Africa. Badawi (2024a) observes that Chinese PSCs have already established presences in multiple African states, but these operations have generally maintained lower profiles and more limited scopes than their Russian counterparts. The Myanmar model could presage more robust security arrangements in African contexts where Chinese investments face heightened threats.

This expanding security footprint reflects what Ghiselli (2021) identifies as the "securitization of overseas interests"—the gradual recognition that economic investments require security protection mechanisms that transcend traditional commercial arrangements. China's evolving approach represents a sophisticated recalibration of how rising powers protect global interests, combining commercial mechanisms with state direction to create security capabilities that operate below the threshold of conventional military deployment. As the Belt and Road Initiative continues to expand across volatile regions, this hybrid security model may become increasingly characteristic of China's global footprint, reflecting Beijing's distinctive approach to power projection in the twenty-first century.

8. The Paradox of Presence: Reconfiguring Power in a Contested World

The emergence of China's joint private security venture in Myanmar represents a profound inflection point in how rising powers navigate the complex terrain between economic entrenchment and security imperatives. Through the theoretical lenses of securitization, graduated sovereignty, and strategic hedging, we can discern not merely an isolated response to localized threats but rather the crystallization of a new doctrine in power projection that may reshape how influence is exercised across contested environments globally.

What distinguishes China's approach is its sophisticated synthesis of commercial legitimacy and state direction—a hybrid model that transcends traditional distinctions between private and state security actors. This "China model" of security operations reflects Beijing's strategic preference for calibrated influence over overt intervention, creating what Mann (1984) might recognize as a new form of infrastructural power that penetrates territories without formal occupation. The joint security company in Myanmar embodies this paradox of presence: simultaneously visible and deniable, commercial yet militarized, local in form yet transnational in function.

The securitization of economic corridors along China's Belt and Road Initiative signals a fundamental recalibration in how infrastructure projects function within national security frameworks. No longer merely conduits for commerce, these corridors have become strategic arteries that demand protection through increasingly sophisticated security arrangements. As Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde (1998) observe in their securitization framework, the designation of economic assets as security objectives transforms how states approach their protection, legitimizing extraordinary measures that transcend normal commercial considerations. The Myanmar case suggests that where traditional diplomacy and commercial security prove insufficient, Beijing is prepared to develop bespoke security solutions that preserve appearances while securing core interests.

This evolution carries profound implications for international relations theory and practice. The Westphalian model of clearly delineated sovereignty encounters new challenges when faced with these hybrid security arrangements that operate across traditional boundaries. Similarly, conventional understandings of intervention must be reconsidered when security operations are conducted through corporate entities with variable degrees of state direction. What emerges is a form of "strategic ambiguity" that allows China to maintain its formal commitment to non-interference while incrementally expanding its security footprint (Enayati 2025).

The theoretical frameworks employed in this study illuminate not only China's approach in Myanmar but potentially a broader pattern as Beijing seeks to secure its global investments against an expanding spectrum of threats. Whether in Pakistan's volatile borderlands, Central Asia's post-Soviet spaces, or Africa's resource-rich conflict zones, the Myanmar model may offer a template for securing strategic interests while minimizing diplomatic costs. As Ong (2006) observes in her analysis of graduated sovereignty, these arrangements represent a fundamental reconfiguration of how power operates in contemporary geopolitics—less through formal territorial control than through calibrated influence exercised through corporate, legal, and security architectures.

Yet this approach contains inherent contradictions that may ultimately prove self-limiting. The same strategic ambiguity that provides flexibility also introduces

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uncertainty about command structures, accountability mechanisms, and rules of engagement. As China's security presence expands globally, these ambiguities could generate friction with host nations, competing powers, and local populations. Moreover, the alignment with authoritarian regimes like Myanmar's military junta carries reputational costs that may undermine China's broader diplomatic objectives, particularly in regions where such regimes face mounting domestic and international resistance.

What remains clear is that China's Belt and Road Initiative has entered a more complex phase—one where the projection of influence increasingly requires security capabilities that extend beyond traditional diplomatic and economic tools. In navigating this evolution, Beijing walks a precarious line between protecting its strategic investments and maintaining its carefully cultivated image as a non-interventionist power. The joint security company in Myanmar represents not an endpoint but rather a waystation in this ongoing recalibration—a prototype for what may become a more comprehensive approach to securing China's expanding global footprint.

As this study has demonstrated, understanding these developments requires theoretical frameworks that can capture the nuanced interplay between state power, commercial interests, and security operations in contested environments. The paradox of China's presence in Myanmar—simultaneously engaged yet distant, intervening yet non-interventionist—offers a window into how power may be exercised in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape, where the boundaries between economic entrenchment and security projection have become increasingly indistinct.

Conclusion: The New Frontier of China's Power Projection

China's decision to establish a joint private security company with Myanmar's military junta marks a pivotal moment in its global Belt and Road calculus. Beyond its stated aim of protecting investments, the initiative signals a deeper, more strategic transformation in China's approach to conflict-prone environments. In choosing to operate through a militarized yet deniable apparatus, Beijing is attempting to thread a needle between preserving its image as a non-interventionist power and securing its increasingly vulnerable geo-economic interests.

The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) is more than a commercial route – it is a strategic artery that underpins Beijing's long-term vision of bypassing maritime chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait. Yet the corridor runs through one of Southeast Asia's most volatile conflict zones. The inability of the Myanmar military to guarantee security, compounded by battlefield losses and diminishing territorial control, has forced Beijing to recalibrate its posture. What emerges is a hybrid model of power projection—where private security functions are fused with state objectives, offering both flexibility and plausible deniability.

Strategically, this development exposes two core realities. First, China's global footprint is maturing from one reliant solely on soft power and infrastructure diplomacy to one increasingly dependent on coercive, hard-power-adjacent mechanisms. The blurring of lines between private security and state military interests is not accidental—it reflects a growing realization in Beijing that safeguarding economic corridors will require force projection capabilities that remain below the threshold of formal military engagement. Second, the move places Beijing in a precarious position within Myanmar's domestic dynamics. While the junta remains China's current partner of convenience, its legitimacy continues to erode. Beijing's overt alignment with an internationally condemned regime could backfire, especially if the junta collapses or if China's security forces are perceived as complicit in repression or violence. Meanwhile, the civilian National Unity Government (NUG) has begun to signal willingness to engage constructively with China, suggesting that Beijing's long-term strategic interests might be better served through more flexible diplomacy rather than rigid support for an increasingly embattled regime.

At the operational level, the Myanmar case offers a model for future Chinese interventions in similar theaters—such as Pakistan, Central Asia, or parts of Africa—where BRI assets intersect with fragile states and insurgent threats. However, the risks are mounting. Should Chinese personnel be drawn into confrontations or implicated in rights abuses, the reputational and geopolitical costs could undermine the very strategic interests China seeks to preserve.

In essence, China's move into Myanmar's security space is both reactive and preemptive: a response to current insecurity and a signal of evolving doctrine in overseas power protection. But as it evaluates the limits of indirect militarization, Beijing must also contend with a paradox—protecting its empire of infrastructure may ultimately require choices that undermine the very principles of sovereignty and non-interference it has long championed.

Whether this experiment in security outsourcing stabilizes China's position in Myanmar—or entangles it further in the quagmire of civil conflict—remains to be seen. What is certain, however, is that China's Belt and Road Initiative has entered a new and more dangerous phase, one where concrete and steel are no longer sufficient safeguards without the shadow of the gun.

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