

Managing Non-Interference: China's Low-Profile Engagement with Rebel Groups in Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper explores how China sustains frequent interaction with Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) while publicly upholding its non-interference principle. Contrary to perspectives that focus on foreign policy shifts, the paper investigates how China manages the contradiction between normative commitment and pragmatic necessity. Drawing on fieldwork interviews, rebel-released documents, and Chinese media sources, the paper shows how China delegates cross-border engagement to a diverse array of non-state, sub-state, and quasi-state actors. Operating outside formal diplomatic channels, these actors nonetheless perform key policy functions, advancing strategic objectives, managing sensitive relationships, and enacting informal forms of foreign policy. The paper conceptualizes this pattern as low-profile engagement: a mode of informal, decentralized foreign policy practice that enables China to exert influence while maintaining plausible deniability. The findings contribute to scholarship on China's evolving diplomacy, the politics of non-interference, and the informal infrastructures through which global influence is exercised in conflict-affected states.