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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Armed Political Orders through the Prism of Arms: Relations between Weapons and Insurgencies in Myanmar And Ukraine

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ABSTRACT (max 150 words)

What is the role of arms in insurgency? Despite growing attention to the study of conflict and non-state belligerents, the linkages between weapons and armed conflict have remained under-researched. This paper explores practices and processes of firearms availability and control in insurgencies and argues that these should be understood in mutual relation with the constitution and distribution of authority. The contributions of the article are twofold. By conceptually systematizing recent shifts in the literature on civil wars and elaborating on small arms and light weapons research, it offers a novel heuristic framework to understand weapons-insurgency relations that revolves around the concept of firearms as “meta-resources” and gestures towards non-deterministic approaches. Second, based on empirical analysis conducted through two embedded case studies, it argues that patterns of authority in the insurgencies taken into consideration in Myanmar and Ukraine dialectically emerged with processes of arms acquisition by armed non-state actors.

KEYWORD KEYWORDS: Insurgency; Arms; Armed Groups; Armed Politics; Rebel Governance.

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Zheng Zhou, The sculpture “Non-Violence” by Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd, in front of UN headquarters at New York City, 13 January 2012 (licensed under the GNU Free Documentation License).

1. Introduction

Created in 1985 by Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd, the renowned sculpture “non-violence” – an oversized Colt Python .357 magnum revolver with knotted barrel – was initially thought to encapsulate John Lennon’s call¹ for a socio-cultural shift to peace and non-violence by playing around the object, its iconography and the unrealistic shape given to it. Undoubtedly, the sculpture quickly became an icon, juxtaposed to other illustrious violence-related artworks such as Picasso’s *Guernica* or John Heartfield’s 1933 “The Old Motto in the “New” Reich: Blood and Iron”. Unveiled in front of the United Nations building in New York some three years later in 1988, the pistol has since been erected in more than 30 locations around the world with its pointed-up muzzle spreading the message from the centre

¹ The sculpture was initially thought of as a tribute to John Lennon after his death in New York City on December the 8th 1980.

of various political projects (Chaoyang Park, Beijing; U.N. Headquarters, New York; Chennai, India; Kirchberg Plateau, Luxembourg, just to mention a few).

While the knotted gun deconstructs (physically and ideally) the meaning of the weapon and shoots in front of bystanders a limpid message, it could have not been better designed to also draw a problematic veil over a particularly spinous problem: the relations between weapons (technologies, objects) and violence. Nested in the sculpture, behind more apparent and immediate meanings, lies a double reference to what Deleuze defined as direct violence of coercion and indirect violence of control (Buchanan 2017). In addition, and connection to this, “non-violence” poses also a question pertaining the relations between objects/technologies per se (the arms), practices and processes revolving around weapons and broader socio-political relations (violence, armed conflict as a conjugation of the latter, authority and power).

The sculpture’s shape, through the knotted barrel, conveys the idea that the weapon is a tool. The presence of this instrument (if unknotted) is deemed to affect the pathologies of society, amongst which is violence (I am purposefully exaggerating). Its materiality is granted prominence – the original version is reproduced in disproportionate dimensions somehow stressing the relevance of quantities and qualities of the object. Its functioning mechanisms, its technology in a sense, is considered relevant and the knot on the muzzle simultaneously acknowledges that the weapon is both “just an object” and “more than just an object”, thus depicting a sort of curse of arms proliferation: magical attributes are endowed to the gun that triggers violence. At the same time the artwork also suggests that there is, or at least there might be, somebody at the rear of the weapon and somebody ahead knotting it, both of them with their agency and intentionality. The revolver holds an intrinsically relational character: it enshrines a centre and a periphery, for when it is unknotted the centre lies around the triggering mechanism, and when it is being knotted centre and periphery change. In this sense the relations between objects/weapons and violence could be understood as a matter of intentions and consequent actions for which the tools are irrelevant. Amidst the winding knots of

these seemingly circular readings one smells the contiguities and limits of two main frameworks that according to Bourne have bridled western political thought in its understanding of weapons-violence relations (2012): *substantivist* views asserting the autonomy of weapons as objects that determine socio-political relations; *instrumentalist* perspectives understanding weapons as neutral tools shaped into violence as determined by agents and their intentions.

This paper deals with the relations between weapons and insurgency, as a particular form of violence. Specifically, it explores how availability and control of small arms by non-state armed actors impact on authority in insurgencies². By focusing on practices and processes, it traces arms dynamics and authority dynamics and argues that the former shall be understood in mutual relation with the constitution and distributions of the latter. The paper tries to avoid deterministic approaches and conceives the linkages between arms and authority, not in terms of linear causality, but through a more interpretative sense of understanding (Chojnacki and Engels 2016). In order to overcome the deterministic and dualistic approach of both substantive and instrumentalist blocks, it follows Bourne's Latourian conception of materiality as a dimension of social and political life (Bourne 2012). In other words, material aspects (and material relations) are conceived as dimensions of the constitution, character and distribution of socio-political relations since the two mutually constitute each other.

This schism has characterized also civil war studies, where a systematic analysis of the impact that availability and control over weapons and related processes - as physical/material as well as social aspects of conflicts - have on armed

² The enquiry is focused on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) as the most significant category of weapons in possession of non-state armed actors. The text adopts the definition of SALW put forward by the Small Arms Survey on the base of the 1997 U.N. Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms. See the Small Arms Survey's definition of Small Arms and Light Weapons, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/weapons-and-markets/definitions.html>; Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms, Annex, General Assembly Resolution A/52/298, para. 16, 25, 27, 27 August 1997, <http://www.un.org/Depts/ddar/Firstcom/SGreport52/a52298.html#b6>. The term "small arms" is used in the text to refer to SALW, their ammunition, parts and accessories while "light weapons" refers exclusively to this category. The term "firearms" is employed in the text as a synonym of SALW.

groups and their socio-political action and practices is still missing. Thus, the aim of this paper is two-fold, theoretical and empirical. First, the article attempts to conceptually systematize the interrelations between arms and insurgency by intertwining recent shifts in the literature on civil war with research on firearms and armed violence. In doing so it contributes a novel heuristic framework for understanding small arms-insurgency relations that revolves around a conceptualization of arms as “meta-resources”.

Second, the empirical part focuses on one specific aspect of these relations and explores the linkages between armed groups’ mode of weapons acquisition and authority in insurgency applying the analytical framework proposed in part I to two case studies: Myanmar and Ukraine. These two contexts, for different reasons and with different characteristics, have been deemed as major areas of firearms proliferation (see Bourne 2007; Duquet ed. 2018), while also being characterized by hybrid orders of authority and governance. Doing so, this part contributes to previous works looking into this specific matter (Marsh 2007; Duquet 2009; Mkutu 2009; Strazzari & Tholens 2010, 2014). In addition, it illustrates how practices and processes of arms acquisition have dialectically emerged with different patterns of authority in the insurgencies analysed in Ukraine and Myanmar and suggests that this has possibly impacted on governance arrangements.

Part II is based on a systematic analysis of primary and secondary sources on firearms proliferation³. Concerning Myanmar, the paper draws also on informal

³ Data sourced from primary and secondary sources have been structured into two different datasets for qualitative analysis. The Ukraine dataset is primarily based on data retrieved from official press releases on firearms seizures issued by the *Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy* (SBU – the Security Services of Ukraine) and the *Derzhavna Prykordonna Sluzhba Ukrainy* (DPSU – State Border Guard Service of Ukraine). In addition, it also comprises news sourced from the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers (NISAT) database on small arms run by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). This dataset consists of 514 cases of official and non-official press releases concerning weapons covering the period 2014-2017. Data for the Myanmar dataset instead were sourced exclusively from the NISAT/PRIO database and resulted in 114 news articles distributed throughout the period 1994-2017. The author is grateful to Dr. Ekaterina Golovko, who contributed to create the dataset on Ukraine as part of the broader EU-funded SAFTE Project (Studying the Acquisition of illicit Firearms by Terrorist in Europe). The main delivery of the project consisted in the edited book “Triggering Terror. Illicit Gun Markets and Firearms Acquisition of Terrorist Networks in Europe”, available here: www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/safte/publications (Duquet 2018). The author wishes to thank also

conversations, unstructured and semi-structured interviews carried out through fieldwork in Thailand and Myanmar in September-October 2018.⁴ Due to evident caveats connected to the very nature of arms dynamics in conflict-complexes, the flaws of secondary sources, the discrepancies in data considered and methods used for the two cases, a comprehensive study of the interplay between mode of weapons acquisition by non-state armed actors and insurgency in Ukraine and Myanmar is outside the scope of this paper. Thus, Part II constitutes an exploration aimed to generate insights by drawing from available sources rather than a full-fledged comparison.

As the question of the role of arms in insurgencies should be situated in the literature on civil war and armed groups, I first turn to the latter to try and delineate the broader canvas of the paper. Second, drawing from the body of work on arms dynamics in conflict (Marsh 2012), the article strives to frame the links between firearms and insurgency. Lastly, in the empirical part, the case studies from armed conflicts in Myanmar and Ukraine are presented and analysed.

Part I | A Systematization of the Relations between Arms and Insurgency

2. From Civil War to the Meso-levels of Insurgency and Armed Politics

By the end of the 1990s, the relative importance of civil wars had fostered the field of peace and conflict studies to inquire into definitional and explanatory questions pertaining this type of armed conflicts (David 1997; Sambanis 2000). At initial stages, the interest rested mainly on structural and proximate aspects of civil wars.⁵ While both macro and micro-level theories of the causes of war found space

Dr. Nicholas Marsh, Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) for granting access and support in navigating NISAT database.

⁴ The author would like to acknowledge the financial support received by Sant'Anna School of advanced studies in conducting this research.

⁵ In particular frequency and intensity (Collier & Hoeffler 1998), the economic causes of civil war (Collier 2000; Sambanis 2004a), pre-conditions for the onset (Fearon et al. 2004), duration (Hegre 2004), civil war outcomes (Licklider 1995, De Rouen et al. 2004), and peacemaking negotiations (Darby 2001).

during the 2000s⁶, the contradictory nature of the causal mechanisms proposed compelled scholars to explore new research areas. In turn, although the field started devoting more attention to the heterogeneity of armed groups, their structures, and behaviour (Weinstein 2007; Kalyvas 2007), an appreciation of the socio-political aspects of intrastate conflict was still missing. Since the end of the decade, three strands of the literature have tried to tackle these gaps: the literature on insurgency fragmentation (Pearlman and Cunningham 2012), rebel governance (Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly 2015), and armed political orders (Staniland 2017).⁷

These three strands have raised broader issues in the field, questioning some of the axioms underpinning previous research. Monolithic or dyadic understandings of conflict actors have been abandoned to emphasise instead their heterogeneity and complex articulation. As a corollary to this multiplicity and heterogeneity, a more nuanced interpretation of civil war has been advanced. The alleged monopoly of the state over the trajectories of political projects during conflict is fundamentally questioned and civil war comes to be understood as a process of competitive overlapping sovereignties not necessarily moving towards state-building. Highlighting the fluidity of power, violence, and territory distributions, this interpretation has stressed the hybrid character of war and peace distinctions. Overall, these considerations are underpinned by the idea that state-building is essentially always tentative, contingent, negotiated, and state authority and governance are permeated with other forms of sovereignty, especially in spaces and contexts at the limits of state capacity (Korf et al. 2018). In conflict and post-conflict situations, for example, state control over the means of violence becomes the product of interactions and negotiations at multiple levels between multiple actors. In turn, while sovereign

⁶ See Staniland 2012 for a more detailed review.

⁷ The literature on insurgency fragmentation focuses on splintering processes in non-state armed actors and emerged from a discontent with dyadic understandings of internal armed conflicts proper of quantitative macro and micro-level analysis. The literature on rebel governance deals with the organization of civilian life during civil war and issues of governance revolving around non-state armed actors. It emerged from a discontent with conceptualizations of civil wars as gloomy spaces of chaos and anarchy and concepts of failed states and ungoverned spaces proper of neorealist approaches. Finally, the literature on armed political orders looks at the interactions between non-state and state actors in an attempt to grasp the fluidity of violence and territorial control during conflict.

violence is closely related to state formation and transformation, the processes connected to availability and control of weapons have an impact on the enforcement of authority and vice versa.

Notwithstanding these crucial developments, which operated a shift towards the study of the meso-levels of civil wars and their politics, arms dynamics have remained relatively under-researched and relegated although evidently relevant.

3. Arms and Insurgency

While some dedicated studies illuminated particular aspects of the links between arms and conflict⁸, generally speaking arms issues have been treated as symptoms and implications of conflict by the literature on civil war. At the end of the 2000s, the considerable body of work on SALW was systematized into three main strands: weapons and warfare (particularly civil war), crime and armed violence within societies, and governance matters (Greene & Marsh 2012). The work of Greene and Marsh provided a more comprehensive understanding of the linkages between arms and armed violence through the adoption of localised, non-state-centric, frameworks and epistemologies in line with the broader “local turn” in peace studies (Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013). Some cross-cutting themes were streamlined, highlighting the intersectionality of the relations between firearms and armed violence across the lines of those strands. First, emphasis was placed on the relationships between control over means of violence and processes of state (trans)formation. Moving away from Weberian conceptions, it was pointed out how no monolithic state monopoly over the use of violence exists and patterns of weapons possession and use are instead the result of changing negotiations between different actors (Greene & Marsh 2012, p. 8). Second, small arms governance was understood as multi-level and involving a multiplicity of actors. Third, weapons were conceptualized not as mere artefacts, but as technologies involving more important

⁸ Specifically: the links between global diffusion of SALW, conflict intensity, and the potentialities of control instruments (Boutwell & Klare 1999); the role of arms in conflict initiation and escalation (Sislin & Pearson 2001); weapons proliferation, arming patterns, and acquisition of arms in conflict (Krause 1995; Lumpe 2000; Pearson & Sislin 1998; Bourne 2007).

social and political factors. Thus, the conclusion was drawn that ‘the interrelationships between SALW availabilities and flows (...) and armed violence, conflict and development (...) are important in a wide range of contexts, but they are more complex, dynamic and context-dependent than generally thought’ (Greene & Marsh 2012, p.251). It is on the base of these openings that, drawing from the recent developments in the literature on civil war, I try to offer a systematization of the interrelations between SALW and insurgency.

The focus here is on how the availability and control of weapons impacts on the dynamics of authority in insurgency. As a form of technology, weapons are at interplay with social dynamics/drivers and integral to the formation and character of socio-political orders (Greene & Marsh 2012, p.9, 255). A major implication, that I draw from research on small arms and armed violence, is the reconceptualization of weapons availability and control dynamics as catalysts of the distributive and constitutive functions of violence. In this sense, weapons should be conceptualized as meta-resources, rather than mere resources: in other words, as technologies/tools the acquisition and control of which is mutually interrelated with the constitution of authority and power as well as with the distribution of control over resources, territory, and political arrangements. Certainly, as it has been noted, while violence dynamics are relevant, political orders can emerge, exist, and evolve in its absence (Staniland 2017). Notwithstanding this, violence cannot be reduced to mono-dimensional understandings, whereby it entails much more than mere physical action and can shape orders even in the absence of actual direct violence, especially considering the long-term duration of its effects (Schlichte 2009; Jabri 2007). Conceiving arms as meta-resources means highlighting the potential impacts that the processes connected to the physical-material and social aspects of availability and control over weapons have on the socio-political dynamics of conflict. It means moving away from a deterministic approach to one emphasising material aspects as a dimension of social and political relations. Along these lines, the relationships between arms and insurgency can be systematized by conceiving weapons as: 1) meta-

resources to be acquired by insurgents in order to uphold a given agenda, 2) meta-resources to be controlled at different levels throughout insurgency.

3.1. Arms as Meta-resources to be Acquired

Concerning the first aspect, I look at how the acquisition of firearms by non-state actors impacts on authority in the structure of insurgency. To do so I draw extensively on and further develop the work of Nicolas Marsh (2007), who first explored the impact of arms availability and acquisition on the trajectories of civil wars. The author argued that the mode of weapons acquisition is a function of availability of weapons and control over their acquisition by insurgents. Marsh defines arms availability as the ‘extent to which a group’s objectives are not constrained by a lack of specific weapons or ammunition’ (Marsh 2007, p.60). Thus, availability is understood not as quantity of arms present, but in terms of access to specific types of weapons in relation to groups’ objectives. Access to arms presents both spatial/ geographical aspects and logistic aspects. In fact, the location of weapons in respect to groups’ areas of insurgency, morphology, distribution of territorial control, and socio-political relations between different actors in conflict are all crucial. Moreover, the question of who holds weapons supplies, the capacity of state authorities to prevent leakages from stockpiles, or the support of bordering states, represent important factors in determining availability. Control over weapons acquisition, instead, is understood as an organizational aspect of insurgent groups: it has to do with whether control of arms acquisition is diffused or centralized - organized at the individual/unit, sub-commanders, or leadership level. Thus, it is important to note that availability and control over arms acquisition can change over time and the mode of weapons acquisition is interlinked with changes in the structure of insurgency.

Following Marsh’s framework, one should expect a correspondence between mode of weapons acquisition by insurgents and the configurations insurgencies. If the former is maintained by the leadership of a single group the insurgency will be unitary, while if different leaders have access and control acquisition then the

civil war will be characterized by ‘warlordism’. When instead single combatants or units’ commanders can autonomously acquire weapons, the insurgency will be structured around several fragmented groups (Marsh 2007, 2012; Strazzari & Tholens 2014). This framework has proven both instrumental in advancing a more nuanced conception of arms availability and in raising attention to the specificity of the issue of control over weapons acquisition. Nonetheless, in Marsh the concept of insurgency and the structure of insurgency remained underexplored and no consideration was given to internal control of arms subsequent to acquisition and armed groups interactions.

Insurgency shall be conceived as a two-level concept: as the activity of a single non-state actor, and/or as the multiplicity of different insurgent groups operating during conflict and their interactions. To understand the structure of an insurgent group I draw from work by McQuinn (2016). McQuinn argues that a crucial feature of ANSAs’ organizations is the command profile, which he defines as the way authority is organized and enforced within the group. Authority can be organized formally, meaning that it is placed in the hierarchy/structure, or it can be organized informally, meaning that it rests on sub-commanders’ hands.⁹ Essentially, the assumption is that when the command profile of an armed group is formalized, the group is centrally controlled, while when the command profile is informal the group is controlled in a decentralized fashion. Concerning the other aspect of insurgency, meaning the relationships between ANSAs, I propose to draw from the typology of armed orders conceptualised by Staniland (2017, p.460). The author has identified situations of conflict actors’ interactions (applicable also to inter-ANSAs relations). These are: hostilities, limited cooperation, alliance, collapse, and incorporation (Ibid). On the base of this canvas, the central question for the second part

⁹ McQuinn provides further elements to discern between formal and informal ANSA’s command profiles. Formalized armed groups hold a formal code of conduct and quasi-judicial mechanisms to internally control members, while informal command profiles coincide with no or little formalization in the code of conduct and no quasi-judicial mechanism. Indicators that are used to analyse the formalization of the command profile of ANSAs consist in the codes of conduct and induction process (whether these are rituals or formal training). In addition to these two features the presence or absence of uniforms, daily political training, established systems of rank and physical training are also considered (Kenny 2010; McQuinn 2015; Siebold 2007).

concerns how the mode of weapons acquisition by non-state armed actors affects authority in the structure of insurgency.

3.2. Arms as Meta-resources to Be Controlled: Non-State Firearms Controls and Governance

A neglected aspect of the role of weapons in insurgencies is the question of control mechanisms over these meta-resources *during* conflict. While an important strand of the literature on SALW has offered a critical analysis of the functioning and development of multi-level systems of arms governance (Bourne et al 2003; Krause 2002; Laurence & Stohl 2002; Greene & Marsh 2012), research on these themes tended to adopt a compartmentalized perspective focusing on “pre” and “post” phases, disregarding instead forms of firearms control enacted during hostilities. Central to this body of work has been the adoption of the concept of governance (rather than mere government). SALW governance consists in ‘the (...) processes, norms, systems and institutions that shape, regulate, manage or control the production, flows, availability and uses of SALW and associated armed violence and insecurity (Greene & Marsh 2012, p.164).’

In areas where state sovereignty and the monopoly over violence are complex and formal institutions absent or constrained, societal forms of arms control are the primary channel of arms governance. Focusing in particular on communities (as locally bounded in a given space), Ashkenazi (2012) has suggested how various non-state actors such as social elites, gangs, and traditional or informal authorities often mobilize informal social processes to control firearms. Armed non-state actors as well have a say in the control of firearms possession and use. ANSAs regulate the possession and use of arms internally with their members, and amongst the population in areas they control. In this regard, some considerations can be noted. First, since territorial control is a scope condition for governance to be implemented by insurgents, the acquisition and control of armaments becomes crucial for groups to obtain and hold territory. Second, control over arms by insurgents becomes both a mean to legitimize their role offering (external) protection to civilians, and a mean to ensure the control of violence against civilians internally to the organization. In

this sense, two aspects assume relevance: the internal control of armed violence by members, and the provision of security. Security provision can occur through community policing or other governance arrangements, and includes the issue of *safety* in relation to armaments. Third, while insurgents retain the initiative, civilians can influence how governance is practiced. Although it constitutes a limit to civilian influence, coercion is not a constant but can instead fluctuate from one side to the other and basically depends on what has been termed as the “imbalance of weapons” (Kasfir 2015). Relations between rebels and civilians partly depend on the relative threat armed groups and population pose to each other (Mao 1963). Ashkenazi’s contribution identified two main patterns of weapons control by communities: the use of incentives and sanctions; and the symbolic and ritualistic aspects attached to the weapon within societies (Ashkenazi 2012, p.228). The use of incentives and sanctions essentially functions through the establishment of an implicit or explicit social negotiation between weapons holders/users and community members.¹⁰ The characterization of guns by their users and society acts as a controlling mechanism by substituting the actual use for the symbol, and by determining appropriate and inappropriate uses, users, or owners connected to contingencies and social rules (Ibid., p.241-243).

Part II | Acquiring Meta-resources: Mode of Weapons Acquisition and the Configuration of Insurgencies in Myanmar and Ukraine

This part attempts to empirically explore the relationships between ANSAs’ mode of weapons acquisition and authority structures of insurgency. The issue of firearms as meta-resources to be controlled is not explored due to lack of data. The two settings of armed conflict in Myanmar and Ukraine are analysed as embedded case studies, i.e. layered on the base of different ANSAs and insurgencies. The following sections look at each setting through the framework presented in Part I.

¹⁰ Ashkenazi notes four types of patterns in which these bargain manifest: the use of prestige and prestige recognition as a bargaining chip; social agreements that violence has surpassed an unbearable threshold and needs to be limited; the bargaining power of civilians in conflict contexts vis à vis combatants in need of resources, information or complicity; the dynamics of feuds (blood vengeance feuds and feuds based upon economic or political power struggles) (Ashkenazi 2012, p. 234-237).

4. Myanmar

After independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Burma descended into civil war and numerous different insurgencies have since swept the country up until today. A very fragmented and heterogeneous control over the use of organized violence characterizes the complex political scenario surrounding the peace process initiated in the first half of the 2000s, which slowly led to the 2015 National Cease-fire Agreement (NCA).¹¹ To date, ten Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) have signed the NCA, while some of the major armed groups continue fighting with the Tatmadaw (the Myanmar Armed Forces) and the government.¹² In addition, pockets of dissent and de facto autonomy also exist in areas controlled by the latter or by ceasefire EAOs. Against this landscape, weapons have long constituted an important commodity, featuring as both trafficked goods and assets to uphold authority.

4.1. *Arms Availability*

Although the very concept of firearms market is contested and often misused, Southeast Asia is usually taken as an example of the existence of distinct regional structures of licit and illicit circulation of firearms (Bourne 2007). The major sources and dynamics of arms proliferation in the region have been connected to the legacy of conflicts and legal and covert supplies of arms channelled with involvement of state apparatuses.

¹¹ The peace process that led to the signature of the NCA was formally initiated by the “roadmap to discipline flourishing democracy” first announced in 2003. The roadmap was a seven-steps process conceived by the Tatmadaw to accompany the country towards the establishment of a stable democratic political system.

¹² Under the Thein Sein administration eight EAOs signed the NCA in 2015: the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen National Liberation Army-Peace Council (KNLA-PC), the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), the Revolutionary Council of Shan State-Shan State Army South (RCSS-SSAS), the All Burma Student’s Democratic Front (ABSDF), the Chin National Front (CNF), the Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO) and the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP). See ACLED (2016), *Peace in Myanmar?*, <https://www.acleddata.com/2016/03/03/peace-in-myanmar/>. Two more EAOs joined in February 2018: the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU).

The following EAOs have not signed yet: the United Wa State Army (UWSA), Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA), their allies of the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Arakan Army (AA), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Kaplan (NSCN-K), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Shan State Progressive Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA-N), and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP).

During World War II, Burma emerged as a strategic buffer zone in South-East Asia and in the immediate post-WWII period weapons were widely available in the country (Myint-U 2011; Gibson & Chen 2011). Throughout the 1960s and 70s, considerable flows were channelled into the region by the U.S., China, and USSR (Tholens 2012, p.101; Chouvy 2013, p.92). It has been estimated that in the aftermath of the Vietnam War in 1975, Vietnam and Cambodia were home to 2 million weapons and 150.000 tons of ammunition (Chouvy 2013). At the beginning of the 2000s, before the European Union's Assistance on Curbing Small Arms and Light Weapons (EU-ASAC) disarmament program was carried out, figures estimated the presence of 500.000 to 1 million SALW in Cambodia (Tholens 2012, p.71). The Communist Party of Burma (CPB), as well as armed groups in NE India at times, was supported by China, while Thailand favoured the strengthening of Shan and Karen armed groups to counterbalance the presence of communist formations on its territory. Cold War patterns of arms supply and proliferation seem to have retained significant impact on the creation and consolidation of regional structures of weapons accumulation and circulation (Bourne 2007, p.163). More recently, the main source of SALW has been represented by the Chinese grey market and cross-border supplies to the United Wa State Army (UWSA), especially between the second-half of the 2000s and 2013 ca.¹³

Generally speaking, four main sub-regional areas have represented important hubs of proliferation and trafficking of weapons in Southeast Asia: the Southern trait of the eastern Myanmar border with Thailand; the so-called "Golden Triangle" intersecting Myanmar's Shan State, Laos, and Thailand just beneath Yunnan Province in China; the border areas between Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India; and, lastly, arms have also flowed from the Northern and North-eastern borders of Myanmar to the western borders with India. Interestingly, these areas ideally match with the borderlands of Myanmar and reflect heterogeneous geographical, topographical, and socio-political characteristics of its territory. Across these four main proliferation areas, overall civilian firearms availability has traditionally been poor in

¹³ Interview with independent consultant, September 2018, Bangkok.

Myanmar borderlands, although various types of weapons are available to ANSAs. Assault rifles are quite ubiquitous, especially AK patterns of Chinese production.¹⁴ Light weapons are also available and trafficked, although overall less frequently and with prevalence in northern Shan State and Kachin.¹⁵ Ammunition are trafficked as well, although there seem to be a general trend of decreasing availability started around the second half of the 2000s, especially on the Myanmar-Thai border.¹⁶

Concerning the response of central governments to the proliferation of arms and ANSAs, the year 1988 is generally considered as a watershed for Myanmar civil wars and state-building processes. After decades of repression and political and economic isolationism, in 1988 the country appeared as an isolated core, surrounded by politically and economically connected borderlands, opposing central authorities as a result of longstanding frictions between centrifugal and centripetal political projects (Meehan 2011, p. 384). Massive public protests against Ne Win's regime, China's changing interests concerning its neighbourhood and the falling apart of Cold War structures are often recalled as the main factors underpinning a crucial shift in the Myanmar's state-building process (Myint-U 2011; Meehan 2011; Wood 2016; Gravers 2016). At the core of this shift laid also changing relations between the Tatmadaw and ANSAs controlling the borderlands. Apart from modernizing its arsenal and restructuring its forces¹⁷, the Tatmadaw and military governments revisited their long-held militia programs while shifting strategy to engage

¹⁴ Most common are the Type 56, Type 81, M-22, M-23, M16s and AR15s. Older rifles such as SKS, M1s and M14 are also present.

¹⁵ In particular grenade launchers M79, M203, SAM and SA7, mortars, recoilless rifles, machine guns, heavy machine guns of 12.7 mm calibre, anti-aircraft machine guns, mines and home-made mines. ¹⁵ Most light weapons are in the possession of the UWSA, Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) to a lesser extent. In the last years 107 surface to surface rocket launchers and anti-materiel rifles (Zijiang M99) have been acquired by the UWSA and apparently sold to the KIA and Arakan Army (AA). Interview with independent consultant, September 2018, Bangkok.

¹⁶ Personal conversations with independent researcher specialized in southeast Myanmar and high-level humanitarian worker with more than ten years experience in mine action in Cambodia, September 2018, Yangon. In addition see Suthep Chaviwan, Suthep Chaviwan 2008, Guerrillas battle rising costs, Bangkok Post (recirculated by Thai Asia Church Herald), 21 December, viewed in March and April 2018, < <http://thaiasiachurchherald.blogspot.com/2009/08/guerrillas-battle-rising-costs.html> >

¹⁷ With purchases of SALW from Pakistan, Israel, Singapore and China and mortar shells from Vietnam.

with EAOs. Arguing that the nature of the governments was a purely transitional one to lead the country towards a new constitution and elections¹⁸, they began to offer pure military truces accompanied by economic incentives to EAOs, concluding a total of 40 ceasefires in about two decades (Buchanan 2016). In such a landscape of ceasefire capitalism (Wood 2011), larger EAOs would receive more favourable incentives and delimitation of territory with relative autonomy. While partial or complete disarmament as well as shrinking of territorial space and transformation into army-controlled militias were reserved to smaller ones or splinter factions¹⁹ (Buchanan 2016, p.14). These agreements concentrated mostly in Kachin and Shan states whereas, notwithstanding some exceptions, hostilities continued throughout the southeast of the country.

The converted groups would retain their weapons and obtain business incentives and concessions while remaining subordinated to the army, in order for the latter to regain control over the borderlands. Between 1989 to 2008-2010, many non-state armed groups were converted into pro-government militias and approximately 16 bilateral ceasefires were signed²⁰ (Meehan 2011, p.388-9; Jolliffe & Bainbridge 2017). From 2009 on, the Tatmadaw's strategy shifted towards a more aggressive policy pushing for EAOs transformation into paramilitary units directly controlled by the Army and engrafted into its structure with different degrees of integration through the so-called Border Guard Forces (BGF) and People's Militia Forces (PMFs) programs. These programs entailed a sort of disarmament and demobilisation process in combination with indirect reform of the Union forces' structure. If on the one hand the underlying political issues at the roots of hostilities continued to remain unresolved, on the other hand the micro-political economy of the borderlands was being reconfigured. The BGF and PMFs scheme were deployed as proxy forces by the Tatmadaw to exert control over territories outside

¹⁸ In this sense the names of the two military governments in power between 1988 and 2011 are self explanatory: State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

¹⁹ The practice of co-optation and militia formation has a long history in Myanmar, as revealed by the use of the term 'Ka Kwe Ye' or 'Pyithusit' as synecdoche to refer to many types of local armed groups somehow connected to the armed forces. See Smith 1999; Ruzza 2015; and Buchanan 2016.

²⁰ Of these 15 transformed into militias.

their de facto sovereignty (Buchanan 2016, p.22). Consequently, renewed fighting between the Tatmadaw and several EAOs such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and TNLA sparked since 2009-11, leading to a further change of attitude by the army. The issue of non-state armed groups transformation was disjointed from the negotiations that later led to the 2015 NCA. The changing geopolitical landscapes and state-building strategy of the Tatmadaw arguably corresponded to different dynamics of weapons proliferation and arms acquisition by non-state armed actors.

4.2. Control Over Acquisition, Authority and Insurgencies

Karen State and Thai-Myanmar Border

Towards the end of the 1980s, these areas were characterized by a plurality of sources of weapons proliferation. At the time, the civil conflict in Cambodia was gradually scaling down and until 1998 weapons continued to proliferate often through systematic larger transfers operated with the involvement of Cambodian, Thai, and at times Burmese authorities. In addition, arms proliferated through leakage from Thai state stockpiles. Thai authorities were also involved in the supply of weapons to Karen groups directly or indirectly deployed as proxies to contain the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and armed groups involved in drug trafficking (Brenner 2017, p.6; Bourne 2007, p.129 and 167). Generally speaking though, by the end of the 2000s weapons availability and access had become increasingly scarce and difficult along the Thai-Myanmar border. This trend was particularly accentuated with regard to ammunition, as the doubling of prices compared to the 1990s would suggest (Chaiwan 2008).²¹ Several factors impinged on the accessibility of Cambodian sources. By 2005-6 efforts to address weapons proliferation in the country had been successfully translated in disarmament activities and significant improvements in Physical Security and Stockpile Management (PSSM) in the framework of EU-ASAC (SEESAC 2006). Furthermore, the Thai government had already started to implement harder policies against alleged terrorist organizations in

²¹ Apparently the cost for a single round of ammunition raised from 10 baht to 20-25 baht.

the wake of 9/11 and the 2002 Bali attacks. In addition, since the end of the 1990s economic interests mainly connected to logging concessions in Karen areas and the growing control of the Tatmadaw over that borderland had led to policy change towards the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and Thailand's attitude towards the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA) and armed actors in Myanmar had been clearly reversed (Chouvy 2013, p.96-7). Lastly, these shifts coincided with the turn in Tatmadaw's counterinsurgency strategy and increased military pressure on Karen lines as a consequence of the ceasefire agreements signed with armed groups operating in Shan and Kachin areas.

Weapons access and acquisition processes in these areas followed a trajectory similar to that of the most important armed group, the KNU/KNLA, which started shrinking and fragmenting (Irrawaddy 2008). One should note that internal fragmentation has represented a longstanding feature of Karen societies (Gravers 2016, p.389). The same could be said for the KNU/KNLA's structure, which could be described as politically centralized but logistically relatively loosely integrated. Although the group has traditionally organized the territory of Karen state into seven different districts under central command, there have always been discrepancies between corresponding KNLA brigades in charge (Brenner 2017, p.3). Particularly, flow and mobilization processes should have been centralized in principle but in reality, each brigade has been autonomous in recruitment and financing over its areas of competence (Ibid.). The same holds true regarding weapons acquisition, whereby apparently the process has been controlled at brigade rather than leadership level.²² The quarter master general of the KNU remains a powerful central authority with power over brigades and privileged connection with governments, but brigade structures have managed and procured their own weapons.²³

The process that led to the signing of the 2012 bilateral ceasefire agreement was one characterized by internal fragmentation, contestations and changing

²² Interview with independent researcher.

²³ Ibid.

power dynamics amongst brigades. The mid-1990s marked the starting point of the KNU/KNLA's decline. A decline that had already begun with the fragmentation of the group when the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) emerged, formed by Buddhist members of the KNLA and Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO).²⁴ The DKBA sided with the Tatmadaw and turned against KNLA's brigades 7 and 6 - which represented the organizational core of the KNU, presiding the headquarters in Mannerplaw and the main smuggling routes (Brenner 2017). After years of progressive shrinking, in 2007 a new splinter group named KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC) emerged due to the signing of a bilateral cease-fire between brigade 7 commander and the SPDC government. Around the same years, the 5th brigade of the DKBA detached itself from the latter as a consequence of the organization's decision to enter the BGF program. Overall, Brenner has described these events as a progressive 'shifting internal power balance from central to northern units of the KNLA, particularly to Mutraw's Brigade 5' (Brenner 2017, p.3). The latter today represents the last stronghold of the Karen insurgency notwithstanding the group's eventual adherence to the NCA in October 2015. Apparently, the decrease of weapons flows and the loss of control over trafficking routes by Brigades 6 and 7 accentuated already existent decentralized weapons proliferation processes that allowed single brigades to be operationally autonomous.

Kachin State and Shan State

While access to weapons was significantly hampered for groups operating in the South-Eastern regions of Myanmar, different patterns characterized the northern Shan State and Kachin state. Throughout the Cold War the CPB remained the privileged recipient of Chinese weapons supplies. With the fragmentation of the CPB²⁵, Chinese instances found in the UWSA a primary interlocutor. In the 1990s, the PLA started a severe modernization process of its arsenal, which generated con-

²⁴ The Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO) is a KNU-affiliated village defence militia from which the armed wing of the movement (the Karen National Liberation Army) first originated (Brenner 2017, p. 3; and Gravers 2016).

²⁵ The group crumbled apart into four different splinter factions: the UWSA, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K).

siderable SALW surpluses. Despite Beijing's collection efforts, Yunnan-based former and active military personnel transferred arms to the UWSA (Chouvy 2013, p.99; Lintner 2015, p.133). UWSA has operated control over weapons acquisition processes at leadership level and these supplies created a sort of spill-over effect that triggered the circulation of older weapons in UWSA's hands towards other EAOs in Northern Shan State. Besides, during this period the UWSA also acted as broker facilitating other groups' weapons acquisition through Chinese channels. During the last decades, although Chinese-Burmese relations improved and China direct weapons supplies scaled down, drug trafficking remained a major source of income to purchase arms and the role of peripheral political and military structures in Yunnan was key to entrench the position of the group and its control over Pangkham and the Wa Special Region no.2. The group set up a modernisation process since 2010-12, year in which it signed a renewed ceasefire agreement with the Tatmadaw. Through networks rooted in Yunnan and passive or active support from Beijing, in the last three decades the UWSA was able to consolidate its status of strategic buffer zone between China and Myanmar. In addition, it emerged as the leader group of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Council (FPNCC).²⁶ To date, the UWSA has remained outside the NCA repeatedly demanding its substitution with a different nationwide truce before taking any step in the actual peace process.

The KIA as well entertained strong relations with the CPB and was able to purchase supplies from the PLA at times (Lintner 2015, p.128; Yawngnwe 1987, p.233). With the crumbling of the CPB, the KIA has been able to secure weapons access with the UWSA, although intermittently and not without difficulties. Apparently, the group severely suffered from lack of ammunition in recent times, although it continues fighting with the Tatmadaw (Chouvy 2013, p.99). In 1994, KIA signed a ceasefire with the government, which remained in place until 2011 (Sadan 2016). The so-called 'ceasefire capitalism' strategy adopted by the Tatmadaw during

²⁶ Political alliance of seven ANSAs aiming to the substitution of the NCA before embarking on a peace process for the constitution of a federal democratic union in Myanmar.

those years and constant pressure to adhere to the BGF scheme, especially after the demise of Peng Jiasheng's MNDAA in 2009, fuelled internal frictions within the KIO/A (Woods 2011). Since then, the Tatmadaw has steadily scaled up military pressure to unprecedented levels until nowadays while, on the other hand, KIA supported the emergence of other EAOs.²⁷

Control over weapons acquisition has been centrally organized at the leadership level by the KIA which is renowned for retaining arms procurement dedicated officers and alleged manufacturing capacity.²⁸ While the territory controlled by the KIA has always been geographically and logistically isolated, progressive waves of attacks and continued implementation of the 4-cuts counter-insurgency strategy by the Tatmadaw have aggravated the connections between different KIA's brigades and the HQ in Laiza, as well as amongst the former themselves (Davis 2018). Generally speaking the group has always been affected by its isolation and found it difficult to establish regular weapons supply lines. KIA's relations with UWSA have always been more tenuous than those between the latter and other non-state armed actors in Northern Shan State. In very recent times this lack of access to weapons (munitions in particular), has occurred in parallel with an organisational restructuring of forces. Larger territorially fixed brigades have been reshaped into more flexible and smaller ones (Davis 2018).²⁹ Moreover, single units have also been encouraged to carry out seizures on the battlefields.

Close relations amongst non-state armed actors, characterize also the case of the Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA). The roots of the PSLF/TNLA can be traced back to 1991, when another Palaung organization, the Palaung State Liberation Organization/Army (PSLO/A), signed a bilateral ceasefire with the Tatmadaw. PSLO/A was a long-

²⁷ In particular the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Arakan Army (AA).

²⁸ With the only potential exception being KIA's 4th brigade in Kutkai township, northern Shan State, which is far from KIO structures and potentially more autonomous (interview with independent consultant). Allegedly KIA manufactures Type 81-pattern assault rifles but reports and details concerning its production capacity are limited and difficult to confirm (phone interview with anonymous informant, May 2019).

²⁹ The group has passed from a total of 5 to 10 brigades, plus two mobile ones. From 4 to 7 brigades in Kachin State, and from 1 to 3 in Northern Shan State.

time ally of the KIA and its 4th Brigade in particular, and relied heavily on supplies provided by the latter (Meehan 2016, p. 368). Left without its primary ally and source of ammunition, when the KIA 4th Brigade fragmented into what would have later become the Kachin Defence Army (KDA) the PSLO/A was practically forced to sign a ceasefire and transform into a government-affiliated militia (Ibid, 369; Kumbun 2018). An internal faction to the PSLO/A rejected the agreement and constituted the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), which continued to oppose the government from the Thai-Myanmar border areas, slowly trying to rebuild its military capacity. In April 2005, under its so-called 'weapons for peace' disarmament program, the Tatmadaw exerted more pressure on the PSLA to hand-in all its arsenal, as it did with other groups (South 2008, p.133). With many former combatants forcibly reintegrated into the ranks of local militia forces and the PSLF forced to withdraw at the Thai border, the PSLA ultimately completely disarmed and ceased to exist (Meehan, 2016, p.357). Meehan has underlined that the 2005 disarmament and demobilisation of the PSLA left many former elite and rank-and-file members dissatisfied and close ties with the KIA allowed to obtain weapons and training needed for the constitution of PSLF's armed wing created in 2009, the TNLA (Ibid). Apparently, many TNLA members actually are former PSLA combatants. The group's weapons in part circulated to local militias under the Tatmadaw scheme when the PSLA was integrated into these forces in 2005 and, from there, ultimately reached the TNLA in 2009 due to former PSLA combatants joining the new armed group (Ibid., p.377). Since its inception, today the TNLA has doubled its size passing from 900-1000 to 6000 combatants.³⁰ At the same time, it has grown more organized, assuming a brigade structure and controlling weapons acquisition at a central, leadership level.³¹ After the initial crucial role of the KIA, in recent years the TNLA has moved closer to UWSA influence/support.³²

³⁰ Interview with independent consultant, September 2018, Bangkok.

³¹ Interview with anonymous informant, September 2018, Kyaukme.

³² Ibid.

5. Ukraine

Significant patterns of governance, conflict and criminality have repeatedly brought to the fore the issue of arms proliferation in Ukraine from various angles in the last decades. Over the years, the country's kaleidoscopic past historical experiences have produced very diverse political settings underpinning the current composite and fragmented configuration of the country. Already existent profound societal rifts burst in 2013, triggered by the events of Maidan square³³, and resulted in an ongoing turbulent conjuncture of armed conflict and politico-economic crisis. As claimed by Matveeva (2016), the conflict in the country, perhaps another example of violent peace (Duffield 2001), did not come unexpected and was the result of social and political polarization, lack of one Ukrainian identity and unique statehood model promoted by the central government.

5.1. *Arms Availability*

With the outbreak of conflict in Donbass in 2014, the sheer number of small arms and light weapons estimated to be present in Ukraine has spotlighted the country as the most complex arms proliferation case in Europe. Firearms are widespread throughout the whole country both in the licit and in the illicit sphere, although not homogeneously. According to (conservative) estimates, Ukraine is considered to be home to a total of 4 to 5 million firearms – 2 million in the licit sphere and from 2 to 3 million in the illicit one (Martyniuk 2017).³⁴ Weapons are not ubiquitous and access is not without barriers but arms still remain fairly available in considerable quantities and varieties of types.

Several sources of weapons fed the first armed formations sprouted up from the events of Maidan and anti-Maidan. Between the First and the Second

³³ Although several transcription techniques for Ukrainian and Russian languages exist, the text tries to adhere to the more conventional norms and respect the transcriptions used by single authors of the sources consulted.

³⁴ To put these figures into perspective, suffice it to remind that the Western Balkans is home to 5 to 6 million registered and unregistered firearms. See Carapic, 2014.

World War present-day Ukraine was swept by several armed conflicts³⁵: weapons originating from these conflicts have traditionally been stored in households, while those in military stocks later became obsolete and generated surpluses after the manufacture of the AK rifle (Ferguson & Jenzen-Jones 2014). Furthermore, as part of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the Ukrainian SSR was home to huge military stockpiles, troop deployments, and weapons factories as it configured a third echelon of defense in the stratified Soviet military strategy (Griffith 2010; Griffith & Karp 2008). With the dismantling of the Pact, vast arsenals were stocked into the country by withdrawing soviet troops deployed in eastern Europe. This generated disproportionate surplus due to the subsequent downsizing of the Ukrainian Army (Chivers 2005).³⁶ Internal armed conflicts and patterns of state collapse in the crumbling of socialist systems at the regional level, such as the civil war in the adjacent Transnistria region of Moldova, the Wars of Yugoslav Secession, and the two wars in Chechnya, also contributed to firearms proliferation (Munteanu 2014; Martyniuk 2017). Finally, Ukraine is as well home to considerable SALW manufacturers.³⁷ Other significant sources of illicit firearms are the conversion of replica firearms and craft-production of weapons within criminal milieus (King 2015).

Proliferation and trafficking of arms are not homogeneous phenomena but rather present different characteristics throughout different areas. With the outbreak of the Donbass conflict, though not necessarily as a direct consequence of it, weapons availability has been largely related to the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) zone and movements from/to the ATO. Nonetheless, the Southern, South-Eastern and also Western parts of the country host important logistic hubs for criminal net-

³⁵ Eastern Galicia was the theatre of the Polish-Ukrainian war fought in 1918 and 1919 following WWI. In the same years, the rest of the country was experiencing a civil conflict that later led to the formation of the Ukrainian SSR in 1922. Two decades later, the extremely fragmented configuration of the country re-emerged once again with the outbreak and unfolding of WWII.

³⁶ Chivers quantified in 2.5 million tons of conventional munitions and more than 7 million small arms.

³⁷ In particular, concerning SALW production: the State Enterprise “Lugansk Cartridge”, located in the Luhansk region (which produces ammunition for SALW); the State Enterprise “Design Bureau Artillery Armament”; the Tasko Corporation; and the “State-Owned Science-Industrial Association “Fort” of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine.

works, such as Odessa, Dnipro, Kharkiv, Kyiv, and Lviv. At a regional level, the bulk of arms trafficking comes from and moves towards the Russian Federation, although episodes of trafficking involving Transnistria and Belarus are sometimes reported. The two border regions between Ukraine and Poland, Volyn and Lviv oblasts, are both renown for their illicit networks, especially concerning amber illicit extraction and commercialization. These networks are often closely entangled with far-right movements. Diversification is a key feature also when it comes to the types of weapons that have circulated in Ukraine. From ammunition to light weapons, small arms and explosives, a wide panoply of arms can be acquired.³⁸ Light weapons are relatively widespread: the availability of shells for light weapons, various calibers of ammunition, anti-tank weapons, and RPG's³⁹ turn Ukraine into a very relevant in-land source of weapons in perspective. In the case of Ukraine, the most crucial dynamic of arms proliferation seems to be the leakage of weapons from state stock-piles through various channels: theft, capture during hostilities, or embezzlement. Moreover, seizures often reported cases of trafficking, involving allegedly antagonistic conflict actors and defectors.

5.2. Weapons Acquisition and Armed Orders in Donbass

In order to assess the trajectory of the insurgency and the evolution of non-state actors' control over weapons acquisition, the remainder looks at the outbreak of hostilities and the first phases of the Donbass insurgency in 2013-2014. The insurgency is divided into three phases. Phase one, from Maidan square demonstrations and the rise of anti-maidan movements, to the emergence of the first embryonic organized groups. Phase two, from the creation of Maidan Self-Defence Forces (SDFs) to the constitution of paramilitary Battalions; and from the organization of civil defence forces to the emergence of militias in Donbass. Phase three, from the Donbass militias to the creation of the DNR and LNR armed groups.

³⁸ For a more detailed description see Duquet 2018.

³⁹ More specifically RPG-7 and RPG-18, 22 and 26, as well as rocket propelled launchers (MRO-A and RPO-A).

Phase I

As early as the beginning of December of 2013 Self Defence Forces (SDF - Samooborona) began to form in the context of Maidan square demonstrations, supported by political movements opposing former president Viktor Yanukovich and aimed at countering Berkut (special riot police) units (Kudelia 2016). As the bottom-up organization of demonstrators turned into active upheaval and open clashes, the streets' arsenals evolved from everyday objects to stones, smoking and incendiary grenades, legally or illegally possessed civilian firearms (Ferguson & Jenzen-Jones 2014; BBC 2014).⁴⁰ Extreme-right wing groups quickly began to hijack demonstrations especially through direct involvement of SDFs (Ishchenko 2016; Gatehouse 2015). While the heavy crackdown on revolts amplified the role of SDFs, many across the political opposition exploited the key position acquired by extreme-right groups in SDFs (Kudelia 2016). As early depicted by the 18th February 2014 march on Kiev's Instituskaya street, SDFs had quickly consolidated their role amongst protesters lines and were structured into battalions, formally under the unified command of Andriy Parubiy (Gatehouse 2015; Balmforth 2014).⁴¹ In addition, weapons were distributed during protests and firing positions set up in the Conservatory and Hotel Ukraine (Gatehouse 2015). As fighting in the streets unfolded, SDFs raided Kyiv's police departments, prosecutor and SBU's offices and garrisons, seizing weapon caches and literally arming Maidan. The gradual hijacking of the revolts by Pravy Sector culminated with the seizure of government and law enforcement authorities' offices in western and central Ukraine.

Due to the evident intertwining between extreme-right movements and SDFs, in Donbass the spectre of nationalism provided a justification for the creation of civil defence forces to protect people from the new government. The first units of civil defence were formed in Donetsk and Luhansk in the winter 2013/2014 under the auspices of the centrist Russophile Party of Regions (Kudelia 2016). While the latter promoted the creation of these groups, their constitution was

⁴⁰ Such as gas and air weapons, hunting and sporting guns and craft-produced weapons.

⁴¹ The Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament) since 14 April 2016.

financed by businesses in Donbass belonging to party networks. Initially the arming channels of defence groups consisted in the aggregation of civilian firearms and leakages from local official stashes. The overthrowing of the Yanukovich government triggered a re-articulation of the political movement along the lines of different businessmen figures' patronage groups (Kudelia 2016). It should be noted that armed forces personnel were enmeshed in these networks at both the national and local level. The initially bottom-up civil defence groups became embedded into these networks triangulating local and regional patrons, armed forces authorities, and separatist leaders.

Phase II

With the ousting of former president Yanukovich, societal rifts intertwined with the protracted deterioration that had characterized the Ukrainian security apparatuses since independence (Matveeva 2016; Griffith & Karp 2008; Aliyev 2016, 502). Leveraging on the entanglement of political and armed structures, the key groups leading Maidan consolidated and expanded their role, as became clear amidst the worsening of the security context in Donbass during the spring 2014 (Puglisi 2015). The dismantling of Ministry of Interior special forces and their integral substitution with the newly created National Guard can be understood as an attempt to reshape state structures on the outcomes of Maidan. In fact, although the disbandment of all armed groups sprouted up from the revolts was sanctioned with a parliamentary decree dated 1st of April 2014, the formation of territorial defence battalions (Batalony Territorialnoi Oborony) had already been mandated in March with an official presidential decree, and the first volunteer battalions were formed between April and May (Puglisi 2015). Behind the organization of volunteer battalions stood an intertwining of political movements, entrepreneurs and oligarchs (Roth 2014; Baczyńska 2015).⁴² These non-state armed groups pursued both institutional and political legitimation as reflected by the October 2014 parliamentary elec-

⁴² Key politico-business figures financing the creation of paramilitary groups. For instance, the role of Ihor Kolomoisky as funder of Dniepr-1 and Dniepr-2 is well-known. Similarly, Azov battalion, originated from the paramilitary national socialist group founded by Andriy Biletsy that was named "Patriot of Ukraine" and renowned for its slogans of white supremacy.

tions, in which six battalions commanders were elected (Aliyev 2016).⁴³ Furthermore, volunteer battalions retained a conspicuous degree of autonomy and were incorporated into state forces through an extremely blurred and fragile legal process during the first phases of the Anti-Terrorist Operation announced on 15 April by President Turchynov (Aliyev 2016, p.509).⁴⁴ These battalions emerged in parallel to state structures to which were only formally subordinated, expanding their influence over the state in a context of political crisis and legal chaos. In this context, they managed to progressively cement a significant monopoly over the use of force.

Although the weapons acquisition processes by paramilitary battalions has remained neglected, the hypothesis has been advanced that supplies were sourced from official stashes (Prentice & Zverev 2016; Aliyev 2016; Puglisi 2015). According to others, these groups received arms through private channels (Gilley 2015; Aliyev 2016, p.509-511). In addition, paramilitary groups carried out firearms seizures or recoveries during military operations and episodes of misappropriation highlighted the incapacity of Kyiv to establish full control over volunteers. Weapons acquisition by volunteer battalions seems to have occurred predominantly through organized top-down distribution, with politico-military leaders on top mediating with oligarchs or state apparatuses.

Meanwhile in Donbass

At the time of the capture of Slavyansk by Igor “Strelkov” Girkin’s forces on 12th April (2014), cities in Donbass were controlled by small local militias cooperating with law enforcement authorities and coordinating in councils with other civil defence groups (Kudelia 2016, p.221). The spiral of dissent, forceful repression, and mobilization already into motion culminated with the complete crumbling of law enforcement structures in Donbass, facilitating access to state armouries and

⁴³ Yuriy Beryoza from the Dnipro 1 battalion and Andrii Teteryuk from the Mirotvorcheskii battalion were elected with the Narodny Front; Semen Semenchenko from the Donbas battalion was elected with Samopomich party; Dmytro Yarosh from the Pravy Sektor battalion, elected with Pravy Sektor; and Andrii Biletsky, commander of the Azov battalion, and Serhiy Mel’nychuk, commander of the Aidar battalion, were independently elected.

⁴⁴ All paramilitary formations received the status of territorial self-defense units: some were placed under the Ministry of Defence, others under the National Guard and the Ministry of Interior and a few were left in a legal vacuum for approximately one year, such as the extreme right “Pravyi Sektor”.

stockpiles. Fragmentation of large or smaller state stockpiles became a leitmotiv of the insurgency, especially during the very first phases (Loiko 2014; Luhn 2014). The first militia battalions began to emerge as alliances of smaller units in conjunction with fragmentation of the state security sector (Puglisi 2015). Moreover, since the start of the ATO there were numerous defections from the Ukrainian Army and law enforcement authorities.

Arms acquisition by militias occurred primarily through the capture of military stockpiles, bases, posts and checkpoints before and during hostilities as well as through the fragmentation of security structures. Access to weapons in considerable quantities was dependent on either battalions' capacity to assault and raid a position or to network with the fragmenting security apparatus. In the meantime, several leaders emerged in different cities in Donbass forming new battalions. As the prospect of a Russian Federation direct intervention faded away, the lead of military operations was taken by the Vostok Battalion, the Army of the South-East in Luhansk, and Girkin's militia (Luhn 2014). By the end of April, coordination between leaders and the recognition of Girkin as commander-in-chief of the region's militias by the political leadership of the Donetsk republic signalled tendencies towards the integration of different armed formations into an organized structure. Finally, on the 24th of May, the self-proclaimed Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika (DNR) and Luganskaya Narodnaya Respublika (LNR) jointly declared the formation of the federative Union of Novorossiia.

Phase III

The consolidation of territorial control over the Donbass-Russian border during the first weeks of the summer 2014 was crucial for the development of the insurgency. The ability to obtain control of smuggling routes on the eastern border allowed armed formations, now under the flag of the DNR and LNR, to cope with a militarily unbalanced situation. In particular, control over border areas was key for the mobilization of manpower and allowed the DNR and LNR to expand their arsenals and capabilities acquiring light weapons, heavier systems, and armoured vehicles. Given the similarities between weaponry in Ukrainian stockpiles and arsenals

of former Soviet countries and due to lack of reliable information, it is extremely difficult to certify Russian support in the form of weapons supplies.⁴⁵ Ferguson and Jenzen-Jones have found that existing stockpiles were the most important source of weapons in insurgents' hands, although it is very likely that pro-Russian separatist groups have received some level of support from one or more external parties (Ferguson & Jenzen-Jones 2014; Ismay 2015).⁴⁶

In August 2014 the military situation in Donbass battlefields rapidly changed. Forced to retreat from Sloviansk and Kramatorsk to Donetsk and Luhansk, insurgent armed groups were able to respond and push back Ukrainian Armed forces in the areas of Ilovaik and Debaltseve. It is interesting to note that by the time this happened the insurgency had assumed an organized and integrated structure, whereby this reaction of the DNR and LNR had been preceded by changes in the leadership of both armed organizations. The acceleration imprinted throughout the second half of 2014 was clearly mirrored in the capacity of the DNR and LNR leadership to consolidate and legitimize their authority, while controlling financial flows to the republics, restructuring the armed groups around a single command, and ousting independent warlords (Kudelia 2016, p. 230).

Conclusions

Having delved into the interrelations between firearms dynamics and insurgency, some theoretical and empirical considerations can be drawn. The analysis of the two case studies highlights the close connection between extreme violence and processes of state (trans)formation. In contexts where state capacities are openly challenged it emerges even more clearly how availability and control over the means of violence have an impact on the enforcement of authority and connected configurations of statehood. Control over weapons acquisition processes by armed

⁴⁵ An in-depth small-scale research on spent cartridges was conducted by C.J. Chivers in the area of Slovyansk, Andreyevka and Semyonovka. The journalist revealed that of the 54 rounds collected, only five appeared to have been manufactured after the Soviet collapse, while all of them bore stamps from the state owned Luhansk Cartridge, see Chivers 2014.

⁴⁶ The support included small arms, light weapons, guided light weapons, heavier weapons systems, and armoured vehicles.

non-state actors seem to influence armed political orders in different ways. For instance, arms availability for ANSAs in Myanmar has been high, facilitated by remote, fairly inaccessible, mountainous areas. The contiguity of ANSA's zones of operation and involvement of state authorities, together with the heterogeneity of terrain, contributed to mould access to weapons and generated an overlapping of actors exercising sovereignty.⁴⁷ In the South-East of the country, the control or cutting down of weapons supplies by state actors after 1988 coincided with centripetal shifts in the control over the use of force implemented through collaborative relations and alliances between the Tatmadaw and armed groups. At the same time, in the north, unitary control over weapons acquisition by the UWSA was paralleled by the creation of a kaleidoscopic landscape of armed political orders dominated by the UWSA that still favours centrifugal trajectories of sovereignty and overall manages relations amongst members of the Northern Alliance and FPNCC. While for the Wa there has always been a single privileged source of weapons and the organization has evolved unitarily and integrated, for the KNU/KNLA a relatively decentralized structure corresponded to a plurality of sources and acquisition mechanisms. The scaling down of Cambodian and Thai pipelines around the mid-1990s corresponded to progressive fragmentation of the movement and gradual co-optation by the Tatmadaw. Similar processes apparently characterized the structuring of the Donbass insurgency. The control over weapons acquisition of the first actors involved in hostilities evolved from accumulative to top-down processes mainly connected to the disaggregation of security apparatuses, capture of state stockpiles, and aid provided by oligarchs' networks. In parallel, overall the insurgency evolved from bottom-up formations connected to local politico-business figures and enforcement agencies to militias backed by oligarchs and linked with national security apparatuses that ultimately rearticulated around the binary DNR-LNR configuration under a single command and integrated structure. This would shed light and apparently confirm the general framework developed by Marsh, whereby mode of weapons acquisition and insurgency's structure are related. In

⁴⁷ Interviews with two anonymous informants, October 2018.

addition though, it should be noted how arms acquisition and control represents a dimension of, and thus impacts on, the constitution and distribution of authority. Another interesting line of analysis emerging from both cases concerns the interactions between ANSAs and decentralised branches of the state which impacted arms acquisition. A point that in turn highlights the fallacy of monolithic conceptions of the state as conflict actor and the mutually constitutive character of armed actors relations.

Conceptually speaking, these insights essentially question the lines dividing studies on arms issues and research on civil war, calling for a reciprocal integration of two spheres that have traditionally developed along parallel tracks as well as an understanding of weapons-related processes as integral dimensions of conflict. In this regard, the article advances existing frameworks investigating the organizational structure of armed non-state actors. Until now, research in this ambit has delved into groups' command profile, financial architecture, and social networks (McQuinn 2015; Staniland 2012) leaving aside a further dimension: meaning how armed groups organize control over arms acquisition. In parallel, part I attempted to contribute theoretically to the literature on rebel governance by framing arms control as a further activity in which insurgents engage. Spotlighting the role of non-state actors in controlling arms opens room for delving into issues such as relations between communities and ANSAs with regard to arms and armed violence control in conflict and post-conflict contexts, or the practices, norms, and symbols put in place by insurgents in this domain of governance. Political power, as Mao Zedong sustained, grows out of the barrel of a gun (Mao 1963): in this sense my account is one that ultimately strived to emphasise weapons and related processes as physical/material aspects that have a mutual impact on socio-political trajectories of conflict.

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