

Chinese Unconventional Threats in the Era of Great Power Competition

Description

Would China ever take a page from [Iran's playbook](#) and cultivate relationships with violent extremist organizations (VEOs)?

Despite its seeming improbability, the increasingly assertive actions of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Southeast Asia raise this compelling question. This article explores when, where, and how the PRC might use VEOs to further its political, military, and economic goals. An analysis of Southeast Asia identifies an intersection of the PRC's goals with those of violent non-state groups in Myanmar, the Philippines, and the Indian border regions. In each case, the PRC could plausibly advance its national interests via a partnered or proxy relationship with select VEOs. The same method of analysis identifies when and where the PRC's collaboration with VEOs would be unlikely due to competing financial and political interests.

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Understanding China's potential tactics and likely flashpoints for irregular warfare is vital for preparing effective countermeasures. Most importantly, the discussion of China's unconventional levers of power serves as a warning against the complete separation of counterterrorism efforts from strategic competition with China.

Where Does the PRC Already Cooperate with Proxy Groups?

Picture

Description: Map depicts the gas and oil pipelines of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Source: [China's New Approach to Myanmar - Geopolitical Futures](#)

In perhaps the defining example of PRC engagement with armed non-state groups, Myanmar has been a testing ground for China's emerging strategy. In the absence of a stable, effective central government in neighboring Myanmar, the PRC maintains mutually beneficial relationships with both the [military government and a complex web of ethnic armed groups](#). PRC collaboration with the military

government of Myanmar and numerous ethnic opposition groups demonstrates President Xi's willingness to arm and fund non-state actors in the pursuit of economic and military interests.

The PRC's interests in Myanmar are largely focused on the development of the 1,700-kilometer [China-Myanmar Economic Corridor](#). First proposed as a standalone project by Beijing in 2017, the project includes oil and gas pipelines, road and rail links, and a deep-sea port located in the coastal city of Kyaukpyu. Upon completion of the corridor and Kyaukpyu Port, the PRC will obtain direct access to the Bay of Bengal and the wider Indian Ocean. This will secure an alternative energy and trade route through Myanmar, open up an easier passage to global markets for the PRC's landlocked Yunnan-based industries, and help reduce Beijing's [vulnerable reliance](#) on maritime energy imports through the Straits of Malacca. In addition to the economic dimensions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Myanmar, there is a budding element of great power competition at play in Kyaukpyu. The port will grant the PRC another outpost in its ["string of pearls"](#) strategy to encircle India, intimidate neighbors, and challenge US naval hegemony in the Indian Ocean.

The PRC's expansive BRI projects in Myanmar traverse a country embroiled in ethnic conflict and tenuously led by a military junta. Beijing's strategic priority is the completion of the economic corridor and unimpeded flow of commerce, irrespective of the internal politics of Myanmar. Consequently, the PRC funds and arms [multiple sides](#) of the conflict to protect its investments, simultaneously engaging with violent non-state actors and the military government.

In lieu of an effective government partner in Myanmar to maintain order, particularly along the Chinese border states, Beijing works through various ethnic armed organizations (EAO), the local power brokers. The largest EAO, the twenty-thousand-strong [United Wa State Army](#) (UWSA), has enjoyed a close relationship with the PRC's security services since its founding in 1989. The UWSA emerged in 1989 from the splintering of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which the PRC had supported with weapons and military equipment since 1968 to combat the nationalist Kuomintang forces that fled into northeastern Myanmar after the Chinese civil war.

In recent years, PRC [weapons shipments](#) to the UWSA have included heavy machine guns, HN-5A Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS), artillery, armored fighting vehicles, and other sophisticated communications equipment. The UWSA further benefits from access to cross-border markets for Chinese currency, rubber and mining industries, construction technology, and communication networks. Although the PRC does not publicly endorse the political goals of the UWSA, [Beijing employs the group](#) as a proxy force to protect ongoing BRI projects, stem the flow of drugs into China, and crack down on cyber scam centers operating in remote areas near the Chinese border.

When necessary, the PRC leverages its relationship with the UWSA and other armed groups to exert pressure on the military government of Myanmar to concede contested territory near PRC investments. Meanwhile, the military government of Myanmar maintains diplomatic ties with Beijing and has purchased over [\\$1 billion](#) in arms and military equipment since 2021 for its war against the UWSA and other EAOs. In recent months, Beijing has [pressured both sides](#) of the conflict into (short-lived) ceasefire agreements to reduce the violent interruptions of trade and construction.

The PRC is not picking sides in Myanmar but rather protecting its strategic interests and investments. Beijing's demonstrated willingness to arm and fund ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar leads us to question what other regions present similar conditions for PRC collaboration with violent, non-state actors.

Where is China Most Likely to Leverage VEOs?

The Philippines and the India/Kashmir border present two such possibilities. The PRC's interest in the Republic of the Philippines is two-fold. First, the PRC seeks to undermine the re-emergence of security ties between the Philippine government and the United States. Manila has recently undertaken strategic steps to deepen its relationship with the United States, marking a significant evolution in its foreign policy. This is underscored by the recent expansion of the [US-Philippine Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement](#). Second, the PRC has actively pursued territorial claims in the South China Sea (SCS), employing a strategy that combines economic leverage and the enhancement of its [soft power](#) within the Philippines. This multifaceted approach aims to sway Manila into acknowledging the PRC's territorial assertions, highlighting a sophisticated blend of diplomacy and economic influence to advance its geopolitical interests in the region. In a recent escalation of tensions, the PRC has intensified its [assertive actions](#) in disputed maritime territories by deploying both coast guard vessels and civilian fishing fleets. The PRC's use of VEOs as a proxy force would allow for plausible deniability on the international stage while weakening the Philippine government's maritime operations in the SCS and straining [US-Philippine relations](#).

The two most likely VEOs for the PRC to leverage are the New People's Army (NPA) and the Islamic State East Asia (ISEA). The New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), has a documented history of engaging in actions against US personnel and interests within the Philippines. Their violent history includes deadly [attacks on US servicemembers](#), underscoring the significant threat the NPA poses to both national and international security interests in the region. The NPA's [stated aims](#) are to overthrow the Philippine government and eliminate US influence in the Philippines, highlighting its ambitious objectives against both the central government and foreign presence. Formed in the image of Maoist revolutionaries, the NPA received [direct funding and military supplies](#) from the Chinese Communist Party from 1969 until the

1976 normalization of Chinese-Philippine relations. This demonstrates the NPA's predisposition to collaboration with the PRC as the Chinese Communist Party's genesis serves as the inspiration behind the NPA's movement.

ISEA also holds both the [capability and intent](#) to attack American and Philippine government interests. The ongoing conflict instigated by ISEA in the southern islands of the Philippines demands [extensive efforts](#) from the Philippine government in terms of time, manpower, and resources. This continuous engagement [diverts Manila's focus](#) and resources from other national security priorities, potentially benefiting the PRC's strategic position. However, the PRC's longstanding campaign against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, under the pretext of combating Islamic extremism, might make the PRC cautious about associating with a violent Islamist group like ISEA. The PRC would go to great lengths to keep a proxy partnership with ISEA highly confidential.

When evaluating the potential for future PRC engagement with VEOs in the Philippines, several indicators could signal an escalation of involvement. A noticeable enhancement in the weaponry and capabilities of these groups could serve as an early warning of increased support. Additionally, a rise in both the frequency and intensity of their attacks, particularly if these occur in tandem or close succession with PRC assertive actions in the West Philippine Sea, could suggest a level of coordination between these organizations and the PRC.

Picture

Source: [China Joins India and Pakistan in the Kashmir Battlespace](#) - New Lines Institute

PRC support for certain VEOs in Kashmir, meanwhile, could provide strategic, economic, and security advantages to Beijing. The PRC's primary regional interests are the protection of nearby BRI investments and the disruption of the Indian military presence along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Pursuant to these interests, the PRC supports Pakistan's territorial ambitions and stands to benefit indirectly from the actions Pakistan takes to exert its power in Kashmir via conventional and unconventional means.

Periodic PRC military incursions into Indian Kashmir, including a [2020 clash](#) in the Galwan Valley that resulted in 120 Indian casualties, underscore the PRC's willingness to violently escalate tensions in the region. In addition to conventional military engagements along the LAC, [Beijing provides financial support to Pakistan](#), whose military occupies a second front with India along the Line of Control (LOC). Should the PRC wish to employ unconventional methods in its simmering conflict with India, Beijing may consider working with or through Kashmir-based VEOs.

Within Indian Kashmir, Pakistan exercises [varying levels of control](#) over a network of Islamist VEOs opposed to Indian rule in the region. The jihadi organizations offer an alternative to conventional military force, operating within urban environments and conducting guerrilla warfare against the Indian government. [Pakistan provides jihadists](#), via its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), with funding, weapons, equipment, and a safe haven to train for their perennial struggle against Indian rule in Kashmir.

The primary organizations [directly associated](#) with Pakistan are Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT, renamed Jamaat-ud-Dawa in 2022), as well as Harakat-ul Jihad Islami (HUJI), and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM). ISI does not enjoy the same relationship with ISIS or al-Qaâ??ida-affiliated groups whose global vision for Kashmir as part of a worldwide Islamic caliphate are at odds with the secular Pakistani state.

Beijing is unlikely to engage directly with Islamist VEOs but could work through existing ISI channels to indirectly fund or arm groups such as JeM or LeT. Using Pakistan as an interlocutor builds upon decades-old relationships between the ISI and select VEOs while providing a level of deniability to the PRC, publicly committed to opposing radical Islamist movements. In fact, from September to December 2023, multiple Indian media outlets reported on [alleged evidence of PRC support](#) to Pakistan-backed militants in Kashmir. Although uncorroborated in Western reporting, the stories claim [Chinese military technology](#), including drones, encrypted communications devices, and advanced weaponry, have been supplied to LeT and JeM via the ISI. While far from definitive proof of PRC engagement, the news stories reveal an existing Indian narrative of Chinese involvement with Pakistanâ??s network of jihadist groups in Kashmir.

Where China is Unlikely to Leverage VEOs

The conditions identified in South Asia, which may accommodate a relationship between the PRC and VEOs, are not replicated in South America or Africa. From the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombiaâ??s Army \(FARC\)](#) in Colombia to the [plethora of VEOs](#) across Africa, both regions offer vectors for VEO engagement, but the PRCâ??s [extensive economic](#) and [diplomatic investments](#) suggest such a partnership would be highly unlikely.

The PRC will work with and through partner governments or institutions to pursue its economic and strategic interests whenever possible. The emphasis on infrastructure development, economic growth, and fostering long-term partnerships under the BRI framework (as opposed to geographic ambitions) suggests a strategic preference for stability and cooperative engagement over the contentious and unpredictable nature of VEOs. To this end, the PRC has fostered relationships with governments across Africa and South America and [voiced support for](#) local counterterrorism efforts.

Engagement with a VEO is an inherently high-risk endeavor, only likely to happen when the PRC lacks a cooperative, effective government partner and does not jeopardize its regional investments.

Conclusion

In examining these key geopolitical hotspots, it is clear that China acts based on its own self-interest. This analysis suggests that the PRC might go beyond traditional forms of international engagement, employing unconventional methods to further its strategic national objectives. Specifically, the PRC may work with VEOs as a novel approach to increase its regional influence. VEOs are appealing because they can disrupt, subvert, or distract. Therefore, China's potential use of VEOs to project power indirectly requires a coordinated counterterrorism response. Understanding Beijing's possible future tactics is crucial for developing effective countermeasures against these unconventional threats.

For more on how China uses nontraditional security forces, see IWI's latest [podcast](#).

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Main Photo: Then-US Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis meets with China's Minister of Defense Gen. Wei Fenghe at the People's Liberation Army's Bayi Building in Beijing, China, on June 28, 2018. (Army Sgt. Amber I. Smith via [DVIDS](#))

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