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Checkpoints, conflict and scam logistics

Mobile control and the politics of circulation in the China–Myanmar–Thailand borderlands

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CHECKPOINTS, CONFLICT AND SCAM LOGISTICS

Mobile control and the politics of circulation in the China–Myanmar–Thailand borderlands



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Xu Peng

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CHECKPOINTS, CONFLICT AND SCAM LOGISTICS

Xu Peng

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how checkpoint regimes shape the politics of digital illicit economies across Myanmar's borderlands, using a comparison of two corridors – the China–Myanmar borderlands of northern Shan State and the Myanmar–Thailand borderlands of Karen State – to trace how checkpoints filter circulation, structure conflict, and become sites of political contestation. Against framings that treat scam centres primarily as criminal or digital phenomena, the paper argues that their operation is intensely territorial: sustained by the physical movement of labour, supplies, and capital through controlled passage points. Drawing on fieldwork in Myanmar-China borderlands and Myanmar-Thailand borderlands, alongside satellite imagery and documentary sources, the paper develops a framework of asymmetric checkpoint regimes and passage reordering to explain divergent outcomes under anti-scam enforcement pressure. In Kokang, the convergence of China's internalised border controls, MNDAA territorial positioning, and anti-scam framing produced a decisive reordering of gateway authority following Operation 1027 in 2023. In Myawaddy, by contrast, pressure from Thai enforcement, KNU/KNLA military advances, and international sanctions disrupted scam operations but did not displace the Karen BGF's brokered control over the gateway. The comparison shows that enforcement campaigns acquire political force at checkpoints rather than compounds alone. Anti-scam pressure may close particular sites, but once translated into control over gateways, it can also become a resource through which armed actors claim governability, renegotiate passage authority, and reshape the wider infrastructures of circulation on which scam economies had depended.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, scam centres based in Southeast Asia have become a major regional and global concern; recent reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) describe them as part of a transnational criminal ecosystem that links fraud, trafficking and underground banking (UNODC, 2023; 2024; 2025). Estimated losses associated with cyberfraud in East and Southeast Asia may have reached between US\$18 billion and US\$37 billion in 2023, and Myanmar's borderlands have become one of the most important sites in this wider expansion (UNODC, 2024).

In an environment where scam centre operations have increasingly moved online, the scam economy is often framed as it relates to the digital economy, but the operation of these sites is still intensely territorial and bound by the physical environment. Captive workers, food and supplies must be moved through physical cross-border checkpoints. These might include formal border posts, internal roadblocks, bridge crossings and, where relevant, entry gates to scam compounds, all of which may act as 'passage control nodes'. These checkpoints can act to 'filter' flows in different ways: the same border crossing may present as porous for goods, but restrictive and sealed to the movement of people; passage may be tightened, redirected, delayed or selectively reopened. In this way, checkpoints are vital to understanding that the operation of scam centres relies on the political control of physical movement, which presents a distinct lens for understanding the economy outside of the digital space. This working paper uses the examination of these checkpoints to determine the points at which physical movement becomes conditional – whether on inspection, documentation, payment, brokerage or coercion. This makes it possible to treat checkpoint assemblages across the three countries as differential 'flow filters' of circulation, rather than as incidental obstacles or mere markers of state presence. Thus, checkpoints become important nodes by which to understand how conflict and scam economies must navigate, and be affected by, the physical environment, helping policymakers to examine junctures of change in complex environments. The working paper uses different locations along the border of Myanmar to investigate this claim. In Myanmar, scam centres have mostly clustered in two conflict-affected borderland settings: the China-facing borderlands of northern Shan State, especially Kokang and Wa State, and the Thai-facing borderlands of eastern Myanmar, especially the Myawaddy–Mae Sot corridor in Karen State. Along the China–Myanmar borderlands, mounting pressure over scam centres culminated in 'Operation 1027' on 27 October 2023, where three ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) – the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Arakan Army (AA), known together as the 'Three Brotherhood Alliance' – launched a series of coordinated attacks on targets across northern Shan State. Through this framing, the MNDAA used anti-scam claims alongside military advances in the area as the pretext to regain key gateways and reorder control over passage. Along the Thai–Myanmar borderlands, too, scam compounds became tied to conflict, but territorial authority remained fragmented among militias, armed groups and brokers – those actors that occupy key points of friction and connection in the network chain. The comparison therefore brings together two borderland settings in which scam-related pressures including anti-scam campaigns by Chinese and Thai authorities, fed into conflict, but with sharply different outcomes: in Kokang, control over key checkpoints was reworked through territorial seizure, whereas in Myawaddy the gateway order remained contested and brokered. They both reorganise labour, goods, capital and communication through controlled compounds, multilingual workers, digital

infrastructure and uneven cross-border routes. Across all of these borderland areas, movement is repeatedly channelled through checkpoints.

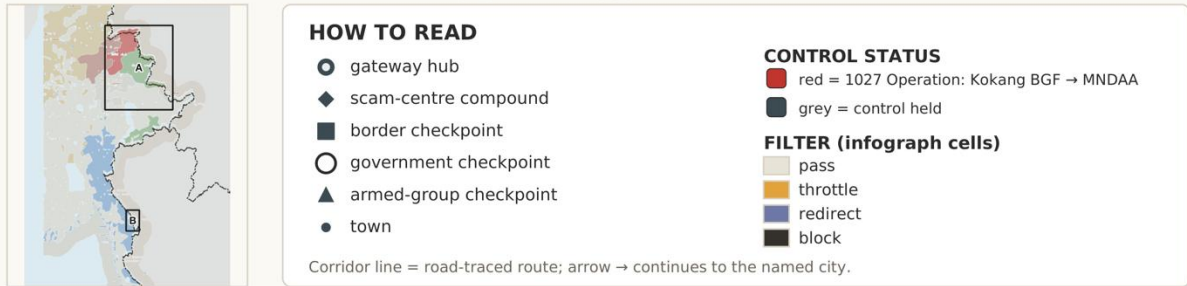
The paper asks three related questions. How do checkpoints regulate different kinds of movement across Myanmar's borderlands, especially people, goods and return channels? How is control over checkpoints used as a political tool by armed and state-linked actors to advance objectives within wartime political economies? Here, 'political tool' refers not only to revenue extraction, but also to the disciplining of mobility, the assertion of authority and the production of bargaining leverage. What role do checkpoints play in shaping the uneven outcomes of anti-scam pressure across different borderland settings: collapse and displacement in some areas, but persistence, adaptation and enclosure in others?

In answering these questions, this working paper makes three contributions. Firstly, it shows that checkpoints work as uneven filters of circulation across borderlands. Their effects vary across inter-state crossings, internal routes and different kinds of flow. In the scam economy, this unevenness is especially visible in the distinction between people and goods: control over labour mobility, confinement, escape and repatriation often follows a different logic from the movement of food, fuel, devices and other supplies. Secondly, the working paper treats the online scam economy as a new reconfiguration of the borderland illicit economy. Its digital features do not weaken its territorial character. They intensify it by placing greater weight on the control of mobility and immobility, on the management of compounds and supply routes, and on the selective organisation of labour across borders. Thirdly, the working paper shows that reactions to scam centres have introduced a new dynamic into conflict politics rather than standing outside it. Armed groups' economic interests have long been entangled with conflict economies in Myanmar's borderlands; what is distinctive here is that the reaction to scam centres itself has become a political resource. Anti-scam action and enforcement do not dismantle scam economies as such; instead, it can be used to justify territorial advance, claim governability, manage repatriation and generate political leverage in negotiations with neighbouring states and domestic rivals. Unless this action converges at a strategic passage point, with either an actor positioned to seize and hold that point, or a neighbouring state that is willing to coordinate enforcement, activity may instead be displaced from one area to another. Checkpoints run through all of these processes. They shape how scam economies emerge, how they are sustained, how they are disrupted and how they relocate under pressure. The unit of effective intervention lies at these checkpoints, rather than compounds themselves, with the politics of digital economies impacted significantly in territorial ways (see Figure 1).

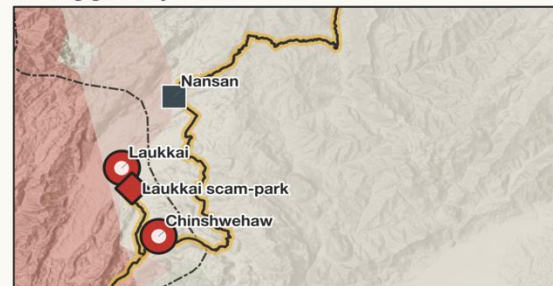
Figure 1. Map illustrating the case studies and the main argument

Checkpoints & the filtering of passage: two scam-hub corridors

Each corridor map is paired with a flow-filter infographic — same glyphs, read across.



Kokang gateway cluster — detail



FLOW-FILTER how each flow fares

	People ↓	Goods ↓	Return ↑
○ Zhenkang (CN)	block	pass	throttle
● Chinshwehaw (MM)	throttle	pass	throttle
● Laukkai (MM)	block	pass	redirect
◆ Laukkai scam-parks	block	pass	redirect

direction of travel ↓

People are stopped; goods keep moving.



Myawaddy crossing cluster — detail



FLOW-FILTER how each flow fares

	People ↓	Goods ↓	Return ↑
■ Mae Sot (TH)	throttle	pass	throttle
○ Myawaddy (MM)	throttle	pass	redirect
◆ KK Park (MM)	block	pass	redirect
◆ Shwe Kokko (MM)	block	pass	redirect

direction of travel ↓

Same pattern — yet control never changed hands.

Credits: Checkpoints & control coding: Xu Peng (DIIS / XCEPT TRACE).
Territorial control: British Red Cross (2025) & ISP-Myanmar (KNA pockets, 2026).
Roads & rivers: OpenStreetMap. Terrain: Esri. Boundaries: Natural Earth & OpenStreetMap. Cartography: P. Schouten.



CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CHECKPOINTS, CHOKEPOINTS AND ASYMMETRIC PASSAGE CONTROL

Checkpoints, chokepoints and the politics of passage

This working paper approaches checkpoints as political institutions of passage. In conflict-affected borderlands, checkpoints and roadblocks are sites where authority is enacted through the capacity to inspect, delay, price, authorise or refuse passage (Schouten, 2019a; 2019b; 2022; Schouten et al., 2024). Travellers, traders, brokers, transporters, returnees and armed actors must negotiate with the authority that controls the road, bridge, border gate, river crossing or compound entrance. Checkpoints make authority visible through practical decisions over who and what may move, rather than through territorial occupation alone.

Checkpoints differ from chokepoints. Chokepoints refer to spatial or infrastructural conditions of concentration: a bridge, port, mountain road, border gate, ferry point, customs channel or transport corridor through which movement is difficult to avoid (Carse et al., 2023; Danyluk, 2023; Cowen, 2014). Checkpoints are the political and institutional arrangements that exploit, secure or govern these conditions. A chokepoint creates the possibility of interruption; a checkpoint turns that possibility into a practice of rule (Schouten et al., 2026). The two overlap in practice: a chokepoint may exist without routinised political control, while a checkpoint may be established temporarily or moved in response to conflict, enforcement campaigns or shifting bargains among armed actors. Gateways operate at a wider scale. In this paper, a gateway refers to a strategic passage formation, such as Kokang's China-facing crossings or the Myawaddy–Mae Sot corridor, where multiple checkpoints, chokepoints, roads, bridges, river crossings, brokers and holding sites combine to organise movement across a borderland. Reordering a gateway therefore means changing the authority that coordinates, filters and benefits from this wider passage formation, rather than simply capturing or moving a single checkpoint.

This distinction matters for illicit economies. Much of the recent work on roadblocks, rebel governance and conflict economies has shown how armed actors extract revenue from routes and traffic without controlling large territories (Schouten, 2022; Buchanan, 2024). Roadblocks can provide predictable income, discipline mobility and sustain institutional consolidation. But checkpoints are not only fiscal instruments. They are also claims to regulate passage: they define categories of movement, assign risk, produce documentation and create opportunities for bargaining. The politics of passage is broader than extortion. It concerns the wider struggle over how circulation is made possible, conditional or impossible.

This working paper builds on the literature and pushes it in two directions. It shifts attention from checkpoints within a single conflict territory to checkpoint regimes operating across neighbouring jurisdictions. Scam economies in Myanmar's borderlands are organised through cross-border routes linking Myanmar with China and Thailand. Their operation depends on state border posts, internal roadblocks, armed-group checkpoints, brokerage routes and entry points to compounds. The working paper also moves beyond the question of whether checkpoints extract rents from movement, asking instead how different checkpoint regimes filter different kinds of movement. This is central for digital illicit economies, where labour, commodities, telecommunications, money and return channels do not move in the same way or face the same restrictions.

Transnational borderlands and asymmetric checkpoint regimes

Most checkpoint studies draw on internal roadblock networks within a single conflict-affected state. This work has clarified how fragmented authority operates and how localised extraction is sustained. It also tends to assume that the key governance dynamics can be explained within the borders of one country. When applied to how illicit industries run through cross-border corridors, however, this framing is insufficient. Checkpoint regimes in transnational cases are instead shaped by interactions across jurisdictions: the mobility controls of neighbouring states, the enforcement practices of differently capable border authorities, and the timing of cross-border crackdowns can all rework what passage means at any given roadblock.

Three lines of variation matter for the cases that follow. The first runs between neighbouring states. Even where countries face related cross-border challenges, they regulate passage through different combinations of documentation, policing, deportation and cross-border coordination. These regimes are also dynamic: they harden, soften or reconfigure as states expand surveillance capacity, formalise documentation, integrate policing technologies or consolidate control over key nodes. Whether a borderland sits next to a highly capable neighbour, a weakly institutionalised one, or a politically ambivalent one shapes what kinds of mobility are possible and what kinds of cross-border coordination can be demanded (Han, 2019; Rippa, 2025; Tawil-Souri, 2012; Atzili, 2006). In Myanmar's borderlands, China and Thailand offer two such configurations, with consequences that this working paper traces in detail.

The second line runs among authorities within the conflict state itself. In contested borderlands, checkpoints may be operated by state forces, militias, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) or brokerage networks (Neil and Chit, 2024; Naw, 2025), which govern passage in different ways. Control over a checkpoint can be a means of extraction, but it can also be used to project authority, demonstrate administrative capacity or claim governability, depending on the political logic of the actor in question. Variation here affects who pays the costs of passage, who absorbs its risks and who converts control over circulation into income or political leverage.

The third line runs across flow types. Formal border gates, informal crossings, internal roadblocks and compound entrances do not necessarily govern movement in the same ways. People, especially workers, are more exposed to scrutiny, restriction, brokerage and confinement than ordinary commodities, since bodies can be identified, questioned, held or returned. By contrast, food, fuel, construction materials, devices and connectivity equipment may continue to circulate through trade routes, brokerage or tolerated smuggling even when human mobility is restricted. Capital is more difficult to locate at a single passage point, as it moves through financial accounts, informal remittance, cryptocurrency, debt relations and commercial settlement. Return channels, through which workers leave compounds and re-enter their countries of origin, depend on another configuration of authority. Passage therefore needs to be analysed across jurisdictions, authorities and the specific flows being regulated. For digital illicit economies that depend on the asymmetric movement of labour, supplies, capital and exit options across multiple borders, this differentiation is central.

From differential filtering to passage reordering

Asymmetric checkpoint regimes sort flows, but they also turn passage control into a political stake (or create leverage space). Earlier academic work on checkpoints emphasised the fiscal function of roadblocks, including predictable rent for armed

actors with low-overhead institutional consolidation (Schouten, 2022; Buchanan, 2024). The argument here pushes this further: in transnational borderlands, control over key passage points can be seized, repurposed and turned into wider political claims by armed and state-linked actors (see Table 1).

This reordering turns on convergence at a single gateway. Asymmetric regimes produce mismatches across jurisdictions, among local authorities and across flow types, which open operable space at the seam between differently governed zones, where actors profit from arbitrage, brokerage and selective compliance. The mismatches are not only material but discursive: when a neighbouring state defines a particular flow as a security priority (e.g. through anti-scam, anti-trafficking or anti-narcotics frameworks), an armed actor can claim governance over that flow. They can then convert the claim into legitimacy for territorial advance, gaining both material leverage over the gateway and justificatory language for taking it. When these come together at the same site, the seizure of a checkpoint reorders who governs passage, who collects from it and what the gateway means for the surrounding political economy. The territorial assemblage of armed protection, brokered economy and infrastructure then recomposes around the new controller.

Whether such convergence happens depends on local political conditions, and the more common outcome is disruption without reordering – such as raids, relocations or brokered concessions, that raise costs without shifting who governs the gateway. The two cases that follow share the same starting condition: asymmetric checkpoint regimes across the China–Myanmar and Thai–Myanmar borderlands, with the digital scam economy as the central illicit industry tying these regimes together. In Kokang, anti-scam pressure from China, MNDAA territorial claims, and the political legitimacy that anti-scam framing offered converged on key gateways in late 2023, producing a partial reordering of the China-facing corridor. In Myawaddy, the same elements did not align. Thai enforcement worked through different instruments, the anti-scam credibility of the Karen National Union (KNU) was constrained by its commercial entanglements with compound operators, and the Border Guard Forces (BGFs)/Karen National Army (KNA) remained territorially embedded in the gateway. The comparison turns on this divergence.

Table 1. Checkpoints as flow filters and political instruments

Checkpoint regime	Main authority	Main flows governed	Political use
State-to-state border gates	Neighbouring states, border agencies, authorised armed or state-linked actors	Cross-border trade, formal passage, returnees, deportations, diplomatic handovers	Regulates international passage; turns enforcement into diplomatic signalling; may become a target of territorial reordering
Internal state checkpoints	State authorities inside national territory	Citizens, migrants, vehicles, documents, selected goods	Extends border control inward; disciplines mobility before the border; creates pressure that can displace illicit activity outward
Armed internal checkpoints	EAOs, BGFs, militias, local commanders, brokers	Labour, supplies, vehicles, cash, devices, escape and relocation routes	Extracts revenue; protects compounds and routes; converts control over passage into military, economic and bargaining power

Source: Author.

SCAM CENTRES AS CHECKPOINTED DIGITAL-TERRITORIAL ECONOMIES

The online scam economy as a reconfiguration of borderland illicit economy

The online scam economy is the latest reconfiguration of an older borderland illicit economy in Myanmar. The contested borderlands of Shan and Karen States have long operated as an extractive frontier in which armed actors derive revenue and political leverage from cross-border commerce, brokered passage and territorial rule (Meehan, 2011; Woods, 2011; Meehan and Dan, 2023; Buchanan, 2024; Sarma, Faxon and Roberts, 2023). Successive forms of accumulation across these borderlands have rested on a common political logic: the conversion of armed protection, negotiated access to land and routes, border location, fragmented sovereignty, and selective control over movement into political and economic resources for armed actors.

This accumulation runs through Myanmar's longer pattern of contested armed politics. The country's borderlands have been shaped by decades of conflict among the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw), EAOs opposed to central rule – among them the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the MNDAA (Smith, 1999; Keenan, 2013; Thawngmung, 2008; Ong, 2020) – and a wider field of militias, Border Guard Forces (BGFs), and state-aligned paramilitary actors whose loyalties have shifted across periods and whose alignments cannot be reduced to a binary of pro- and anti-junta positions (Buchanan, 2016; Hu and Konrad, 2018; Peng, 2026). The Myanmar military helped build this configuration by using illicit economies to extend state authority at the frontier, while displacing the political and economic costs onto borderland populations. Scholarship on Myanmar's borderlands has captured this logic through concepts such as ceasefire capitalism (Woods, 2011), armed sovereignties (Woods, 2019) and brokered rule (Meehan and Dan, 2023), showing how political authority and capital accumulation are jointly produced through border infrastructures, armed protection and cross-border brokerage. This configuration shifts over time as armed groups, illicit economies and border conditions change in relation to one another. Armed actors adapt their strategies to changing political environments, while new illicit economies reshape what passage and protection mean at the border (Peng, 2024a; Naw, 2025).

The genealogy of borderland accumulation in Myanmar's contested borderlands, especially the China-facing side, runs through three overlapping phases. From the 1950s until the 1990s, the Cold War-era drug trade dominated illicit accumulation in Shan State, with EAOs and Ka Kwe Ye (KKY) (militias created by the Myanmar military to support the military state) depending on opium production, heroin refining and trafficking routes that linked the 'Golden Triangle' to markets in Hong Kong, mainland China, Thailand and beyond (Meehan, 2011; Buchanan, 2024; Peng, 2024a). The relatively porous border of this period combined loose state control on the Myanmar side with limited Chinese capacity to seal off Yunnan. This was both the condition and the consequence of these flows, and the Myanmar military used the KKY scheme and later co-option arrangements to extract from this trade rather than dismantle it (Lintner, 1994; Meehan, 2011; Priamarizki, 2020). A 2020 High People's Court ruling in Henan Province, China captures the infrastructural pattern that emerged: a Yunnan-based defendant had walked across the Ruili border that separates China from Myanmar to purchase methamphetamine, returned the next day and shipped the drugs to a buyer through domestic courier services while travelling separately by commercial aviation – a

tactic Chinese law enforcement calls ‘separating people from goods’ (High People’s Court of Henan Province, 2020). The same combination of informal cross-border movement with formal commercial logistics would later support the scam economy.

From roughly 2000 to 2020, the post-1989 ceasefires reorganised the borderland economy, as the MNDA, UWSA, National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and other groups in northern Shan negotiated autonomy in exchange for partial alignment with the Myanmar military. The casino industry in Kokang and Mong La grew under arrangements that combined militia governance, junta patronage and Chinese investment. Cross-border casino tourism depended on the porous-but-managed mobility of Chinese visitors and on the ceasefire-period institutional infrastructure of armed protection, brokered land access and tolerated transgression. EAO strategies during these decades shifted from primitive capital accumulation towards legitimacy-seeking through nominally legal cross-border ventures, while continuing to engage in drug trade and smuggling (Rippa and Saxer, 2016; Peng, 2024a). From 2020 onwards, Covid-19 border closures and intensified Chinese border controls disrupted cross-border flows on which both formal and informal economies depended. Casino tourism collapsed alongside the broader visitor economy, and armed groups pivoted towards online gambling and later towards online scam operations as a form of accumulation less reliant on the open movement of people and more reliant on enclosed compounds, captive labour and digital communications infrastructure (Franceschini, Li and Bo, 2023; 2025; Peng, 2024a, 2024b).

What distinguishes the scam economy from earlier configurations of borderland accumulation is the form this assemblage has taken. Earlier border economies centred on commodity production, frontier consumption or physically present visitors (for example, in opium leaving the production zone or gamblers entering the casino zone) and were organised around routes and transit points. Scam operations depend instead on digital infrastructure, remote management, multilingual workers and the selective control of movement across jurisdictions (UNODC, 2023, 2024). The online scam industry is more than fraud at scale, whether romance, investment or cryptocurrency scams; it is the political economy through which labour, commodities and capital are assembled into industrialised deception, organised through the recruitment, transfer, confinement and management of workers held to that purpose (Franceschini, Li and Bo, 2023, 2025; Jespersen et al., 2023; Peng, 2024a).

The compound is the operational unit: it concentrates labour, accommodation, telecommunications equipment and back-office functions within a perimeter that armed actors guard, monitor and control access to. The labour force is multilingual and largely foreign – drawn from China, Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Africa¹ and elsewhere – recruited through deception, debt-bondage and trafficking networks, and held under conditions ranging from contractual coercion to outright captivity (UNODC, 2023; 2024; Franceschini, Li and Bo, 2025). Operations require a continuous inflow of workers, food, fuel, electronic devices, networking equipment and cash, alongside outflows of fraudulent earnings through underground banking and cryptocurrency channels, while workers who escape, are released, or are repatriated pass through brokered exit

¹ Reported African victims and workers in Southeast Asian scam compounds include nationals from East African countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, as well as West African countries such as Nigeria. International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) notes that scam-centre trafficking now draws victims from multiple regions, while recent reporting has identified Ethiopian and Nigerian nationals among those rescued or repatriated from compounds in Myanmar and wider Southeast Asia (Interpol, 2025; The Guardian, 2025).

channels whose terms are set by armed protectors and neighbouring-state authorities (Ma and Chen, 2025; Peng, 2024a, 2024b).

Compound economies and the territorial politics of passage

The territorial reproduction of compound economies runs through the everyday politics of passage. Whether labour is held in place, supplies arrive on time, proceeds clear out before enforcement intensifies, and workers can be released or extracted under acceptable terms – all of this depends on who controls the passage points through which flows are sorted, taxed, redirected or refused (Schouten, 2022; Schouten et al., 2024). And because passage politics operates differently across jurisdictions, controllers and flow types, the same compound-based industry generates different political effects in different corridors.

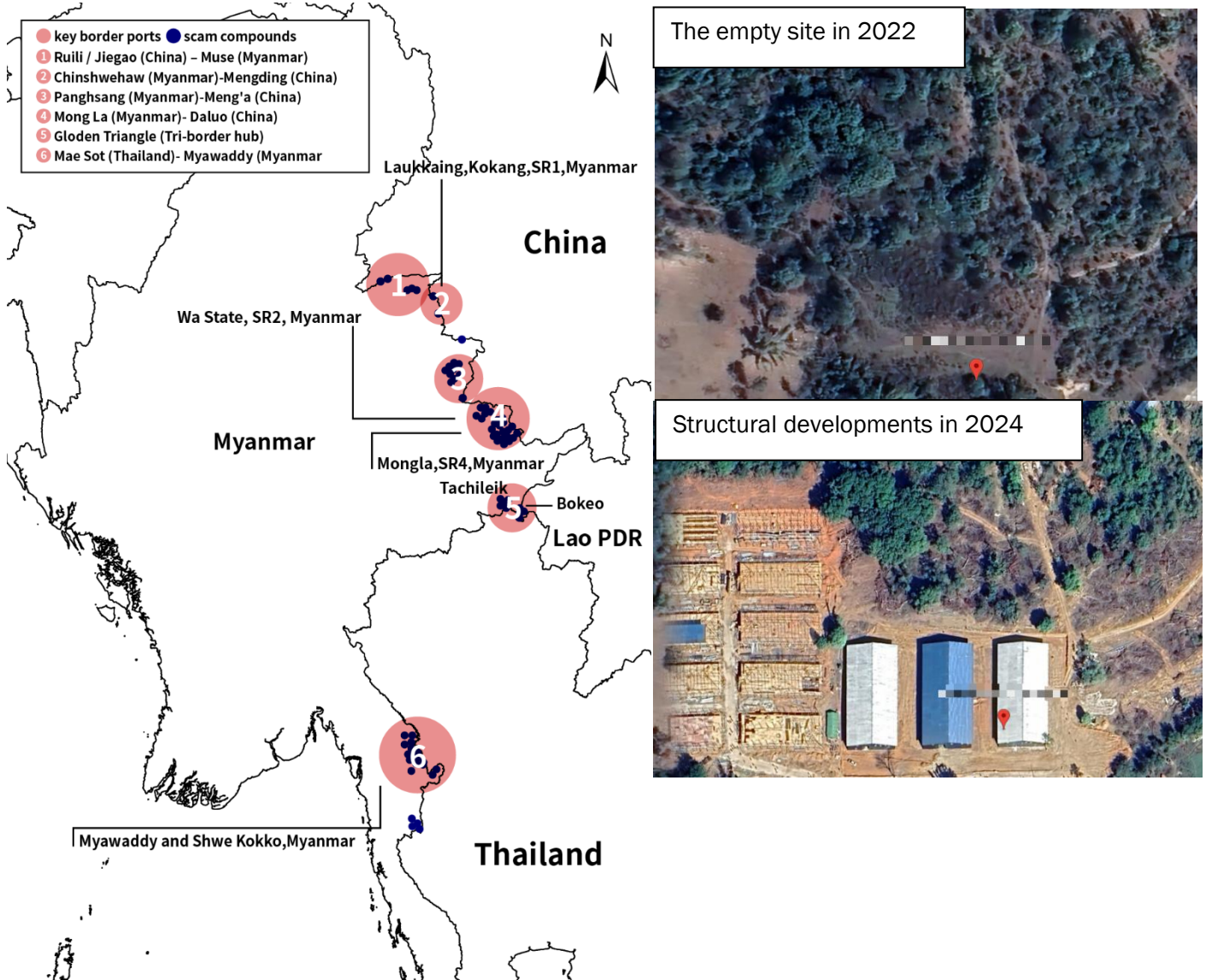
In Myanmar, scam compounds have clustered above all in two such configurations: the China-facing borderlands of northern Shan State, especially Kokang and Wa, and the Thailand-facing borderlands of Karen State, especially around the Myawaddy–Mae Sot crossing (see Figure 2). On the China-facing side, scam operations were concentrated around Laukkai, Kokang’s capital, where the BGF-dominated protection order that followed the 2009 Kokang conflict entrenched the so-called ‘Four Big Families’ until the MNDA’s return in 2023 (Peng, 2026),² and in Wa-controlled territories of northern Shan State. On the Thailand-facing side, compounds expanded along the Myawaddy–Mae Sot corridor under the Karen BGF, later renamed the Karen National Army (KNA). The largest of these compounds, the ‘Shwe Kokko’ complex, has been estimated to generate annual profits of US\$192 million, divided between the Myanmar military and the Karen BGF (Tower and Clapp, 2024).

Under enforcement pressure, the industry redistributes rather than dismantles (see Figure 2), with compounds, workers and supply lines moved from one armed-controlled territory to another, using the same uneven checkpoint geographies that first enabled their concentration (Peng, 2025; Schouten et al., 2026). Scam-centre operators also shape these possibilities of passage: through protection payments, collusion with armed and military-linked authorities, and brokered arrangements with local power holders, they secure advance warnings, organise transfers and keep selected routes open under pressure. What kinds of relocation become possible, what kinds are foreclosed and what political opportunities emerge for armed actors when passage is reworked, all depend on how the checkpoint regimes across the two corridors operate.

This working paper identifies three types of checkpoint regime that the case studies examine: state-to-state border gates, internal state checkpoints and armed internal checkpoints. The cases trace how these regimes interacted across the China–Myanmar and Thai–Myanmar corridors between 2020 and 2025.

² The BGF and the illicit activities in Kokang were predominantly overseen by a group of local crime families, most notably the Bai, Wei, two Liu and Ming families, led respectively by Bai Suocheng, Wei Chaoren, Liu Guoxi, Liu Zhengxiang and Ming Xuechang, all of whom were Kokang natives. (Note: Some sources refer to a core ‘four families’ excluding the Ming family, but subsequent crackdowns have identified all five.)

Figure 2. Scam hubs and major border ports in China–Myanmar–Thailand



Source: The map on the left was prepared by Xu Peng, combining UNODC mapping of reported scam-compound locations with the author’s compilation of major border trading ports and passage nodes. The pink numbered circles indicate key border ports or cross-border hubs; the blue dots indicate reported scam-compound locations. Locations are approximate and are used to illustrate spatial clustering rather than to provide a comprehensive inventory of all scam operations. The images on the right were prepared by Xu Peng using Google Earth satellite imagery. Locations were identified by victims. These images show the change in scam hub distribution between 2022 (top image) and 2024 (bottom image). At this site in Tanyan in northern Shan State, new scam hubs have moved from contested borderlands to further into the state by 2024.

CASE I. CHINA–MYANMAR BORDERLANDS: DIFFERENTIAL FILTERING, REVENUE DISPLACEMENT AND THE KOKANG GATEWAY REORDERING, 2020–2024

This case examines how checkpoint regimes in the China–Myanmar borderlands became active sites of political and economic contestation between 2020 and 2024. First, pandemic-era securitisation in Yunnan moved border control inward, away from the formal international line and into county-level administrative spaces especially those border townships on the China side. This produced an ‘internalised borderland’ where access to the frontier was filtered through passes, inspections, registration and delay before the border itself was reached. Second, this filtering worked unevenly: ordinary cross-border movement, casino-style visitor mobility and informal labour circulation became harder, while selected commodity routes, supplies, devices and digital coordination remained workable through brokered channels. This selective permeability displaced revenue from older border businesses and made compound-based scam operations more viable on the Myanmar side. Third, by the time of ‘Operation 1027’ in late 2023, checkpoint control became a political stake. The contest over Chinshwehaw, Laukkai, and the corridor extending into Lashio was not only a struggle over territorial control, but also over the authority to regulate passage, capture gateway revenues, manage return channels and turn anti-scam claims into bargaining leverage vis-à-vis both Naypyidaw and Beijing.

Filtering people before the border: Yunnan’s internalised checkpoint regime, 2020–2022

By mid-2020, the pandemic-era checkpoint regime along the China–Myanmar border was producing a directional asymmetry in mobility (Ong, 2020; Grundy-Warr and Lin, 2020); informal exit could still occur, while formal return had become increasingly difficult. A criminal case later heard by the Anhui High People’s Court in China makes this asymmetry visible.

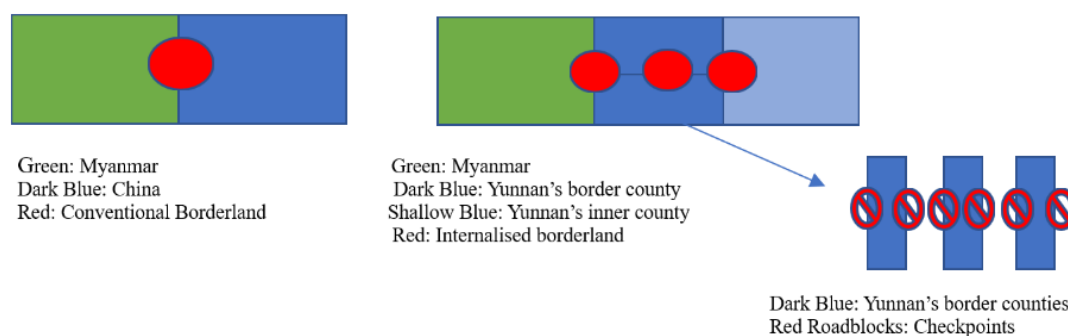
In June 2020, a 19-year-old man from China crossed the China–Myanmar border through an informal route, an act later treated by the court as illegal border crossing, and entered the Flying Dragon Studio (飞龙工作室), a money-laundering operation in Laukkai, Kokang, servicing online scam syndicates on the Myanmar side. Accounts under his control moved more than RMB 331 million in defrauded funds. He was later arrested and sentenced to eight years’ imprisonment. At trial, his defence counsel argued that he had been ‘lured into Myanmar’, ‘unlawfully detained for over a month’, and had joined the operation because return to China was impossible. The court rejected these claims as a defence against conviction, while leaving largely uncontested the underlying account of recruitment, confinement and blocked return (High People’s Court of Anhui Province, 2023).³

This case shows how differentiated checkpoint operation appeared from the position of a young worker caught inside the scam economy: leaving China through informal routes remained possible, but return was narrowed into a high-friction process. This gap between exit and return became one condition through which compound-based operations could retain labour on the Myanmar side.

³ Prolonged enclosure, being held in place for months, unable to return, while continuing to be involved in scam industries, lends itself to two opposing legal readings: as evidence of coercion that attenuates subjective intent, or as evidence of sustained embeddedness that consolidates it (Interview with a lawyer defending scam suspects, Kunming, China, April 2025).

On the Chinese side of the border, this tightening had a specific administrative and spatial architecture. Fieldwork in Yunnan border counties between 2021 and 2022, including in Zhenkang, Gengma, Cangyuan, Lancang, Ximeng and Menglian, shows how pandemic-era securitisation moved border control inward. It operated not only at formal state-to-state crossings, but also through entry-and-exit passes, internal checkpoints and county-level approval systems that filtered access to the frontier before travellers reached the international border (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. The spatialities of the conventional borderland, the internalised borderland and the inner border checkpoints during the Covid pandemic



Source: Figure prepared by Xu Peng, based on the author's conceptualisation of the internalised borderland and field observations of Covid-era border controls in Yunnan's China–Myanmar border counties.

A distinctive mechanism of this internalisation was the entry and exit pass system. County governments required documentary justification for movement into or out of border counties, with passes carrying multiple stamps from different authorities. Work-related travel typically required authorisations from the county committee, the employer and the county's Covid Emergency Headquarters; personal travel, including family visits, commonly required a longer chain of approvals, extending down to village committees and community-level governance units (see Figure 4). The political effect was not simply expanded surveillance, but a redistribution of the authority to deny passage. Village committees and grassroots cadres became authorised to judge whether a given trip was 'necessary', and passage depended on the willingness of low-level officials to sign and stamp. The filter was therefore no longer located only at the international border. It had been dispersed across Yunnan's administrative hierarchy.

Figure 4. Heavily securitised mobile control of internalised checkpoints before entering Yunnan border counties bordering with northern Myanmar

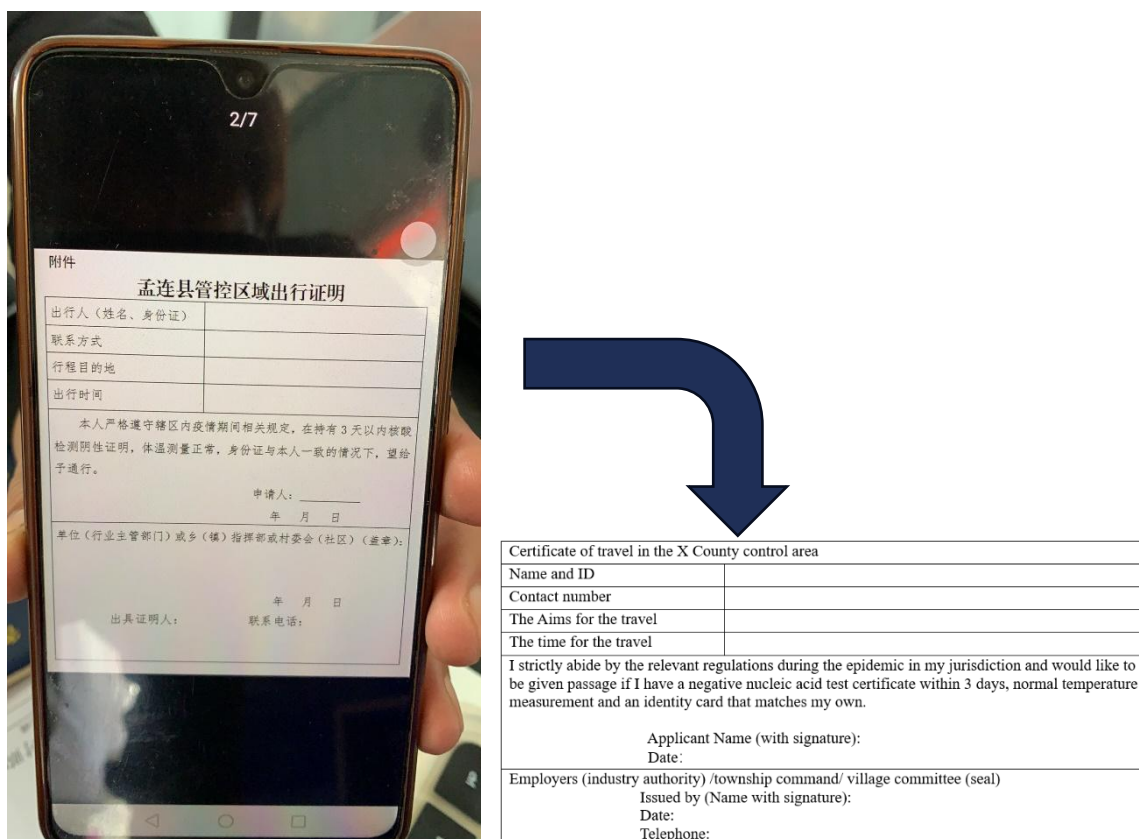


Source: Photos by author (2021–2022).

The discretion built into the pass system was uneven across Yunnan and intensified as travellers moved towards the frontier. On the route from Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, through Pu'er and into the border counties, each county required additional stamps and shorter Covid-test validity windows. Entering Zhenkang, one of the most frontier-facing counties, required a test taken within the previous 24 hours; less proximate counties accepted results from 48 to 72 hours. Restrictiveness was therefore spatially graduated. It became strongest near the international line, even though the line itself was no longer the only site of control. Within this layered system, the stamp thus functioned not only as a health document but as a way of moving accountability downwards onto frontline officers while concentrating refusal at the checkpoint encounter (see Figure 5). As one officer at Lancang–Menglian crossing explained,⁴ rising case numbers led to 'more stamps', and frontline staff were not always confident that they possessed the latest documentation rules, resulting in repeated returns to obtain 'another stamp' as a form of 'insurance'. Refusal at the checkpoint was therefore built into the system's variability. Shifting rules across counties, time periods and risk categories created repeated openings for officers to deny passage without breaching protocol.

⁴ Interview with border patrol officers in November 2021, Lancang, Yunnan, China.

Figure 5. A standard template of the borderland county's entry and exit pass and its translation in Yunnan



Source: Photo by author (2021–2022); translation by author.

This layered filter operated unevenly across different flows. The movement of people was restricted sharply while the movement of certain goods was not. Border trade continued under the official principle of *ren-huo fenli, fenduan yunshu, fengbi guanli*: separating people from goods, segmenting transport and enforcing closed management. Chinese state media confirmed the design: although passenger movement through Yunnan's border ports declined sharply in early 2020 as China, Myanmar, Vietnam and other states imposed entry restrictions, border trade itself had not stopped (China News Service, 2020). Fieldwork in Menglian in April 2025 with the local border trading company confirmed this history and described unusually high demand during the pandemic for basic supplies – food, medicine, generators, construction materials and connectivity equipment – moving from Yunnan into Wa State and other autonomous zones on the Myanmar side through formal trade channels, intermediary brokerage and occasional smuggling. This was not merely a residual continuation of pre-pandemic trade; instead, it was tied to provisioning needs in the autonomous zones in Myanmar, including supply chains on which compound-based scam operations were beginning to depend. The checkpoint regime, therefore, separated forms of circulation rather than closing the border as such; people were filtered sharply while tightly managed commodities flowed, including those that materially sustained the digital illicit economy across the border.

From selective permeability to revenue displacement: labour immobility, commodity passage and the expansion of scam compounds, 2020–2023

The internalised checkpoint regime described in the previous subsection produced effects beyond travel friction. By 2021–2022, border towns that had depended on routine circulation were increasingly immobilised. Ruili, the largest border city in Dehong Prefecture and a principal land trade gateway between China and northern Myanmar, experienced nine separate lockdowns with a cumulative urban lockdown duration of 160 days (Ma, 2022).⁵ Smaller frontier towns experienced similar containment through less visible bureaucratic forms. In Zhenkang, a county-level gateway facing Kokang, fieldwork between late 2021 and early 2022 found that in-restaurant dining had been suspended across the urban centre, with only takeaway service permitted on the grounds that gatherings in enclosed spaces posed a Covid risk. The town, normally a crossing point for traders, transport workers and casino-bound visitors travelling towards Laukkai, appeared unusually empty for extended periods. Border areas faced even harsher restrictions: entry and exit were strictly prohibited, and many villagers remained confined to their homes for over a year. After Jiegao (a border trade zone near to Muse in Myanmar) reopened for the second time, tens of thousands of Myanmar nationals were gradually persuaded by Chinese authorities to return across the border, further reducing the everyday circulation on which the China-side frontier economy had depended (Dingxiangyuan, 2022; Bloomberg News, 2022; Niu, 2026).

The economic effects of this were less a gradual decline than a compression of the borderland economy. Labour-intensive and place-bound businesses faced a mismatch between fixed costs and shrinking mobility, encouraging shifts towards activities requiring less physical presence and more remote coordination. Meanwhile, tighter restrictions on human mobility altered the cost structure of borderland exchange more broadly. Even where certain forms of commodity circulation continued, the reduced movement of people made transport, brokerage and everyday commercial coordination more expensive and uncertain, leading to an inflation surge (Hein Htoo Zan, 2024; Wardani and Myar, 2022).

The same checkpoint regime reshaped the options of Chinese nationals already on the Myanmar side. Anti-scam ‘homecoming’ campaigns operated through the quarantine-bottlenecked return channels (Qin et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2024; Yu and Cheng, 2021). The Mong A’ crossing, for example, had limited daily capacity tied to quarantine bed availability on the Chinese side, with only around 150 to 200 returnees processed per day,⁶ while travellers faced both financial costs and uncertainty about securing a place (see Figure 6). By March 2022, 43,786 returnees from Myanmar had reportedly been reviewed, among whom 10,589 had crossed informally and around 70 per cent were identified as having gone to engage in scam operations (Guyu Lab, 2023). Chinese Ministry of Public Security figures reported that, between April 2021 and July 2022, 230,000 people involved in fraud overseas had been persuaded to return (CCTV News, 2022). These figures show that return was significant, but they do not mean that return ended the labour pipeline. A senior Yunnan counter-fraud officer interviewed by Tencent News observed that ‘young people, even after being persuaded to return to China, would go back to Myanmar again, falling into a constant cycle’; he described buying one returnee an air ticket home, only to learn that the man had found another route back

⁵ One media account described the reopening of the Ruili–Myanmar border gate on 8 January 2023 as the resumption of customs clearance after 1,012 days of closure (Ning, 2023).

⁶ Due to the limit of the daily crossing, interviews with border patrol officers, December 2025, Menglian, Yunnan, China.

across the border soon afterwards (Guyu Lab, 2023). Anti-scam interception and return therefore became, for some workers, one stage in a checkpointed labour circuit rather than a definitive exit from it.

Selective permeability changed the conditions under which compound-based scam operations could remain viable. The preceding paragraphs have shown two linked effects: workers and returnees faced narrowed routes out, while selected provisioning routes continued to operate. An interview with a border trading company revealed that there had been an unusually high demand during the Covid period for basic supplies from Yunnan to Wa State, Myanmar, which appears to have supported the operation of scam centres. The smuggling of SIM cards is another example. In one 2023 case at Daluo port on the China–Myanmar border, customs officers intercepted 46 boxes of undeclared mobile SIM cards, totalling 11,500 cards, hidden in an export vehicle declared as carrying bottled water (Beijing Daily, 2023; China Daily, 2025). This uneven arrangement connects the pandemic-era checkpoint regime to the Kokang analysis that follows, where control over Chinshwehaw, Laukkai and the road towards Lashio became a struggle over who could filter labour, supplies, returnees and anti-scam claims.

Figure 6. Covid quarantine camp in Menglian border



Source: Photo by author (2021).

Reordering the gateway: Kokang's BGF order, MNDAA return and anti-scam politics of passage, 2009–2024

Previous sections traced how the internalised checkpoint regime filtered persons sharply while accommodating flows, and how this differential filtering reorganised the labour and supply conditions on which compound operations on the Myanmar side could draw. Why the political contest over checkpoints then intensified in Kokang, and at the moment it did, requires turning to the longer historical pattern in which the region is embedded. Kokang's illicit economies have moved through several phases: opium under the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in the 1970s and 1980s, heroin and methamphetamine through the 1990s, casino-led accumulation from the early 2000s

(Kim, 2020; Lintner, 2000; Nanda, 2020) and online scam compounds from the late 2010s. They have however been organised through the same political infrastructure: cross-border protection arrangements with Yunnan-side authorities, rent extraction tied to control over a small number of passage points, and the conversion of illicit revenue into territorial authority and external recognition (Peng, 2024a; 2026). What is distinctive about the current moment is not the digital character of the economy as such, but the way the post-Covid checkpoint regime turned this existing infrastructure into something armed actors fought to capture.

Kokang's significance in Myanmar's borderland politics stems first from its geography. Although territorially small, it borders Yunnan Province and sits on a corridor linking China to Laukkai, and beyond that, to the inland routes to northern Shan State towards Lashio to Mandalay, and Myanmar's wider transport corridor (Hu and Konrad, 2018). This geography made Kokang the site of the Myanmar military's first major experiment with the BGF scheme, which aimed to co-opt pre-existing armed groups in contested border regions and fold them into a state-aligned security order. Rather than dismantling these forces altogether, the military sought to place them under a pro-state framework while allowing them to retain arms, territorial influence and access to local revenue (Buchanan, 2016; Priamarizki, 2020). In Kokang, this logic was applied against the MNDAA, which had governed Kokang since the collapse of the CPB in 1989 and was one of the earliest ceasefire armed groups in Myanmar's borderlands. In 2009, after escalating tensions with the MNDAA, the Myanmar military displaced its leadership and installed a breakaway faction as the Kokang BGF. The result was a form of co-opted border governance in which militia authority, state patronage and checkpoint control were combined to manage movement and extract revenue from the border corridor (Buchanan, 2016).

This earlier settlement shaped the spatial disposition of the MNDAA for over a decade. Following the 2009 displacement, the MNDAA never succeeded in regaining territorial control. A series of MNDAA offensives between 2015 and 2018 to retake Kokang failed, and the MNDAA was pushed back into peripheral zones. In the years that followed, it relied in part on support from the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) in Mong La, another ceasefire-based armed authority in Shan State Special Region 4 with close cross-border links to China (Rippa and Saxer, 2016; Peng, 2026).⁷ Interviews conducted in 2018⁸ indicated that the MNDAA maintained a presence in remote rural and mountainous areas within Kokang's hinterlands. This spatial separation is important because it defined the strategic problem the MNDAA later faced: any return to urban Kokang required not only territorial advance, but the recovery of the checkpointed gateway system linking China-facing border gates to Laukkai and the inland routes beyond.

The tension centred on Beijing's growing concern with border stability and the existence of two competing Kokang orders.⁹ The MNDAA had attempted to retake Kokang's urban areas in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018, and each attempt had failed. By 2020, the Kokang BGF had become increasingly exposed through its association with the scam

⁷ MNDAA soldiers undertook military training and engaged in agricultural activities around Mong La, the NDAA's capital in Shan State Special Region 4. The personal connection also mattered: The leader of the NDAA, Lin Mingxian (also called U Sai Lin in Burmese), was MNDAA leader Peng Jiasheng's son-in-law.

⁸ Interview with Kokang residents, Laukkai, Myanmar, 2018.

⁹ This was not the first time Kokang had supported dual orders. From the colonial period through the Cold War and after, Kokang has cycled through single-lineage chieftainship struggles, family-faction proxy wars and renewed family-based factional conflict (Peng, 2026).

industry operating in Laukkai. The rising number of Chinese victim cases had begun to register as a domestic security concern in Beijing — one that the Kokang BGF's leadership was unable or unwilling to address. The MNDAA, peripheralised since 2009 and operating from rural Kokang and Mong La, found itself better aligned with Beijing's anti-scam priorities (Peng, 2023; 2026).

When the Three Brotherhood Alliance launched Operation 1027 in October 2023, the MNDAA's framing of the offensive made the convergence explicit. On the same day, the MNDAA issued its own Statement to the Nation (《告全国人民书》), declaring two interlinked objectives: to strike at the 'telecom-fraud militias' (电诈民团) and to 'recover' the First Special Region of Shan State — that is, Kokang itself. The statement further announced that, from 6.00 am that morning, the Lashio–Muse and Lashio–Chinshwehaw highway sections would be placed under round-the-clock martial law, with all vehicular movement prohibited, and that a full mobilisation order had been issued across MNDAA forces (MNDAA, 2023). The Three Brotherhood Alliance statement issued the same day used the same framing in slightly broader terms, naming as targets both the SAC (the State Administration Council, set up by the military junta post-2021 to run the functions of the state) and 'its associated militia groups, that have been involved in [online gambling fraud] operations' (Three Brotherhood Alliance, 2023).

The result of Operation 1027 was decisive. The Three Brotherhood Alliance successfully seized strategic passage points; Chinshwehaw and Lashio were the decisive captures: Chinshwehaw, the main gateway connecting China-facing circulation to Kokang's urban heartland, and Lashio, the main inland hub linking Kokang to the broader northern Shan State and the highways to Mandalay. The fiscal stakes were significant. Chinshwehaw and Muse together accounted for around 91 per cent of recorded China–Myanmar border trade, with combined daily cross-border value estimated at US\$8.91 million (ISP-Myanmar, 2023). Four months after the offensive began, the MNDAA reopened the Chinshwehaw border trade post under a reported 70/30 tax-sharing arrangement favouring the MNDAA over the junta and resumed an average of 200 trucks per day crossing into Yunnan (Shan Herald Agency for News, 2024; 2026).

The political meaning of the BGF's loss follows directly from this. Kokang's pro-military militia order had long served as a mechanism through which the junta could claim a degree of frontier control without directly governing the everyday complexities of the border. It provided a delegated system for securing strategic access towards China and managing the economic interface of the frontier. When that order was displaced, the junta did not merely lose 'territory'; it lost a particular form of frontier governance capacity through which it had governed passage, extracted revenue and projected influence along a sensitive China-facing corridor. More than a change in who held the checkpoint, the loss of Kokang marked a wider rupture in Myanmar's conflict dynamics: the breakdown of the junta's attempt to stabilise contested borderlands through militia-based proxy rule.

The relationship between the checkpoint regime and the conflict it filtered ran in both directions. The pandemic-era controls that had shaped the labour and supply conditions for compound expansion became, by late 2023, part of the infrastructure through which an anti-scam offensive could be coordinated, repatriation staged and a competing claim to govern the China-facing corridor advanced. But the offensive then fed back into the regime that had enabled it. Measures that had first been introduced as exceptional

responses to a public-health emergency were carried forward under a new securitisation tied to anti-scam enforcement and the policing of the digital illicit economy. The checkpoint apparatus along the China–Myanmar borderland did not disappear as the pandemic receded. It was preserved and redirected towards a new political purpose. A system that had initially regulated the movement of people and goods became a means through which armed actors and the Chinese state assessed, endorsed or rejected claims to control passage. In Kokang, Operation 1027 was therefore both an outcome of the checkpoint regime built between 2020 and 2023 and a force that consolidated it further. Ultimately, the checkpoint did not merely shape conflict from the outside; it became something that conflict reproduced and intensified from within (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. High fences were not dismantled even after the Covid pandemic in the China–Myanmar borderlands



Source: Photos by author (2025).

The Kokang case presented above demonstrates the conditions in which checkpoint regimes can be reordered, rather than disrupted or displaced. Three main elements converged between October 2023 (especially following ‘Operation 1027’) and early 2024. The first of these is an alignment of anti-scam discourse: increased pressure from the Chinese government following rising cases of Chinese victims had elevated the threat of the scam activities to a security concern that the Kokang BGF was unable or unwilling to address, while the aims of the MNDAA began to align more clearly with Beijing’s priorities. The second was armed strategic positioning: anti-scam framing provided the legitimacy during Operation 1027 for territorial gains and advancement by the MNDAA, reshaping their spatial reality, authority and bargaining power. The third was in neighbouring state coordination, with Chinese border controls and systems working in the same direction as the MNDAA’s advance and allowing the group to maintain command, especially in pandemic-related checks. When these three conditions converged, the result was not redirection or displacement but a transfer of command from the Kokang BGF to the MNDAA. The loss of territory by the Kokang BGF was also a loss of functional coordination authority.

CASE II. THAI-MYANMAR BORDERLANDS: MULTI-ACTOR ENFORCEMENT, PROTECTION-MEDIATED PASSAGE AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE MYAWADDY GATEWAY, 2024–2026

In the Kokang case presented above, changes in checkpoint control followed a major shift in territorial control that achieved a more sustained reordering of passage, with the MNDA taking on the controlling functions of checkpoint control. Despite similar conflict occurring between 2024 and 2026, however, the case of the Thai–Myanmar border did not see the same level of reordered control. Instead, the borderland area around the Moei River (see Figure 8) reveals a different configuration from the China–Myanmar borderlands. Scam compounds persisted here not because pressure was absent, but because checkpoint governance returned repeatedly to brokered control rather than durable exclusion.

Figure 8. Moei River (Myawaddy–Mae Sot border) and the First Thai–Myanmar Friendship Bridge between Myanmar and Thailand



Source: Photo by author, December 2025.

Myawaddy is a major border town in Karen State on the Thai–Myanmar border, directly opposite Mae Sot in Thailand’s Tak Province. As one of the most important crossings between Myanmar and Thailand, it links the frontier not only to Thai markets and transport routes, but also to inland corridors running through Karen State into the rest of Myanmar. Authority over the gateway has long been distributed across the BGFs, the Myanmar military and the KNU. By April 2024, this distribution made the gateway difficult to capture decisively and equally difficult to dismantle; when the KNLA seized

key junta positions in Myawaddy, including Battalion 275, the KNU announced plans to establish a civilian administration and pledged to suppress scam compounds. Limited evidence emerged of systematic dismantlement. The junta responded with reinforcements and sustained air and artillery strikes, sharply raising the costs of holding the urban gateway. Thousands of civilians fled towards Thailand, crossings over the Friendship Bridge were restricted, and the border zone became more difficult to govern. By late April of the same year, the KNU made a tactical withdrawal under combined military and cross-border pressures, and the Karen BGF facilitated the junta's re-entry into Battalion 275. Subsequent Thai enforcement – utility cuts, judicial action and screening at the border – disrupted compound operations and raised their costs. Scam compounds adapted through Starlink, relocation within the wider corridor and the selective exposure of some sites while others continued to operate.

In Kokang, control over key nodes shifted decisively, allowing a reordering of passage. In Myawaddy, control remained mediated by multiple actors whose repeated interventions did not align. The two subsections that follow set out how this gateway was structured before the pressure of 2024–2025 began, and how that structure absorbed the convergence of external enforcement without being reordered.

Holding the Myawaddy–Mae Sot gateway: militia-mediated passage control and the persistence of the BGF authority, 2010–2024

On the Myanmar side, authority over the Myawaddy gateway has long been shaped less by direct civilian state administration than by a combination of military command, state institutions and military-aligned Karen armed actors. The KNU, founded in 1947, is one of Myanmar's oldest EAOs, and for decades maintained political and administrative structures in areas under its influence, often operating alongside or in competition with Myanmar state administration (Thawngmung, 2008). Over time, internal divisions, Buddhist–Christian tensions and military pressure from the Myanmar military led to its fragmentation. In 2009–2010, the Myanmar military's BGF programme sought to incorporate former ceasefire organisations and militia units into Tatmadaw-linked battalion structures, while allowing local commanders to retain considerable influence over arms, territory and revenue-generating activities. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a KNU breakaway faction, split over this arrangement: major DKBA factions, including the Saw Chit Thu-led faction, accepted incorporation into the Karen BGF, while other DKBA elements refused or later operated separately. Saw Chit Thu subsequently became a pivotal militia broker in and around Myawaddy, particularly in relation to border trade, local security provision, Shwe Kokko and scam-linked business zones (Watanabe, 2024; Keenan, 2013; South, 2011). The Karen BGF announced its rebranding as the Karen National Army (KNA) in 2024.

By late 2024, the old Myawaddy–Kawkareik road had become increasingly checkpointed, with more than fifty checkpoints reportedly operated by a range of actors, including junta forces, the KNU/KNLA, the BGF/KNA, the KNU/KNLA-PC, the DKBA and other resistance groups (Independent Mon News Agency, 2024). Within this fragmented checkpoint landscape, the BGF/KNA retained particular importance because of its role in securing Myawaddy town, the border trade zones and the bridge areas linking Myanmar to Thailand. After the April 2024 escalation and the KNLA-led forces' temporary withdrawal from Myawaddy, BGF/KNA units moved to fill the security vacuum in the town. Local reports estimated that around 1,000 BGF troops were present in Myawaddy, with Saw Chit Thu's unit conducting daily patrols with around thirty vehicles.

Although the junta continued to oversee border economy and administration, the BGF/KNA supervised town security and law enforcement and maintained a security presence around the border bridges, including the Second Friendship Bridge, where control was reported to be shared with junta forces (Karen News, 2024; Independent Mon News Agency, 2024).

Scam compounds thus expanded within this protection order. Shwe Kokko, for example, began construction in 2017 as a joint venture between Yatai International Holdings Group (a Chinese firm) and the Karen BGF, with the BGF taking a 20 per cent stake (Zaw, 2025; Justice for Myanmar, 2024). By 2024, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) estimated annual profits from Shwe Kokko alone at US\$192 million, split equally between the Myanmar military and the Karen BGF (Tower and Clapp, 2024). In May 2025, the US Treasury designated the KNA as a transnational criminal organisation and sanctioned Saw Chit Thu and his two sons for facilitating cyber scams, human trafficking and cross-border smuggling, and announced further sanctions against the KNA in September 2025 (US Department of the Treasury, 2025; US Department of State, 2025).

Pressuring the Myawaddy–Mae Sot gateway: fragmented enforcement and the limits of passage reordering, 2024–2026

The gateway order described above came under sustained pressure from 2024 onwards. The EU, the UK and the US successively targeted BGF/KNA leaders and the associated companies that they controlled through sanctions regimes (Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, 2023; Council of the European Union, 2024; US Department of the Treasury, 2025). Beijing intensified diplomatic pressure after the ‘Wang Xing’ trafficking case in January 2025.¹⁰ Thai authorities suspended electricity and fuel supplies through Thai intermediaries linked to scam compounds in February 2025, and Thailand’s Department of Special Investigation (DSI) moved to issue arrest warrants for senior figures connected to the gateway. Pressure on Myawaddy was therefore substantial, but it remained fragmented. Each instrument acted on a different part of the gateway system: sanctions targeted financial exposure, utility cuts targeted the infrastructures that powered the compounds, Thai controls filtered the movement of people across the Friendship Bridge, Chinese diplomacy raised the political cost of visible inaction, and publicised raids addressed the reputational profile of the scam economy. These interventions filtered different flows and vulnerabilities, but they did not combine into a coordinated system capable of displacing the armed authority that held the gateway.

Across the very period in which external pressure was increasing, satellite imagery analysed by Justice for Myanmar showed that more than 20 new structures were built within KK Park 1 and KK Park 2 (both part of the larger ‘KK Park’ scam centre compound in Myawaddy in Myanmar, on the Thai border) between February and December 2024, with further land cleared for additional construction (Justice for Myanmar, 2024). Satellite imagery analysed for this working paper also shows a similar

¹⁰ Wang, a Chinese influencer, was reportedly deceived through a fake film-production opportunity and trafficked into scam compounds along the Myanmar–Thailand border in early 2025. His disappearance gained wide public attention after his girlfriend mobilised online and celebrity networks in China, prompting senior Chinese police engagement in Myanmar and Thailand, leading to his release within days. The case subsequently intensified Chinese pressure on enforcement efforts (Tower, 2025).

pattern, both in the expansion of the transport infrastructure (see Figure 9, showing shipping points) and the scale of the scam compounds (see, for example, Figure 10).

Figure 9. Shipping points on the Moei River between Thai–Myanmar (near Shwe Kokko), from 16 September 2018, 7 February 2022, 25 April 2025 and 10 January 2026



The four images show the same Moei River crossing area near Shwe Kokko on 16 September 2018, 7 February 2022, 25 April 2025 and 10 January 2026. Across these dates, the site shows the persistence and gradual adaptation of small-scale river logistics infrastructure, including riverbank landing points, dirt access roads, nearby storage or compound-like structures, and connections to road networks on both sides of the Thai–Myanmar border. The figure illustrates how informal river passage points close to Shwe Kokko remained available across changing enforcement and conflict conditions.

Source: Satellite images © Vantor 2026

Figure 10. KK Park satellite image from 2022 to 2025 (left to right: 1 Jan 2022, 14 Oct 2022, 25 Jan 2023, 17 Jan 2024 and 25 April 2025)



Source: Satellite images © Vantor 2026

Compared to China–Myanmar borderland controls, the Thai enforcement illustrates the jurisdictional limit of this pressure. When fighting intensified in April 2024, the Thai foreign minister announced preparations to receive up to 100,000 refugees; more than 4,000 Myanmar nationals attempted to cross the Friendship Bridge, and approximately 650 were returned once fighting subsided (Strangio, 2024; Fortify Rights, 2024). Thai enforcement was not evenly distributed across the border itself. The international boundary along the Moei River was, in practice, lightly screened: Thai border patrol officers interviewed in December 2025 indicated that available personnel were insufficient to monitor the river along its full length, and informal crossings continued at multiple points throughout the period (see Figure 11). While additional screening did

exist and operate inland from Mae Sot, foreign passport holders could be questioned about the purpose of travel and onward arrangements, including whether pick-up or onward transport had been facilitated by Thai nationals. Reports from informants with experience visiting these routes multiple times suggest that this inland screening only intensified from 2025, after the Wang Xing case and the corresponding political pressure on Thai authorities.

Figure 11. Checkpoint near the KK Park (first picture) and the KK Park after the crackdown, showing a damaged building, December 2025



Source: Photos by Author, December 2025.

Compared with Kokang, where the MNDA directly challenged the Kokang BGF and the ‘Four Families’, the Myawaddy case involved a different configuration of armed contestation: the KNU/KNLA challenged a BGF/KNA-controlled gateway, but its pressure was constrained by weaker external alignment, compromised anti-scam credibility and limited military consolidation. Although the KNU Central Executive Committee issued a formal statement in February 2024 declaring its commitment to dismantling online scam operations in Karen State (KNU Central Executive Committee, 2024), its anti-scam framing was weakened by its prior involvement in the scam economy. Analysis published shortly before the April 2024 offensive indicated that KNU-owned companies had leased land to Chinese crime syndicates operating KK Park, with senior KNU figures named as signing witnesses (The Irrawaddy, 2024), which compromised the political force of the KNU/KNLA’s anti-scam position.

The junta and the BGF/KNA retained enough coercive capacity to keep the April 2024 offensive from reordering the gateway. By 23 April, under intensified military pressure and the threat of further airstrikes, the KNLA withdrew from positions it had taken, while the BGF/KNA facilitated the return of regime troops to Infantry Battalion 275 (Reuters, 2024; The Irrawaddy, 2024). Publicised raids on Shwe Kokko and KK Park later that year were framed as decisive action against scam hubs (Peck, 2025), but they were repeatedly accompanied by reports that compound operators had been notified in advance, that key figures were relocated before raids took place and that recruitment into new compounds increased after crackdown announcements (The Irrawaddy, 2025b; 2026). The continued discovery of large scam sites in militia-linked areas reinforced this pattern: in November 2025, KNU troops reportedly found another scam centre run by a junta-allied militia, suggesting that battlefield disruption and publicised

enforcement exposed and displaced parts of the scam economy rather than dismantling the protection arrangements that sustained it (The Irrawaddy, 2025a).

The contrast with Kokang turns on the relationship between filtering and command. In Kokang, anti-scam filtering became attached to a change in who commanded the passage system. The MNDAA's offensive shifted control over Laukkai, Chinshwehaw and the roads linking Kokang to Yunnan and inland Myanmar. Beijing's security concerns gave the anti-scam frame additional political force, while the collapse of the Kokang BGF order changed who could regulate return, revenue, supplies and recognition at the gateway. Filtering and command shifted together. In Myawaddy, filtering multiplied without producing the same transfer of command. Sanctions exposed BGF/KNA-linked financial networks, Thai controls shaped entry into Thailand, Chinese pressure raised the diplomatic cost of visible scam activity, and KNU/KNLA military pressure briefly challenged the control of Myawaddy town. These interventions reached the gateway from different institutional positions. They did not shift the actor able to hold together roads, bridges, compound security and everyday passage through the Myawaddy–Mae Sot corridor (see Figure 12; a regular checkpoint in a Thai village around KK Park, which shows none of the dramatic change seen in the case of Yunnan borders).

Myawaddy therefore clarifies the limit of checkpoint pressure under fragmented enforcement. Pressure altered the environment around the gateway, but did not reorganise the passage regime. The BGF/KNA remained the actor able to connect armed protection, access to the bridges, river crossings and the security arrangements around the compounds. Other actors could interrupt particular movements, raise costs or increase visibility, yet coordinating authority over passage remained in place. This is why the compounds could continue to expand even while sanctions named their leaders, Thai authorities cut their power and the KNLA controlled their surroundings. The gateway was pressured repeatedly, but the command structure that sustained it was not replaced.

Figure 12. A routine checkpoint in a Thai village adjacent to KK Park, showing little change compared to border checkpoints with Yunnan



Source: Photo by author.

This second case contrasts with Case Study 1. Instead of convergence, the Myawaddy case shows what happens when anti-scam pressure, military capacity and gateway control do not align. This was seen at several points. Firstly, weaker, fragmented enforcement by authorities on the Thai side of the border meant that movement was filtered, and utility cuts put pressure on infrastructure, while Chinese pressure following the Wang Xing incident increased political pressure, but no coherent transfer of coordination authority was seen, allowing the BGF to retain de facto control. Scam compounds reoriented and adapted to pressures like the utility pressures through the use of Starlink, for example, ensuring the ability to continue operating. The KNU's anti-scam claims were also weakened by its prior exposure to commercial entanglements around scam-linked activities, as well as by the KNLA's inability to hold territorial gains. The withdrawal of the KNLA ensured that the gateway was disturbed but not reordered. These actions affected different aspects of gateway control, without coalescing to force significant change.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how checkpoint regimes, conflict and digital illicit economies interact across two of Myanmar's borderlands, with particular attention to incumbent state and neighbouring-state efforts to limit or contain online scam centres. The comparison shows that these configurations are not isolated; they form part of a wider regional field in which enforcement pressure, armed control and scam relocation are shaped by uneven checkpoint regimes across neighbouring borderlands. At the centre of this process are checkpoints. They matter not only because they filter movement, but also because they allow armed and state-linked actors to govern passage, extract revenue and turn control over strategic gateways into wider political advantage.

The comparison between Kokang and Myawaddy shows this clearly. In the China–Myanmar case, the internalisation of checkpoint controls within Yunnan sharply restricted the mobility of people while allowing some commodity circulation to continue through narrower and more regulated channels. This did not produce a uniform border closure. Instead, it reordered the border economy by weakening activities that depended on routine human movement while leaving enough logistical circulation in place for digital illicit economies to expand. In this context, anti-scam enforcement became politically useful to the MNDAA, but only because it coincided with a wider territorial and military opportunity. Once it gained control over key gateways, anti-scam action was no longer simply a law-and-order claim; it became part of a territorial claim through which the MNDAA could pursue political return, disrupt the existing protection order and present itself to China as a force capable of restoring governability along a sensitive frontier. The Kokang case therefore does not suggest that armed actors everywhere can easily capitalise on anti-scam campaigns. Rather, it shows that campaigns against illicit economies can become political resources when enforcement pressure converges with an armed actor's capacity to seize or govern strategic passage points.

The Thai–Myanmar case produced a different outcome. In Myawaddy, scam compounds operated within a militia-mediated gateway order that was pressured and contested, but not displaced. Checkpoints still filtered movement unevenly, but they did so within a more fragmented and brokered system. The problem was not the absence of enforcement. It was instead that anti-scam interventions by Thai authorities on the Thai side, and military pressure from the KNU/KNLA on the Myanmar side, did not produce a Kokang-style seizure or reordering of gateway control. The BGF/KNA therefore retained de facto authority over the gateway, the routes feeding compounds and the channels through which released workers could be screened, held and removed. The border remained more open in everyday practice than the China-facing frontier, while Thai-side controls worked more through screening, temporary holding and repatriation management than through the deeply layered internal checkpoint regime seen in Yunnan. Under these conditions, raids and crackdowns raised costs and caused disruption, but they did not dismantle the protection order that sustained the scam economy. What persisted was not only the compounds themselves, but the checkpointed system of passage through which they remained viable.

The Kokang-Myawaddy contrast shows how anti-scam enforcement becomes politically consequential when it is absorbed into struggles over passage authority. In Kokang, the MNDAA's seizure of key passage points turned anti-scam claims into its territorial return movement and restored the order in a mutually reinforcing way. In Myawaddy, by

contrast, territorial contestation did not produce a comparable reordering of passage. Thai-side measures and KNU/KNLA pressure disrupted the scam economy, but the BGF/KNA retained de facto authority over the gateway. Pressure therefore disturbed routes, slowed movement and raised operational costs, while leaving the authority that organised passage largely intact.

The policy implication of this is clear: anti-scam enforcement should be understood as a problem of passage governance, rather than solely one of criminal suppression. Crackdowns may remove workers from particular compounds or interrupt specific operations, but their longer-term effect depends on whether they alter the arrangements through which compounds are supplied, protected, accessed and exited. Where those arrangements remain under the control of armed or militia-linked authorities, enforcement is more likely to displace activity than dismantle it.

The contrast between these two cases goes against two common framings. Scam economies cannot be explained through governance vacuums, but are organised through a dense but uneven field of control in which different actors govern different layers of movement for different purposes. Scam economies are also not deterritorialised through their digital activities – instead, they depend on the movement of goods and people, and are impacted by the physical reality at checkpoints. Checkpoints matter because they shape both the practical conditions of illicit economies and the political possibilities available to conflict actors. They affect whether labour can be confined or released, whether goods and communications can continue to move, whether repatriation can be organised, and whether anti-scam action can be converted into authority, bargaining leverage or claims to legitimacy.

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