

Research Article

# Designing Federalism in Myanmar: An Asymmetric and Ethno-Territorial Model

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**Abstract:** An asymmetric and ethno-territorial federal system represents a governance framework designed to manage entrenched conflicts within a single state. This model entails an uneven allocation of powers, granting certain constituent units' distinctive political structures and greater autonomy compared to others. It also aligns internal boundaries with ethnic settlement patterns and politico-military zones, aiming to mitigate ethnic tensions and accommodate secessionist claims. Myanmar, as a multi-ethnic country with complex geography and a prolonged history of civil war, provides a compelling context for examining the applicability of asymmetric and ethno-territorial federalism. This single-case study utilises qualitative research methods to investigate Myanmar within the framework of an asymmetric ethno-territorial model, while proposing strategies for the design of federal institutions. The findings indicate that three conditions render Myanmar conducive to this approach: 1) a geographically and ethnographically intricate configuration; 2) a historical trajectory, notably the formative period from British colonial rule to independence in January 1948; and 3) fragmented governance arising from an extended civil war, characterised by multiple politico-military domains. The study advocates the establishment of new federal institutions and the development of a revised political map. For instance, Shan State, as the largest ethnic minority state, could form a Tribal Assembly representing its diverse ethnic subgroups, while redrawn boundaries may be necessary in areas with complex ethnic compositions and overlapping military influence, including the Palaung, Wa, and Kokang autonomous regions. Furthermore, to enhance the broader applicability of the findings, Myanmar's federalisation model will be systematically compared with other countries through typological analysis.

**Keywords:** Designing Federalism, Asymmetric Federalism, Ethno-Territorial Federalism, Asymmetric Ethno-Territorial Model, Myanmar.

## 1. Introduction and Literature Review

Federalism fundamentally examines a hybrid governmental system in which authority is distributed between national and subnational levels [1; 2]. It concentrates on structuring governance to integrate geographic and demographic entities into a unified polity, ensuring balanced power-sharing between central and constituent units [3; 4]. The concept of federalism has produced various typologies across different dimensions. One classification addresses the distribution of powers among constituent units, distinguishing between symmetric and asymmetric federations [5].

Symmetric federalism describes a system in which all constituent states hold equivalent powers within the governing framework, promoting equality among the units (ibid, 861). Examples include the United States, Australia, and Brazil, where constituent units possess similar institutional designs and comparable authority. In contrast, asymmetric federalism grants unequal status to certain units, concentrating greater powers in regions dominated by specific ethnic groups or influential areas [6]. The primary focus of asymmetric federalism lies in recognition politics, seeking to mitigate or resolve ethno-nationalist disputes in multinational or deeply divided states [7; 8]. Canada, Russia, and India exemplify states with asymmetric federal structures. Based on demographic and geographic considerations, ethnic federalism allocates governing authority according to ethnographic features, granting major and minor ethnic groups distinct homelands with autonomous governance systems [9]. Examples include Belgium, Ethiopia, and Québec. Conversely, territorial federalism disperses concentrated ethnic populations across subnational units to emphasise geographic or regional identity, utilising boundaries to fragment homogeneous ethnic settlements [10]. Australia, Brazil, and Nigeria illustrate territorial federations.

Anderson [10] evaluates the merits and limitations of ethnic and territorial federalism, proposing ethno-territorial federalism as an integrative model. His analysis indicates that ethnic federations with fragmented homelands frequently fail, leading to state collapse or secession, as seen in post-communist Eurasian states (the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia) and parts of Africa (the East African Federation, Ethiopia-Eritrea). Territorial federalism, by contrast, can curb ethnic separatism and preserve state integrity by employing geographic boundaries to disperse

concentrated ethnic groups. Nigeria serves as an example, initially structured as a territorial federation with three geographic regions (North, West, and East). In societies with complex territorial-ethnographic structures, such as Northeast India and Québec, a hybrid approach combining ethnic and territorial principles can enhance conflict management. This model accommodates one or more territorially concentrated ethnic groups with dedicated homelands while distributing numerically dominant groups across multiple units [10]. Evidence suggests that this hybrid approach reduces failure rates relative to pure ethnic federalism and surpasses territorial federalism in managing ethnically divided societies. It provides a balanced framework for resolving protracted conflicts and addressing secessionist pressures.

Myanmar, characterised by ethnic diversity, complex geography, and a prolonged civil war, presents a valuable case for examining asymmetric ethno-territorial federalism. Situated in Southeast Asia, it faces geopolitical fault lines and ethno-nationalist tensions that necessitate a federalist solution [11; 12]. The nation is geographically divided by mountain ranges into the Central River Plains and hill frontier regions [13]. These fragmented regions are further subdivided into numerous autonomous territories inhabited by diverse ethnic groups, each with distinct languages, customs, and religions [14]. Historically, federalism has been a recurring feature of Myanmar's political development, particularly during British colonial administration and the state formation period from 1947 to 1948 [15]. The British established new administrative boundaries, consolidating multiple subregions into larger governance units. The Panglong Agreement of 12 February 1947, regarded as Myanmar's first federalist blueprint, was signed by General Aung San on behalf of the Interim Government and leaders of the Shan, Kachin, and Chin ethnic groups [16]. Subsequent civil conflicts have generated fragmented politico-military territories, controlled by the national military and various ethnic armed organisations, necessitating sophisticated ethno-territorial governance for conflict resolution.

This research analyses Myanmar through an asymmetric ethno-territorial lens and proposes strategies for federal institutional design. It identifies three critical conditions that favour such a model: 1) a complex geographic and ethnographic configuration; 2) a historical trajectory, particularly the period from British rule to independence in January 1948, which offers lessons on power distribution and territorial governance; and

3) fragmented governance resulting from prolonged civil war, featuring multiple politico-military domains that amplify ethnic and secessionist challenges. Collectively, these factors underscore the relevance of asymmetric principles and ethno-territorial arrangements for developing a viable federal system in Myanmar. This study proposes the establishment of new federal institutions and the development of a revised political map for Myanmar. An asymmetrical federal model is recommended, as certain constituent units face more complex ethno-territorial challenges than others. For instance, Shan State, which comprises multiple ethnic minorities and ongoing armed conflicts, could establish a Tribal Assembly representing political delegates from its diverse ethnic subgroups. In Myanmar's context, a hybrid of ethnic and territorial federalism is appropriate. Ethnic federal structures are suitable for areas containing distinct ethnic homelands, such as Shan State, parts of Kachin State, and the Sagaing Region. In contrast, regions predominantly inhabited by Burman populations should be subdivided into multiple territorial units based on geographic criteria. Moreover, in areas with intricate ethnic settlements and competing military presence, new boundary lines are required. Examples include the Palaung, Kokang, and Pa'O Self-Administered Zones (SAZs) in Shan State.

An asymmetrical ethno-territorial framework provides a promising model for federalism in Myanmar. According to *Designing Federalism in Burma* (2005), compiled by William and Sakhong, all Union of Myanmar member states should possess separate constitutions, individual State Legislative Assemblies, State Governments, and State Supreme Courts. The Union Assembly is envisioned as a bicameral body, comprising an upper Chamber of Nationalities and a lower Chamber of Deputies. [Breen \[17\]](#) applies historical institutionalism to examine federal trajectories in Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, identifying institutional designs capable of balancing centripetal and centrifugal forces. He illustrates how Myanmar and comparable Asian states are adopting deliberative political institutions that accommodate diverse ethnic groups, fostering greater political equality. Similarly, [South \[18\]](#) posits that federalism is instrumental in resolving enduring centre-periphery and state-society conflicts in Myanmar. He advocates for a post-coup federal democracy that recognises existing state governing structures, largely controlled by anti-coup ethnic and pro-democracy actors, and suggests a bottom-up approach empowering community-based ethnic organisations to inform the federal framework.

[Raynaud \[19\]](#) notes that Myanmar's ethnic armed groups currently administer proto-states, providing public services and governance independently from the central authority. He highlights that ethnic demands for federalism include asymmetric provisions, such as reserved territories and autonomous zones or divisions. The 2008 Constitution formally recognises five Self-Administered Zones and one Self-Administered Division for ethnic groups lacking full state status. According to [Wansai \[20\]](#), the creation of new constituent units is essential for establishing a federal democratic union, with Shan State as the primary administrative entity, followed by Kachin State and Sagaing Region. Within these areas, numerous ethnic subgroups maintain politico-military organisations, including Kokang, Pa'O, Palaung, and Wa in Shan State; Shan-Ni (Tai-leng) in Kachin State and parts of Sagaing Region; and Naga in Sagaing Region. Consequently, a revised political map is necessary for these three subnational units and potentially for the entire federation.

The reviewed literature provides valuable insights into federal design in Myanmar. However, existing studies do not fully address: 1) the specific characteristics of Myanmar that make it suitable for an asymmetric ethno-territorial model, and 2) the design options most likely to operationalise federalism within this model. This qualitative research fills these gaps by generating new knowledge on Myanmar's federal potential and proposing a practical prototype for constructing a future federal system.

## 2. Research Methods

Data for this study were collected through documentary research employing policy analysis techniques, utilising existing documents as the primary source for exploring and examining federalism in Myanmar. The sources encompass official government records, books, reports, scholarly articles, policy papers, newspapers, and relevant websites. These materials include theoretical frameworks of federalism and perspectives from various policy actors, including Myanmar government officials, political party representatives, ethnic armed organisations, foreign scholars, and local intellectuals with expertise or familiarity in the subject. Drawing on this evidence, the study provides recommendations for implementing asymmetric ethno-territorial federalism in Myanmar. This approach allows for analytical insights into governance challenges and the formulation of policy guidelines. The research adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating geography, history, ethnography, political science, and security studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of federalism development. According to [Bennett and Checkel \[21\]](#), within-case analysis relies on evidence derived from a specific temporal, spatial,

or thematic domain, defined as a case. This research constitutes a single-case study, treating Myanmar as a federalising state particularly suited for asymmetric ethno-territorial arrangements. In line with [Pepinsky \[22\]](#), empirical data from this country are employed to generate novel insights and advance knowledge in the field of federalism. While the study focuses on a single case, it is situated within a broader comparative framework. To enhance generalisability, Myanmar's experience will be systematically compared with other countries through typological analysis.

## 3. Research Results

### 3.1 Major Conditions for Designing Federalism in Myanmar

In developing Myanmar's federal system, key considerations include the nation's geographic and ethnographic configuration, the historical trajectory of modern state formation, and the fragmented politico-military territories resulting from the prolonged civil conflict.

### 3.2 Myanmar Geographic Ethnography

[Donnison \[23\]](#) observes that central Myanmar is dominated by the Ayeyarwady river system, including its principal tributary, the Chindwin, and the shorter Sittang River. Surrounding this central valley, a mountainous horseshoe extends to the west, north, and east, inhabited by hill communities such as the Kayans/Karens, Kayahs/Karennis, Kachins, and Chins, who differ from the Burmans in race, language, and religion. To the south, the rivers, having accumulated sediment along their courses, discharge into the delta at the Gulf of Martaban (Mottama). Beyond the western hills lies Rakhine/Arakan, a southern extension of the Chittagong coastal strip, home to Buddhist Rakhine/Arakanese and various Muslim communities. To the southeast of the main delta, plains framed by mountains separate Myanmar from Thailand, inhabited by Mon, Kayin, Kayah, Shan, and Burman populations [\[13\]](#).

Myanmar's geography can be classified into distinct subregions. The division between valleys and hills reflects a clear polarization in terrain elevations, relevant to the country's agroecology. Historically, the development of a central irrigated rice heartland functioned as a territorial nucleus for state formation, extending from lowland regions to the hill frontiers [\[24\]](#). Certain wet-rice zones, such as Minbu and Kyaukse in Upper Myanmar, have long been central to agricultural development and state-building [\[25\]](#). Anyar, the central plains of Upper Myanmar encompassing Sagaing, Magway, and Mandalay, is predominantly Burman. Following the 2021 coup, Anyar has emerged as a hub of popular resistance against the junta, with the People's Defence Force (PDF) seeking control over major waterways and transport routes, including the Shwebo Valley, a historic agricultural core on the Mu River basin [\[26\]](#).

Shifting cultivation, particularly slash-and-burn agriculture, remains a prominent practice in Myanmar's frontier regions. Hill communities differ from valley populations in religion and lifestyle, often following animist beliefs or Christianity in the twentieth century, whereas lowland populations are predominantly Buddhist or Muslim [\[27\]](#). [Scott \[24\]](#) classifies Myanmar's borderland mountainous massif into hill units: Kachin Hills, Chin Hills, and Shan Highlands. These areas historically resist domination from the lowland Burman central authorities. Hill societies employ strategies such as geographic dispersion, mobile cropping practices, preservation of ethnohistorical identity, and formation of ethnic military units integrated into wider alliance systems. By combining demographic settlement patterns with geography, Myanmar's ethno-territorial configuration can be divided into subareas:

In south-eastern Shan State, the Golden Triangle spans approximately 225,000 square kilometres, encompassing the Shan Hills of north-eastern Myanmar, northern Thailand's mountains, and the high plateau of Laos [\[28\]](#). Populations in this subregion are mainly Tai, Shan, and Lao, part of the Sino-Tibetan ethnolinguistic family. Numerous ethnic minorities of Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Burman origin, including Meo, Akha, Lisu, Lahu, and Chinese Haw immigrants from Yunnan Province, also reside here (ibid.). Historically, Wa lands along the Sino-Myanmar border in northern Shan State were self-governing. The Wa maintained armed autonomy with firearms, crossbows, and fortifications, engaging in trade with neighbouring groups such as the Shan, Lahu, Chinese, and Burmans. They are officially recognised in both Myanmar and China as ethnic minorities with political autonomy [\[29\]](#). The Palaung (Ta'ang) primarily inhabits northern Shan State, with concentrations in Namhsan, Namkham, and Mantong townships. This territory has been the centre of Palaung political struggle against the Myanmar government for five decades [\[30\]](#).

Kayah State is a mountainous region divided by the Thanlwin (Salween) River, flowing from Tibet to Mawlamyine (Molmein). Loikaw sits on a western plain. The population comprises multiple subgroups: Kayah, Kayaw, and Kayan (Padaung) reside in the west; Paku in the south; and Shan and Pa'O in the north [\[31\]](#). Historically, the five pre-colonial

fragmented Kayah states—Katarawadi, Kyenphogyi, Bawlake, Namekon, and Naun Pale—were divided into Eastern Karenni (Katarawadi) and Western Karenni (the remaining four) (ibid., 159). The Kayins are distributed across the Delta, Sittang Valley, and eastern hills, stretching from southern Shan State to Tavoy and Myeik. The main Kayin divisions are Pwo and Sgaw, sometimes referred to as Plain and Hill Karens. These subgroups are further differentiated by residence (hill, valley, urban, forest), religion (Christian, Buddhist, syncretic movements), and political alignment (armed struggle versus cooperation with Burmans) [32; 33].

The complex geographic-ethnographic features of Myanmar demonstrate the need for asymmetric ethno-territorial federalism. In states such as Shan, comprising multiple ethnic subgroups and hill territories, an asymmetric federalist structure is appropriate. Establishing subunit homelands in specific hill regions allows for autonomous governance, while central lowland Burman populations are distributed across multiple territorial units, reflecting Myanmar's unique ethno-territorial configuration.

### 3.3 History of Myanmar's Modern State Formation

The British colonial governance in Myanmar evolved through multiple phases, with administrative arrangements varying across regions. In 1826, Rakhine and Taninthayi were annexed by the British and initially placed under the direct authority of the Governor-General of India. Since Rakhine bordered Bengal, it was transferred under the jurisdiction of the Bengal presidency. By 1839, Taninthayi, being geographically separate from any Indian territory, was subject to the Bengal government for revenue and judicial matters, while overall administration remained under the Governor-General of India. Following the annexation of Lower Myanmar in 1852, colonial territories were managed by different commissioners: the Rakhine Commissioner remained under Bengal's oversight, the Bago Commissioner was administered by the Government of India, and Martaban came under the authority of a separate Commissioner [34].

The colonial administration was fully consolidated in 1885 when British forces captured Mandalay, the royal capital of Upper Myanmar, and extended control over all remaining territories by the following year. The British introduced additional administrative complexity by establishing two distinct governance systems: Myanmar Proper and the Frontier Areas Administration (FAA) [35]. According to Sakhong [36], the British implemented legal frameworks in each territory, such as the Kachin Hill Tribes Regulation of 1895 and the Chin Hills Regulations of 1896, applicable to present-day Kachin and Chin states and adjacent areas. Other legislative measures included the 1922 Act transforming Shan states into the Federated Shan State, as well as the Government of Burma Act 1935 and Burma Act II (1937), which applied to territories formerly under Burman kings, including the Mon and Rakhine/Arakanese kingdoms and the Kayin-inhabited delta [6].

Administrative arrangements within the FAA were complex, and British control over the frontier regions remained limited. The Wa community retained political isolation, and as late as 1940, the Naga hill region had no formal classification under British administration (Burma Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry, 1947 Report). The FAA brought together a variety of ethnic-nationality territories into a single administrative framework [35]. During British administration of Shan State, boundaries were adjusted to consolidate scattered units into larger administrative entities. In 1881, Shan State was divided into Northern Shan States, Southern Shan States, Myelat States, Myitkyina District, and Upper Chindwin District. Mong Mit State was incorporated into Northern Shan State in 1920, while the small state of Loi Maw was merged with Yawng Hwe State in 1928 [37]. The British also established the Federated Shan State, allowing local Shan chiefs to retain certain autonomous rights, including tax collection, law enforcement, judicial oversight for civil and criminal cases, and appointment of local officials. Central departments overseeing Public Works, Medical Administration, Forestry, Education, and Agriculture were instituted under the federation's supervision. The Federated Shan State thus functioned as a semi-autonomous administrative unit within colonial Myanmar (ibid., 174-177).

The political landscape shifted as the British administration prepared to grant Myanmar independence [23; 38]. In early 1947, the second Panglong Conference convened to provide a platform for leaders of the Frontier Areas to present their conditions for federating with the Burman heartland. Following extended negotiations, on February 12, the majority of participants, including General Aung San on behalf of the interim Myanmar government, as well as representatives from Shan State, Chin Hills, and Kachin Hills, reached a consensus to pursue independence from Britain. The agreement also ensured that hill populations would be permitted self-governance without interference from central authorities. Ethnic minorities were granted the authority to exercise administrative, judicial, and legislative powers within autonomous states and to preserve their cultural identity, in return for joining the Burmans in the newly independent union [39].

The Panglong Agreement prompted the establishment of the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry (FACE) in March 1947. FACE's mandate was to evaluate the perspectives of different ethnic leaders regarding federation and to propose guidelines for drafting a federal constitution. The committee acknowledged the challenges of designing a federal system, particularly the integration of fragmented territorial units and enclave regions into coherent governance structures, the allocation of seats for the Frontier Areas within the constituent assembly, and enhancing electoral awareness among ethnic populations [6]. FACE also suggested a potential federal framework, proposing Shan State and Kachin Hills as constituent states, with Kayah State as another prospective unit. The Chin Hills, together with other key territories such as the Thanlwin/Salween District, the Kayin heartland near the Thai border, and adjoining Kayin-inhabited regions, were recommended to be incorporated into Myanmar Proper [35].

Following the committee's recommendations, Myanmar embarked on a constitutional drafting process led by General Aung San. He proposed that the union consist of National or Union States, including Shan, Kayah, and Kachin Hills [34]. Under this model, each Union State would possess internal autonomy and independent institutions, encompassing legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Constitutional provisions were intended to guarantee power-sharing, with each constituent state adopting its own constitution [15]. Each Union State was also defined by specific geographic boundaries, significant population size, and the capacity to maintain a distinct identity within the federal union [34]. Aung San's vision of asymmetric governance received broad approval from ethnic representatives, suggesting that federalism could be successfully established. This trajectory was abruptly disrupted when Aung San and several key ethnic leaders were assassinated six months prior to independence. On 4 January, 1948, Myanmar attained formal independence, yet the unfinished federalist framework faced immediate challenges in addressing long-standing ethno-territorial conflicts.

The transitional period from British rule to modern state formation (1947–1948) provides crucial insights for federal design in Myanmar. Certain regions, designated for special subnational administration due to unique ethnogeography characteristics, were identified in the Second Schedule of the Government of Burma Act 1935. These areas were classified into two categories: Part I Schedule Areas, comparable to India's Excluded Areas, included the Federated Shan State, Shan states outside the Federation (e.g., Singkaling Khamti), Rakhine Hill Tracts, Chin Hills Districts, Kachin Hill Tracts of Myitkyina, Thanlwin District, and other unadministered territories. Part II Schedule Areas, analogous to India's Partially Excluded Areas, comprised the Homalin Sub-Division of Upper Chindwin District, Myawaddy Circle in Kawkaik Township, and the Kayin Hill Tract in the eastern Toungoo District of the Sittang Valley [34]. This classification reflects recognition of ethnographic and geographic distinctiveness within subnational units, consistent with theoretical principles of asymmetric and ethno-territorial federalism.

### 3.4 Myanmar's Fractured Politico-Military Territories

Myanmar's contemporary political authority landscape is highly heterogeneous, comprising multiple governing territories, competing power bases, and military strongholds. Scholars examining the country's political dynamics have identified a variety of territorial and autonomous units using distinct typological frameworks. Callahan [40] analyses the complex interactions between the central state and local, often non-state actors negotiating and contesting political authority in ethnic states. She categorises civil war governance territories into three relationship patterns: devolution from the central government to local, warlord-like authorities; direct occupation by the Myanmar military; and coexistence involving varying levels of cooperation and negotiation between central authorities and local actors.

Dean [41] classifies ethnic state governing regions into three principal types. First, borderlands adjacent to Thailand and China function as revolutionary or "liberated" zones, controlled by armed ethnic opposition groups such as the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), which present themselves as defenders of ethnic homelands against incursions by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces). Second are ceasefire areas, exemplified by territories under the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and New Mon State Party (NMSPP), where ethnic armies retain and administer agreed autonomous zones, marked by checkpoints and flags, while official communication with the central government occurs through liaison offices within state-controlled regions. Third are semi-autonomous areas managed by splinter factions of ethnic armies, including the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). These smaller, less clearly demarcated territories often overlap with regime-controlled areas, and some local militias engage in economic activities, including potentially illicit trade, in exchange for negotiated privileges.

Jolliffe [42] differentiates Myanmar's governing units into *de jure* territories, as defined by the 2008 Constitution, and *de facto* territories contested by multiple actors, including the central government, state-aligned militias, and opposition ethnic armed forces. Under the 2008 constitutional framework, state and region governments are headed by centrally appointed chief ministers supported by a small cabinet of line ministers. The Constitution also establishes six Self-Administered Areas (SAAs) for specific ethnic groups, who are minorities in their respective states or regions but form local majorities in designated townships. The SAAs encompass homelands of the Wa, Pa'O, Palaung, Danu, and Kokang in Shan State, and the Naga in Sagaing Region. The effective control of these areas, however, depends on ethnic armed group capacity, with territories classified as: 1) hostile, seized or maintained by force; 2) tolerated, where ceasefire arrangements allow conditional access; and 3) accommodated, where armed groups cooperate openly with the state in return for access.

Ethnic armed actors maintain independent mapping and administrative systems, often diverging substantially from official government demarcations. Since the 1995 ceasefire, the NMSP has exercised near-complete autonomy over portions of Mon State bordering Thailand and along the Mon-Kayin border. The National Democratic Alliance Army, or Mongla Group, governs much of eastern Shan State adjacent to Laos and China with near-total independence. State-backed militias further complicate the political geography through varied local governance roles [42]. The United Wa State Army (UWSA) administers its main ceasefire territory east of the Thanlwin River with a governance structure influenced by the Chinese Communist Party [43]. Kachin movements advocate for integrating the Kachin homeland enclave in northern Shan State into a larger Kachin State, while Palaung communities seek to extend their sub-state territory beyond the existing Palaung Self-Administered Zones [44]. Since the 2021 coup, Myanmar's political topography has become even more fragmented. Escalating violence has led to territorial losses for the Myanmar military and reconfigured the national political terrain. Thawngmung and Robinson [45] propose six territorial categories to capture the current landscape: 1) low-resistance junta-controlled areas; 2) high-resistance junta-controlled areas; 3) active armed conflict zones; 4) areas controlled by highly vulnerable non-state armed groups; 5) relatively secure areas dominated by non-state armed forces; and 6) border zones sheltering internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees.

The first category includes major urban centres such as Yangon, Naypyidaw, and Mandalay, along with towns in regions like Thaton and Mawlamyine, where the military maintains strict security through checkpoints and household inspections. The second encompasses towns within proximity to conflict zones, where military presence is maintained despite exposure to opposition attacks. The third refers to areas of active conflict from which residents have largely fled, where neither the military nor resistance forces exercise effective administrative control. The fourth comprises zones governed by resistance forces but vulnerable to military airstrikes. The fifth covers territories dominated by Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) or People's Defence Forces, with relative immunity from direct military action, typically in border areas or secure central locations such as Sagaing. The sixth includes border regions in neighbouring countries where refugees and young people evading conscription reside in camps or informal settlements [45].

Overall, Myanmar exhibits a highly differentiated ethnoterritorial structure in which the strategic interests of armed groups are tied to the scope of territory under their influence. Spatially bounded political entities exercise governance over populations and land, while the heterogeneity of power allocation reflects each armed group's military capability and territorial contestation. This complex political terrain renders Myanmar amenable to an asymmetric and ethnoterritorial federal model, capable of accommodating diverse political territories and managing secessionist pressures.

### 3.5 Recommendations for Designing Federalism in Myanmar

This section aims to review existing proposals for establishing federalism in Myanmar and to advance additional practical approaches for its implementation.

#### 3.6 Past and Present Proposals

Historical documents authored by state officials, politicians, and scholars provide valuable insights into designing federalism in Myanmar, particularly within the framework of asymmetric and ethnoterritorial arrangements.

San C. Po, a Kayin member of the Burma Reforms Committee, proposed merging Taninthayi Division and Nyaunglebin Sub-Division (Bago Division)

into a single constituent unit within a larger United Frontier Kayin States. Po's vision for an autonomous Karen country encompassing territories predominantly inhabited by the Kayins drew inspiration from *'India—a Federation?'* (1926) by Alexander Frederick Whyte, First President of the Imperial Assembly of India and Chairman of the Whyte Committee on Colonial Myanmar reforms [33; 47]. In 1946, Reginald Dorman-Smith, an Anglo-Irish diplomat and Governor of Burma, proposed several alternatives for the future Kayin State. These included establishing special administrative arrangements for Kayin enclave areas on the Burman central plains to meet the socioeconomic demands of the Kayin people. He also highlighted a contiguous Kayin-dominated territory in Taninthayi Division that could be incorporated into the Kayin Areas, while noting the challenge of securing a maritime outlet for economic purposes due to the Mawlamyaing zone being primarily inhabited by the Mons [34].

Burma Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry in 1947 [46] reflected the diverse perspectives of ethnic political leaders on subnational ethnoterritorial demarcation and asymmetric governance. The Kachin Memorandum (April 1947), signed by representatives from Bhamo, Myitkyina, North Hsenwi, Mongmit, and related organisations, advocated for incorporating all of Myitkyina and Bhamo Districts, along with northern Katha District, into the proposed Kachin State [34]. The memorandum emphasised that the Kachin Hills, extending along streams and narrow plains with Shans and Burmans interspersed, required territorial consolidation to reduce ethnic antagonism (*ibid*, 229). Similarly, Chin representatives from Kanpetlet highlighted the challenges of geographical remoteness, leading to the recommendation that Kanpetlet areas be federated separately with Myanmar Proper (*ibid*, 233). During the 1947 constitutional drafting, the Union and States Powers Sub-Committee evaluated the formation of constituent units. Shan State was deemed fully qualified for subnational governance, while Kachin areas, though economically less developed, were considered viable as a new subnational unit. Kayin and Kayah regions could be developed into distinct states, whereas the Chin lacked sufficient conditions for statehood (*ibid*, 112-124). Consequently, the 1947 Constitution asymmetrically established four ethnic states—Shan, Kachin, Kayin, and Kayah—and one Chin Special Division.

The Shan State Proposal in 1961 advocated federalism as a framework for self-determination. It recommended recognising Shan State as a major constituent unit based on population, territorial extent, and historical formation. Following the 1947 constitutional principle, only Myanmar Proper and Shan State would be classified as Union States, while other areas would be designated Autonomous States or National Areas, each with differing degrees of governance autonomy. In this structure, Union State leaders would hold the title of Governor, whereas the heads of Autonomous States and National Areas would serve as Chief Executive Officers and Administrators, respectively [48]. However, this proposal, linked to secessionist aspirations, contributed to the 1962 military coup, halting federalism dialogue in post-independence Myanmar.

The 1974 Constitution, drafted under Ne Win's authoritarian regime, delineated subnational boundaries comprehensively, including seven ethnic states (Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan) and seven Burman divisions (Ayeyarwady, Magwe, Mandalay, Bago, Yangon, Sagaing, and Taninthayi). The 2008 Constitution continued the seven ethnic states and reclassified the divisions as regions, adding a union territory for Naypyidaw, five Self-Administered Zones (SAZs) for Danu, Kokang, Pa'O, Palaung, and Naga, and the Wa Self-Administered Division (SAD) in Shan State. These units underscored the ethnoterritorial complexity of Shan State and Sagaing Region, highlighting the potential need for asymmetric federal arrangements in these areas.

In opposition political circles, the Federal Constitution Drafting and Coordinating Committee (FCDCC) adopted a second draft of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of the Union of Burma in early 2008. Comprising NLD parliamentarians and ethnic armed organisation representatives, the draft proposed in Article 55 the creation of new Federal Union states either by uniting contiguous territories within an existing state or combining adjacent territories from multiple states or regions. Article 49 categorised territories as National States, Nationalities States, and Federal Territories, including Arakan (Rakhine), Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Karenni (Kayah), Mon, and Shan National States; Irrawaddy and Tenasserim (Taninthayi) Nationalities States; and the Federal Capital [20]. Raynaud [19] notes that this framework implied the consolidation of Yangon, Bago, Magwe, Mandalay, and Sagaing Regions into a single constituent state, reflecting ethnoterritorial adjustments in the Burman heartland.

The 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference (UPC-21CP) in 2016 revealed contrasting visions of federalism. Pado Saw Tar Do Mu (KNU) advocated a multinational, ethnic-based federalism emphasising constituent equality and indigenous sovereignty, whereas Myint Soe (USDP) supported geographically oriented federalism with cooperative linkages among regions, states, and self-administered areas to promote development (Global New Light of Myanmar, September 2, 2016, 1). The Federal Democracy Charter (FDC), issued by the National Unity and

Consultative Council (NUCC) and National Unity Government (NUG) in 2021–2022, outlined administrative, legislative, and judicial frameworks for federal units (Section 52, Chapter 8). While the FDC addresses federal state formation, it offers limited guidance on asymmetric and ethno-territorial arrangements, focusing primarily on institutional design in the post-coup context. In September 2022, a dialogue between U Thein Oo (NUG Justice Minister) and Bo Naga (Myanmar Royal Dragon Army, Sagaing Region) emphasised the necessity of contiguous territories for establishing ethnic states. They suggested that multiethnic areas such as Tanintharyi Region could form new states, Mon State and Ayeyarwady Region could be adjusted based on demographics, Yangon Region might function as a city-state, and the remaining Bago, Magwe, Mandalay, and Sagaing Regions could be unified into a prospective Burman State [20].

Collectively, these historical and contemporary sources provide a solid foundation for designing federalism in Myanmar. Nevertheless, the practical application of asymmetric ethnoterritorial federalism remains limited, particularly regarding the creation of institutions and mechanisms to mitigate protracted conflicts. The following section will address this gap by offering new theoretical and practical recommendations beyond the existing proposals.

### 3.7 A New Proposal

Building upon historical and contemporary federalism proposals, this section supplements the analysis with a survey of ethnoterritorial challenges in present-day Myanmar and offers recommendations for potential models of national federalism. Drawing on the theory of asymmetric and ethnoterritorial arrangements and informed by Myanmar's empirical realities, it becomes possible to propose the creation of new political institutions and to consider a comprehensive redrawing of the national political map.

### 3.8 Institutional Design in Asymmetrical Model

Overall, Myanmar's federal structure should be based on an asymmetrical model, as certain subnational units exhibit concentrated geopolitical and demographic characteristics and face more complex governance challenges than others. Shan State, the largest ethnic minority state, characterised by deeply divided societies and fragmented political territories, warrants a fully asymmetric arrangement. To a lesser degree, Kachin State and Sagaing Region may adopt a semi-asymmetric federal configuration. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) has historically pursued the establishment of a federal democratic framework, whereas the Shan-Ni State Nationalities Army (SNA) has declared a Shan-Ni (Tai-leng) State as a subunit within the existing Kachin State and Sagaing Region. In Sagaing Region, the Naga predominantly inhabit the northwest, exercising significant political authority within the Naga Self-Administered Zone, while Chin and Burman populations remain continuously settled in the area [49].

Kayah State and Chin State might acquire a semi-asymmetric federal status. After the coup, dynamic coalitions of diverse ethnic revolutionary actors emerged to undertake public administration of these two states. The KSCC and ICNCC were established to form federal states and practice self-government [42]. Rakhine State can exist in the larger federalist structure, yet with a highly decentralized arrangement. The AA has controlled most townships state-wide. AA leaders believed that a confederal system, with a larger share of power for constituent units, would best fit state development. This resource-rich state was under the prosperous Arakanese Kingdom and now houses diverse major economic projects for foreign investment, but the Rakhine peoples are still impoverished [20]. Hence, confederalism in an asymmetric federalist scheme may be appropriate for governing Rakhine State.

In terms of institutional design, Shan State may have a bicameral parliamentary system, comprising a popular assembly and House of Nationalities, while other constituent states might use a unicameral system. A bicameral structure federally (Naypyidaw) could be replicated in Shan State to respond to its intricate problems. The popular assembly might be elected by single-member constituencies, one for each township, with the House of Nationalities chosen by single-member constituencies, twelve seats in all of Shan State. Further members (one fourth) for both assemblies would be appointed by the Tatmadaw. Due to widespread emergence of ethnic armies, additional seats would be allocated to ethnic representatives. Apart from military members, more seats would be granted to ethnic armed organizations such as RCSS, UWSA, and TNLA. The Assembly of Nationalities in Shan State could be morphed into a Tribal Assembly. Beyond twelve elected members, more seats may be added by electing ethnic members from different tribes and subgroups. The seat quota for each group would depend on demographic numbers in a comprehensive census. Potential ethnic members should encompass valley Shan, Wa, Palaung, Lisu, Akha, hill Kachin, and other specific tribes such as Intha, living around Inle Lake, and Taungyo, mainly in Pindaya.

The Kachin State administrative structure may be divided into two main spheres. The Myanmar government and Tatmadaw still govern the state by power bases in Myitkyina, but some townships controlled by KIO, with its seat at Laiza, should have a specific governing format. KIO, KIC, and KIA have historically participated in governing Kachin territories and may become the main pillars for ruling Kachin State in an asymmetric federal model. KIC, an administrative body, produces governing laws and may supervise KIA and all relevant departments in public administrative affairs. While continuing to oppose the Tatmadaw with limited resources, KIO has renovated local governing systems by deploying loyal bureaucrats and providing essential public services to Kachin society.

Sagaing Region now hosts some of the strongest PDFs to emerge since the coup. In Monywa Township and adjacent areas, violent incidents by junta forces have included razing homes and villages. Despite Tatmadaw presence in towns, the junta governing system has collapsed in several rural areas with no administrators at the village tract level, and bureaucratic offices have closed. In this political vacuum, new governance structures by opposition forces have been developed, including committees by local PDFs with guidance from NUG. The Sagaing Forum is another driving force for developing a bottom-up federal democratic structure. The forum comprises a diverse membership, including CDM, teachers, intellectuals, campaigners, and local PDFs, willing to collaborate and dialogue on inclusive decision-making. The goal is to establish federalism regionally. Based on diverse post-coup political institutions and its geographic status as the largest region in the Burman heartland, an asymmetrical federal model would suit Sagaing Region.

According to Jolliffe's work the KSCC is designated as the leading political organization in Kayah State during the revolutionary period, aiming to eradicate authoritarianism and establish a federal democratic union. KSCC has established a Karenni State government under collective leadership and ensured diverse groups may participate in state political development. KSCC intends to work with NUG during the interim period until a federal democratic state is achieved [42]. In Chin State, ICNCC, a leading organization in developing federal democracy, was formed in April 2021 by elected NLD members, Chin political parties, CNF, and Chin civil society organizations. CJDC was later formed to coordinate several scattered armed forces. Chin community initiatives include developing township schools and establishing police forces and agricultural maintenance sectors. Forming these political institutions is a basis for designing federalism in the constituent states.

An asymmetric model is essential for Rakhine State. AA serves as the de facto political, administrative, and military institution, commanding a vast area and creating parallel governance. Its political aim is autonomy under a confederalist structure and possibly independence. AA leaders seek to create an Arakan Nation through the Way of Rakhita, encapsulating the struggle for national liberation and restoration of Arakan sovereignty [50]. The Tatmadaw has tried to reinforce frontline positions to defend Sittwe, the state capital, which hosts state government offices and over a dozen battalions, but is at risk of capture by AA [51]. Granting decentralized autonomy in an asymmetric institutional arrangement, dominated largely by AA and its networks, would be one option for governing Southwestern Myanmar.

To offer practical guidelines, the Myanmar government and other stakeholders should develop a mechanism integrating inclusive, multi-stakeholder dialogue. A sustainable peace process requires the inclusion of all major stakeholders, including the new elected government, Tatmadaw, NUG, various ethnic armed groups, emerging resistance forces, and civil society networks. These stakeholders can express federalism ideas in a nationwide federal dialogue. The federal forum can be divided into sub-forums/conferences, aiming to create political institutions in constituent units. KIO, KSCC, ICNCC, RCSS, and other socio-political organizations with high capability in federal governance and public service delivery would be invited to join. The concept of Tribal Assembly (based on asymmetric federalism) can be proposed within Shan State's sub-forum, while human resources from Sagaing Forum can collaborate with Myanmar government agencies and local civil societies to develop a bottom-up federal democratic structure. Results from sub-forums/conferences can be scrutinized and endorsed by the central committee of the nationwide dialogue. Recommendations can also be submitted to the national parliament, government, subnational governments, and other governing organizations for implementation.

### 3.9 Drawing an Ethno-Territorial Model Political Map

The current state framework, consisting of seven ethnic states, seven Burman regions, five self-administered zones, one self-administered division, and a single union territory (Naypyidaw), could largely be maintained; however, boundary adjustments are warranted for certain subnational units. In the post-coup context of Shan State, the TNLA has extended its military operational zones beyond the Palaung SAZ as

established in the 2008 Constitution. While this expansion has been broadly supported by the Palaung population, other ethnic groups have expressed increasing concern. Concurrently, Kachin ethnonationalist claims for a Shan-Ni sub-state in North Hsenwi remain active [52]. The Kokang, maintaining their traditional sub-state system in northern Shan State [53], have also sought to extend territories beyond the Kokang SAZ and may negotiate with TNLA over joint territorial delineation. TNLA's envisioned statehood would encompass contiguous areas inhabited predominantly by the Palaung, along with neighbouring territories where they form a minority, including Shan, Kachin, and Kokang populations. Consequently, the political map should be revised to reflect these intersecting ethnic homeland claims.

The UWSA, administering the Wa SAD recognized under the 2008 Constitution, has also expanded southward into southern Shan State. This territorial distribution divides UWSA-controlled areas into northern regions near the Chinese border and southern regions bordering Thailand. Although the Constitution formally recognises only the northern sector, UWSA leaders aspire to consolidate both areas into a unified Wa State with autonomous highland governance [54]. Similar complexities arise in the Pa'O-inhabited southwest of Shan State, where the Pa'O SAZ cannot fully contain nationalist aspirations. The PNLO, along with the more recent PNFC, has proclaimed an expanded Pa'O State and seeks to designate Taunggyi, the Shan State capital, as its principal administrative hub [20].

The establishment of official self-administered zones and divisions, alongside ongoing sub-state construction by ethnic armed groups, underscores the relevance of ethnic-based territorial arrangements in Shan State. Evidence from continuous territorial planning and expansion highlights the applicability of ethnofederalist principles to Shan State's political configuration. In Kachin State, the Shan-Ni community asserts historical claims over Myitkyina, Mohnyin, and Bhamo districts [55]. Since the Cold War, the Shan-Ni state-building movement has persisted, complicating governance within Kachin State. Shan-Ni territorial claims also extend to Kalay, Hkamti, Mawlaik, Katha, and Tamu districts in Sagaing Region, necessitating coordinated management between Kachin State and Sagaing Region to accommodate Shan-Ni sub-state aspirations.

Rakhine State faces challenges in potentially redefining northern boundaries, where Muslim populations predominate. Historically, the Mayu Frontier Administration (1961-1964), formed prior to General Ne Win's coup, included Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and western Rathaung townships [56]. Contemporary ethno-religious divisions remain evident between northern Rohingya and Muslim communities and central and southern Rakhine Buddhist communities. Revision of Mayu demarcations, or adoption of alternative criteria, may mitigate these longstanding tensions. Since early 2024, the AA has controlled Paletwa Township in Chin State, despite opposition from multiple Chin organisations [57]. Paletwa is regarded by AA as the initial liberated western-front area, with plans for an administrative framework. Given the intermingling of Chin and Rakhine populations, numbering approximately 100,000 Chin in Rakhine State [ibid], applying principles of peaceful coexistence without fixed boundaries may be appropriate at this stage.

The politico-geographical structure of Kayah State reflects the presence of multiple ethnic armed groups. KNPP controls the Ta Khu mountain range along the Prawn River, while KNPLF, a KNPP splinter, maintains strategic bases in northwest Demoso and Bawlakhe townships [58]. Territorial federalism in Kayah State should consider delineated strategic zones corresponding to each armed group's presence. Additionally, Kayah populations in Momgpai (Moebye) in southern Shan State, north of Loikaw, have historically been linked to Kayah statehood, indicating that either an ethnofederalist arrangement within existing Momgpai sub-state boundaries or representation in the Shan State Tribal Assembly could be appropriate (ibid, 108).

Kayin State requires a territorially informed federal structure. The KNU-administered area is segmented into seven districts, each under KNLA brigade control: Thaton (Brigade 1), Toungoo (Brigade 2), Nyaunglebin (Brigade 3), Mergui-Dawei (Brigade 4), Papun (Brigade 5), Duplaya (Brigade 6), and Pa'an (Brigade 7). Simultaneously, the Myanmar government designates seven townships: Pa'an, Kawkareik, Kyainseikgyi, Myawaddy, Papun, Thandaung, and Hlaingbwe [17]. The area along the Dawna Range and Moei River on the Thai-Myanmar border contains informal settlements influenced by warlord networks and transnational Chinese corporate interests. This borderland economic zone, including KK Park and Shwe Kokko, poses transnational security risks, such as drug trafficking, human smuggling, and cybercrime. Hence, an asymmetric federal model with clearly demarcated territorial jurisdiction would enhance governance effectiveness in this complex border region. Map 1 illustrates the post-coup governance landscape in Myanmar, comprising multiple constituent units subdivided into various sub-areas. Within an ethno-territorial framework, Shan State includes several sub-states and greater states such as Pa'O, Palaung, Kokang, Kachin, Mongla, and Wa. The Shan-Ni Sub-State spans Kachin State and Sagaing Region, while the Naga Greater State is located in north-western Sagaing Region. These units are defined by ethnic homeland boundaries. By contrast, Bago

Region demonstrates a territorial model, partitioned into eastern and western sectors. In terms of asymmetry, Rakhine State has evolved into an Arakan Confederation, while portions of Kayin, Kayah, Mon, Chin, southern Shan State, and Sagaing Region exhibit emerging federalist governance arrangements.



Map 1. State-Building & Consultant Units

Mon State comprises approximately ten townships across two districts: Mawlamyine and Thaton. Ye Township, under Mawlamyine District, includes two sub-townships, Khaw Zar and La Mine. This geographically grounded structure provides a foundation for territorial federalism. Although Kayin communities reside within Mon State, their ethnic homeland boundaries have not been formally delineated. In early 2024, the New Mon State Party (Anti-Military Dictatorship) (NMSP-AD), a splinter from the original NMSP with a six-decade history of armed resistance, initiated operations. NMSP-AD seeks to establish a federal union grounded in democracy across operational areas encompassing Mudon, Kyaikmaraw, Ye, and Thanbyuzayat townships in Mon State, as well as Kyainseikgyi and Kawkareik townships in Kayin State [59]. Strengthening the NMSP-AD's administrative apparatus may allow partial negotiations with NMSP and KNU regarding boundary adjustments.

Burman-majority regions have historically employed geographic-based territorial management, dispersing large Burman populations into smaller administrative units. The seven regions are named after cities or geographic landmarks rather than ethnic identities, and their boundaries traverse diverse settlements. Tanintharyi Region, for instance, encompasses heterogeneous populations including Burman, Kayin, Mon, and Siamese communities, yet its four districts—Tavoy, Myeik, Bokepyin, and Kawthoung—fragment ethnic concentrations within geographic demarcations. Magway Region is particularly suited for geographic-based governance. The lowland plain lies between the Bago Mountain Range to the east and Chin and Rakhine Hills to the west. Burman-majority populations are distributed across five territorial districts: Magway, Minbu, Thayet, Pakokku, and Gangaw. Following the coup, the People's Revolution Alliance (Magway) emerged as a defence force opposing the military, with the political objective of building a federal democratic Myanmar. Despite this, the Tatmadaw retains control over most districts and townships, and formal governance structures have not yet been established; thus, immediate redrawing of boundaries within Magway may be unnecessary.

Bago Region, however, could benefit from clearer territorial delineation. The Bago Yoma Range serves as a natural divider, separating east Bago within the Sittang Valley from west Bago on the Ayeyarwady Basin. Post-coup PDF battalions operate across four districts: Taungoo and Bago in the east, Pyaw and Tharrawaddy in the west. East Bago battalions, aligned with KNU influence, are active in Shwegyin, Kyaukkyi, and Mone townships, as well as along the old Yangon–Mandalay corridor [60]. In this context, establishing explicit boundaries between east and west Bago—or within the Sittang Valley—would enhance governance clarity. Mandalay Region’s southern dry zone has been designated as Naypyidaw Union Territory, comprising four districts: Ottara, Zeyathiri, Dekkhina, and Pyinmana. This capital territory functions as a central logistical hub for hinterland development, overseeing agricultural zones in the Upper Sittang Valley [51]. Under federalisation, Naypyidaw would constitute a federal territory, directly administered by the national government.

Within the central dry zone, Anyar Township faces persistent challenges, including entrenched poverty, limited access to essential services, and localized violence stemming from clashes between Tatmadaw-aligned militias and resistance groups [62]. Territorial management tailored to Anyar’s specific conditions should therefore be considered. In Sagaing Region, a territorial framework is particularly appropriate for Burman-inhabited areas. Major urban centres include Sagaing, Shwebo, Monywa, Katha, and Tamu. Ethnic subgroups such as the Kadu and Ganang inhabit the Upper Mu and Meza River valleys; however, they have not advanced substantive claims for autonomous homelands. Exceptions include the Naga Self-Administered Zone, where leaders aspire to establish Greater Nagaland, encompassing adjacent areas in north-western Sagaing Region and north-eastern India [63]. Within the context of Myanmar sovereignty, territories on the Indian side cannot be incorporated into Myanmar’s Naga SAZ.

Overall, Myanmar’s governance architecture would benefit from differentiated ethno-territorial models. Shan State, select areas of Kachin and Rakhine States, and parts of Sagaing Region are suited to ethnofederalist structures with explicit boundary demarcations reflecting ethnic homelands. Most Burman-majority regions and other ethnic states may continue under geographic-based governance, although certain zones with unique security, economic, or sociocultural characteristics require clearly defined territorial delineation.

#### 4. Conclusion and Comparative Typological Analysis

The Myanmar case illustrates the importance of combining asymmetric and ethno-territorial arrangements as a compromise model for federal design. Such a model holds the potential to reduce conflict and strengthen human security by curbing political violence, safeguarding minority rights, and promoting inclusive governance alongside institutional reform. Simultaneously, it may address Myanmar’s long-standing secessionist challenges by balancing the competing centripetal and centrifugal forces within the state. A comprehensive study of this process suggests that Myanmar’s federalisation can be examined through a broader comparative lens. Developing a typology encompassing various federal structures enables systematic comparison with other states undergoing federalisation. A foundational framework for such analysis links two principal dimensions: 1) the distribution of power among symmetric and asymmetric constituent units, and 2) the demographic, geographic, ethnic, territorial, and ethno-territorial characteristics of the units. Integrating these dimensions produces a 2 × 3 matrix, in which the cell types correspond to six potential forms of federal arrangement. This typology is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Comparative Typological Building

Power Distribution among Constituent Units	Demographic-Geographic Configuration		
	Ethnic	Territorial	Ethno-Territorial
Symmetric	Symmetric and Ethnic Federalism (1)	Symmetric and Territorial Federalism (2)	Symmetric and Ethno-Territorial Federalism (3)
Asymmetric	Asymmetric and Ethnic Federalism (4)	Asymmetric and Territorial Federalism (5)	Asymmetric and Ethno-Territorial Federalism (6)

Type 1, symmetric and ethnic federalism, is characterised by uniform power allocation across subnational units while permitting the creation of constitutionally autonomous ethnic areas, delineated according to the distinct cultural identities of minority groups. Type 2, symmetric and

territorial federalism, shares similar egalitarian power distribution with Type 1, but administrative structures are nominally oriented around territorial or geographic management rather than ethnic considerations. Type 3, symmetric and ethno-territorial federalism, maintains equivalent power distribution across units but integrates both ethnic and territorial principles within its governance framework. Type 4, asymmetric and ethnic federalism, confers varying degrees of authority to constituent units while maintaining multi-ethnic values in the overall governance system. Type 5, asymmetric territorial federalism, exhibits a similar asymmetrical power allocation but prioritises territorially or regionally based administrative arrangements. Type 6, asymmetric and ethno-territorial federalism, combines the asymmetrical power structure of Types 4 and 5 with a hybrid governance model incorporating ethno-territorial management as a compromise mechanism.

Applying this classification, comparative analysis of federal dynamics in other countries can offer instructive insights for Myanmar. Ethiopia and Nepal exemplify symmetric and ethnic federations (Type 1). The United States, Australia, Germany, and Brazil illustrate symmetric and territorial federations (Type 2). South Africa represents a quasi-federal model with symmetric and ethno-territorial characteristics (Type 3). Bosnia and Herzegovina constitutes an asymmetric ethnic federation (Type 4), whereas Malaysia and Nigeria demonstrate asymmetric territorial federalism (Type 5). Examples of asymmetric ethno-territorial federal states (Type 6) include India, Russia, Spain, and Canada.

Myanmar fits Type 6, and a comparison with India is particularly instructive within the Asian federal context, given geographic proximity and a shared British colonial legacy [11]. India demonstrates asymmetric ethno-territorial federalism, accommodating geographic complexity and ethnic diversity by granting constituent states varying levels of power and autonomy. Northeast India illustrates this model, with evolving territorial arrangements: Nagaland was established in 1963, followed by Manipur, Tripura, and Meghalaya from Assam in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh in 1986, and Mizoram in 1987 [10]. In the late 1980s, the Bodo-speaking region of Assam pursued an ethnic homeland grounded in linguistic identity (ibid, 174). Manipur exemplifies territorial polarisation, with the Meitei in the plains and Nagas and Kukis in the hills. Conflicting claims arise as the Meitei advocate independence, while Nagas and Kukis propose dividing the state into three units. Likewise, the Mizo Hills became Mizoram Union Territory, and Tripura’s hill areas received autonomy. District councils in Mizoram and Meghalaya govern tribal territories, with some tribes exercising authority at both local and state levels [64] (ibid, 204–205).

Comparing Myanmar with India reveals useful parallels. The division between Mainland and Frontier Myanmar, alongside sub-state formations in Kachin and Shan States, resembles Northeast India’s Scheduled Areas, where hill tribes are governed through special administrative mechanisms. These arrangements can inform Myanmar’s asymmetric ethno-territorial federalism. Other federal models may also offer lessons. Malaysia’s asymmetric territorial federalism grants Sarawak and Sabah greater autonomy, with the Putrajaya Federal Territory providing a potential parallel to Naypyidaw, while North Borneo’s evolution offers insights for Shan State and frontier regions [65]. The United States, as a symmetric territorial federation, demonstrates how practices like gerrymandering influence governance and boundary management, suggesting that geographic demarcation could guide Myanmar’s Burman regions and frontier states [10].

Through this typological framework, six forms of federalism are defined. In the context of Myanmar, constructing a future federation may be informed by cross-national comparisons that integrate theoretical constructs with empirical evidence, offering a methodologically robust basis for designing an adaptive, ethnically sensitive federal system.

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