

# **Gatekeeper Governments and Modulated Rebels**

## *Politics of International Humanitarian Engagement*

### **Abstract**

International actors engage rebel groups in conflict zones for better humanitarian outcomes. What are the political conditions under which such external engagement occurs in internal conflict zones? We argue “insecure governments” and politically “modulated rebels” are the key factors that explain the international humanitarian engagement with rebels in civil conflicts. With the history of instability marred by coups and frequently changing hands of governments, insecure governments resort to international help and allow international actors to interact with their internal enemies. In contrast, other governments play a gatekeeper role, dealing with internal enemies autonomously. On the rebel side, politically “modulated rebels” are the prime candidates for those rebels engaged by international actors for humanitarian purposes. Such modulation is likely to occur after civilian-connecting experiences over time by holding territory or after peace talks. We test these arguments using the case of the United Nations action plans, in which some rebel groups committed to reducing the practice of child soldiering between 2000 and 2015. We find that the combination of “insecure governments” and “modulated rebels” can systematically account for the UN action plans occurrence. Our analysis has implications for the role of external actors in internal conflict zones around the world.

In 2009, the Moro Islamic Liberation Movement (MILF) in the Philippines struck a deal with the United Nations action plans (MILF/BIAF, 2009). The document laid out the specific timelines and tasks to reduce the number of child soldiers in the rebel ranks. Subsequently, the MILF disassociated all of the identified child soldiers, 1,859 of them, in the group (UN/SC, 2017). As of 2014, the MILF became the political party in the Mindanao region after the peace deal with the government.<sup>1</sup> Between 2000 and 2015, about a dozen of rebel groups in the world have signed the UN action plans to stop the practice of child soldiering, while other approximately 100 groups did not.<sup>2</sup> Since the post-Cold War period, international efforts in internal conflicts have grown with the means of peacekeeping, mediation, or sanctions (Krasner and Weinstein, 2014; Howard and Stark, 2017). The presence of external actors in conflict zones is a salient feature of global politics today (Hoeffler, 2014; Breslawski and Cunningham, 2019; Matanock, 2020). This trend might change due to the backlash and retrenchment in international actions (Krasner and Weinstein, 2014; Börzel and Zürn, 2020), but the contemporary relevance of international engagement still remains.

In this paper, we study the phenomenon of international humanitarian engagement with rebel groups in conflict zones. The phenomenon is characterized by direct interaction of international actors with non-state armed actors to achieve humanitarian goals of reducing human suffering in conflict zones while promoting restraints in violence. For instance, the International Committee of the Red Cross has been interacting with non-state armed actors for the matters of detention and humanitarian restraints via training and dialogue (Jo and Thomson, 2014; Bussmann and Schneider, 2016). The Geneva Call, a Swiss-based non-governmental organization, has been negotiating the Deeds of Commitment, whereby non-state armed actors can commit to international humanitarian norms, with some substantial outcomes on the issue of anti-personnel mines (Gleditsch et al., 2018; Fazal and Konaev, 2019). These examples illustrate that the phenomenon of engaging violent actors is making its mark in contemporary global human security scenes. Under what conditions do international actors engage violent non-state armed actors in conflict zones for better humanitarian outcomes? What are the political processes of international humanitarian engagement with rebel elements in conflict zones?

Several interlocking puzzles motivate our research. It is not obvious why national governments would accept external actors to deal with their own internal domestic political affairs. National governments might prefer dealing with their internal enemies on their own terms. As well, it is not apparent either as to why rebel groups would accept international actors to restrain their wartime behavior when they can choose to exploit the military advantage without outside interference.

In order to tackle the proposed questions and puzzles, we develop a theory of international humanitarian engagement with rebel groups. Our analysis leads us to expect that the phenomenon of humanitarian engagement with rebels is attributed to two crucial factors. The first is the national governments' consent condition. Governments in civil wars are likely to exhibit acceptance of international help when they fail to maintain their own stable political order with their own hands. The second is the rebel groups' consent condition. Rebels are likely to let outsiders in for humanitarian engagement when they have politically modulated incentives after peace talks or after civilian-connecting experiences over time by holding territory. These two factors of "insecure governments" and politically-modulated rebels constitute key parts of our theoretical story of

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<sup>1</sup> Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, as described in Loesch (2017: 96).

<sup>2</sup> Patterns uncovered in our UN action dataset, as explained in the empirical section of this paper.

international humanitarian engagement with rebel groups. To illustrate the dynamics of international humanitarian engagement, we present an empirical analysis of the UN action plans. We show the importance of two factors of insecure governments and modulated rebels in bringing out the international humanitarian engagement outcomes. The analysis carries broader implications for global security governance.

In what follows, we lay out the theory of humanitarian engagement in conflict zones by examining the preferences and goals of key stakeholders, namely rebel groups and host governments, in their interactions with international humanitarian actors. We then test our expectations with the case of the UN action plans utilizing the dataset of global civil wars between 2000 and 2015. We conclude by highlighting the opportunities and constraints of international engagement with violent actors in conflict zones.

## **A Theory of International Humanitarian Engagement**

The key political process of international humanitarian engagement involves getting the consent from both host governments and rebel groups. We first examine the conditions under which some governments open up their security situation to outside actors while others jealously guard their sovereignty. We then examine the conditions under which rebel groups, as the violent actors in internal conflicts, have incentives to engage with external actors for humanitarian purposes.

### ***Insecure Governments***

We argue that **insecure governments** are likely to accept outsiders for the purpose of humanitarian engagement. Governments are likely to feel insecure if they continue to experience short-lived regimes or frequent leadership changes or facing coups. Marred by the history of insecurity, these governments might want to bring in outsiders as a last resort. Often weak and ineffective in dealing with their internal enemies, these governments may be open to the idea of shared sovereignty (Krasner, 2004) and experiment with outside solutions when internal solutions fail. In general, governments want to keep internal sovereignty by maintaining their own tight grip and implement their own solutions to rebellion. In doing so, however, there might be circumstances where they might have to sacrifice external sovereignty and let outsiders in if the security situation is unmanageable. The tradeoff in those governments' calculus becomes between "sovereignty loss" and "security gains." By accepting outsiders, insecure governments might lose sovereignty to control internal matters autonomously or exclusively. But on the other hand, they might allow outside actors to meddle with their internal affairs with some expectation for potential security gains. Here, potential security gains mean the increased chance of expected win in the civil war should external actors decrease the capacity of insurgent groups.

By contrast, **secure governments**, confident in their internal security issues, are likely to block outsiders and play gatekeeper roles. Secure governments are the ones that have adequate security apparatus to deal with armed dissent. With ample internal options of repression or military campaigns, secure governments might prefer dealing with internal enemies autonomously rather than involving outsiders in. Within the confines of their sovereign territory, these governments have diverse options to respond to internal rebellion, including accommodation, co-optation, to repression (Heger and Salehyan, 2007; Staniland, 2017; Asal et al., 2019). In these situations, governments might block the international access upfront, often utilizing counter-terrorism laws

that restrict the movement of international actors engaging non-state armed groups in national sovereign territories (Modirzadeh et al., 2011). The idea of rebel elements interacting with outside actors brings forth the issue of conferring legitimacy to their internal enemies, heightening the sensitivity of gatekeeper governments with reputational concerns in civil conflicts (Walter, 2006). Being afraid that their legitimacy would be lost if external actors fruitfully engage their internal enemies on their political turf, gatekeeper-governments would jealously guard their sovereignty. Stripped of the host government consent,<sup>4</sup> international actors cannot enter the sovereign territory with ease, especially on the matter of what is considered to be the matter of national security. The tools gatekeeper governments employ range from outright rejection of international access<sup>5</sup> to the subtle measures that require many bureaucratic obstacles for civil society to operate (Dupuy et al., 2016). In some cases, host governments may accept international actors but then obstruct the international efforts in various ways.<sup>6</sup>

The above logic of potential security gains, sovereignty loss, legitimacy concerns, and capacity to deal with internal security threats, collectively suggests the following: international humanitarian engagement is more likely to occur with insecure governments than with secure governments.

### *Modulated Rebels*

Even if host governments give the green light for international actors to engage their internal enemies, international humanitarian actors still face the second obstacle of getting the consent of the rebel actors. Under what conditions would the rebel groups consent to humanitarian engagement? We propose that rebels with modulated political incentives are susceptible to international humanitarian engagement. **Modulation** here refers to political experience rebels gain during rebellion, which could modify their military and political preferences. Such experiences as building relationships with civilians via territorial control, governance experiences, or going through peace talks, can open rebel groups to external engagement. The counterbalancing incentive here is the consideration of military advantage. Exercising restraint can be costly for rebel groups as they are engaged in armed struggle against governments. The expectation of political gains via interaction with civilians have potential to temper their military incentives, ultimately motivating them to engage with international actors for humanitarian purposes.

**Territory-holding rebels** may be likely to say “yes” to international humanitarian engagement after developing a long-term relationship with civilians. This lot will be distinguished from temporary ragtag fighters that victimize civilians without social embeddedness (Moore, 2019). In rebel-held areas where a rebel group solely wields its influence, rebel-civilian relations would be more likely to be stable, compared to the situation of heavily contested zones where questions of loyalty arise (Kalyvas, 2008: 406; Berman et al., 2011). Research has shown inclusive groups are less likely to kill civilians compared to exclusionary ones depending on the rebels’ broad or narrow social base (Stanton, 2016). Also, rebels tend to kill civilians outside of their

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<sup>4</sup> The politics of consent is central to many settings of international involvement, be it the situation of peacekeeping (Piccolino and Karlsrud, 2011; Yuen, 2000; Karreth et al., 2021; Pushkina et al., 2022), election monitoring (Kelley, 2008; Hyde, 2011), or humanitarian intervention (Binder, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Examples abound, from al-Bashir’s expulsion of international aid agencies in 2009 (Rice and Branigan, 2009), to the recent ones in Venezuela and Syria’s Assad government. For more examples, see ACAPS (2020).

<sup>6</sup> In the context of election monitoring obstructions, see Simpser and Donno (2012). In the case of “pinioning peacekeepers,” see Duursma (2021).

controlled zones, not inside their own controlling territory (Holtermann, 2019). Collectively, the above previous findings indicate that some rebel groups may well be concerned with the humanitarian consequences of their own civilians mainly when those civilians are the rebels' core constituencies, supporters, and potential recruits. In contrast, rebel groups without a clear territorial basis would have no qualms in civilian abuse, consequently, no interest in investing in international humanitarian engagement.

We additionally expect that territory-holding rebels **with governance experiences**, relative to no-territory holding rebels, may be willing to agree to the international humanitarian engagement, even if such engagement might mean restricting their scope of military actions. Time-horizon can explain such engagement. Strong rebel presence on the ground increases the political time horizon on staying in the controlled area rather than playing the "roving bandits" (Olson, 1993). The consideration of a long-term horizon with respect to civilian relations can provide some rebel groups with the incentives to govern (Breslawski, 2021) rather than to exhaust, exploit and plunder their social bases. As rebels become stationary, rebel groups are more likely to care about the relations with civilians in the long run either for recruitment purposes or during everyday interactions (Mampilly, 2015). Rebels might reason that exercising restraint in their controlled territory can also fend off potential backlash from constituencies. This mechanism resonates with the existing finding that rebel groups with long-term time horizons would be more likely to provide a social order (Arjona, 2017). Some socially-embedded groups might even provide inclusive social services to their domestic constituencies in their controlled area (Stewart, 2018), deepening the relationship with local populations.

On a practical level, territory-holding rebels also provide the simple ease of establishing contacts. From the perspective of international actors, territory-holding rebels are prime candidates for identifiable interlocutors for international humanitarian engagement. International engagement often takes time to identify the leadership within rebel ranks, as well as time to forge trust with the key actors (Grace, 2012). When rebels shift positions and mobile operations, it is difficult for international actors to engage them fully. Territory-holding rebels confer some practical advantages of identifying interlocutors.

As well important would be the timing rebel group faces. It is **after the peace talks** when rebels likely experience modulated incentives for humanitarian engagement, compared to other periods of their rebellion lifecycle. At the heart of rebels' humanitarian politics lies the key calculus between military advantage and political gains (Fazal and Konaev, 2019). Peace talks can push rebels to put a premium on potential political gains over military incentives to fight effectively. The timing of peace talks would also indicate a bigger push for international legitimacy on the part of the rebels. The engagement via peace talks, then, can provide a window of opportunity for humanitarian interactions.

Benign reasons might not be the driver for many territory-holding rebels. In some rebels' calculation, the international interactions might come with material benefits such as humanitarian aid, as is the case in some conflict situations (Terry, 2002; Wood and Sullivan, 2015). Rebel groups can also aim to control where the aid goes, probably retaining their political control in the rebel-held zones (Beardsley and McQuinn, 2009; Matfess, 2022). The international engagement could also have putative and side-benefits of legitimacy that some groups desire and aspire to have on the world's stage (Jo, 2016; Huang, 2016; Fazal, 2018). Humanitarians strive to be neutral, impartial, and unbiased, but often the realities of conflict zones might generate such incentives of control and leverage on the side of rebels' ledger (Rubenstein, 2015; Barnett, 2011).

Summing up, facilitating situations for rebel engagement will include 1) when rebel groups go through civilian-regarding experiences with their territorial control, particularly with governance experiences, or 2) when rebels engage in peace talks.

## **Empirical Evidence: Analysis of the United Nations Action Plans**

We test the plausibility of our claims by studying the United Nations (UN) action plans from the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) office. The UN/CAAC action plan is “a written, signed commitment between the United Nations and those parties who are listed as having committed grave violations against children” (UN/CAAC, 2021). As of November 2020, 32 action plans have been signed, including 12 government forces and 20 non-state armed groups (UN/CAAC, 2021). The key aim of the UN action plans is to stop the use and recruitment of child soldiers among state and non-state armed forces. Child soldiering has been a persistent problem in active combat zones where incentives to recruit help are abundant (Beber and Blattman, 2013). Not only are children used for combat roles, but also as porters, informants, or even for sexual exploitation.<sup>27</sup> Child soldier use by states has been decreasing over time, but non-state uses have cropped up as conflicts become severe.<sup>28</sup> It is estimated that approximately 30,000 verified cases of child soldiers existed between 2012 and 2017 (Child Soldiers International, 2019). These are only verified cases, so actual numbers are likely to be larger. In Yemen, the Houthis were open to UN action plan engagement but back-tracked their negotiation with the UN after the flare-up of conflict in 2017 (UN/GA-SC, 2018: 28-30). In Colombia, FARC child soldiers were demobilized after the 2016 peace agreement but started increasing its recruitment in 2018 (UN/GA-SC, 2019: 9-10). In Myanmar, many non-state ethnic armed groups are still using children in their ranks while the government restricts the UN access to those groups using bureaucratic hurdles (UN/GA-SC, 2020: 17-19).

Since 2000, the UN/CAAC office has exerted efforts to engage non-state armed groups to reduce the number of child soldiers, with the help of the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). The first case of Ivory Coast bore fruit in 2005, and then the effort was extended to other parts of the world. Sometimes negotiations succeed (e.g., negotiations with some groups in the Central African Republic); other times fail (e.g., Yemen with Houthis, recently). Charged broadly with the task of protecting children during armed conflicts around the globe, the UN/CAAC Office starts with the list of violators (so-called “shame list”) that use and recruit child soldiers around the world. Approximately 40 rebel groups and 10 states are on the shame list annually.<sup>29</sup> Once the list is identified, the UN delegation or staff try to contact states as well as non-state actors. In some cases, rebel groups take the initiative to contact international actors.<sup>30</sup> The negotiation takes place when the conflict parties are willing to commit to the action plans. As such, the plans themselves are essentially consent-based and often

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<sup>27</sup> See UN/CAAC annual reports, various years. Also, see Haer and Böhmelt (2018) for the practice of girl soldiers.

<sup>28</sup> See Haer and Böhmelt (2016) for the patterns of child soldiering. Child soldiers have been used in about 20 countries around the world, and the UN lists about 50-60 “conflict parties” every year that violate children’s rights, including the child soldier use. However, the UN list is not exhaustive and usually lists severe violations.

<sup>29</sup> Sudan, Chad, Sri Lanka, Yemen are among the state parties that have signed onto these action plans.

<sup>30</sup> It is not directly observable whether the UN initiates the process or whether rebel groups voluntarily contact the UN. Nonetheless, the UN initial contact appears to be the norm, with only a few cases where rebel groups conduct diplomacy to reach out to international actors. Interview with Alec Wargo, UN official at the UN/CAAC (April 2015).

confidential.<sup>31</sup> The details include time-bound plans that come with action steps, such as issuing commander orders.<sup>32</sup> The actions are subject to so-called Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms that allow international monitors to access rebel-held areas. The psychological and social, and community-based programs are also discussed on the way of negotiations as part of a humanitarian engagement.

From a research design perspective, the case of the UN/CAAC action plans provides both unique and generalizable aspects of humanitarian engagement. The case is unique in providing a relatively difficult case for humanitarian engagement with non-state armed actors. The United Nations is primarily an inter-governmental body, bound by political constraints from member states. In contrast, international non-governmental organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)/Doctors Without Borders, have no such political constraints from member states.<sup>33</sup> Compared to the international non-governmental organizations, governments in civil conflicts are more likely to block the UN efforts because of the sovereignty concerns. If we can identify the conditions where humanitarian engagement can operate in the case of UN action plans, then we are likely to find those conditions in the case of other international actors as well.

The case is also unique as it deals with the issue of child soldiering. The issue is arguably more difficult to solve than other humanitarian issues since child soldiering is a socially rooted problem. The lens is useful in testing our modulated-rebels hypothesis. Much like the issue of other humanitarian politics, such as the anti-personnel mines issue or civilian killing issue, child soldiering involves incentives to exploit military advantage, in this case, using children as weapons and resources to wage war. Unlike the anti-personnel mines issue where the technological issue of de-mining is prominent, child soldiering is a social issue that penetrates the social norms. Engaging rebel groups for detecting and demining the mine-laden fields is a qualitatively different task from the engagement that convinces the social community with their own norms of childhood and adulthood. The child soldiering issue involves social and cultural issues such as the Islamic society treating the age 13 as legitimate adults while international standards have it as 18. The case of the UN/CAAC action plans will especially carry implications for how humanitarians engage deeply social problems, such as sexual violence, as opposed to the problems that involve military technologies.

Structurally, the problem of child soldiering is essentially analogous to other humanitarian issues related to wartime conduct. The issue presents the tension between military advantage and humanitarian restraints. Why would rebel groups give up child soldiering (or use of anti-personnel mines) when they could benefit from such an act? Why would governments give up their sovereign prerogatives to allow international actors to operate in their conflict zones? Considering these commonalities, the analysis employed here can be utilized for other humanitarian engagements and possibly be scaled up beyond the issue of child soldiering. The core analytical features of the engagement process and environment should be transportable to other cases of humanitarian action in conflict zones around the world.

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<sup>31</sup> It is often the preference of armed groups not to disclose all the details of the agreement. Interview with Alec Wargo, UN official at the UN/CAAC (April 2015).

<sup>32</sup> For the incorporation of the UN action plans into the internal code of conduct, see MILF/BIAF (2009).

<sup>33</sup> And in fact, in the issue of anti-personnel mines, the Geneva Call was able to engage more than 60 (out of approximately 200-300 rebel groups around the world at any given time). In the case of the UN action plans, only a dozen was engaged.

In our empirical analysis, we test three observable implications based on our theoretical analysis. Hypothesis 1 concerns our argument about insecure governments and gatekeeper governments. We expect that host governments that can afford to deal with their own internal enemies are likely to block UN access. In contrast, the host governments that feel vulnerable in their security situations are more likely to give consent to the UN engagement with their rebels. Hypotheses 2a and 2b concern our argument about modulated rebels with relatively civilian-regarding tendencies. We write out the expectations below.

H1 (insecure government hypothesis): UN action plan is more likely when the host government is *insecure* with its own domestic challenges, compared to the situation where host governments are *secure* in dealing with their internal enemies.

H2a (modulated rebel hypothesis 1): UN action plan is more likely when a rebel group exhibits control over territory, particularly with governance experiences, compared to the situation when a rebel group lacks such control.

H2b (modulated rebel hypothesis 2): UN action plan is more likely when a rebel group went through peace talks, compared to the situation when a rebel group did not go through peace talks.

## ***Sample and Data***

We test our hypotheses with the sample of rebel groups in contemporary civil wars between 2000 and 2015. To construct a sample that could be potentially targeted for the UN/CAAC action plans, we first started with all the rebel groups as in the Non-State Actor (NSA) dataset by Cunningham et al. (2013).<sup>34</sup> The empirical universe of child soldiering by rebel groups is not all the countries in conflict, but most of them. This is going to be our list of “potential” rebel groups that could have been “candidates” for the UN/CAAC action plans. Among 56 countries that were embroiled in civil wars between 2000 and 2015 in our sample, about 52 had experienced the use and recruitment of child soldiers by non-state armed actors.<sup>35</sup> At the rebel-group level, among 136 groups in the sample between 2000 and 2015, 120 groups have a history of child soldiering, and ten groups signed onto the UN action plans.<sup>36</sup> The UN action plans started with the Ivory Coast case in 2005, and we assembled the dataset with the temporal scope of 2000-2015, in order to ensure comparisons before and after.<sup>37</sup> The unit of observation is rebel-year, where each

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<sup>34</sup> The NSA dataset we started with as a platform (version 3.4) covers until 2011, so the new groups having emerged after 2011 such as SPLA in Opposition, in South Sudan are not incorporated into the dataset. The NSA dataset focuses on the conflict that generated more than 25 battle-related deaths, but this criterion leaves out some groups that generated low-intensity conflicts. For example, some groups (e.g. SLA-Abu Gasim) are in the UN action plan list, but do not exist in the NSA dataset. These groups are excluded from the current analysis to maintain the entry barrier at the same level for all rebel groups.

<sup>35</sup> This count is based on Haer and Böhmelt (2016).

<sup>36</sup> These 10 groups, with the host country and signing year information, are MPIGO (Ivory Coast 2005), FRCI (Ivory Coast 2005), MPCFI (Ivory Coast 2005), MJP (Ivory Coast 2005), CPJP (Central African Republic 2011), SLA/A-MM (Sudan 2006), SPLM (Sudan 2009), JEM (Sudan 2012), CPN-M/UPF (Nepal 2009), MILF (Philippines 2009).

<sup>37</sup> In this particular analysis, we set 2000 as the starting point for long running groups. If a rebel group enters the dataset after 2000, we set the starting point as whenever a rebel group enters the dataset.

observation marks yearly data for each rebel group within a specific conflict-ridden country. This yearly observation allows us to track down the fluctuations of conflict events. With the assembled data, we analyze the occurrence of the UN/CAAC action plans, along with the other contextual factors of humanitarian engagement.

### *Variables*

The dependent variable is the UN/CAAC action plan occurrence. The variable is coded as 1 for the year a rebel group within a specific country signs. For a rebel group that does not sign, all the years are coded as zero. We coded the occurrence of UN action plans from the reports by the UN/CAAC Office.<sup>38</sup> Out of 120 groups between 2000 and 2015 that have a history of child soldiering, we have ten groups that signed the UN/CAAC action plans. The signer groups are clustered in five countries (Central African Republic, Ivory Coast, Nepal, Philippines, and Sudan).<sup>39</sup> This setup gives us variation across countries as well as across rebel groups within a country. At one level, we observe a cross-rebel variation within one country, where some rebel groups within one country sign the UN/CAAC action plans (e.g., MILF in the Philippines) while others don't (e.g., Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines). At another level, we observe cross-country variation, where some countries allow rebel groups to sign UN/CAAC action plans (e.g., Central African Republic and Ivory Coast) while others don't (e.g., Colombia, India, and Myanmar).

**Figure 1.** Child-soldiering and rebel action plan 2000-2015.



*Source:* Authors' own figure based on the reports by the UN Children and Armed Conflict Office.

Figure 1 presents the world map with the countries where rebel groups used child soldiers as well as the countries where rebels signed the UN action plans. The 52 countries where Haer and Böhmelt (2016) report at least one of its rebel groups used child soldiers are colored with light

<sup>38</sup> For example, see the series of reports by UN/CAAC in the reference list at the end of this paper.

<sup>39</sup> Groups that do not sign include the ones that are in Myanmar, Colombia, India, and Yemen, for instance. Rebel groups signed after 2015 and para-militant groups were excluded from the sample.

grey. The five countries colored with dark grey (Ivory Coast, Central African Republic, Sudan, Philippines, Nepal) are the ones in which at least one rebel group in its domain signed the UN action plans. We note child-soldiering is clustered around sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. While the numbers are few, the UN action plan cases also show a similar trend.

Key explanatory variables include the measures of “insecure governments” and “modulated rebels.” To create the variable, *Insecure government*, we use “political effectiveness” score from the state fragility index provided by the Center for Systemic Peace (Marshall and Cole, 2017). The index is composed of multiple dimensions of internal security threats, such as regime durability, leader years in office, and the number of coup events, ranging from 0 (more secure) to 3 (less secure) (Marshall and Cole, 2017: 52). In our dataset of 41 governments, twelve are politically secure (lower than 1); fifteen governments are at the medium range (higher than 1 and lower than 2); fourteen are politically insecure (higher than 2).

To measure the concept of “modulated rebels,” we use *Rebel territorial control*, a dummy variable taken from the NSA dataset. In our dataset, approximately 35% rebel-years are associated with territorial control, the other 65% with no territorial control. We additionally use *Territory with governance*, the index of rebel’s territorial status and social service provision to capture the variation in the civilian-regarding tendency of rebel groups. Using the Rebel Quasi-State Institutions (Albert, 2022) and the governance activities related to social services (Huang and Sullivan, 2021), we built our *Territory with governance* variable, by adding three dummy variables: Rebel territorial control, Health governance (provision of health services to civilians), and Education governance (rebel provision of education for civilians). Within the range of 0 to 3, a higher value of the index indicates that a rebel group is more likely to be associated with civilian-regarding tendency. To account for rebel groups’ moderation of military incentives and increased motivation for political options, we use the time-varying variable, *After peace agreement*, the years of and after signing a peace agreement. This variable was sourced from the UCDP Peace Agreement Dataset (Pettersson and Öberg, 2019).

We control for several rebel and government characteristics. On the government side, we control for the variables that can affect the government’s capacity to deal with internal security threats as well as the governments’ incentive to allow external actors within their sovereign territories. We control for the level of economic development (*GDP, logged*) to account for the government’s overall capacity. We also control for the number of rebel groups (*Rebel number*), as multiple rebel groups can heighten the governments’ security concerns (Walter, 2006). The number of rebel groups ranges from 1 to 16. The governments in the sample face 1-4 rebels for most rebel-years (approx. 60%), but the rest experience multiple rebel groups in a given year. Political regime type (*Regime type*) on the democracy-autocracy scale is also controlled for, as is the tendency of democracies to open up for international interactions for humanitarian purposes (Gleditsch et al., 2018). We use polity score 2 from Polity IV project (Marshall et al., 2017), which fills in the political regime scores throughout the observation years. Since reciprocity is the centerpiece of humanitarian politics (Morrow, 2007), we add the government’s signing of the Optional Protocol for the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (*OPCRC*, so-called Child Soldier Treaty). Lastly, we include the variable, *Gov’t P5 support*, as the support by the five permanent members (P5) in the UN Security Council for the host government might also condition the government’s willingness to open up their security situations to external actors.

On the rebel side, we control for the variables that can capture various military, political, and organizational factors, which can be potentially associated with the rebels’ incentives to sign

the UN action plans. As for military factors, the capacity to fight and mobilize will be important to control since militarily strong rebels may have less incentive to engage in humanitarian engagement (Fazal and Konaev, 2019). We use the *Rebel strength* variable in the NSA dataset (Cunningham et al., 2013) to capture this notion of rebel military incentives. It is an ordinal measure (high, medium, and low), rated relative to the government. For additional political factors on the rebel side, we include the secessionist groups (*Secessionist*) as one of the potential correlates of rebel groups' interaction with outside actors and rebel diplomacy (Huang, 2016). We created a dummy variable extracting information from the "conflict type" variable in the NSA dataset. As for the organizational factors, we include the degree of central control and command (*Rebel central control*), following the logic of discipline within rebel organizations affecting rebel wartime behaviors (Weinstein, 2008; Johansson and Hultman, 2019). External support structures and resources also might condition rebel group engagement with outside actors (Beardsley and McQuinn, 2009; Wood and Sullivan, 2015), so we include the rebel support by the permanent-five members of the UN Security Council (*Rebel P5 support*). We constructed this variable by extrapolating the information from the narrative related to rebel support in the NSA dataset.

We additionally included a couple of control variables on the side of the international actor. The capacity of the UN/CAAC office is often assisted by the existing UNICEF presence. For this, we control for the number of UNICEF personnel (*UNICEF personnel, logged*). This variable is constructed from the United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination annual personnel statistics from 2000 to 2015 (UN/CBE, 2000-2015). We also control for the conflict intensity, since the severe security situations are pointed out as practical reasons to keep the international actors out. *Conflict intensity* variable comes from the UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset (Gleditsch et al., 2002). 0 indicates no visible military confrontations; 1 refers to minor conflict; 2 refers to major conflict. Sources and measures of the above variables are further described and summarized in the appendix, along with descriptive statistics.

## ***Results***

We estimate time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) logistic models with random effects. TSCS logistic random-effects model allows us to control for unknown unit-specific effects and exploit the maximum variance in our data. In particular, the random effects framework provides leverage to control for rebel group-specific unobservable confounders. As well, given the rare event nature of our dependent variable, this TSCS setup allows us to overcome the separation problem since the model exploits the maximum variation – both space and time – in our data. Since one of our main explanatory variables – *Rebel territorial control* – does not vary with time, we specify a random-effects model as an alternative to using rebel group-level fixed-effects.<sup>40</sup> Table 1 reports the results.

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<sup>40</sup> On the efficiency gain of the random-effects model versus fixed effects models when within unit variation is low, see Clark and Linzer (2015). In our case, within unit variation is the variation within each conflict in a country. Most of the variation comes from across-unit variation in our data. Therefore, random effects specification is more appealing to us.

**Table 1.** Statistical analysis of the UN action plan occurrence.

	Model 1 Baseline	Model 2 Baseline	Model 3 Baseline	Model 4 Gov't	Model 5 Rebel	Model 6 Full	Model 7 Full
Insecure government	3.746*** (0.540)	3.496* (2.007)	3.394** (1.690)	5.325*** (1.154)	2.686*** (0.995)	6.664*** (1.109)	12.07*** (3.994)
Rebel territorial control	4.050** (1.688)	3.474* (1.795)		2.552 (1.757)	5.463** (2.158)	5.298*** (1.859)	13.78** (5.570)
After peace agreement		6.473*** (0.867)	4.316*** (1.506)	6.135*** (0.758)	7.563*** (1.361)	6.668*** (1.091)	9.772*** (1.787)
Territory + governance			0.976** (0.439)				
GDP (logged)				1.610*** (0.611)		3.365*** (0.628)	5.127** (2.364)
Rebel number				-0.223 (0.345)		-0.0383 (0.433)	0.426 (0.709)
Regime type				-0.0371 (0.121)		0.00804 (0.210)	0.172 (0.248)
OPCRC				0.852 (1.062)		0.842 (1.097)	3.228 (2.996)
Gov't P5 support				2.589* (1.478)		7.671*** (1.638)	13.07*** (4.538)
Rebel central command					-0.605 (1.338)	-1.673** (0.798)	-0.710 (1.205)
Rebel strength					1.363 (1.475)	2.186*** (0.817)	2.369** (1.017)
Rebel P5 support					1.168 (1.501)	-5.820*** (1.944)	-11.65** (4.944)
Secessionist					2.517 (2.577)	-1.795 (1.743)	-5.593 (4.727)
Conflict intensity							-9.247* (5.391)
UNICEF personnel (logged)							-3.725** (1.509)
Number of UN action plans	10	10	6	10	9	9	9
Number of rebel groups	107	107	67	96	96	92	92
Observations	1356	1356	564	1265	1235	1152	1152

*Note:* Results based on time-series cross-sectional random-effects logistic models. Standard errors in parentheses \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . The time cubic polynomial approximation (t, t2, and t3) are included in the models but not reported. Constant suppressed. Error terms are clustered at each rebel group in the dataset. The sample is rebel groups using child soldiers, identified in Haer and Böhmelt (2016).

Model 1 reports the baseline result with the two main explanatory variables, controlling for the time dependence of the outcome variable (Carter and Signorino, 2010). The coefficient of *Insecure government* is positive and statistically significant. The result indicates that the UN action plans are more likely when the host government is more exposed to internal security threats. The finding is consistent with our theoretical expectation about gatekeeper governments. For their part, rebel groups are more likely to sign the UN action plans when they control territory. The coefficient of *Rebel territorial control* is positive and statistically significant.

Model 2 introduces a time-varying rebel incentive to sign the UN action plans, *After peace agreement*. The positive, statistically significant coefficient suggests that rebel groups sign the action plan especially after securing peace agreement with the government.<sup>41</sup> The results suggest that the peace agreement periods may be the prime-time international actors can bear the fruits of humanitarian engagement.

Model 3 introduces *Territory with governance*, which further accounts for civilian-regarding tendencies of rebel groups. While the coefficient is positive and statistically significant, we are cautious in emphasizing the finding due to the reduced number of observations and UN action plan cases resulted from some missing values in the governance dataset. Collectively, these baseline results provide some support for H1, H2a and H2b.

Model 4 includes the control variables related to host governments. In this specification, we are particularly interested in observing how the finding on insecure government changes when we introduce some government-side confounding factors. The coefficient for *Insecure government* remains positive and statistically significant. The states with more democratic governments and with P5 member support are more likely to see the rebel groups signing UN action plans.

Model 5 presents results including control variables that are varying at the level of rebel groups. The central result – a rebel group is more likely to sign a UN action plan when the group holds territory, or when the group signed a peace agreement – is also tested out in this model. The model shows that the effects of rebel side factors, including central command, the strength of rebel forces, and receiving P5 support, do not reach conventional significance levels, indicating that the political modulation, compared to other factors, might be a significant factor in explaining rebels signing the UN action plans. *Secessionist* variable is also not significant. We interpret the result to mean that the secessionist might be more likely to open to the outside world but most likely blocked by sovereignty-guarding states.

Model 6 estimates the effects of both government and rebel-related control variables. The effects of three main explanatory variables (*Insecure government*, *Rebel territorial control*, and *After peace agreement*) remain robust. The positive and significant effect of *Rebel strength* on the rebel groups' UN action plan signing hints at the possibility that strong rebels do not have to resort to low-cost rapid mobilization of children in their war efforts (Faulkner and Doctor, 2021). The positive effect of *Gov't P5 support* interestingly contrasts to the negative effect of *Rebel P5 support*, gleaning the asymmetric nature of civil conflicts. While the support from the permanent five on the government side facilitates the signing of UN action plans, the same support on the rebel side operates as an inhibitor to the UN action plans. Rebel groups receiving enough external

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<sup>41</sup> In the appendix, we also show that the effects of peace agreement are conditional upon rebels' territorial control. The marginal effect of peace agreement is statistically distinguished from zero only if rebel holds territory. It further demonstrates that rebel's modulated incentive is a key explanatory factor and that the conclusion of peace agreement reduces the cost of reducing child soldiers uses for civilian-regarding groups.

support may not feel the need for gains that can be earned via engaging with the UN actors.<sup>42</sup> The result is consistent with our theoretical framework of rebel's calculus in balancing political and military incentives, as well as with the previous findings of rebel engagement with humanitarian actors (Beardsley and McQuinn, 2009).

Lastly, Model 7 examines the effect of conflict intensity. We expected that conflict intensity hinders the conclusion of UN action plans because it is an obstacle to international actors for security reasons primarily. The result indicates that conflict intensity is an inhibitor, but the effect is statistically significant only at the 90% level.<sup>43</sup> This implies that the physical intensity of the conflict might be a less significant and salient factor in explaining the rebel engagement phenomenon, compared to the governments' sovereignty-guarding tendencies or rebels' territorial control. This hints at the possibility that political obstacles are salient features of humanitarian engagement, even compared to the physical vicissitudes of conflict. Surprisingly, the number of UNICEF personnel is not positively associated with the conclusion of UN action plans.<sup>44</sup> This, we interpret, as the host governments' control of security. While allowing the large UNICEF personnel in their jurisdiction, host governments appear to be hesitant extending that invitation to the international engagement with rebel groups.

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<sup>42</sup> The results are similar with respect to rebels that are dependent on natural resources. Resource-based rebels are less likely to sign UN action plans. Results on file with the authors.

<sup>43</sup> We did an additional check with the battle-related deaths to proxy conflict intensity, but the results are similar. Results on file with the authors.

<sup>44</sup> The direction remains robust if we alternatively code this variable, for instance, divided by the population size in a country.

How substantial is the effect of *Insecure government* and *Rebel territorial control* on the occurrence of the UN/CAAC action plans? We calculate average marginal effects based on Model 7 and plot them in Figure 2 with 95% confidence intervals.

**Figure 2.** Average marginal effects of key correlates on the UN action plan occurrence.

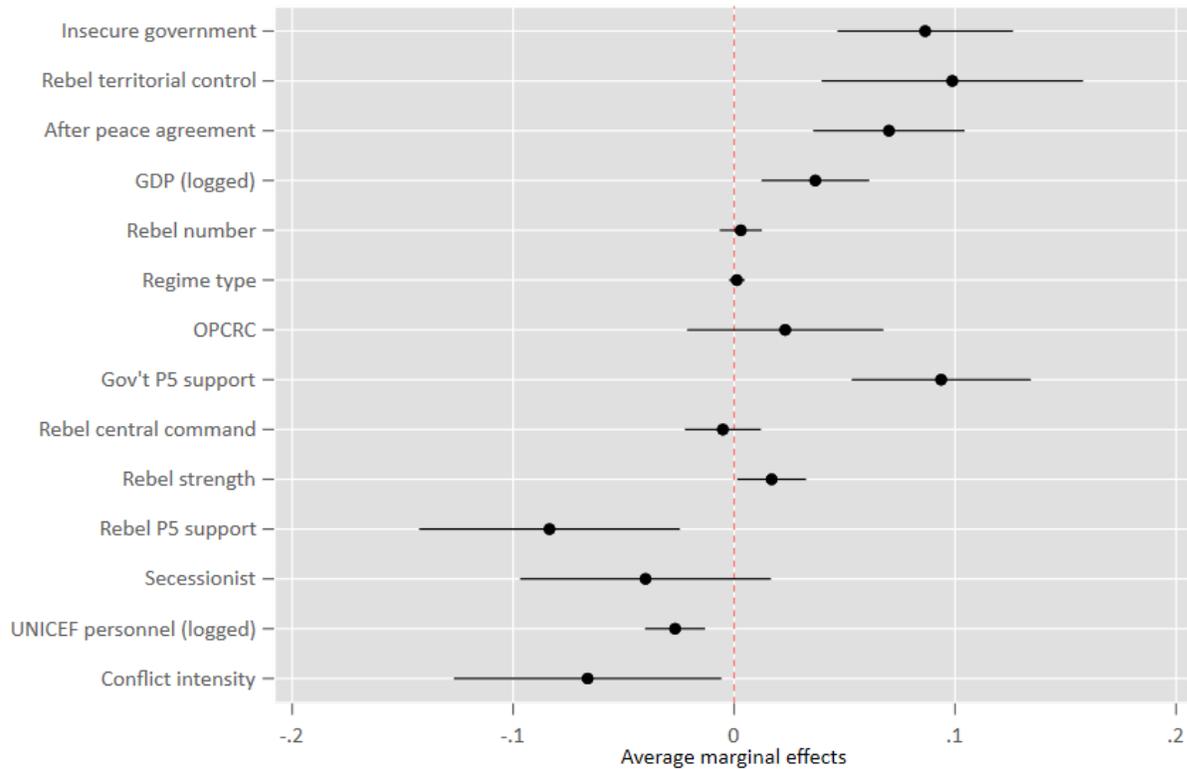


Figure 2 indicates that a one-unit increase in *Insecure government* increases the probability of signing the UN action plan by about 8.6%. As the government becomes internally insecure in maintaining the stability of the political regime – for instance, the score increases from 0 to 1, 1 to 2, or 2 to 3 – the probability of rebel groups signing a UN action plan increases about 8.6% on average. This, again, is consistent with our expectation that it is internally insecure governments that would open up to outside intervention in dealing with rebel groups for humanitarian engagement. Turning to the rebel side, switching from a non-territorial rebel group to the territorial one increases the probability of signing a UN action plan about 9.9%. Signing a peace agreement, which captures a time-varying incentive of rebels, increases the chance of signing a UN action plan about 7%.

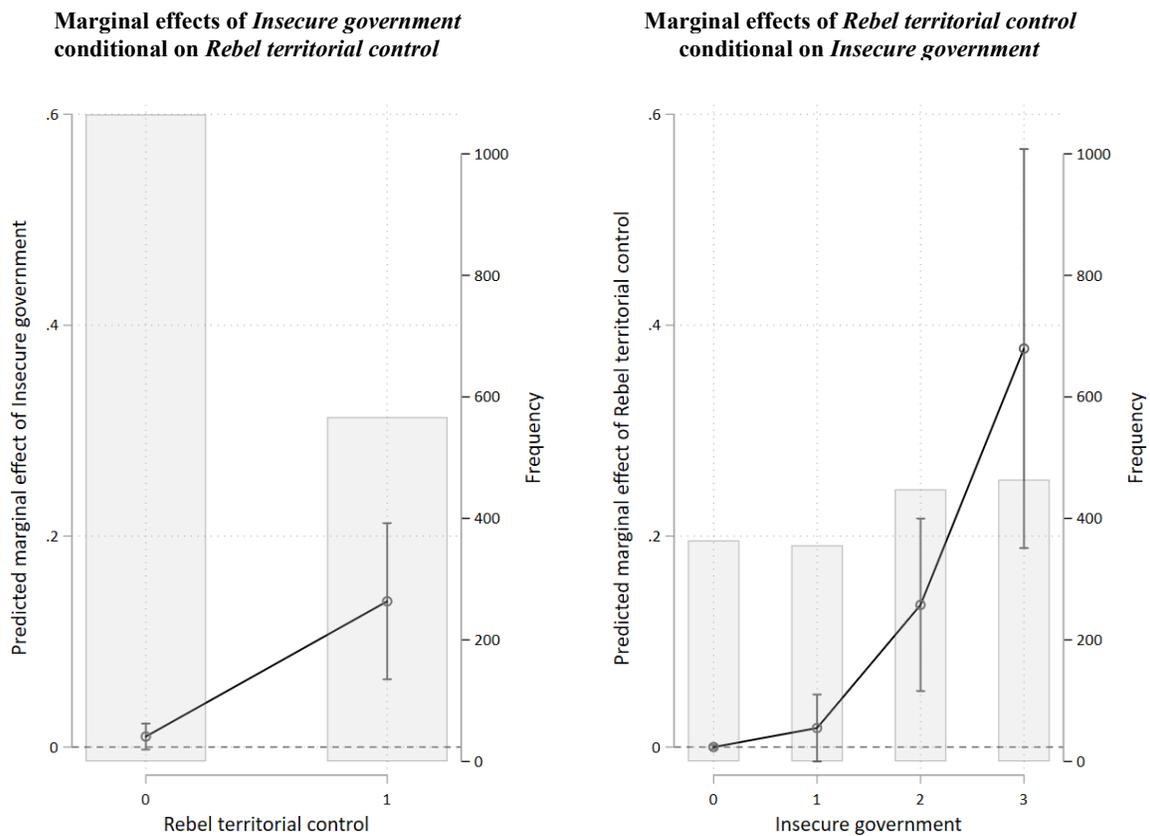
### ***Further exploring the engagement process***

The statistical analysis lends support for our hypotheses about government gatekeeping and modulated rebels. We further test additional implications on how international engagement

works. In principle, UN tries to contact every warring parties,<sup>45</sup> but we do not fully observe whether the government blocked the access or the rebel groups rejected the access. What we observe as researchers is whether the UN action plans occurred or not. We theorized the process starting with the UN in negotiation with the government first and then getting the consent from the rebel group. It implies that to conclude a UN action plan, the presence of either condition only – rebel territorial control or government openness – might not be sufficient. Even if the government is willing to open its border to international actors, the prospect of signing a deal is very low if rebel groups are not willing to negotiate. Similarly, even if rebel groups embrace international engagement, sovereignty-guarding governments will deprive rebels of such opportunities.

Given this consideration, we specify the interaction model in which other settings are equivalent to Model 7 in Table 1, and test whether the effect of rebel territorial control and security vulnerability of the government is conditional upon each other. Figure 3 reports two conditional marginal effect graphs, one for *Rebel territorial control* and the other for *Insecure government*.

**Figure 3.** Interactive effects of *Insecure government* and *Rebel territorial control*.



*Note:* The vertical lines in the left panel plot the marginal effects of *Insecure government* conditional on *Rebel territorial control*, with 95% confidence intervals. The vertical lines in the right panel present the marginal effects of *Rebel territorial control* conditional on *Insecure government*, with 95% confidence intervals. The bars in both graphs present the number of observations for each category.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Alec Wargo, UN official at the UN/CAAC (April 2015).

The left panel of Figure 3 demonstrates that the effect of *Insecure government* is positive and statistically significant at 95% level only when rebel groups hold territory. This pattern illustrates that even if the government opens an opportunity for international actors to approach rebels, the UN action plans are less likely to occur when rebel groups are not interested in negotiating. Similarly, the right panel of Figure 3 shows that the effect of *Rebel territorial control* is conditional upon *Insecure government*. The effect is only positive and statistically significant when the host government is more politically vulnerable in its internal security. The result indicates that rebel groups have a chance to engage with international actors only when the government is internally insecure and allows them to enter its borders. When the government doesn't allow international actors to come in, signing a UN action plan is unlikely, even if rebel groups are willing to do so.

All in all, our theoretical expectations are borne out by empirical evidence of the rebel UN action plans. In our dataset, we see that some UN action plans do not occur potentially because of rebel group's rejection (e.g., al-Shabaab in Somalia). In other cases, the UN action plans do not occur because of government consent factors (e.g., Myanmar until the political opening, Syria under Assad regime). Our case investigation of the conflict in the Philippines, presented in the appendix, further corroborates our finding on the role of government openness to bring international actors in as well as the role of rebel territorial control. Taken together, the evidence we present in this paper suggests that the confluence of government consent and rebel control is helpful in understanding international humanitarian engagement with rebels in conflict zones.

Process-wise, humanitarian engagement appears to be operating much like a filter. Humanitarian organizations are hemmed by sovereignty-guarding governments and then screened out by unwilling rebel groups. We have about 200 countries in the world, about 30-40 of them in civil conflicts at any given point in time. About ten countries opened up to international engagement with UN action plans during the timeframe between 2000 and 2015. Among those ten governments, about five opened up to reform their own national security forces,<sup>46</sup> and the other five opened up international humanitarian engagement to the rebel groups as well (Central African Republic, Ivory Coast, Nepal, Philippines, Sudan). Among about 120 rebel groups with child soldier experience, only a dozen rebel groups within those five host governments had finalized the action plans with the UN, hinting at the role of gatekeeper governments. This filter-characterization of humanitarian engagement, based on political motivations of the government and rebels, can be useful in understanding humanitarians' political access to conflict zones.

## Conclusion

The politics of humanitarian engagement with rebel groups is influenced by government blockage and rebels' modulation. More broadly, our research suggests political conditions for external actors entering into internal conflict zones. Specifically, we uncovered the conditions of when host governments block international access and when rebel groups may be receptive to international humanitarian engagement.

The theory and empirical findings presented in this paper can be extended to other cases of international engagement with rebels in conflict settings. First, the theory of consent and control

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<sup>46</sup> The five countries are Afghanistan (signed in 2011), Chad (signed in 2011 and delisted in 2014), Democratic Republic of Congo (signed in 2012; delisted in 2017), Myanmar (signed in 2012), Uganda (signed in 2007 and delisted in 2008). All the listing information comes from UN/CAAC (2021).

can also be applicable to other non-state armed actors and militant groups, such as paramilitary organizations or terrorist organizations, going beyond traditional rebel insurgents.<sup>47</sup> Second, the theory of humanitarian engagement can inform other settings of international engagement, such as aid distribution in conflict zones or peacekeeping consent.<sup>48</sup> The core calculus of security gains and sovereignty loss may be calibrated differently, but the theoretical framework should still be relevant. Third, we analyzed the child soldier issue, but the framework of consent and control can be modified to other types of international engagement and access politics in conflict zones.<sup>49</sup>

This paper presented a focused investigation into the political process of engaging rebel groups by international actors. Going beyond engagement, “reforming rebels” might be more difficult to achieve, but it can be done. Gleditsch et al. (2018) has provided a proof of concept in reporting some evidence that non-state armed groups reduced the use of anti-personnel mines after signing the Deeds of Commitment. International actors are expanding the engagement into more social issues, such as child soldiers, sexual violence, or health matters. But currently, our understanding of the success in international engagement is limited. In all the dozen cases of UN/CAAC action plan cases in the Central African Republic, the Philippines, Sudan, Nepal, and Ivory Coast, some cases such as the Philippines and Nepal were successful in terms of no apparent surge of child soldiering while some child soldiering cases still remain in South Sudan (UN/GA-SC, 2019). Within the Central African Republic, it is notable that anti-Seleka factions used a fewer number of child soldiers, compared to the anti-Balaka faction that did not sign the UN action plans (UN/GA-SC, 2020). Why this variation exists in terms of compliance with international actions, we leave for future research. Such a deeper understanding of how non-violent engagement can bear fruits vis-à-vis violent actors will help us reduce violence and human suffering in conflict-ridden societies around the world.

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<sup>47</sup> In the case of pro-government paramilitary organizations, we expect the government’s gatekeeper role to be prominent and salient due to the government’s incentive to hide their involvement (Bapat, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2014). In the case of terrorist organizations, the ones that control territory, as the Islamic State did at one point (Revkin, 2020), will be applicable in terms of what international actors can or cannot do in terms of engagement activities.

<sup>48</sup> We note that our finding of gatekeeper government is consistent with the peacekeeping literature, which finds militarily strong governments (measured by army size) not consenting to peacekeeping operations (Gilligan and Stedman, 2003; Fortna, 2004).

<sup>49</sup> Granted, the consideration of military advantage might be exclusive to the phenomenon of humanitarian engagement that directly deals with the issues of restraints in conflict behaviors. Such consideration of military aspects might be absent to international organizations, NGOs, or foreign state agencies that simply negotiate access to conflict areas to do their aid work, for instance.

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