



USIP SENIOR STUDY GROUP FINAL REPORT

China's Role in Myanmar's Internal Conflicts



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This report is the first in the Senior Study Groups (SSGs) series that USIP is convening to examine China's influence on conflict dynamics around the world. A group of thirteen experts met from February to June 2018 to assess China's involvement in Myanmar's internal conflicts, particularly those in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan states, as well as China's impact on Myanmar's overall peace process. This report draws in part on previous research commissioned and published by USIP, including *China and Myanmar's Peace Process*, by Yun Sun; *Understanding China's Response to the Rakhine Crisis*, by Adrienne Joy; *Burma's Northern Shan State and Prospects for Peace*, by David Scott Mathieson; and *Reframing the Crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, by Gabrielle Aron. Unless otherwise sourced, all observations and conclusions are those of SSG members or of expert guests at SSG meetings.

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CONTENTS

Preface	2
Executive Summary	4
Historical Overview	10
China's Interests in Myanmar	16
The Nationwide Peace Process and Conflict in Kachin and Shan States	22
The Rohingya Crisis and Conflict in Rakhine State	30
Conclusion	34

Preface

»» **China has begun to confront, if not navigate, conflict-laden conditions in fragile countries worldwide. Myanmar is one of those states.**

As China becomes more assertive internationally, it increasingly projects its economic and strategic influence across its periphery and beyond. Through such projects as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's reach is global and touching nations on every continent at every stage of national development. In the process, it has begun to confront, if not navigate, conflict-laden conditions in fragile countries worldwide.

Myanmar, also known as Burma, is one of those states. China has long had a complex relationship with this nation along its southwest border. At the crossroads of South and East Asia, its extensive coastline stretching along the Bay of Bengal, Myanmar offers China an outlet to the Indian Ocean and access to strategic and potentially lucrative new trade routes. Massively underdeveloped, Myanmar presents boundless opportunities for Chinese economic development and infrastructure projects, as well as the potential projection of Chinese strategic influence into the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean.

Myanmar's long-standing internal conflicts, however, have obstructed development and dangerously destabilized the region. The Rohingya crisis in Rakhine State has produced some one million refugees who have fled into Bangladesh,

leading to charges of ethnic cleansing against Myanmar security forces. Fighting between the Myanmar military and armed ethnic groups—heightened by systemic violence, injustice, and inequality—continues, fueled by illicit resource trade and human trafficking, both of which flourish in areas where governance and security are weak. Such activity has flared in recent years, particularly in the north of the country and especially along the Myanmar-China border.

As a result, China has become a central external player in both Myanmar’s peace process and internal affairs in general. How Beijing—and neighboring Yunnan Province—engages Myanmar will have substantial impact on the ongoing transition there, and thus on long-standing US interests in a stable, secure, peaceful, just, and democratic Myanmar able to maintain its sovereign independence.

That, in short, is the reason for this study—the first in a series on China to be conducted by USIP. Myanmar’s location makes the country a unique case, particularly in regard to US-China cooperation. It is well known that China harbors a singular sensitivity to Western activity along its extensive border. We believe this study offers a window into themes of Chinese foreign policy and national interest globally. We further believe it essential to not ignore the potential impact of great power cooperation—or competition—on Myanmar’s pursuit of peace, the achievement of which will reverberate positively throughout Asia.

Any consideration of supporting peace in Myanmar, however, must have the approval and support of Myanmar’s people. It is in their hands that the promise of peace, justice, and democracy lie. We offer this report as a contribution to them and to their dreams of peace.

Derek Mitchell
President, National Democratic Institute

Daniel Twining
President, International Republican Institute

»» REPORT ABBREVIATIONS

AA Arakan Army	FPNCC Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee	NDA Shan State East National Democratic Alliance Association
ABSDF All Burma Students’ Democratic Front	KIA/KIO Kachin Independence Army/Organization	NLD National League for Democracy
ALP Arakan Liberation Party	KNU Karen National Union	NMSP New Mon State Party
ARSA Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army	KPC Karen National Liberation Army—Peace Council	PLA(N) People’s Liberation Army (Navy)
BCP Burma Communist Party	LDU Lahu Democratic Union	PNLO Pa-O National Liberation Organization
BRI Belt and Road Initiative	MNDAA Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army	RCSS Restoration Council of Shan State
CNF Chin National Front	NCA Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement	SSA Shan State Army—North
DKBA Democratic Karen Benevolent Army		TNLA Ta’ang National Liberation Army
EAO Ethnic armed organizations		UWSA United Wa State Army

Executive Summary

Since gaining its independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Myanmar (also known as Burma) has faced ethnic division and conflict.¹ For decades, an array of ethnic political movements and their armed wings have sought political, economic, cultural, and social rights as protection against domination by (majority) Burman authorities, even as the Myanmar military (the Tatmadaw) has asserted that its mission is to ensure the country's sovereign independence, territorial integrity, and unity. Majority-minority ethnic relations and the distribution of power and resources have been the most serious problems since independence. Achieving mutual trust and a system of governance agreeable to all of Myanmar's diverse peoples are the country's defining challenges.

In northern Myanmar near the Chinese border, fighting between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups has increased despite efforts to advance a comprehensive peace process that gained momentum under the Thein Sein government beginning in 2011. A Nationwide Cease-fire Agreement (NCA) was signed by eight groups in October 2015, but most of the larger groups abstained, including those along Myanmar's border with China. Under the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, progress has been slow: the peace process has stalled, confidence in it has fallen, and violence has increased, particularly in Kachin and northern Shan states along the Chinese border. Divisions between NCA signatories and nonsignatories have grown, the divide roughly corresponding to whether a group is located on the India or Thai border (signatories) or China border (nonsignatories). Several nonsignatory groups formed the Northern Alliance to strengthen their military and political power.



The Myanmar military's commander-in-chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing (front left), State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi (front center), and government and ethnic leaders pose for a photo after the opening ceremony of the 21st Century Panglong conference in Naypyidaw, August 31, 2016. (Photo by Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

Driven by security concerns, economic interests, and a desire for political influence in a country with which it shares a 1,500-mile border, China is playing a key role in Myanmar's internal security and peace process. Armed clashes between Myanmar's military and ethnic armed groups along the Myanmar-China border occasionally spill into China. The Chinese province of Yunnan has sheltered tens of thousands of refugees during periods of intense fighting in Myanmar. In 2013, China designated a special envoy, selected from among its most seasoned diplomats, to serve as lead point of contact and formal observer to Myanmar's peace talks. This envoy, who changed in 2015, remains an important player in facilitating talks between the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the Myanmar government.

China has also come to the defense of the Myanmar government over the crisis in Rakhine State to the west, where the Tatmadaw has carried out a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing, if not genocide, against the mostly Muslim Rohingya population. China has protected Myanmar from sanctions at the United Nations and has offered rhetorical and material support for its handling of the so-called terrorist attacks.² Furthermore, China has extensive economic interests in Rakhine, including a major port at Kyaukphyu, a planned special economic zone (SEZ), and a road, rail, and pipeline network to move energy and other materials and supplies from the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar to Yunnan Province.

Map 1. Myanmar's Border with China



For its part, the United States has long supported Myanmar's reform process but has had a limited role in the peace process. This is in part—though by no means entirely—due to China's explicit opposition to US engagement, particularly in areas along the Chinese border, and general concern about US influence in Myanmar. Myanmar will serve as the ultimate arbiter of any US involvement in its affairs. Nonetheless, assessing China's role in and perspectives toward Myanmar's internal conflicts may offer important insights into overall conflict dynamics inside the country and help inform potential US peace-support policies going forward.

Observations

China has set aside its stated adherence to the principle of noninterference to become more proactively and assertively involved in Myanmar's peace process. It has made efforts to be directly involved in the primary conflict issues Myanmar faces and has sought to shape the decisions and choices of Myanmar's various players. It has offered itself as a mediator in the conflict and pressured nonsignatory groups along its border to attend successive Union-level dialogues in Naypyidaw. As indicated, it has sought to limit the involvement of third countries (including the United States) in the peace process, despite the desire of several Myanmar groups for broader international engagement. In response to the Rohingya crisis, China has proposed principles and a process for resolution, and offered, unsuccessfully, to mediate between Myanmar and Bangladesh to resolve their disputes.

Myanmar considers China's engagement to be constructive overall. Both government-affiliated and unofficial interlocutors, including those from ethnic groups, commented that China's involvement in peace has not been unduly obstructive or harmful to the process to date. They note that Myanmar's government has alternately resisted and welcomed China's involvement as long as China helps promote Naypyidaw's goals. Ethnic groups have responded similarly, although those along the border have few options but to accede to Chinese pressure.

Myanmar harbors questions about China's ultimate motives, however. Myanmar observers have remarked that China ultimately benefits from neither hot war nor complete peace. Beijing seeks a reduction of fighting along its border to safeguard stability, maintain cross-border economic ties, and mitigate refugee flows. Cessation of fighting more broadly, including in Rakhine State, allows for its investments to proceed unobstructed, including strategic infrastructure projects linking Myanmar—and the Indian Ocean—to China under its Belt and Road Initiative and China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.

At the same time, genuine peace risks China's strategic position in the country. Continued friction between central authorities and border populations provides Beijing a major source of influence over Naypyidaw. That leverage may be used, among other things, to prevent “unwelcome” influence of the United States in the country and thus the region. Genuine sustained peace also would weaken China's influence over ethnic nationalities, particularly along the border. That includes the Wa people, who speak Chinese, trade in Chinese currency, and receive substantial

»» **The Rohingya crisis has provided China an opportunity to reestablish its primacy among Myanmar’s foreign relationships, attract popular support in Myanmar, and assert its leadership in regional affairs.**

support from China to maintain the thirty-thousand-person Wa army and political autonomy. Because China does not expect that real peace is possible for the foreseeable future, it calculates little cost to its generally constructive, if interested, role in Myanmar’s peace process.

China has demonstrated little interest in coordinating peace-support efforts with others. Successive Myanmar governments have sought to ensure the international community is coordinated in its support of the peace process. Ethnic groups have likewise sought united support for the goal of peace with justice. Although many mechanisms have been established to ensure such coordination, China has been notably absent from them. Beijing worked side by side with the United Nations as an official observer of the process under the Thein Sein government, but since 2012 has continued to operate independently—and opaquely—to help Myanmar address its internal challenges.

The Rohingya crisis has provided China an opportunity to reestablish its primacy among Myanmar’s foreign relationships, attract popular support in Myanmar, and assert its leadership in regional affairs. As Naypyidaw’s handling of the Rohingya crisis has strained its relations with the United States and other Western countries, China has buffered Myanmar from international pressure and taken steps to protect Myanmar from criticism and punitive actions in the United Nations Security Council. Beijing seeks to use its pro-government position on the Rohingya issue to win Naypyidaw’s support for China’s political and economic interests throughout the country, including development of the Kyaukphyu port and SEZ in Rakhine State.

Private actors within China and outside official control also contribute to conflict, including illicit cross-border trade and mercenary services. Largely illicit Chinese entities that traffic in Myanmar’s natural resources often act in concert with corrupt officials in the Myanmar government, military, and EAOs to fuel conflict in Kachin and Shan states. As a result, Chinese business actors provide revenue to conflict actors on both sides and help sustain Myanmar’s civil war. Chinese citizens, including retired People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers, have reportedly sold their services as mercenaries for EAOs. There is no indication that officials in Beijing support, let alone sponsor, such activity.

China has strengthened central direction over Myanmar policy in the past decade, ensuring improved coordination and control of the diplomatic, military, and economic aspects of its relationship with Myanmar. In the past, Yunnan actors have tried to exploit vague central government directives on cross-border activity. However, Beijing has put Yunnan provincial authorities on a tighter leash, largely in response to crises along the border. It has also reduced the space previously accorded Yunnan’s provincial leadership in the Sino-Burmese relationship.

Even as Beijing strengthens ties with Myanmar's government and military, a number of domestic factors will continue to constrain Chinese influence in the country. Myanmar, like other countries in Southeast Asia, seeks to avoid overreliance on any single country and to maintain a balance of power among large countries to enable it to maximize its leverage and defend against undue external influence in its affairs. Myanmar particularly worries about Chinese influence because of China's size, power, and proximity, as well as the way China's economic development projects have been carried out without due consideration for the well-being of Myanmar's population and ecology. At the same time, Myanmar admires China's rapid economic development, wants to benefit from Chinese trade and investment, and recognizes that geography is destiny and thus Myanmar must maintain a constructive relationship with its neighbor to secure its own long-term stability and development.

Recommendations

The United States should continue to support the complete and timely implementation of the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State (the "Annan Commission") report in 2017. Among other things, the report's recommendations called for citizenship verification, freedom of movement, and access to livelihoods for the Rohingya, and socioeconomic border security and socioeconomic development more broadly in Rakhine State.³ In the process, the US government should consider ways to both apply pressure and appropriately engage the Myanmar military in a way that empowers democratic institutions in Myanmar, moves toward resolution of the Rakhine crisis, and continues the progress of reform inside the country.

The US government should seek more open dialogue with Beijing about respective peace-support activities to avoid attitudes that could complicate an already difficult peace process and resolution of the Rakhine crisis.

At the same time, the United States should encourage China to support implementation of the recommendations of the Advisory Commission, and to participate in broader international aid coordination initiatives related to the peace process and Rakhine State to maximize efficiency and improve effectiveness. That would require China to avoid viewing the United States and other nations' engagement in Myanmar in zero-sum terms.

The US government should also encourage Beijing to be more transparent about its peace strategy and engagement with various players, including ethnic armed organizations along its border. In the process, China should avoid any actions or policies that obstruct or inhibit furtherance of peace inside Myanmar due to narrow consideration of its own national interests.

Finally, The US government should encourage Beijing to develop a framework for responsible investment in Myanmar's conflict areas that takes into account the concerns of local communities and minimizes the potential to fuel conflict.

Historical Overview

Myanmar’s approach to China reflects its historical suspicion of big powers and its desire to fiercely protect its national sovereignty. Its geographic location between India and China and its experience over the centuries of foreign invasion, colonization, and political pressure from various countries have made Burmese leaders wary of foreign intentions and fearful of their country’s becoming a pawn of foreign powers.

Sharing a 1,500-mile land border, China and Burma have been inextricably linked for centuries through politics, war, bloodlines, and commerce. From the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty in the late thirteenth century through the Qing dynasty in the 1760s, China repeatedly attempted to conquer Burma, yet geographical obstacles such as mountain ranges and rivers proved unsuitable for large-scale military action.⁴ The two sides signed a peace treaty in 1769, and Burma had loose tributary ties to China until the British colonized it in 1885.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China and Burma increased contact via borderland horse caravans, rebels, and refugees that moved between Yunnan and northern Burma as a result of ongoing wars in China and expanded bilateral trade.⁵ Chinese immigration to Burma increased during the colonial period, as it did in many Southeast Asian states. As a result, many of the same ethnic groups in Burma also are in China, and the border creates opportunities for smuggling, illegal activities, and investment that strongly affect Sino-Burmese relations today.

During World War II, the Republic of China allied itself with the United States, the United Kingdom, and other allied powers, dispatching an expeditionary force into Burma to aid the British troops against the invading Japanese forces. The China-Burma-India theater became the Achilles’ heel of Japan’s occupation of mainland China. This large Chinese military presence during World War II, followed by



A sign on a bridge on the China-Myanmar border warns people not to cross, January 2009. (Photo by Ben Blanchard/Reuters)

the retreat of the Chinese Nationalist, or Kuomintang, forces into Burma after losing the Chinese Civil War in 1949, complicated relations between Burma and China. In the early 1950s, Burma suspended a US economic aid program for several years over CIA aid to the remnant Kuomintang forces.⁶

The decolonization of the British Raj after World War II gave birth to the independent nations of India and Pakistan in 1947 and Burma in 1948.⁷ The delineation of the borders between these new(ly identified) nations created tensions that are still unresolved. The most pressing concern for Burma is that the lines drawn in 1947 and 1948 meant that hundreds of thousands of Bengali-speaking Muslims, later known as Rohingya, remained in Rakhine, and that communities with similar demographics found themselves citizens of East Pakistan, which in 1971 became independent Bangladesh.⁸

Postcolonial Burma was among the first noncommunist countries to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC) following its establishment in October 1949. Burma and China established official diplomatic relations in 1950, and the Yangon government coined the term *pauk phaw* to describe the friendly (*fraternal*) relationship between the two countries.⁹ In 1960, Burma and China peacefully demarcated the colonial border that previous Chinese governments had refused to

»» **In the 1990s through the 2000s, China used its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council to shield Myanmar from international condemnation and sanctions.**

recognize, both sides ceding some territory to the other. China agreed to this in part to demonstrate internationally that it was not an aggressive state.¹⁰

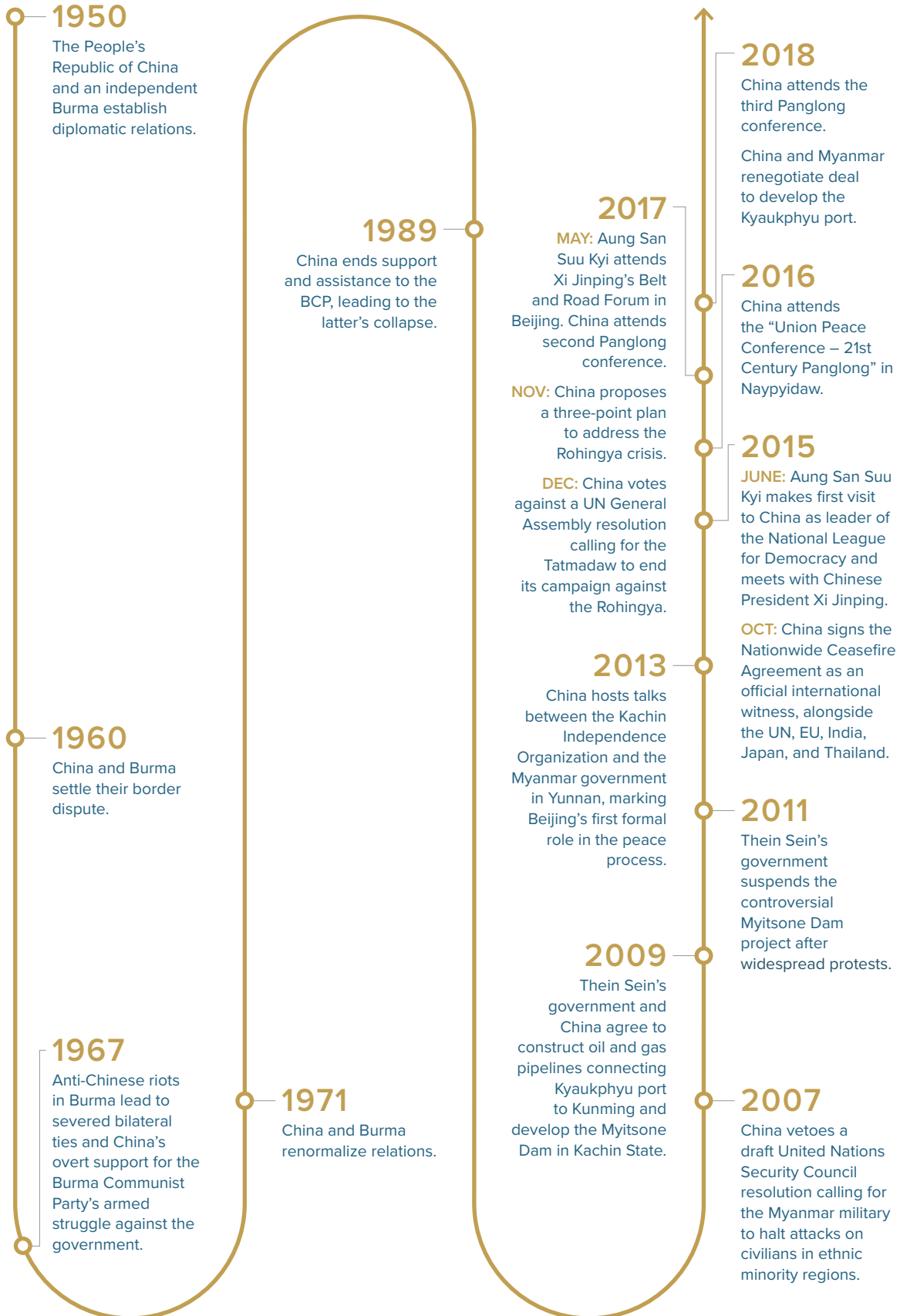
The expulsion of Chinese communities from Burma in the early 1960s under General Ne Win and the anti-Chinese riots in 1967 during the early stage of Mao's Cultural Revolution generated hostility in both countries.¹¹ In the aftermath of the riots, Beijing severed bilateral ties and began overtly supporting the armed struggle of the Burma Communist Party (BCP) against the Burma government; it viewed party-to-party relations as different from state-to-state relations.¹² The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) provided financial, military, and personnel support for the BCP to help it establish a "liberated area" of more than twenty thousand square kilometers along the shared border in Shan State.¹³

China's active support for the BCP is just one example of China's support for similar communist party-led insurgencies in virtually every Southeast Asian country.¹⁴ After Deng Xiaoping came back to power in 1978, he severed all these ties—except the CCP's relationship with the BCP. In 1989, China finally ceased its assistance to the BCP, leading to the latter's collapse, but has maintained relationships with former BCP splinter groups. Chinese support for the BCP is not forgotten within today's Tatmadaw, many of whose senior leaders fought the BCP insurgency and their Chinese allies in their youth.

Nevertheless, in the 1990s, China-Myanmar relations improved. Nearly two-thirds of the Myanmar army, navy, and air force personnel sent abroad for training between 1990 and 1999 received training in China.¹⁵ In return, the Tatmadaw offered China access to natural resources in Myanmar's remote areas, especially Kachin State, and Myanmar's generals profited from Chinese investments. China was interested in opening the border for trade and extracting natural resources to fuel its own economic development, particularly in southwestern Yunnan Province.

China's relations with Myanmar also improved following their respective crackdowns on political reform movements in the late 1980s that resulted in the international isolation of both. China supplied Myanmar with military assistance that was no longer available from Western countries and pursued broad military cooperation with the military government. Since the late 1980s, China has been a major supplier of military hardware to Myanmar, providing more than 90 percent of its military transport.¹⁶ China's military sales also include anti-ship cruise missiles, targeting radar, naval guns, and corvettes.¹⁷ Myanmar bought \$1.4 billion in arms from China between 2000 and 2016, approximately \$1 billion since 2011, when Thein Sein became president.¹⁸ China also used its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council to shield Myanmar from international condemnation and sanctions in the 1990s through the 2000s.

Figure 1. Timeline of Contemporary China-Myanmar Relations



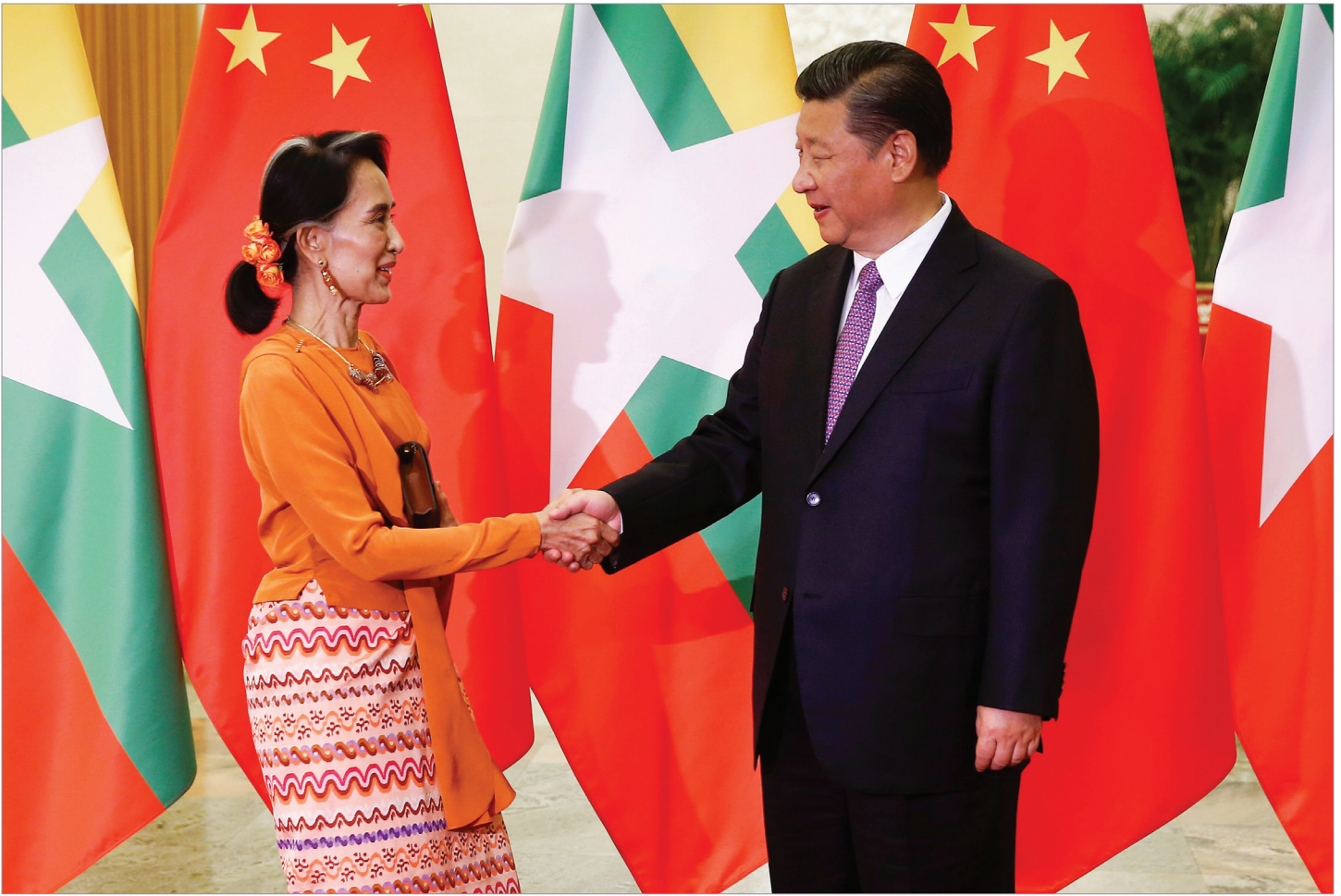
»» Today, Beijing is bolstering relations with both the government Aung San Suu Kyi and the military because it recognizes that it needs the acquiescence of both to achieve its interests in Myanmar.

A shift in China's approach to Myanmar took place after 2011 as Myanmar began to transition from military rule toward an elected civilian government and China found that it could no longer rely on its strong relationship with the military to protect its dominant position in the country. Chinese leaders shifted their engagement to the quasi-civilian government of President U Thein Sein, who was also a former prime minister and a general. They were shocked, however, when in September 2011 he suspended construction of the Chinese-financed Myit-sone dam project in Kachin State following protests by local residents and others across the country.¹⁹ Coupled with more protests against Chinese-backed mines and factories in Myanmar, the Myitsone suspension underscored the risks to China of relying on relations solely with one set of actors in Myanmar, such as the military or the Thein Sein government, to protect their interests. Accordingly, Chinese policymakers sought to diversify China's engagement and embarked on a multilayered engagement strategy to improve relations and its public image in Myanmar, including outreach to the NLD, other opposition parties, and the public.²⁰

China's Relations with the NLD and the Tatmadaw

Today, Beijing is bolstering relations with both the NLD government and the Tatmadaw because it recognizes that it needs the acquiescence of both to achieve its interests in Myanmar. When the NLD government won the 2015 elections in a landslide, Chinese observers worried that China-Myanmar relations would weaken under the new leadership because Aung San Suu Kyi appeared to be more open to the West. Beijing was at first fearful of her because, among other things, she had been educated in India and in Britain and had strong ties in the West. In response to improved relations between Myanmar and the United States, Chinese authorities worked to restore China's close relations with Myanmar, appointing a high-level special envoy for Asian affairs to concentrate on Myanmar.

When the NLD took office, the Chinese mounted an aggressive campaign to strengthen ties between Beijing and Naypyidaw. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was the first foreign counterpart to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi in her capacity as foreign minister, and Xi Jinping has continued to court her since. In fact, Aung San Suu Kyi has made several trips to China since taking office. Chinese officials opened multiple channels of communication with the NLD and maintained a strong interest in the peace talks launched in 2011 with ethnic armed forces



State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi shakes hands with President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, May 16, 2017. (Photo by Damir Sagolj/Reuters)

along the border. The Chinese government also courts Myanmar citizens through diplomatic outreach and “soft power” study tours, and this pattern of Chinese engagement has increased after the onset of the Rakhine crisis in 2017.

Beijing has also made efforts to strengthen its military-to-military relationship with the Tatmadaw, continuing to enhance contacts and increase training and technical exchanges between China’s and Myanmar’s armed forces. In May 2017, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted its first joint exercises, including communications and search and rescue, with the Myanmar navy. Chinese navy ships visited Myanmar in what is seen as an important milestone in the projection of Chinese naval power into the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean.²¹ Amid ongoing fighting along the China-Myanmar border, Beijing is also seeking ways to improve cooperation on border management.²² The Tatmadaw, however, does not want to be solely dependent on China and has cultivated military ties with—and purchased weapons from—Russia, India, and Israel, among other countries.

China's Interests in Myanmar

Beijing has several clear strategic interests in Myanmar: stability on its shared border, access to the Indian Ocean, and a wide variety of economic interests.

STABILITY ON THE BORDER

China is keenly focused on maintaining security and stability along its porous border with Myanmar. Refugees fleeing conflict in Myanmar have sought safety in China, and continued violence on the Myanmar side of the border threatens China's commercial interests and the security of Chinese citizens living in both countries. In August 2009, for instance, fighting between the Kokang army, known as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Tatmadaw drove more than thirty-seven thousand refugees into Yunnan.²³ During MNDAA clashes with the military in 2015, Myanmar warplanes dropped bombs that hit China's side of the border, killing five Chinese citizens.²⁴ In March 2017, two Chinese citizens on the Myanmar side of the border were killed during clashes.²⁵

At the same time, continued conflict has facilitated drug and human trafficking, resource smuggling, and other illicit activity along their common border. It has also prevented effective responses to emerging health challenges, including drug-resistant malaria, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases.²⁶

ACCESS TO INDIAN OCEAN

Myanmar's lengthy coastline along the Bay of Bengal is integral to China's efforts to secure multiple points of access to the Indian Ocean.²⁷ This access is critical for enhancing trade and interregional economic connectivity, supporting Chinese naval activities, and furthering China's objectives. Myanmar's Kyaukphyu port project on the Bay of Bengal can reduce the shipping costs of imported goods and oil from Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, to inland Chinese provinces.²⁸ China has



China's People's Liberation Army Navy vessel Zhenghe on a goodwill visit to Myanmar, May 23, 2014. (Photo by Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

long coveted such a direct outlet to the Indian Ocean. But Chinese investment in Myanmar's ports is unlikely to lead to a permanent Chinese military presence there, given that Myanmar's 2008 constitution prohibits the presence of foreign troops on its territory.²⁹ Nevertheless, Myanmar experts and officials have raised concerns that Myanmar risks falling into a debt trap over the project, citing the case of the Hambantota port, which Sri Lanka handed over to China on a ninety-nine-year lease in 2017. This, they say, is what could happen were Myanmar to default on its debt repayments.³⁰

ECONOMIC INTERESTS

China also has significant economic interests in Myanmar, particularly in the resource-rich northern areas. For decades, China has been investing in, extracting, and importing natural resources, including jade, lumber, metals, and oil. Bilateral trade totaled \$10.8 billion in fiscal year 2016–2017, according to Myanmar's official statistics, the bulk of it passing through Muse and other border towns in northern Myanmar into Yunnan.³¹ Trade with Myanmar is particularly important for Yunnan: although it is less than 1 percent of China's total trade volume, it accounts for 24 percent of Yunnan's.³² Myanmar is thus important to Yunnan's economic growth, and Yunnan is both one of China's poorest provinces and a key priority in the PRC's national development plans.

Map 2. China's Trans-Myanmar Oil and Gas Pipelines





Logs on the Yangon River, July 2015. (Photo by Ye Aung Thu/AFP/Getty Images)

China is also a market for illicit cross-border trade in drugs, logging, wildlife, charcoal, jade, and other gems. Transnational organized crime actors from China are known to have been “deeply and intimately involved” in these illegal economies for decades.³³ Neither government provides figures for illicit cross-border trade, but both acknowledge it.³⁴ Chinese actors have been accused of fueling conflict in northern Myanmar by engaging in natural resource extraction and other economic projects in the conflict area, thereby generating revenue for Myanmar’s various conflict actors. Local communities have also criticized what they perceive to be Chinese exploitation of Myanmar’s resources, which has led to not only economic but also environmental concerns.³⁵ Chinese hydropower developers, alongside Thai companies, have proposed a number of dams in ethnic areas of Myanmar, including a cascade of dam projects on the Thanlwin (Salween) River, that are currently on hold but have contributed to mistrust between the government and locals over environmental concerns and social impacts.

Myanmar is a key element of China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. Several BRI projects are slated for Myanmar, including the East-West and North-South road corridors. Other proposed road projects would provide transport infrastructure to areas of the Irrawaddy River Basin and



Shipping containers in Yangon, May 2016. (Photo by Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

surrounding mountain areas. During Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to Beijing in December 2017, President Xi urged her to consider the construction of a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor to further advance bilateral ties. Chinese state-run media reported that Aun Sang Suu Kyi agreed to China's proposal, but it is not yet clear whether the proposed corridor will amount to anything more than a slogan for projects already under way.³⁶ Earlier, China had proposed a rail project from Kyaukphyu in Rakhine State to Kunming (Yunnan's capital), but the project was suspended in 2014.

One of China's key strategic moves in Myanmar is its plan to construct a deepwater port at Kyaukphyu on the Indian Ocean. The Kyaukphyu deep-sea port in the Bay of Bengal, a \$7.3 billion project, is an important entry point for the China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines and other commercial activity to fuel the development of China's southwest. In 2015, a consortium led by Chinese developer CITIC won bids to develop the port and an attached industrial park, but the deal was suspended. China is now seeking a 70 percent stake in the port, but renegotiation of the agreement is not yet finalized.³⁷

Chinese companies have also invested in twin oil and gas pipelines to bring crude oil from the Middle East and Africa and natural gas from offshore Myanmar to Kunming for consumption in China. Myanmar, which has proven reserves of twenty-three trillion cubic feet of natural gas, is an important regional source of gas for China.³⁸ In 2009, the Thein Sein government and China agreed to construct a 690-mile crude oil pipeline and 1,123-mile natural gas pipeline worth a total of \$5 billion to connect Kunming to the Indian Ocean via Kyaukphyu port.³⁹ The China-Myanmar oil and natural gas pipelines, running parallel inside Myanmar, start near Kyaukphyu port and run through Mandalay, Lashio, and Muse (the second two are in northern Shan State) before entering China at the border city of Ruili in Yunnan Province. The oil pipeline was completed in 2014 but did not begin operations until April 2017 because of delays over the Myanmar government's request that China pay an extra crude oil tax.⁴⁰ These overland systems through Myanmar will transport 5 percent of China's oil imports and 6 percent of its natural gas imports and allow China to avoid the Strait of Malacca, the key oil shipping chokepoint in Southeast Asia.⁴¹

GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS

China's geostrategic interests lead it to seek privileged access and influence inside Myanmar and to diminish influence of Western countries, particularly the United States, and especially along Myanmar's border with China. In early 2016, for instance, the newly arrived PRC ambassador repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) urged the US ambassador not to travel to Kachin or eastern parts of Shan states because the United States "should respect China's interests"—implying that China deserved to have predominant presence and influence in these areas, if not elsewhere in Myanmar, regardless of the wishes or interests of Myanmar, let alone the interests of other countries.

»» INDIA'S INTERESTS IN MYANMAR

India sees itself as competing with China for influence in Myanmar. Viewing Myanmar as part of its sphere of influence, India feels threatened by China's penetration of Myanmar and increasing naval presence in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. India and Myanmar, once a single territory under British colonial rule, share deep historical ties, democratic institutions, familial linkages, and more recently a common objective of preventing China from becoming the regional hegemon. India is also concerned about its northeast and Myanmar's Naga minority, which has had relations with Indian Naga insurgents and has often operated out of bases inside Myanmar. However, informed observers argue that India is punching below its weight and underperforming in Myanmar. This is primarily because Indian policymakers have not paid enough attention to Myanmar, and Indian trade and investment in Myanmar pale in comparison to those of China.

The Nationwide Peace Process and Conflict in Kachin and Shan States

Fighting in Kachin and Shan states—the northern borderlands near China—has thwarted progress on a nationwide peace process. The current-day peace process began in 2011 under Thein Sein’s quasi-civilian government. Over the following several years, the government negotiated the multilateral Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, which was signed by eight of twenty-one ethnic armed groups on October 15, 2015. After coming to power in 2016, the NLD government took over the peace process and made it its signature initiative, hosting three 21st Century Panglong peace conferences in Naypyidaw, in 2016, 2017, and 2018. In February 2018, after the first two meetings concluded, two more EAOs signed the NCA. Through that peace process, the signatories and representatives from the Myanmar military, parliament, political parties, and civil society have met to discuss a range of political, social, economic, and security issues, the goal being to reach an accord that supported durable peace with all ethnic groups.

Many of the groups that have signed the NCA are from Myanmar’s eastern and western borders with Thailand, India, or Bangladesh. Most of the nonsignatory groups are from the northern border with China, in particular Kachin and northern Shan states.⁴² Here, fighting has intensified, leaving some one hundred thousand people displaced as of April 2018.⁴³

In Kachin State, the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) have been fighting since a seventeen-year ceasefire agreement collapsed in 2011. In 2018, the Tatmadaw has



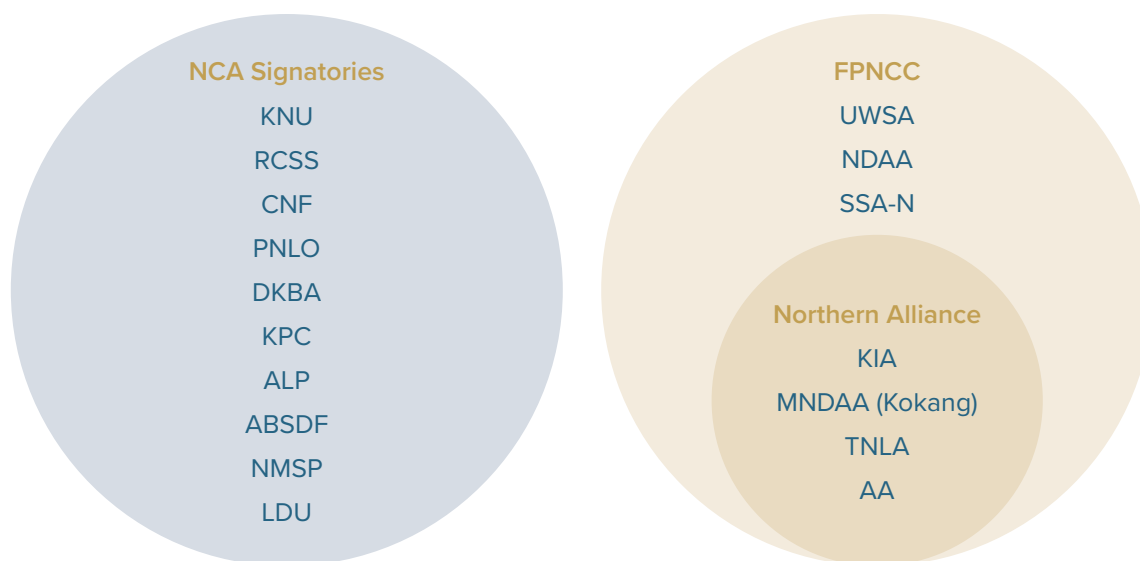
Attendees pose for a picture after the signing ceremony of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Naypyidaw, October 15, 2015.
(Photo by Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

stepped up attacks on KIA positions in Kachin State, an upsurge in conflict that has sparked antiwar protests in Myanmar.

The conflict in neighboring northern Shan State is more complex. Following the breakdown of the KIA ceasefire, KIA base areas became hubs for the formation or remobilization of other ethnic armed groups that have expanded their operations into northern Shan State.⁴⁴ Here, the Tatmadaw is currently fighting the KIA and three of its allies—the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the Arakan Army (AA), which together form the Northern Alliance.⁴⁵

This northern coalition has also joined with other groups from Shan State that are not currently engaged in fighting with the military to form the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC). Under the leadership of the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the FPNCC is the mechanism through which these groups engage in discussions with the government's peace process representatives. The incorporation of the FPNCC bloc, which currently rejects the NCA, into a national peace process is key to any long-term resolution of conflict in northern Myanmar.⁴⁶

Figure 2. Ethnic Armed Organizations



Note: Some English-language Myanmar media outlets use the name Northern Alliance as a shorthand for the FPNCC, but officially the two groups do not have the same member organizations: three FPNCC members are not members of the Northern Alliance.

As China engages with each of the groups in this complex conflict scenario, its actions are equally complex and at times seemingly contradictory. Beijing supports the Myanmar government and its peace process, but at the same time provides shelter, weapons, and other assistance to some of the ethnic armed organizations.

China's Role in Myanmar's Peace Process

Despite Beijing's professed commitment to the principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries, China has had both direct and indirect influence on conflict and peace dynamics in northern Myanmar. After the Tatmadaw launched airstrikes against KIA positions around its headquarters in Laiza on the Chinese border in December 2012 and three bombs landed on Chinese territory, thousands of Kachin refugees crossed the border into Yunnan. As a result, China's special envoy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Vice Minister Fu Ying, visited Myanmar to meet with President Thein Sein in December 2012 and January 2013. China hosted several rounds of talks between the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and Myanmar government representatives in the border town of Ruili in Yunnan Province. Naypyidaw rejected China's offer to mediate the dispute as an inappropriate intrusion into Myanmar's internal affairs, but allowed China's special envoy, along with the UN envoy, to observe the broader array of bilateral and multilateral peace talks in ensuing years. China signed the NCA in October 2015 as an official international witness, alongside the UN, the EU, India, Japan, and Thailand.

As scholar Yun Sun notes, China's participation in peace talks with the Kachin marked a policy shift in response to China's rising concerns about border stability.⁴⁷ Prior to 2012, Beijing was concerned that any direct involvement would be seen by Naypyidaw as unwelcome interference in its internal affairs. Yet as hostilities resumed in Kachin State and disrupted stability along the border area, Beijing faced increased domestic pressure to act.⁴⁸

China and the Panglong Conferences

On occasion, China has actively pressured EAOs to engage in dialogue with the government. In advance of all three 21st Century Panglong peace conferences, China's Special Envoy Sun Guoxiang played a key role in urging EAOs to attend the meetings, including groups engaged in fighting with the Tatmadaw and opposed to the NCA on which the conferences are based. In an unprecedented show of shuttle diplomacy in May 2017, Sun met in Yunnan with ethnic armed groups from the FPNCC, urged them to attend the conference, and then flew them from Kunming to Naypyidaw on a chartered Chinese plane.⁴⁹ Many of the representatives of the ethnic armed groups reported that they attended solely because China had pressured them to do so. After one day, however, frustrated KIA and UWSA representatives walked out. Despite the walkout, their attendance demonstrated that China could exercise enough influence to persuade even the groups least invested in the peace conferences to attend, though Beijing could not control their decisions once there.

More recently, China helped arrange travel for Northern Alliance members, who flew from Kunming to Naypyidaw, accompanied by Sun, to attend the third conference in July 2018.⁵⁰ Sun, who had urged the Northern Alliance to attend, was also present at the meetings in Naypyidaw.⁵¹

»» THE KACHIN INDEPENDENCE ARMY

The Kachin Independence Army, Myanmar's second largest ethnic army, boasts an estimated ten thousand troops and another ten thousand reserve forces.^a A predominantly Christian ethnic minority, the Kachin are related to the Jingpo (Jingpaw) ethnic minority in China. The KIA battled the Tatmadaw for autonomy until KIA leaders agreed to a ceasefire with the Burmese government in 1994. This ceasefire remained in place for seventeen years but fell apart in June 2011 after the Tatmadaw launched a major military offensive against the KIA. In 2018, the Tatmadaw stepped up attacks on KIA positions in Kachin State, seeking to reduce the KIA's area of operations and wrest control over the jade, gold, and other mines that generate profits for the group. In 2017, shortly after a meeting in Wa territory, the KIA left the United Nationalities Federal Council, an ethnic umbrella organization representing nonsignatory groups in negotiations with the government over the NCA, and joined instead the Wa-led FPNCC, which rejects the NCA.

a. Myanmar Peace Monitor, "KIO," www.mmpeacemonitor.org/stakeholders/armed-ethnic-groups/155-kio.

In addition to facilitating talks, China has also contributed funds to the peace process. In 2017, China donated \$1 million and pledged \$3 million to the government's peace process work, in addition to separate contributions for relief to internally displaced persons.⁵² Because China is not a member of the Joint Peace Fund, an eleven-member grouping of primarily Western donors to the peace process, its contributions are not coordinated through this body, but go directly to the Myanmar government with fewer requirements for accountability.

Chinese Decision Making: Beijing and Yunnan

Much of the day-to-day engagement between China and northern Myanmar has historically been conducted out of neighboring Yunnan. Beijing and Yunnan continue to both play important, yet different, roles on Myanmar issues. Beijing makes national and foreign policies regarding Myanmar that the Yunnan provincial government is expected to implement. Yunnan officials remain a part of decision making on issues related to trade, investments, transnational crime, and other issues that have socioeconomic impact in Yunnan.⁵³

» MYANMAR NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE ARMY

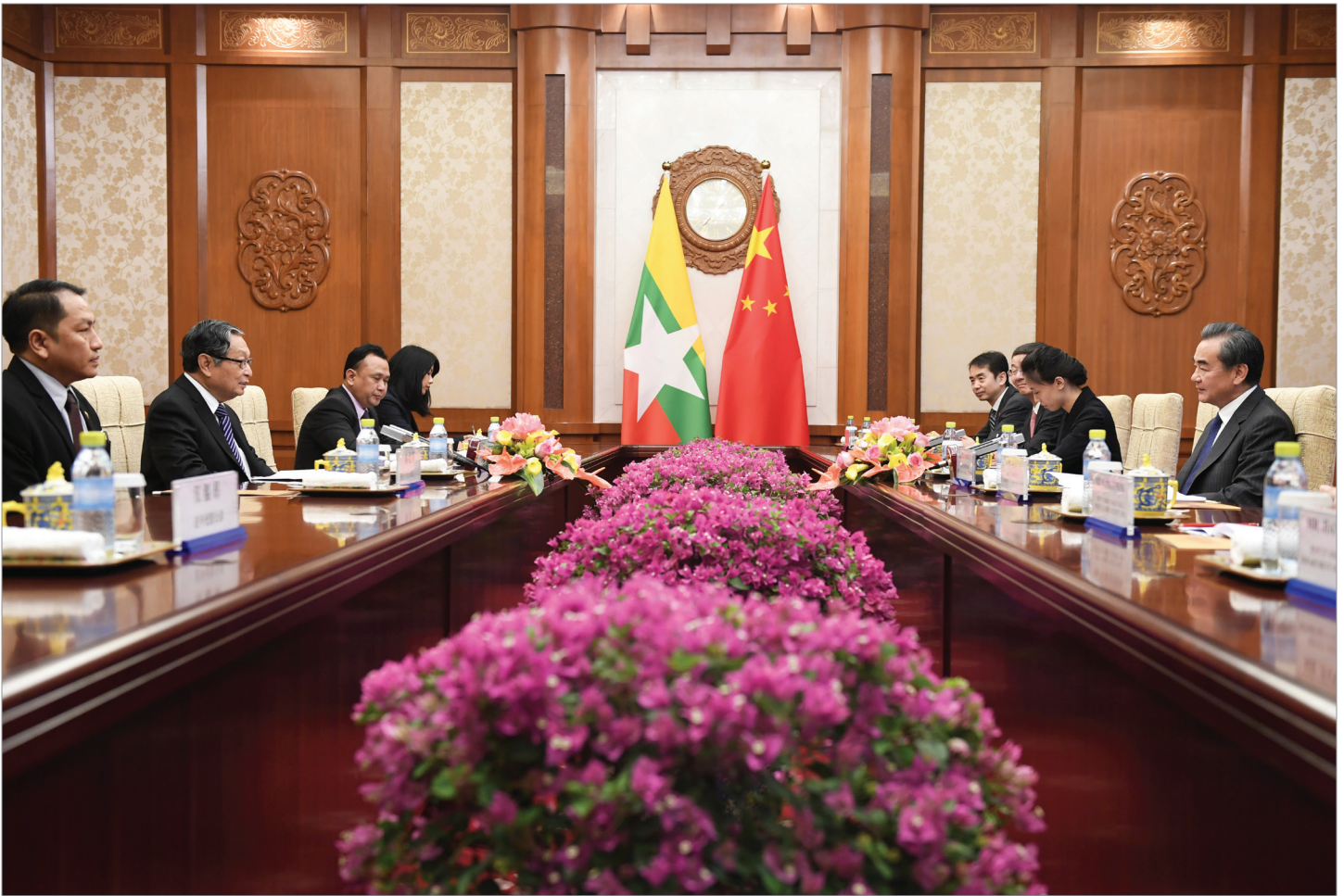
The three-thousand-member Kokang army, known as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, is an ethnic Han Chinese group based in Shan State on the Chinese border and has special ties with China. Following clashes in 2009 with the Tatmadaw, its leader Peng Jiasheng (also known as Phone Kya Shin) spent five years in exile in Yunnan and Thailand before launching new offensives against the Tatmadaw in the Kokang region in 2014 and 2015. Amid the clashes, China reportedly allowed Peng's troops to use Chinese territory to outflank the Tatmadaw; meanwhile, the Myanmar government claimed that the Chinese armed, trained, and financed Kokang fighters.^a In 2015, Myanmar warplanes dropped bombs on China's side of the border, killing five Chinese farmers in Yunnan.^b Chinese netizens reacted strongly to the Tatmadaw's military operations against the Kokang and called on the Chinese government to do more to protect their fellow Han Chinese Kokang.^c In March 2017, fighting drove more than twenty thousand refugees into Yunnan, where local Chinese residents gave them food and other assistance.^d

a. Yun Sun, "China and Myanmar's Peace Process," Special Report no. 401 (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, March 2017), www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR401-China-and-Myanmar-Peace-Process.pdf; *The Economist*, "The Han that Rocked the Cradle," March 12, 2015, www.economist.com/asia/2015/03/12/the-han-that-rock-the-cradle.

b. Reuters, "China Says Myanmar Apologizes for Bombing, Admits Responsibility," April 2, 2015, www.reuters.com/article/us-china-myanmar-idUSKBN-OMTOMA20150402.

c. Enze Han, "Geopolitics, Ethnic Conflicts Along the Border, and Chinese Foreign Policy Changes toward Myanmar," *Asian Security* 13, no. 1 (2017): 67.

d. Yimou Lee and Shwe Yee Saw Myint, "Thousands Flee Myanmar Army Clashes with Insurgents Near China Border, Official Says," Reuters, March 8, 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-insurgency-china-idUSKBN16F0LD; Reuters, "Dozens of Myanmar Soldiers Killed in Rebel Clashes Near China Border," March 14, 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-insurgency-china-idUSKBN16L0FG.



Myanmar's Minister of the Office of the State Counselor Kyaw Tint Swe and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meet at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing, June 28, 2018. (Photo by Greg Baker/Pool via Reuters)

In the past several decades, Kunming has in some cases acted on cross-border issues without first receiving Beijing's approval. This is the result, in part, of Yunnan's geographical distance from Beijing; moreover, Chinese attention to Myanmar tends to be low and Myanmar issues do not often rise to the highest levels of Chinese decision making in Beijing unless there are crises along the border, such as the Kokang conflict in 2009. Beijing has issued general statements on what Chinese entities should do at the border, namely, to ensure peace and stability. However, without clear and explicit regulations and restrictions, some Chinese actors in Yunnan may believe that they have a green light to pursue activities as they see fit.

Over the last ten years, however, Beijing has put Yunnan provincial authorities on a tighter leash, largely in response to crises on the China-Myanmar border. After Myanmar's military government regained control of the Kokang region from the MNDAA in 2009, Beijing conducted a policy review. It found that Yunnan's exclusive access to information and relations with ethnic armed groups in northern Myanmar harmed China's national security. As a result, Beijing began to communicate with ethnic armed groups in Myanmar more directly.⁵⁴



United Wa State Army soldiers march in Pangsang, October 4, 2016. (Photo by Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

Although Beijing has consolidated control over Myanmar policy, Chinese bureaucratic actors have differing views of China's national interests in Myanmar. The Chinese Communist Party's International Liaison Department and the MFA are focused on improving party-to-party relations and state-to-state relations, respectively, as well as supporting Myanmar's peace process. They also have taken steps to strengthen people-to-people ties between the two countries, such as through numerous, fully-funded "soft power tours" to China for Myanmar civil society organizations to promote friendly ties.⁵⁵

Stakeholders in Myanmar trust China's MFA, and view the PLA as more sympathetic to ethnic minority leaders and more likely to take actions that fuel the ongoing conflict. For example, some experts believe that the PLA and actors with possible links to the PLA are supplying weapons to ethnic armed groups in Myanmar, and may even have tried to pressure the Tatmadaw to stop offensives against ethnic armed groups.⁵⁶ Retired PLA also continue to engage in lucrative business deals and even serve as mercenaries for ethnic armed groups in Myanmar.

China and the United Wa State Army

China's seemingly contradictory policies on the peace process are clearly reflected in its ties with the United Wa State Army. A formidable force of thirty thousand active fighters, the UWSA plays a central role in conflict in northern Myanmar even though it has not fought with the Tatmadaw since 1988; it has had its own bilateral ceasefire with the Myanmar government since 1989 and rejects the NCA. Today, it provides arms to Northern Alliance groups and, through the FPNCC, leads them in negotiations on the peace process.

Located in eastern Shan State along the Chinese border, the UWSA operates in the Wa Self-Administered Division, an area with constitutional status just under that of a region or state. UWSA leaders do not seek independence from Myanmar, but instead want to be officially recognized as a separate ethnic state with a high degree of autonomy over Wa internal affairs.⁵⁷ The Tatmadaw can enter the Wa's self-administered division only by invitation and without arms; otherwise, the Wa area is accessible only via China. For this reason, the PLA views the Wa as a strategic buffer zone along its border against Western influence.

The UWSA enjoys a strong relationship with China, particularly with actors in the PLA and Yunnan Province. Many Chinese advisers, including Chinese intelligence officers and former PLA personnel, are close to the Wa leadership, and the UWSA often echoes official Chinese talking points.⁵⁸ For example, the UWSA convened a summit in February 2017 with seven ethnic armed groups at its Pangsang (Pangkham) headquarters on the Chinese border. The summit leaders called on China and the United Nations to mediate the peace process, voiced support for China's BRI projects, and offered security guarantees for Chinese projects in ethnic armed group areas—all of which were music to Beijing's ears.⁵⁹ China's links with the Wa are also strengthened by investment, communications, and transport, which are all linked to Yunnan; moreover, the schools in the Wa area teach mostly in Chinese. Observers have noted the extraordinary level of Chinese influence on the UWSA, as well as the Wa's allegiance to China, highlighting that China's ties with other ethnic armed groups in Myanmar are notably weaker.⁶⁰ Relative to its steady relations with UWSA, China could probably exert more pressure over the Kachin Independence Army but has not. The KIA and other ethnic armed groups at times operate independently in ways not always consistent with Chinese interests.

In addition, an informed expert argues that China is a major supplier of arms to the well-equipped UWSA. The expert argues that the Chinese government seeks to maintain centralized control of the arms to the ethnic armed groups by sending weapons only to UWSA.⁶¹ In an upgrade to the Wa's military capability, China reportedly shipped tank destroyers and several helicopters armed with air-to-air missiles to the Wa indirectly via Laos in 2013.⁶² In turn, the UWSA, which has its own arms factories, supplies Chinese-style arms to other members of the FPNCC, including the Northern Alliance.⁶³

The Rohingya Crisis and Conflict in Rakhine State

The plight of the predominantly Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State has attracted intense international attention over the last two years, after wide-scale violence by the Tatmadaw against the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017, in response to attacks carried out by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), led to profound atrocities and prompted a massive exodus of refugees to Bangladesh.⁶⁴ Despite hundreds of thousands of Rohingya residing in the northern part of the state for generations, Myanmar's government and a large majority of the population do not recognize the Rohingya as citizens, let alone as a recognized ethnic nationality, but as illegal immigrants at best, if not a national security threat to the country.

In addition, the Tatmadaw faces a conflict with the Arakan Army, whose arrival in Rakhine State introduced a new threat to peace in Myanmar's western states. The AA draws on ethnic Rakhine grievances that its people have been treated as second-class citizens and fears that the Rohingya, if politically empowered, will diminish the influence of ethnic Rakhine and dominate Rakhine State.⁶⁵ Established in Kachin State in 2009, the AA is composed of Buddhist ethnic Rakhine (Arakan) rebels that currently operate in Rakhine, Chin, Kachin, and Shan states. It has trained with the KIA and is organized and equipped with weapons. Since 2015, it has operated in Buddhist townships close to the state capital of Sittwe and expanded to the Rohingya townships of Buthidaung and Rathedaung, effectively complicating the Tatmadaw's attempts to fight ARSA by presenting it with an additional threat.⁶⁶



Burmese and Chinese flags on a newly built processing camp for Rohingyas in Rakhine State, March 2018. (Photo by Joe Freeman/AFP/Getty Images)

China's Security and Economic Interests in Rakhine

Unlike the conflicts in Myanmar's northern borderlands, conflicts in Rakhine State do not pose an immediate security threat to China because Rakhine State is far from its border. Violence in Rakhine has been concentrated in the northern townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw, not near Chinese investment projects such as the Kyaukphyu port in the southern part of the state. China also does not have strong ties with ARSA or share a cultural or ethnic affiliation with the Rohingya or Rakhine populations, although it does maintain some contact—as it does with all ethnic armed groups on the China-Myanmar border—with the Arakan Army, which trained in neighboring Kachin State and now has a presence in Kyaukphyu.

Although the security threat is low, the expansion of extremist activities by these armed groups may threaten Chinese interests in the future. Moreover, discussions with informed observers suggest that China likely analogizes Myanmar's perception of a Rohingya terrorist threat to its perception of a Uyghur terrorist threat in its northwest province of Xinjiang. Beijing may seek to make common cause with Naypyidaw on that basis.

» Myanmar's leaders are wary of relying too heavily on China. They recognize that Beijing is pursuing its own national interests that do not always coincide with what would be best for Myanmar.

Local opposition could threaten the security and success of massive Chinese-led infrastructure projects in Rakhine State. The Kyaukphyu port project includes development of an industrial park in a special economic zone in Rakhine, and has ignited local protests over its potential negative impact on the environment and local livelihoods.⁶⁷ Some local Rakhine leaders are suspicious of China's ambition on their soil and do not want to see the Naypyidaw government trade away Rakhine sovereignty in exchange for economic deals with China. Instability in Rakhine State since 2012, specifically around Kyaukphyu, has created concerns in China about the viability of its port and SEZ plans and has led some in China to propagate a conspiracy theory that the United States was behind the Rohingya turmoil, as part of a plan to undermine Chinese activity. This perspective took root within Myanmar society more broadly following US and international condemnation of the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in late 2017.

China's Impact on the Rakhine Conflict

As Western countries criticize Naypyidaw's handling of the Rakhine crisis and call for investigations into ethnic cleansing, Beijing has taken advantage of the opening to support Myanmar's government and recover lost ground in the bilateral relationship, including among the broader public with its anti-Rohingya sentiments. China has opposed or weakened UN resolutions aimed at punishing or pressuring the Tatmadaw to cease its violent oppression of the Rohingya.⁶⁸ Following the August 2018 release of a UN fact-finding mission report that called for senior Tatmadaw generals to be investigated for possible culpability in genocide, China's foreign ministry did not call for follow-up but defended Myanmar by referring to Rakhine's "complex background."⁶⁹ Chinese officials have expressed support for Myanmar's need to address a terrorist threat and stressed that others should not condemn Myanmar for the way it handles its affairs.⁷⁰ By blunting international criticism of the policies of Myanmar's government and military in Rakhine State, Beijing also hopes to avoid broader condemnation of China's approach to its own Muslim minority population, in particular, the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.⁷¹

To address the Rohingya crisis, in November 2017 China proposed a three-point plan. It called for a ceasefire, an agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh on the repatriation of Rohingya refugees, and international efforts to promote economic development in Rakhine.⁷² Naypyidaw declined Beijing's offer to mediate an agreement but welcomed China's political support, particularly at the UN.

In addition to diplomatic support, China has provided material support to security personnel and some humanitarian aid in response to the crisis. Unlike many Western donors, China prefers to provide aid directly to the Myanmar government rather than working through international organizations. In the months after the August and September 2017 violence, for instance, China sent two hundred prefabricated houses for displaced persons.⁷³ It also donated about \$150,000 to the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement to assist the Myanmar government's efforts to "help restore peace and stability" in Rakhine.⁷⁴ Last, it gave 150 tons of supplies, including tents and blankets, to Bangladesh for Rohingya refugees in the country in September 2017.⁷⁵

As Myanmar has become more alienated from the West on the basis of differing perceptions of the Rohingya crisis, China's efforts to strengthen its economic and political influence in Myanmar have had a notable impact. After the Thein Sein government's opening to the West, the NLD government is turning back to China for assistance and protection. When confronted with increasing Western criticism and isolation, even Western-oriented individuals within Myanmar's senior leadership are reported to say, "We always have China." Although Chinese influence in Myanmar under the NLD government may be as strong, if not stronger, now than during the years of the Thein Sein administration, it has natural limits. Myanmar's leaders, both civilian and military, are wary of relying too heavily on China. They recognize that Beijing is pursuing its own national interests that do not always coincide with what would be best for Myanmar. As a result, Naypyidaw has gradually become more willing to cooperate with the United Nations. Myanmar welcomed a United Nations Security Council delegation to Rakhine State in May 2018 and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UN agencies in June 2018 to help oversee any future repatriation of Rohingya refugees.

Conclusion

»» **The United States should pay attention to the impact of China's role in Myanmar's internal conflicts given its interest in the success of Myanmar's peace efforts.**

As China becomes more involved in conflict zones around the world, its engagement in Myanmar has been particularly direct and influential. That Myanmar sits on China's border creates a unique dynamic that sets China's interests and role in Myanmar apart from its objectives and influence in other conflict-affected countries.

The United States should pay attention to the impact of China's role in Myanmar's internal conflicts given the broader US interest in the success of Myanmar's peace efforts and overall reform experiment. To that end, the United States should sustain long-term and high-level engagement on a wide range of political, social, economic, and security issues to help Myanmar through its difficult transition, at all times making clear that the only way to achieve lasting peace is through a common commitment to justice, compromise, mutual respect, and equal rights and equal protection for all of Myanmar's diverse people.

Notes

1. Without political intent, the report uses Burma as the state's name before 1989, Myanmar thereafter, and Burmese as an adjective and to describe the citizens and the language.
2. "Rakhine Issue Is an Internal Affair: Chinese Ambassador," *Global New Light of Myanmar*, September 14, 2017, www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/rakhine-issue-internal-affair-chinese-ambassador. In September 2017, China donated equipment and supplies, including bulletproof helmets, to police in Rakhine State to help promote stability there. "Zhongguo xiang miandian zhengfu juanzeng jing wu wuzi" (China Donates Police Supplies to the Myanmar Government), *CRI Online*, September 21, 2017, <http://news.cri.cn/20170921/2c766065-c534-a299-5b34-974d67965d99.html>.
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6. David I. Steinberg, "Burma-Myanmar: The U.S.-Burmese Relationship and Its Vicissitudes," in *Short of the Goal: U.S. Foreign Policy and Poorly Performing States*, edited by Nancy Birdsall, Milan Vaishnav, and Robert L. Ayres (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2006), 224.
7. The Dominion of Ceylon also gained independence in 1948, and in 1972 became the Republic of Sri Lanka.
8. Between 1947 and 1971, Pakistan contained a Western Wing and an Eastern Wing. In 1971, the Bengali-speaking Eastern Wing gained independence as Bangladesh.
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