

MYANMAR AND THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF CHINA

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This issue brief examines China's influence operations in Myanmar, focusing on the tools and strategies Beijing employs to advance its political, security, and economic interests. It argues that China's approach is multifaceted, encompassing engagement with ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), weapons transfers, mediation and ceasefire facilitation, diplomatic support for the Myanmar military, and extensive economic engagement. China has sought to balance its relationships with the military and EAOs while using its influence to protect its strategic interests, particularly along the China-Myanmar border and in major infrastructure and resource projects. Its diplomatic support has provided the Myanmar military with important international backing, while economic ties have deepened China's presence in Myanmar's political and economic spheres. The case demonstrates that influence operations can remain contested despite significant power asymmetries. Ultimately, China's preference for stability has not necessarily translated into support for durable peace or democratic governance.

Introduction

In the realm of international politics, sovereign states often attempt to influence the behavior of other states. Attempts to influence can involve the use of force or the threat of force. There are also softer dimensions of influence that involve economic incentives and the reframing of other countries' norms and values. As long as influence operations result in mutually beneficial outcomes, they go uncontested. On the other hand, influence

operations could result in the suppression of local voices, interests, and domestic initiatives. While it is critical to evaluate the impact of operations on a sovereign state's ability to act independently, the challenge is that such operations are often difficult to identify.

Influence operations can be broadly categorized into two types. First, sovereign states engage

specific individuals or organizations in other countries to ensure they are favorably disposed towards their initiatives. Often, such operations are conducted clandestinely and are therefore very difficult to evaluate. On the other hand, sovereign states also attempt to influence the political and economic processes of other countries. For instance, while the United States' Marshall Plan aimed to rebuild Europe, devastated by war, it was also guided by a political imperative to contain the spread of communism into Western Europe. Such behavior by sovereign states in influencing others is relatively more amenable to evaluation.

Since China has emerged as a major power, it has become necessary to study and evaluate its influence operations abroad. This issue brief uses China-Myanmar interactions as a case study to examine the tools and tactics Beijing deploys to promote and protect its interests in neighboring countries such as Myanmar. China has a multi-pronged approach—modulating the trajectory of ethnic conflict, selling weapons, facilitating cease-fires, providing diplomatic support on interna-

tional platforms, and engaging economically—to project influence in Myanmar.

Ethnic Conflict

Myanmar-China relations are often described as a “Pauk-phaw” friendship, which connotes a fraternal relationship.¹ China and Myanmar share a 2,204-km border, dotted with ethnic communities on both sides. There is considerable power asymmetry between the two countries. China is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and had a GDP of approximately USD 18.74 trillion in 2024.² China's rise as a major power has been rapid and dramatic. It clocked double-digit economic growth for over two decades and continues to be the world's largest exporter. China has a very large army with over 2 million active personnel.³ On the other hand, since its independence, Myanmar has experienced persistent political instability, as various armed groups controlled large parts of the country. Because of its autarkic economic policies, Myanmar has remained a least developed country (LDC).

During the Second World War, Myanmar served as a transit country through which the Kuomintang (KMT) received supplies from the Allied powers. After the Second World War, large numbers of KMT troops moved into Myanmar and used it as a base to launch attacks on China. Although the then-government of Myanmar played no role in supporting the KMT, the bilateral relationship between the two countries was marked by suspicion. China sought to gain leverage in its relations with Myanmar by extending support to the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). The prolonged communist insurgency, along with other Ethnic Armed Groups (EAO), ensured that Myanmar was tied down in managing internal stability.

After Mao Zedong's death and Deng Xiaoping's rise, China's support for the CPB began to wane. By the late 1970s, the CPB had lost momen-

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tum and collapsed completely by the end of the 1980s.⁴ The shift in Chinese strategy was guided by geopolitical and geo-economic considerations. Myanmar's geopolitical location became increasingly salient for China. Myanmar provides China with access to the Indian Ocean region and is critical to Beijing's two-ocean strategy. China was also eager to deepen economic ties with Southeast Asian countries to drive growth in its south-western provinces, such as Yunnan, which shares a long border with Myanmar. Furthermore, Myanmar has significant natural resources that could be used to power economic growth in provinces such as Yunnan in China.

Weapon Sales

However, the end of the communist guerrilla movement did not mark the end of insurgency in Myanmar. Although various EAOs (such as the Kachin Independence Army and the Karen National Liberation Army) have operational histories dating back to the 1940s, the CPB's collapse led to the consolidation of other EAOs, including the Wa and Kokang armed groups.

It should be noted that numerous reports suggest that the Wa and Kokang armed groups have close relations with China and were able to procure arms from China. For instance, there were reports that the United Wa State Army (UWSA) procured military helicopters, air-to-air missiles, and man-portable air defense systems from China.⁵ However, Chinese officials often dismissed such reports, stating that "the Chinese Government holds a clear and consistent policy of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Myanmar.⁶ Nonetheless, reports of the supply of Chinese weapon systems to other armed ethnic groups, such as the Arakan Army in Myanmar, continue to persist.⁷

China sought to maintain a balance in its relations with the EAOs and the Myanmar military. Con-

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sequently, China has also provided the Myanmar military with a large supply of weapons, ammunition, spare parts, and machinery required to manufacture weapons. It is estimated that China may have supplied Myanmar with weapons worth USD 267 million since the military coup in February 2021.⁸ Myanmar purchased the FTC-2000G fighter jets and K-8 aircraft, which were extensively used against rebel groups in recent years.⁹ There were also reports that the Myanmar military modified Chinese commercial drones to carry bombs for targeting ethnic armed groups.¹⁰ Interestingly, China also provided Myanmar's defense forces with a Type 035B Ming-class diesel-electric attack submarine.¹¹ There were reports that Myanmar procured surveillance technologies from China, which were deployed against protesters calling for the return of democracy.¹²

Mediation and Ceasefires

To protect its economic interests, including substantial investments in infrastructure projects such as oil and gas pipelines, China engaged

with various stakeholders in Myanmar.¹³ In the process, China emerged as an important facilitator of ceasefires in Myanmar and sought to balance its relations with ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar military. For instance, in 2013, peace talks were held in Ruili, China, between the Myanmar government and the Kachin Independence Army. China played an important role in arranging security and in shaping the negotiation agenda.¹⁴ These talks marked a significant departure, as China formally served as a mediator. Subsequently, to support national-level ceasefires, China's Special Envoy on Asian Affairs, Sun Guoxiang, announced that Beijing had extended financial assistance of "US\$3 million via the UN in support of Myanmar's peace process."¹⁵ In May 2017, China encouraged various EAOs to participate in the Second Panglong Conference, which sought to address ethnic conflict by promoting a federal system.¹⁶

After the military coup in February 2021, there was a perception that China played a significant role in shaping the trajectory of the civil war.

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There were instances when China used the EAOs to achieve its security objectives inside Myanmar. In 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance—comprising the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)—launched operations, seized large tracts of land, and attacked criminal syndicates operating in the border regions. China had long complained to the Myanmar military that these online criminal syndicates were targeting its citizens. Disappointed by the Myanmar military's lack of a decisive response, China nudged the Three Brotherhood Alliance to seize control of territories from which the criminal syndicates operated.

However, China also did not fully lean towards the EAOs. Beijing deployed a range of tactics, such as border closures, to ensure that the EAOs negotiated with the military.¹⁷ In 2024, China hosted talks in Kunming and facilitated a ceasefire, the Haigeng Agreement, between the Myanmar military and the Brotherhood Alliance.¹⁸ Chinese officials called on all the relevant parties in Myanmar to “exercise maximum restraint toward each other and solve the issues through dialogue and consultations.”¹⁹ Subsequently, China also supported the elections organized by the Myanmar military, which were boycotted by leading political parties. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman stated that “China congratulated Myanmar on a steady and orderly general election with active turnout,” and added that “China stands ready to continue deepening the comprehensive strategic cooperation with Myanmar.”²⁰

Diplomatic Support

On the international stage, China stood firmly in support of the Myanmar military. In 1988, the student protests were suppressed, and the Myanmar military did not honor the results of the 1990 election. As the international community censured Myanmar and imposed sanctions,

China extended diplomatic support and emerged as a vital economic partner. After the 2021 military coup, China was perceived as supporting the Myanmar military's actions. Chinese newspapers referred to the coup as a mere cabinet reshuffle.²¹ While much of the international community shunned engagement with military leaders, China's foreign minister visited Myanmar in July 2022 to attend the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation meetings.²² In 2023, China's foreign minister called on the international community to respect Myanmar's sovereignty and play a constructive role in helping Myanmar achieve peace and reconciliation.²³ Although the foreign minister did not explicitly refer to them, the statement could be interpreted as aimed at Western countries, specifically the U.S., which has been advocating for full democracy in the country. China's President Xi Jinping met with Myanmar's leader, Min Aung Hlaing, in Moscow in May and again at a Tianjin Guest House in August 2025.²⁴ Subsequently, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Myanmar in April 2026. These high-level interactions were seen as an endorsement of Myanmar's election process.

Economic Footprint

The multipronged influence operations enabled China to scale up its economic footprint in Myanmar. The Shwe gas fields, off the Rakhine coast, were discovered by a consortium that included Indian and South Korean energy companies. However, the gas from these fields is being shipped to Yunnan Province, China, via pipelines. The decision to export the gas may have been made by the military because China had a dominant presence in other international forums and held veto power in the UNSC, which the Myanmar military needed. China has been a principal beneficiary of timber and other mineral exports, such as jade. In 2024, Myanmar accounted for almost 57 percent of China's rare earth resource imports.²⁵ China was also involved in mining, hy-

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dropower, and a host of infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. Through the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, the Kyaukpadaung Deep-Sea Port and Special Economic Zone, the Yangon New City Project, the Border Economic Cooperation Zones, and a host of other initiatives, China has become deeply embedded in Myanmar's economy.

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, the following are a few important takeaways on the growing influence of China in Myanmar. First, given the fractured character of the Myanmar polity, China engaged not only with the Myanmar military but also with a host of EAOs, providing both with arms and ammunition. On the border, China supported various ethnic armed groups and also engaged with the Myanmar military, supporting it on various international platforms.

Second, China prefers political stability in Myanmar to protect its investments. However, a prefer-

ence for stability did not imply addressing fundamental political fault lines in Myanmar. Despite prolonged engagement and deep ties, China has not been able to nudge the various stakeholders in Myanmar towards a durable peace. Perhaps a fragmented polity with multiple groups controlling different parts of the country offers China greater opportunities to exert influence in Myanmar.

Third, Chinese economic activities enabled it to gain greater political influence in Myanmar's political and social spheres. Enhanced political and diplomatic engagement enabled China to expand its footprint in Myanmar's economic landscape.

Finally, because the Myanmar military often required China's support on various international platforms, including the United Nations Security Council, it was not in a position to openly express its disapproval of Chinese policies. However, there were instances when Myanmar's disappointment with Chinese policies spilt onto the streets. There were protests against Chinese projects such as the Letpadaung copper mine and the Myitsone hydro-electric project. There were demonstrations in front of Chinese diplomatic establishments, demanding that Beijing refrain from supporting the Myanmar military after the coup. Numerous Chinese firms and factories were targeted and set on fire in March 2021, as many people in Myanmar disapproved of what they perceived as Chinese support for the Myanmar military's actions.²⁶

The China-Myanmar case study demonstrates that, despite power asymmetry, influence operations can be contested. A stable Myanmar with a federal democratic polity will be better positioned to manage Beijing's influence operations.

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