



Restoring China's Support for the Spring Revolution: Analysis and Recommendations

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Introduction

For over a thousand years, Myanmar has had a contentious relationship with its northern neighbor, China. In the post-independence period, despite Burma (Myanmar) adhering to its non-alignment strategy and socialist political system, China sponsored multiple insurgent groups within the country that battled the central government forces. However in the last 20 years, China's influence has been exercised more directly, first as a major partner of the military government, and, second, as the country's most influential neighbor. In doing so, China has attempted to cautiously balance its diplomatic support to engage both the military government and the Burmese democratic movement (led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy), as well as ethnic resistance organizations who controlled much of the Myanmar territory on the China/Burma border.

This paper examines the most recent and dramatic evolution of China's approach toward Myanmar following the 2021 coup, highlighting how China has shifted from a position of balanced engagement of all major political factions to active support favoring the military junta. This shift has been driven by mounting military losses suffered by the junta, growing economic anxieties, and complex geopolitical calculations. It has resulted in politically risky calculations by China as it provides both material and political backing to Myanmar's military regime, including legitimizing an internationally condemned election process. This paper details the multifaceted reasons behind this realignment—tracing the interplay of security interests, economic imperatives, and regional strategy—and assesses its implications for Myanmar's ongoing struggle for democracy. Concluding with a forward-looking analysis, this paper offers concrete recommendations for the National Unity Government (NUG) on how to restore a constructive relationship with China, including strengthening internal unity among opposition forces, proactively engaging Chinese stakeholders, and articulating a compelling framework for mutually beneficial cooperation that addresses China's core interests while upholding the aspirations of the Myanmar people.

The Evolving State and Uncertain Future of China-Myanmar Relations

During the four years since the 2021 coup, Myanmar's military has steadily lost territorial control and political legitimacy. At the same time, the opposition — the country's Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), People's Defense Forces (PDFs), and the NUG — gained traction and territory. China had previously developed strong relations with the ousted civilian government led by the National League of Democracy (NLD). It also distrusted Myanmar's weakened military leadership. Additionally, China had longstanding relations and considerable influence over various ethnic armed organizations (EAOs/ERO's) along its border. Coupled with the continuously volatile political landscape in Myanmar, these factors left the Chinese Communist Party unprepared for the abrupt change in Myanmar's political leadership.

China decided to move cautiously immediately after the coup, positioning itself as a key power broker capable of exerting influence regardless of who was in power in Naypyidaw, the capital city of Myanmar. Beginning in 2023, however, China began to recalibrate its strategy. The most significant developments resulting from this decision were Beijing's efforts to change the battlefield dynamics on the ground through support of the junta; place pressure on EROs to align with the junta; and enable the military to claim the veneer of legitimacy through national elections, despite the elections being roundly criticized as illegitimate.¹ At a time when prospects for a peaceful political resolution lack any clear roadmap, China's strategic shift can be seen more as an attempt to assert greater control over Myanmar than in support of a path that would lead the nation to a democratic future.

The earliest signs of the reorientation of China's policy arose in the wake of Operation 1027 in 2023, a major resistance campaign by the Three Brotherhood Alliance.² Operation 1027 was launched on Oct. 27, 2023. The effort resulted in the military losing control of large swathes of the northern Shan State, enabling resistance forces to gain control of key trade routes with China.³ This situation better positioned the Brotherhood Alliance to launch a large-scale operation in central Myanmar, increasing the likelihood that a full collapse of the military would

¹ Myers, Lucas. "China Is off the Fence in Myanmar." War on the Rocks. November 22, 2024. <https://warontherocks.com/2024/11/china-is-off-the-fence-in-myanmar/>.

² The Three Brotherhood Alliance is composed of three Myanmar resistance forces. First, the Myanmar National Democracy Alliance Army (MNDAA), also known as the Kokang Army, is one of the ethnic minorities living on the northern border with China. Second, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) serves as the armed wing of the Palaung State Liberation front, another ethnic group living in the northern area of the Shan State. Finally, the Arakan Army is the armed wing of the United League of Arakan, an ethnic minority in the West of the country, and the People's Defense Forces, armed militia groups that have arisen since the coup, largely, though not exclusively, the military arm of the National Unity Government.

³ Abuza, Zachary. "Operation 1027 Moves Myanmar Civil War Closer to a Tipping Point." Radio Free Asia. February 27, 2024. <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/myanmar-opposition-1027-02272024135257.html>.

occur. The Chinese government began to show increased concern that they would lose influence over Myanmar if the junta were to collapse.

In response to the Myanmar military's losses, Chinese special representative Deng Xijun visited the China-Myanmar border area to urge the ERO's to cease their military offensive. In addition, Wang Xiaohong, a member of the Chinese State Council and Minister of Public Security, traveled to Myanmar on October 30, 2023, to address border security issues with the junta, as reported by military-controlled media.⁴ Ultimately, Deng Xijun facilitated several negotiations in Kunming that led to the creation of a ceasefire agreement known as the Haigen Agreement, which halted further advances by the Three Brotherhood Alliance.⁵

China's efforts to implement the ceasefire fell apart after repeated violations by the junta, leading to further losses by its military. On June 25, the Three Brotherhood Alliance's Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), relaunched an offensive, resulting in the capture of over 80 junta bases in the northern Shan State and northern Mandalay Region in subsequent weeks.⁶ With support from other opposition forces, they launched an attack on Lashio, the de-facto capital city of the northern Shan state and the headquarters of the junta's Northeastern Military Command on July 4th, claiming complete control one month later on August 3.⁷ The battle was marked by intense street combat in which the revolutionary forces overcame their better-armed opponents. Ultimately, over 500 young PDF members were killed, many of whom were former students who left their studies and homes to join the struggle against the military regime. The victory was all the more remarkable as the operation was characterized by the MNDAA forces using small arms, rocket-propelled grenades, and drones, while the junta military responded with artillery and airstrikes.

Despite the heavy costs, the capture of Lashio was greeted as a major accomplishment throughout Myanmar. For many civilians, this event symbolized growing hope for freedom, suggesting a shift in the balance of power away from the military. Morgan Michaels, a Singapore-based analyst with the International Institute of Strategic Studies, who oversees its [Myanmar Conflict Map](#) project, described the regime's loss of the Northeast Command as "the

⁴ Peck, Grant. "Senior Chinese Official Meets Myanmar Leader for Security Talks as Fighting Rages in Frontier Area." AP News. October 31, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/china-myanmar-border-cooperation-shan-817f76898eb7a2a13f2ebdf397b2b04c>.

⁵ "Three Brotherhood Alliance Threatens to Capture More Junta Bases in Shan State If Ceasefire Violations by the Junta Continues." Burma News International. January 26, 2024. <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/three-brotherhood-alliance-threatens-capture-more-junta-bases-shan-state-if-ceasefire>.

⁶ Nayt, Thit. "Operation 1027: Major Gains in Phase Two of Myanmar Resistance Offensive." The Irrawaddy. July 30, 2024. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/war-against-the-junta/operation-1027-major-gains-in-phase-two-of-myanmar-resistance-offensive.html>.

⁷ "MNDAA Claims Seizure of Myanmar Junta Command Headquarters." The Irrawaddy. August 3, 2024. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/war-against-the-junta/mndaa-claims-seizure-of-myanmar-junta-command-headquarters.html>.

most humiliating defeat of the war."⁸ He noted that without control of Lashio, it would be a significant challenge for the junta to maintain its remaining outposts in the area.

However, the MNDAA's gains and the army's strong battlefield losses prompted a strong Chinese reaction, after a period of relative distancing from Myanmar's internal events. Following the takeover of Lashio, China shut down border trade in areas controlled by the Brotherhood Alliance as well as cut telephone and electricity supplies to Laukkai, a key MNDAA-controlled city located in the Kokang Self-Administered Zone in the northern Shan State.⁹ This made it difficult for the EROs to continue operations.

In a further example of China's increasing shift to direct interference, Chinese Special Envoy Deng Xijun arrived in Naypyidaw on August 8, 2024, to discuss border security and preparations to support the junta's proposed 2025 elections, which was reported by military-controlled media.¹⁰ Deng's visit appeared to be mainly preparatory for a subsequent visit by Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Indeed, less than a week later, on August 14, 2024, Wang visited Nay Pyi Taw to promote Beijing's more visible stance, as reported in Chinese state media.¹¹ The official readout from the meetings said Wang Yi reportedly assured Min Aung Hlaing that "China opposes chaos and war in Myanmar, interference in Myanmar's internal affairs by extra-territorial forces, and any attempts to drive a wedge between China and Myanmar."¹²

Despite stated opposition to "external interference," China exerted pressure on the United Wa State Army (UWSA), an ERO that governs the Wa Self-Administered Zone along the borders of China and Thailand.¹³ China moved to restrict the flow of goods and supplies to areas controlled by the Brotherhood Alliance. During a meeting on August 27, 2024, Deng Xijun advised the UWSA to implement a "four cuts" strategy,¹⁴ targeting food, funds, information, and recruitment against the MNDAA as well as the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) to curb their

⁸ Rising, David. "Strategically Important Myanmar Military HQ Appears to Fall to the Resistance, in a Blow to Regime." AP News. August 6, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-fighting-lashio-civil-war-militias-e994e50600340cc06190e0b91ff75f75>.

⁹ "China Closes Border to Pressure Myanmar Ethnic Armies into Peace Talks." The Irrawaddy. August 28, 2024. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/china-closes-border-to-pressure-myanmar-ethnic-armies-into-peace-talks.html>.

¹⁰ "China Envoy, Myanmar Junta Chief Meet on Border Clashes." 2024. The Straits Times. August 9, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/china-envoy-myanmar-junta-chief-meet-on-border-clashes>.

¹¹ "Myanmar Leader Min Aung Hlaing Meets with Wang Yi_Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China." Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China. August 14, 2024. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbxhd/202408/t20240815_11474224.html.

¹² Mathieson, David Scott. "China's Ambiguous Meddling in Myanmar's Complex Conflicts." Asia Sentinel. September 19, 2024. <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/china-meddling-myanmar-complex-conflicts>.

¹³ Wansai, Sai. "UWSA SUMMONED AND GIVEN CHINA'S POLICY DIRECTIVES: Propping up Myanmar military junta regime may be counter productive for China." Shan Herald Agency for News. October 14, 2024. <https://english.shannews.org/archives/27438>.

¹⁴ Oo, Ko. "Is China Really Pulling the Strings of Myanmar's Ethnic Armies?" The Irrawaddy. October 17, 2024. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/is-china-really-pulling-the-strings-of-myanmars-ethnic-armies.html>.

offensives against the regime.¹⁵ Following this pressure from China to withdraw from Lashio, the MNDAA peacefully returned control of Lashio to the Myanmar military on April 21, 2025.¹⁶ A Chinese ceasefire monitoring team was dispatched to oversee the transition of control of the city from the MNDAA back to the military.¹⁷ Analysts of the region agree that this marked one of the most significant examples of Chinese involvement in Myanmar's internal affairs. Yet despite these actions, on April 21, 2025, Guo Jiakun, a spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, continued to maintain that China does not interfere in Myanmar's domestic issues.¹⁸

The shift in China's policy also impacted the ERO's relations with the largest representative of Myanmar's people, i.e. the National Unity Government. In 2023, the Shan Herald Agency for News reported that Deng Xijun recommended the Brotherhood Alliance also avoid engaging with the civilian NUG and its armed wing, the People's Defense Force (PDF), as China perceives the NUG to be influenced by the United States.¹⁹ In response, the MNDAA released a statement declaring its intention not to collaborate with the NUG in political or military affairs.²⁰

In return for China's support, critics note that Myanmar's military has been willing to surrender autonomy and national pride in a bid for its own survival.²¹ In August 2024, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visited Thailand to attend the 9th Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting.²² There, during informal talks with officials from Laos, Myanmar, and

¹⁵ "Leak Reveals Secret Meeting between China's Envoy, Wa Group on Controlling MNDAA." Asia News Network. October 8, 2024. <https://asianews.network/leak-reveals-secret-meeting-between-chinas-envoy-wa-group-on-controlling-mndaa/>.

¹⁶ Strangio, Sebastian. "Myanmar Rebel Leader Has Been Detained in China, Report Says." The Diplomat. November 19, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/11/myanmar-rebel-leader-has-been-detained-in-china-report-says/>.

¹⁷ Maung, Kavi. "In Orchestrating Lashio Handover, China Tightens Its Grip on Myanmar." The Irrawaddy. April 24, 2025. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/in-orchestrating-lashio-handover-china-tightens-its-grip-on-myanmar.html>.

¹⁸ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun's Regular Press Conference on April 21, 2025." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China." April 21, 2025. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202504/t20250421_11600794.html.

¹⁹ Wansai, Sai. "UWSA SUMMONED AND GIVEN CHINA'S POLICY DIRECTIVES: Propping up Myanmar military junta regime may be counter productive for China." Shan Herald Agency for News. October 14, 2024. <https://english.shannews.org/archives/27438>.

²⁰ "Brotherhood Alliance Member Distances Itself from NUG; Death Toll from Aftermath of Typhoon Yagi Rises." DVB. September 20, 2024. <https://english.dvb.no/brotherhood-alliance-member-distances-itself-from-nug-death-toll-from-aftermath-of-typhoon-yagi-rises/>.

²¹ Moe, Kyaw Zwa. "China's Bullying Diplomacy: How Beijing Sabotaged Myanmar's Revolution." The Irrawaddy. November 3, 2025. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/chinas-bullying-diplomacy-how-beijing-sabotaged-myanmars-revolution.html>.

²² "The 9th Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) Foreign Ministers' Meeting - กระทรวงการต่างประเทศ." 2024. กระทรวงการต่างประเทศ. 2024. <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/9th-mlc-fmm-2?cate=5d5bcb4e15e39c306000683e&menu=5d5bd3da15e39c306002aafa>.

Thailand, he emphasized three “bottom lines”²³ for Myanmar’s government: Myanmar must avoid civil strife, remain within the ASEAN family, and resist infiltration or interference by external powers.²⁴ Analysts in the region noted that his rhetoric was indicative of a colonial posture — reaffirming the belief that China views Myanmar as a protectorate and subordinate partner.

Political and Economic Drivers of China’s Policy Towards Myanmar

While its policy towards Myanmar has always been driven by its significant strategic and economic interests in the country, how China assesses those interests (and which factions in Myanmar best serve them) has evolved over time.²⁵ During the early phases of Myanmar’s democratic transition, Xi Jinping invited Aung San Suu Kyi to Beijing for a meeting, only a few years after being released from house arrest.²⁶ The invitation was extended to Aung San Suu Kyi in her capacity as chairperson of the NLD, even as at the time Aung San Suu Kyi was only an elected parliamentarian. In the years following, including the 2015 national election in which the NLD won a supermajority of seats to the national parliament, China engaged frequently with both the military and the civilian government. Chinese policy during this period was driven by an intense pragmatism; it was impossible to ignore the populist support that Aung San Suu Kyi and her party enjoyed as the country turned to a more open political system. As a result, China’s strategy was implemented under the belief that good relations with the NLD would pave the way for its strategic interests to be secured. During this period, China also regularly engaged with the country’s most significant EROs, who dominated the border regions of the two countries. However, since the coup, China’s policy has shifted. Instead of an approach of mutual respect for the civilian and military leadership, China is now focused on a single stakeholder, Myanmar’s military.²⁷ China’s decision appears based on the mistaken calculation that the military junta, for all its many faults, is key to preserving the following strategic and economic interests:

²³ “China Voices against External Interference with Myanmar’s Internal Affairs.” XinhuaNet. December 17, 2025. <https://english.news.cn/asiapacific/20240817/cf5afec9971d4c8dac275d39d25f17a1/c.html>.

²⁴ “SEEKING A PROCESS STRATEGY FOR MYANMAR: CHINA’S INITIATIVE.” ISP on Point. August 19, 2024. https://ispmyanmar.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/20240827-ISPOnPoint-021-China_Process_ENG.pdf.

²⁵ Paing, Thant Aung. “China in Myanmar: How the Game-Changing Neighbor Would Continue to Maintain Its Influence.” Stimson Center. August 26, 2024. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/china-in-myanmar-how-the-game-changing-neighbor-would-continue-to-maintain-its-influence/>.

²⁶ Garafola, Cristina L. “Aung San Suu Kyi’s Trip to China: Sino-Myanmar Relations as the Countdown to the November Elections Begins.” Rand. August 10, 2015. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2015/08/aung-san-suu-kyis-trip-to-china-sino-myanmar-relations.html>.

²⁷ Moe, Kyaw Zwa. “China’s Bullying Diplomacy: How Beijing Sabotaged Myanmar’s Revolution.” The Irrawaddy. November 3, 2025. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/chinas-bullying-diplomacy-how-beijing-sabotaged-myanmars-revolution.html>.

1) China's Two Oceans Policy

For the last four decades, Myanmar has been central to China's "Two Oceans Strategy," designed to secure China's access to both the Pacific and Indian Oceans.²⁸ China's strategic priority to gain access to the latter is focused on control of a dual-use deep-sea port in Kyauk Phyu on Myanmar's west coast. Kyauk Phyu, strategically situated on the Bay of Bengal, offers China an overland route to the Indian Ocean, allowing energy imports and trade to bypass the Malacca Strait, a vulnerable route in the event of any regional or global conflict. By securing direct access to the Indian Ocean, China aims to extend its influence considerably beyond its existing presence in the Pacific. The potential establishment of a naval presence on Myanmar's west coast by China would lead to significant changes in the security dynamics around the Indian Ocean. Indeed, some observers are predicting a future where Chinese diplomats refer to Myanmar's Kyauk Phyu and the surrounding area as "China's west coast."

2) China-Myanmar's Economic Corridor (CMEC)

The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)²⁹ is part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and is intended to support China's strategic goal of securing permanent access to Kyauk Phyu and Indian Ocean.³⁰ Initially part of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), CMEC gained prominence as an exclusive project after India's hesitancy to join the BCIM due to its preoccupation with geopolitical concerns. Today, CMEC focuses on developing the Kyauk Phyu Deep Sea Port and the Special Economic Zone in Myanmar's Rakhine State. This is coupled with the ongoing construction of roads, railways, and pipelines linking Kunming in China's Yunnan Province to Myanmar's largest city, Yangon, as well as Kyauk Phyu. These developments are designed to bolster trade as well as the flow of resources between the two nations. (For details on CMEC four main components, see Appendix 1.)

3) Myanmar's Natural Resources

Myanmar is endowed with a wide range of natural resources, including jade, timber, oil, gas, hydropower, and rare earth minerals. China has a significant interest in all of these resources. It plays a dominant role in Myanmar's resource economy, serving as its largest trading partner and investing over \$25 billion between 1988 and 2019. In perhaps the most remarkable aspect of China's investment in Myanmar, the country supplied approximately

²⁸ Nielsen, John. "Myanmar - China's West Coast Dream" Danish Institute for International Studies. May 18, 2022. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/myanmar-chinas-west-coast-dream>.

²⁹ Ahmad, Waleed. "Introduction to the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)." Paradigm Shift. September 16, 2023. <https://www.paradigmshift.com.pk/china-myanmar-economic-corridor/>.

³⁰ Kinyua, Brian Gicheru. "China's Access to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar Is Almost Complete." The Maritime Executive. October 21, 2022. <https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/china-s-access-to-the-indian-ocean-via-myanmar-is-almost-complete>.

57% of China's rare earth imports in 2024. Following a sharp rise in exports after 2018, Myanmar shipped nearly 42,000 metric tons of rare elements by 2023, with a particular emphasis on heavy rare earth elements (HREE), such as “dysprosium and terbium, that play crucial roles in high-tech manufacturing, including in defense and military, aerospace and renewables sector.”³¹ China is a key player when it comes to other natural resources as well. Myanmar also accounts for a significant part of China's tin ore imports, which are critical for semiconductor production. These investments come at a time when Beijing has tightened export controls, triggering global supply disruptions and highlighting the world's dependence on Chinese supply chains.

China appears to have decided that the junta will better serve its economic and political interests than the democratically elected NLD. Given the junta's acquiescent relations with China (acting as if their country, Myanmar, is a protectorate), China appears to be betting that Myanmar's junta will protect its interests over and above any other international or domestic priorities or criticisms, or internal conflicts with ERO's. Indeed, China's investment has attracted criticism, from concerns with environmental degradation to allegations of unfair trade practices and exploitative investment policies. The country's jade industry is concentrated in Kachin State, currently under the control of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). The industry generates billions of dollars annually. Yet, the majority of profits are captured by Chinese buyers, leaving local communities with minimal economic benefit. A 2015 Global Witness report estimated the jade trade's value at over \$31 billion, driven by intense Chinese demand that has fueled illegal mining and widespread environmental degradation.³² China's activity in Myanmar's timber industry has also come under scrutiny. A 2024 report by the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) drew attention to the environmental damage caused by illegal logging linked to Chinese firms, particularly in the northern regions of the Kachin and Shan states.³³ China's investments also extend to hydropower, most notably the controversial \$3.6 billion Myitsone Dam project, which raised serious concerns about its potential impact on the Irrawaddy River's ecosystem and surrounding communities.³⁴

Natural resources have also become a bargaining chip in relations between China and Myanmar's ethnic resistance organizations. A 2022 Global Witness investigation indicated that unregulated mines in Myanmar contribute significantly to global HREE supplies, essential for

³¹ Butts, Dylan. 2025. “How War-Torn Myanmar Plays a Critical Role in China's Rare Earth Dominance.” CNBC. June 23, 2025. <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/06/24/chinas-rare-earth-dominance-myanmar-plays-a-critical-role-.html>.

³² “Jade: Myanmar's ‘Big State Secret.’” Global Witness. October 23, 2015.

<https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/oil-gas-and-mining/jade-myanmars-big-state-secret/>.

³³ “EIA at 40 – Exposing the Flood of Valuable Rosewood and Teak Timber from Myanmar to China.” Environmental Investigation Agency. June 14, 2024. <https://eia-international.org/news/eia-at-40-exposing-the-flood-of-valuable-rosewood-and-teak-timber-from-myanmar-to-china/>.

³⁴ “Locals Call for Permanent Halt to Myitsone Dam Project.” Burma News International. October 1, 2025. <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/locals-call-permanent-halt-myitsone-dam-project>.

magnets in electric vehicles, wind turbines and other advanced technologies.³⁵ Most HREE from Myanmar originate in the Kachin State, where ongoing conflicts over political autonomy persist. Since the February 2021 military coup, rare mineral mining in Kachin State has expanded under the control of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). The KIA has leveraged its control over exports to engage in negotiations with Beijing, though the long-term effectiveness of this strategy in promoting regional stability is questionable.

As China shifted its policy in the belief that the junta would best serve its economic and political interests, it had to overcome their initial skepticism of Min Aung Hlaing's leadership. China's previous stance signaled that it even preferred the relative stability experienced under the previous NLD government. In 2024, ChannelNewsAsia reported that China had even considered replacing Min Aung Hlaing, though how that would have been achieved was not specified.³⁶ However, as China's fears of greater instability in Myanmar grew, influenced by the multiple factors, e.g. military losses suffered by the junta, domestic short-term concerns within Myanmar, largely from Chinese and Myanmar business interests affected by the civil war, as well as long-term geopolitical interests, and an overall frustration with the status quo, it began to outweigh their concerns with Min Aung Hlaing's leadership. The Chinese domestic pressure arose from the disruption to cross-border trade, amplified by voices from Myanmar's affected business community, whose interests relied heavily on Chinese investment. Business stakeholders from a border city in China, Ruili, lobbied and even threatened the TNLA to stop any offensives, in order for commerce to resume.³⁷ At the same time, as China's position showed signs of change, the junta sensed the opportunity to gain their favor sending former Myanmar president Thein Sein to visit China, where he lobbied Chinese leadership to support Min Aung Hlaing, understanding that Beijing's calculus was already shifting in favor of the junta.³⁸ This new direction was further solidified when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Myanmar and met with former dictator Than Shwe, who had previously appointed Thein Sein as president and Min Aung Hlaing as Commander in Chief. These high-level exchanges demonstrated the realignment of China's strategic interests with Myanmar's ruling military, marking a clear and decisive shift from a cautious, balanced approach, to active interference in support of a single stakeholder.³⁹

³⁵ "Myanmar's Poisoned Mountains." Global Witness. August 9, 2022.

<https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/transition-minerals/myanmars-poisoned-mountains/>.

³⁶ "CNA Explains: Myanmar's Ex-President Visited China, Followed by Its Junta No 2. What's the Play?" CNA. July 10, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/myanmar-china-junta-thein-sein-soe-win-cna-explains-4467241>.

³⁷ ဗွီအိုအေ (မြန်မာ့သတင်းစာ). 2024. "TNLA ကိုတရုတ်စာပို့ဖိအားပေး" ဗွီအိုအေ. ဗွီအိုအေသတင်းဌာန.

<https://burmese.voanews.com/a/china-warn-tnla-to-stop-fighting/7765129.html>.

³⁸ "Myanmar's Ex-President Thein Sein Goes to China." The Irrawaddy. June 28, 2024.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/myanmars-ex-president-thein-sein-goes-to-china.html>.

³⁹ Michaels, Morgan. "What China's Growing Involvement Means for Myanmar's Conflict." IISS Myanmar Conflict Map. August 7, 2023. <https://myanmar.iiss.org/analysis/chinas-growing-involvement>.

This strategic pivot took place alongside the passage of the U.S. BURMA Act. The BURMA Act, passed by the U.S. Congress, was designed to support Myanmar's democratic movement by authorizing sanctions against the military and providing humanitarian assistance. Despite these aims, the Act has had limited practical impact on Myanmar's internal dynamics. Instead, it heightened Beijing's concerns, as Chinese leaders feared that the National Unity Government (NUG) might seek a closer partnership with the United States, potentially shifting the regional balance of power.⁴⁰ Regardless of the substantive difference the US BURMA Act may or may not have provided, China's shift was also driven by broader regional ambitions.⁴¹ President Xi Jinping's possesses a vision of building an anti-Western bloc,⁴² and new global order in part to counter U.S. global influence.⁴³ Central to these ambitions was the desire to restart the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a key part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Maritime Silk Road. President Xi was no longer willing to wait to resume the CMEC project; he asked Min Aung Hlaing to restart these efforts when he met with him on the sidelines of the celebrations marking the 80th anniversary of the victory in the Soviet Union's Great Patriotic War.⁴⁴ To effectively counter the United States, China is aggressively pursuing its "Two Ocean Policy"—seeking access to both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. For this, Myanmar's strategic location is crucial, and China increasingly saw the need for greater control over Myanmar's political affairs as U.S. involvement in the country grew.

China's Need to "Legitimize" Myanmar's Junta

After recalibrating its position and expending extensive effort to tamp down on military conflict in the north of Myanmar, China has also sought to bolster the perceived political legitimacy of the military. These actions have been both symbolic and substantive.

On Nov. 6, 2024, the junta chief Min Aung Hlaing was invited to China, where he met with Chinese Premier Li Qiang in Kunming as part of the Greater Mekong Subregion summit.⁴⁵ The Xinhua readout prominently featured a photo of Min Aung Hlaing shaking hands with Li, who reportedly expressed support for the junta's announced plan for elections in 2025. This visit showcased a level of public support and de facto recognition that had been thus far denied to the

⁴⁰ Thiha, Amara. "Unraveling China's Strategic Re-Engagement in Myanmar." Peace Research Institute Oslo. August 3, 2023. <https://www.prio.org/comments/1045>.

⁴¹ Myers, Lucas. "US Policy on Myanmar for 2024 and Beyond." March 2024. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/2024-03_IndoPacificInTheWorld_Myers.pdf.

⁴² Kuhrt, Natasha and Roshchin, Evgeny. "China's Anti-Western Bloc? Not so Fast." CEPA. September 3, 2025. <https://cepa.org/article/chinas-anti-western-bloc-not-so-fast/>.

⁴³ Soong, Claus. "China and Russia Are Using the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to Push Alternative Global Order." Merics. July 31, 2025. <https://merics.org/en/comment/china-and-russia-are-using-shanghai-cooperation-organization-push-alternative-global-order>.

⁴⁴ 刘强. "Xi Urges China, Myanmar to Keep Advancing Key Projects of Economic Corridor." 2025. http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/topnews/2025-05/10/content_117868070.html.

⁴⁵ Myers, Lucas. 2024. "China Is off the Fence in Myanmar" War on the Rocks. November 22, 2024. <https://warontherocks.com/2024/11/china-is-off-the-fence-in-myanmar/>.

Myanmar military's leader. Beijing has also sought to steer Myanmar through the junta-promised elections, which it appears to view as the only viable path forward toward legitimacy, despite the junta lacking a clear roadmap for credible elections. Despite these deficiencies, China continues to pursue this route as the key to shaking up the status quo, with the goal of transforming the military into a legitimate civilian government.

This policy has many skeptics. Analysts point out that credible elections are simply not possible, particularly with only 14% of the country's landmass, under "stable" military control according to the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar.⁴⁶ The junta's November 2025 electoral plans, already delayed, exclude most major democratic parties like the NLD (which won the 2020 election in a landslide) and SNLD, instead favoring the military's own proxy, the USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party), as well as minor factions.⁴⁷ Myanmar's junta's election plans and China's support for them has been met with both skepticism and resistance. Since August 2024, when Foreign Minister Wang Yi pledged electoral support, Beijing has continued to lobby its ASEAN neighbors to accept the junta elections as a solution. Recent diplomatic efforts include a 2024 December Bangkok meeting, where China urged Myanmar's neighbors to back "peace and reconciliation." However, at the most recent ASEAN Summit in October, 2025, the attending Foreign Ministers voiced deep concern about ongoing violence in the country.⁴⁸ The organization also refused to send election monitors, stating that any support for elections would be predicated on the cessation of violence and an inclusive political dialogue that must precede "free, fair, peaceful, transparent, inclusive and credible general elections."⁴⁹ ASEAN's more critical stance on elections aligns with a similar policy from the European Union.⁵⁰

Despite this regional and international opposition, or perhaps because of it, China has intensified its support of Myanmar's election, including an effort at political grooming, such as hosting multiple junta-aligned delegations in 2025, including USDP chairman U Khin Yi's IDCPC-facilitated visit.⁵¹ These efforts underscore Beijing's fundamental, if risky, strategy : to preserve influence through managed elections that maintain junta rule in all but name.

⁴⁶ "Review of Effective Control in Myanmar: 2024 Update." Special Advisory Council for Myanmar. May 2024. <https://specialadvisorycouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SAC-M-Effective-Control-in-Myanmar-2024-Update-ENGLISH.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Myint Myat, Shwe Yi. "Myanmar's Planned Elections Are a Sham." East Asia Forum. November 16, 2025. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/11/16/myanmars-planned-elections-are-a-sham/>.

⁴⁸ Strangio, Sebastian. "ASEAN Foreign Ministers Voice 'Concern' about Ongoing Myanmar Conflict." The Diplomat. October 28, 2025. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/asean-foreign-ministers-voice-concern-about-ongoing-myanmar-conflict/>.

⁴⁹ Mail, Malay. "Asean Won't Send Observers to Myanmar's December Elections, Sources Say." Malay Mail. October 27, 2025. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/world/2025/10/27/asean-wont-send-observers-to-myanmars-december-elections-sources-say/196122>.

⁵⁰ AFP. "'Neither Free nor Fair': EU Rejects Myanmar Junta's Planned Election." The Irrawaddy. October 18, 2025. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/myanmars-crisis-the-world/neither-free-nor-fair-eu-rejects-myanmar-juntas-planned-election.html>.

⁵¹ IDCPC is the International Department of the Communist Party of China.

With so many factors aligned against the probability of any sort of successful national elections, why China is pursuing this policy in the face of such obstacles is a reasonable question. At its core, the reasons are likely that historically, China has viewed Myanmar as part of its regional sphere, seeing it as an extension of its national interests.⁵² China's growing economic and strategic investments in the country have only heightened the commitment it has to be the country's main international partner.. As such, it is particularly sensitive to increased Western involvement in the country and near its borders. The Chinese government has expressed, on various occasions, its view that Western powers — especially the United States — should refrain from intervening in these areas. Its support for elections, and buttressing the military junta, is a key element to keeping the influence of other powers at bay.

Restoring China's Support for the NUG and the People of Myanmar

Contrary to China's suspicions, the NUG is not a particularly pro-American entity. The NUG recognizes the geopolitical realities of its neighborhood. In a January 2024 position statement, the NUG pledged to "safeguard Chinese economic investments and other socioeconomic enterprises within Myanmar."⁵³ It also reaffirmed support of the one-China policy, aiming to continue the positive relationship established by the NLD government. While it may not be as submissive as the current junta, NUG offers a more stable and sustainable path forward that advances the interests of Myanmar's people and provides opportunities for mutually beneficial economic and security collaboration with China. In the long-term, Chinese interests can only be secured through cooperation with both the NUG and EROs.

To make a case for China's support, the NUG and Myanmar's EROs must first overcome their factionalism and develop a united front. The NUG, led by acting president, Duwa Lashi La, already recognizes this requirement.. He has recently spoken on the need for NUG reform and greater alignment with EROs, while also recognizing the reticence of some ERO's to become part of NUG. However, unity will require action by all parties. Instead of sending proxy representatives to the NUG, ERO's will need to have their senior leadership participate in the coalition unity government. Relations with China will only improve by building a functional alliance, capable of developing a concrete political framework that demonstrates both the alliance's reliability and its strategic value.

Second, the NUG must reduce the perception of its dependence on the United States and the West. This will necessitate public steps indicating that they are pursuing a balanced relationship with both superpowers. To achieve this balance, the NUG would be wise to develop ties with influential academic institutions in China (e.g. CICIR, Yunnan University, etc.), as well as

⁵² Nielsen, John. "Myanmar - China's west coast dream: Understanding Beijing's interests in Myanmar." Danish Institute for International Studies. 2022. https://pure.diiis.dk/ws/files/5476663/myanmar_china.pdf.

⁵³ Graceffo, Antonio. "Myanmar NUG Upholds 'One China.'" Taipei Times. January 24, 2024. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2024/01/24/2003812532>.

regional government bodies and trade associations in Yunnan, which have the ear of Beijing's government.

NUG is fortunate that the current policy of China is reactive, not proactive. It is fundamentally risky for China to put its support behind an extremely unpopular government that is continuing an aggressive and ultimately unwinnable war against its own people. China's hope that the upcoming election may add a veneer of legitimacy to the regime have little chance of succeeding, as indicated by the overwhelmingly successful silent strike of December 10th, 2025.. With the riskiness of China's current policy increasingly apparent, the NUG and its nominal allies among the ethnic resistance organizations, have an opportunity to shift the narrative and build a strategic alliance that not only builds unity among its people, but can win the tacit support of its neighbor. These actions by the NUG will create the conditions for the eventual resumption of a civilian led government that respects the will of Myanmar's people.

Appendix 1

As of 2025, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor has four main components:

Kyauk Phyu Deep Sea Port:

The Kyauk Phyu Deep Sea Port is a planned deep-water port in Myanmar's Rakhine State designed to accommodate large container vessels and tankers.⁵⁴ According to the Lowy Institute, it is a \$7.3 billion project. The Chinese state-owned investment company, Tearline.mil notes that China's CITIC Group leads the development consortium, with a 70% stake and a 50-year lease.⁵⁵ As noted earlier, the Deep Sea Port can provide China with direct access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, bypassing the congested Malacca Strait.

Kyauk Phyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ):

Attached to the Kyauk Phyu Deep Sea Port project is the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ), a 2400-acre industrial park integrated with high-end housing. It is intended to attract foreign investment and foster export-driven growth. The SEZ is planned to include industries such as textiles, construction materials, food processing, pharmaceuticals, and electronics. Ultimately, it is designed to serve as a critical node on a new trade corridor connecting China, India, and ASEAN countries.

⁵⁴ Poling, Gregory. "Kyaukpyu: Connecting China to the Indian Ocean." Center for International & Strategic Studies. April 2, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kyaukpyu-connecting-china-indian-ocean>.

⁵⁵ Alatorre, Carlos. "China's Investments in Myanmar: Analyzing the Status of Projects." Tearline.mil. May 8, 2024. https://www.tearline.mil/public_page/china-investments-in-myanmar.

China-Myanmar Border Economic Cooperation Zone:

Unlike Kyauk Phyu, the China-Myanmar Border Economic Cooperation Zones are in the north of the country, along the China-Myanmar border.⁵⁶ These zones are cross-border commercial areas to further trade and investment. Key locations include Muse, Chinshwehaw, and Kan Pite Tee. Muse and Chineshwehaw both lie in the Northern Shan State, though Muse is under the control of the military, while Chineshwehaw remains under the control of the Kokang Army. Meanwhile, Kan Pite Tee is located in the Kachin State, under the control of the Kachin Independence Army.

Transportation Infrastructure

China has already made significant investments in transportation infrastructure, marking it as a priority for the completion of CMEC. It aims to connect Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province in southern China, with Myanmar's economic centers, including the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Current and anticipated investments include developing oil pipelines, roads, rail networks, highways and pipelines to enhance regional connectivity and facilitate trade between the two countries, improving access to the Indian Ocean. Two oil and gas pipelines have already been built.⁵⁷ Operational since 2013 and 2014, they are among the few successful projects within the CMEC. The oil and gas for these pipelines comes from an offshore well in the Rakhine State. These pipelines run from Kyaukphyu to Kunming, offering China a direct channel for energy imports and strengthening the country's energy security. They predate the 2017 official launch of the CMEC. Among one of the priority transportation projects central to this effort is the planned Muse-Mandalay Railway, a 431-kilometer track intended to link key regions within Myanmar as part of the CMEC. However, the development of road infrastructure faces big challenges due to ongoing countrywide conflict, affecting the overall progress of transportation networks.

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⁵⁶ "China and Myanmar to Develop Border Economic Zones" Maritime Gateway. August 30, 2023. <https://www.maritimegateway.com/china-and-myanmar-to-develop-border-economic-zones/>.

⁵⁷ "Belt and Road Monitoring Project: Myanmar–China Oil and Gas Pipeline Projects" Sandhi Governance Institute. 2021. <https://brimonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/MyanmarPipe.pdf>.