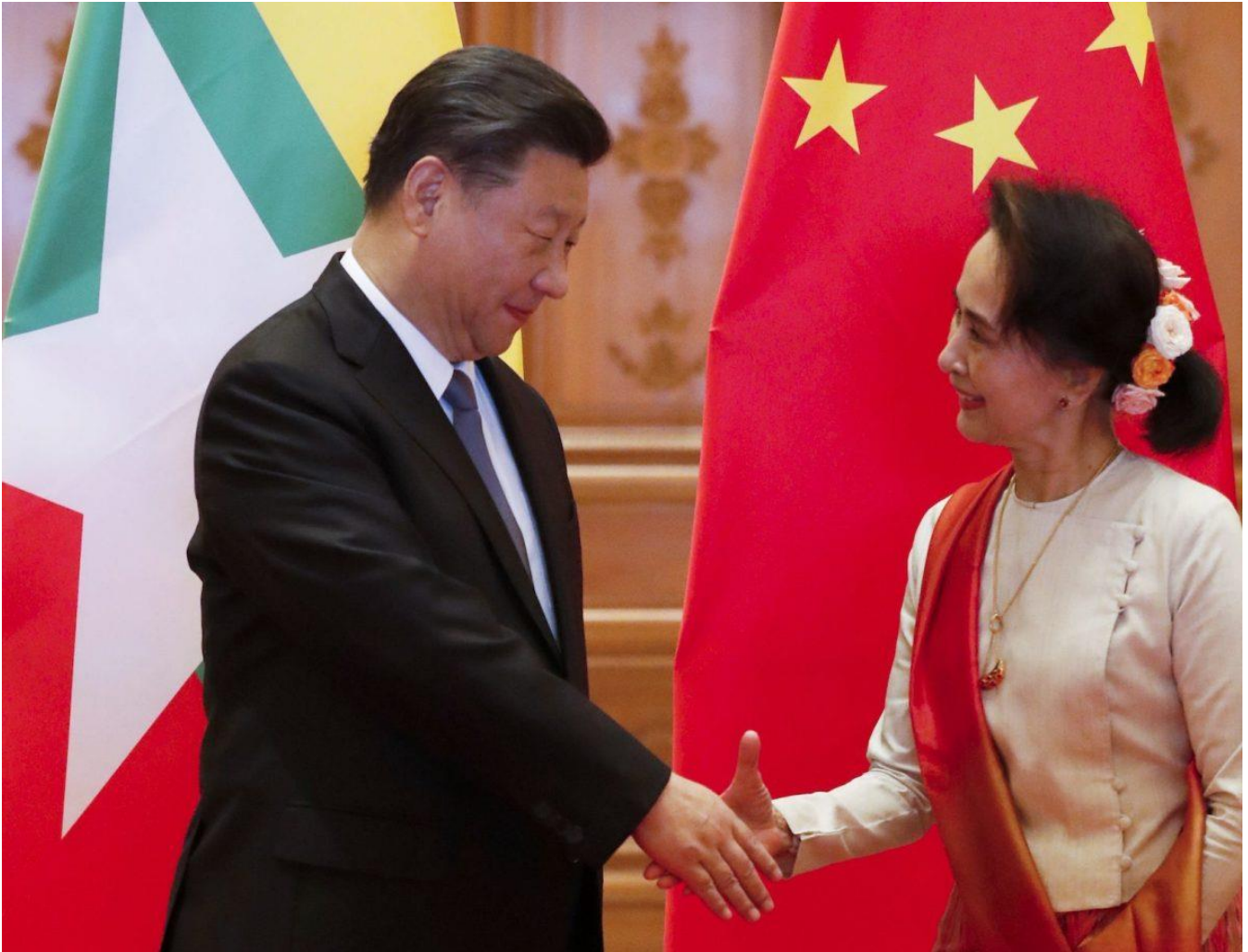


## Why China wants Suu Kyi to win Myanmar's polls

*China's interests will be better served by the Suu Kyi-led status quo than a return to military-dominated rule*

By **BERTIL LINTNER** > SEPTEMBER 3, 2020



***Chinese President Xi Jinping (L) and Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi shake hands before a bilateral meeting at the Presidential Palace in Naypyidaw on January 18, 2020. Photo: AFP/ Nyein Chan Naing/Pool***

BANGKOK – As Myanmar enters an election season, the economy, Covid-19 and issues of war and peace are expected to dominate the campaign trail discourse.

But for the international community, speculation centers on which direction foreign policy will likely take after the poll: toward an even stronger and closer relationship with China or a shift towards a more independent posture.

Much has changed since the leaders in Beijing favored Myanmar's authoritarian military regime and were deeply suspicious of then opposition leader and one-time pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

Now, Chinese government representatives have made no secret in recent private discussions that they would prefer to see Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) win and are wary of the generals, who they find it increasingly difficult to influence and control.

The military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party lost badly to the NLD at the 2015 election and it's not clear it will fare much better at this November's poll.

While Myanmar's military sees it as their duty to defend the nation's sovereignty and seek to lessen national dependence on China, Suu Kyi turned to Beijing for economic and other assistance after her previous allies and admirers in the West distanced themselves from her over the Rohingya refugee crisis.

Beginning in August 2017 and still ongoing, thousands of Rohingyas have been killed while hundreds of thousands have fled across the border into Bangladesh due to a Myanmar military crackdown.

Once seen as a champion of human rights, Suu Kyi refused to condemn the carnage the UN and others have termed as possible "genocide." As such, Suu Kyi turned dramatically and almost overnight from darling to pariah of the West.

The third force in Myanmar's topsy-turvy foreign relations is Japan, which sees the dangers of the region's shifting geopolitics and thus has not joined the West's condemnations.



***Rohingya refugees shout slogans at a protest against a disputed repatriation program at the Unchiprang refugee camp near Teknaf on November 15, 2018. Photo: AFP/Dibyangshu Sarkar***

From August 21 to 24, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi paid visits to Papua New Guinea, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar to strengthen Tokyo's presence in the four Southeast Asian countries. That his tour took place amid the pandemic underscores the importance of his mission: to counter China's rising regional clout.

In Myanmar, Motegi met Suu Kyi as well as Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Motegi promised Suu Kyi technical assistance to contain the spread of Covid-19. They also agreed to better facilitate travel for businesspeople and students between the two countries.

In discussions with Min Aung Hlaing, Motegi pledged support for Myanmar's peace process. A statement issued by Japan's Foreign Ministry also stated rather curiously and without elaborating that Motegi and Min Aung Hlaing "exchanged views" on regional affairs, "including the South China Sea issue and concurred on deepening cooperation between the two countries."

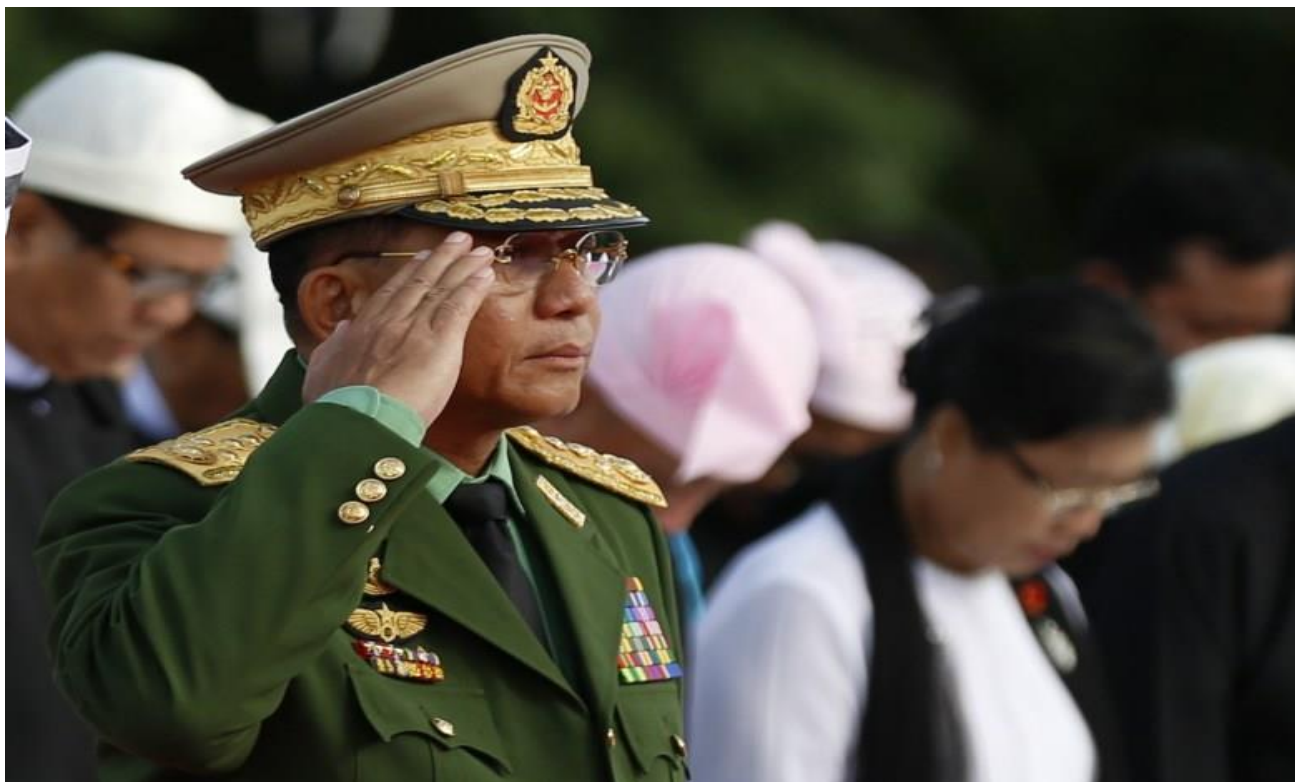
It remains to be seen whether Motegi's promises to Suu Kyi will be enough to make a dent in Beijing's already strong influence over Myanmar. That's plain to see in the so-called China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a bilateral scheme that involves the construction of high-speed railways, highways and upgraded waterways along Myanmar's rivers.

The project is seen as a crucial link in Chinese President Xi Jinping's global infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which arguably will take on more importance in neighboring Southeast Asia as tensions rise with the US in a new Cold War.

Myanmar's link and outlet to the Indian Ocean will provide an alternative route for China's trade with the Middle East, Africa and Europe, which currently travels via vulnerable sea lanes through the contested South China Sea and congested Malacca Strait.

During a historic visit to Myanmar in January, Xi secured no less than 33 memoranda of understanding, including 13 relating to infrastructure projects, in talks with Suu Kyi and other mostly civilian officials.

Those included a multi-billion-dollar plan to establish a special economic zone and industrial park near Kyaukphyu, where a deep-sea port is already being developed with Chinese investment.



***Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing attends a ceremony to mark the 69th Martyrs' Day in Yangon.  
Photo: AFP via Mur Photo/U Aung***

Min Aung Hlaing, on the other hand, stunned many observers when he said during a visit to Moscow in June in an interview with a Russian news network that “terrorist groups” exist in Myanmar “because of the strong forces that support them.”

Although the military leader did not name any group or foreign force in particular, it was clear that he was referring to the insurgent Arakan Army (AA) in the country’s western Rakhine state which is known to be equipped with Chinese-made weapons.

In November, the Myanmar military seized a huge cache of Chinese weapons, including brand-new rocket launchers and a surface-to-air missile, from another rebel army in northern Shan state.

China’s carrot and stick policy towards Myanmar consists of loans, grants and support for anti-Covid-19 campaigns on one hand while providing some of the country’s many ethnic armies access to China’s huge, informal arms market, which is grey rather than black.

Despite the Covid-19 crisis and numerous talks between government officials, military leaders and representatives of the country’s many ethnic armed organizations, Myanmar’s civil war is raging in several border areas and it has become increasingly clear that it is being heavily influenced by China.

Initiated by former president, ex-general Thein Sein shortly after he assumed office in March 2011 and continued under the present Suu Kyi administration, the peace process has attracted rich support from the West as well as Japan.

But a national ceasefire agreement (NCA) comprises only a handful of groups, some without arms or territory under their control. The most recent peace meeting was held this month and ended with nothing more than an agreement to hold further talks about talks.

The fact remains that groups representing more than 80% of all ethnic combatants have not signed the NCA and are unlikely to do so. Those groups, seven in all, are united under the umbrella of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC). All are known to be close to China.



***UWSA special force snipers participate in a military parade in the Wa State’s Panghsang, April 17, 2019.  
Photo: AFP/Ye Aung Thu***

The most powerful of them, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), is equipped with Chinese-made assault rifles, machine-guns, mortars, surface-to-air missiles and even light armored personnel carriers and other military vehicles.

AA is a close ally and has via other FPNCC members received weapons from the UWSA. So, too, has the powerful Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in the far north of the country and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, an ethnic Palaung group that operates over large swathes of territory in northern Shan state.

The West and Japan may be involved in the peace process, and Motegi may have pledged increased support for efforts to bring decades of civil war to an end. But Chinese security officials have in recent meetings with FPNCC members told them not to have any dealings with peacemakers and other officials from the West or Japan.

It is thus clear that China has no intention of giving up its big stick and that recent developments have exposed just how irrelevant other outside actors have become to the peace process.

While the West is caught in the quagmire of the Rohingya crisis and Japan is doing its utmost to maintain and develop ties with Myanmar, China still rules the roost. And that largely explains why China backs a continuation of the democratic status quo, with Suu Kyi and her NLD still in power after November's election.

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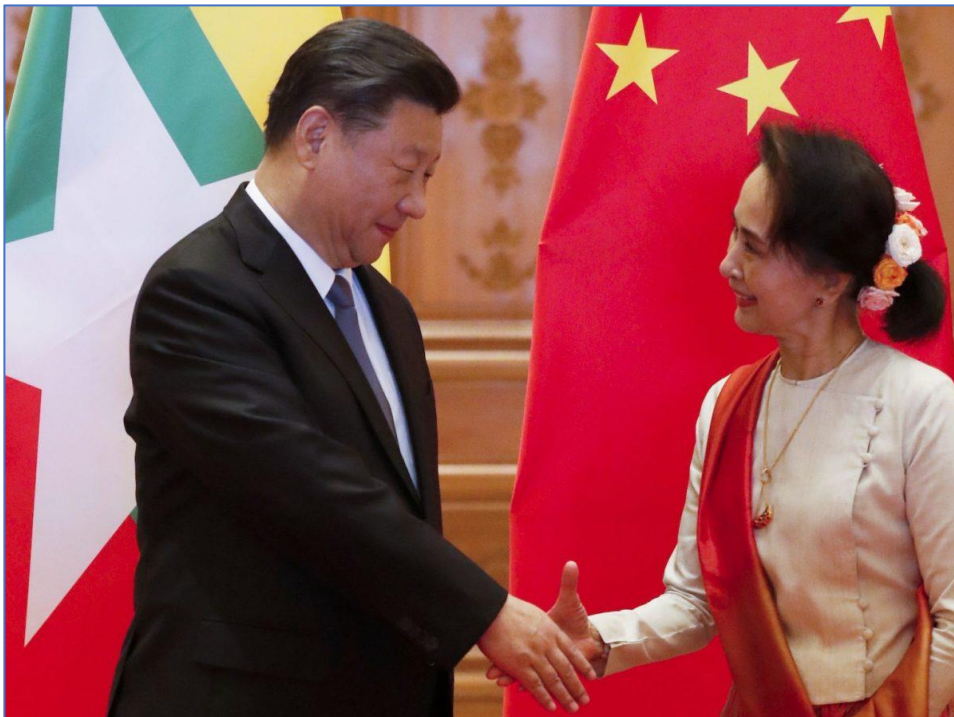
**TAGGED:** [Aung San Suu Kyi](#), [Block 3](#), [China](#), [Min Aung Hlaing](#), [Myanmar National League for Democracy](#), [November Elections](#), [Rohingya Refugee Crisis](#), [Toshimitsu Motegi](#).

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<https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/china-flips-the-electoral-script-in-myanmar/>



## China flips the electoral script in Myanmar



*Suu Kyi is now close to old adversary China while long-ruling military is skeptical of Beijing's intent ahead of pivotal polls*

By [BERTIL LINTNER](#) > MAY 25, 2020

*Chinese President Xi Jinping (L) and Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi shake hands before a bilateral meeting at the Presidential Palace in Naypyidaw, January 18, 2020. Photo: AFP/Pool/Nyein Chan Naing*

**CHIANG MAI** – Elections are scheduled for November in Myanmar, and there is no indication so far that the polls will be postponed due to the Covid-19 crisis. Neither is there much doubt about the outcome.

Most political observers believe that State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) will win again, though not in the same landslide fashion as in 2015 as recent by-elections show she and her party have lost significant support in ethnic areas.

But the bigger electoral question is how her party's delicate relationship with the autonomous military will play out and, in that context, how her government's ties to its powerful northern neighbor China will be portrayed and potentially politicized on the campaign trail.

An entirely new paradigm has emerged in Myanmar, one where Suu Kyi is now seen as a trusted ally of Beijing and the military as a nationalistic bulwark against China's strong advances. That's a significant reversal, one that could have implications for stability in the lead-up to polls.

When Suu Kyi was under house arrest during military rule or active in non-parliamentary politics, China viewed the long-time pro-democracy icon with suspicion. That was at least in part because her late British husband, a Tibetologist, maintained ties with many Tibetans in exile.

The military, on the other hand, was closely allied with China and depended on friendly relations with Beijing for arms supplies and diplomatic support at the United Nations, particularly when Western nations sought to refer its harsh political repression to the Security Council for possible sanctions.

Fast forward to the present and those tables have turned. Suu Kyi has become China's go-to politician for projects and schemes, while the military, though not openly critical of Beijing, has sought to keep a distance from its advances.



*Chinese President Xi Jinping (R) and Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi (L) at the Presidential Palace In Naypyidaw, January 17, 2020. Photo: AFP/Thet Aung*

The flipped script has been driven by geopolitics. The Rohingya refugee crisis, and Suu Kyi's refusal to condemn the carnage the military unleashed in Rakhine state in 2017, have dramatically turned her from being the darling of the West into an international pariah.

She has been stripped of one human rights award after another, many of which she earned during her long non-violent struggle for democracy against abusive military rule.

As such, Western aid can no longer be taken for granted in Myanmar, with most grants conditional on improvements in or respect for human rights. But economic development is crucial for Suu Kyi to maintain her popularity ahead of this year's election.

That has pushed her ever closer to China and its no-strings-attached aid and assistance. Indeed, in November 2017, just months after hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees streamed across the border into Bangladesh, Suu Kyi was given red carpet treatment in Beijing.

In January this year, Xi Jinping became the first sitting Chinese president to visit Myanmar since Jiang Zemin toured the country in December 2001. Xi arrived in Myanmar with 33 bilateral agreements that if implemented will bind Myanmar ever closer to China.

Those include high-speed rail and deep-sea projects and strengthening of the so-called China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which aims to give China direct access to the Indian Ocean. The agreements were crucial parts of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which Myanmar joined as a founding member in 2015.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the Myanmar military's commander, may have visited Beijing a week before Suu Kyi arrived in 2017, a visit at which Xi described Chinese-Myanmar military relations as "the best ever", but both knew in reality that wasn't and still isn't the case.



***Army chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has tried to show the Myanmar army does not discriminate against other faiths. Photo: AFP/ Thet Aung***

Myanmar's military sees itself as the chief defender of national sovereignty and, according to security analysts in Yangon, the generals are apprehensive about China's rapid economic and infrastructure expansion in the country.

That apprehension is compounded by insurgencies in ethnic Palaung-inhabited areas in northern Shan state and Rakhine state in the west, where the Arakan Army (AA) has grown from a handful of guerrillas to a formidable fighting force in the span of less than a decade.

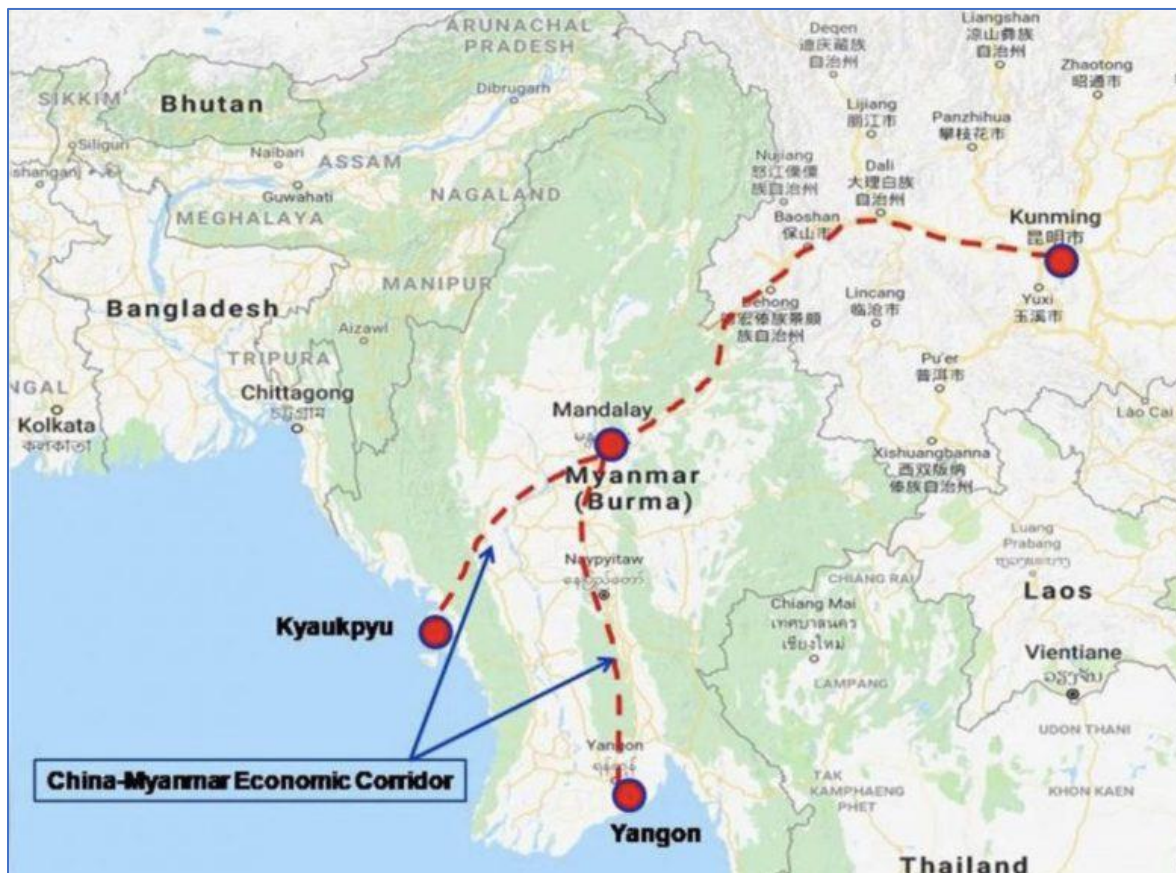
It is hardly any secret that both the Palaung Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and AA are equipped with Chinese-made weapons obtained through the United Wa State Army, Myanmar's strongest and best-armed ethnic army which has a long-time close relationship with China.

In November last year, the military expressed its displeasure that the country's most active insurgents carry mainly Chinese arms. A huge cache of Chinese-made weapons, which the military claimed it had captured from the TNLA, was put on public display and shown on national television.

Among the haul was automatic assault rifles, recoilless rifles, boxes with bullets, RPGs and even a FN-6 shoulder-fired MANPAD, or man-portable air-defense system gun. Pictures displayed on social media have recently shown an AA commander carrying an FN-6, a gun which has been seen previously in a civil war situation only in Syria and Iraq.

China's double-game in Myanmar, where it serves as both an armed conflict mediator and supplier of arms to insurgents, is a long-worn carrot and a stick approach to get what it wants, namely the CMEC and access to Myanmar's rich natural resources including copper, gold, jade, amber and rare earth metals.

Myanmar is the only immediate neighbor through which China can bypass the congested Malacca Strait and the contested waters of the South China Sea, putting the development the deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu on the Bay of Bengal high on Beijing's BRI agenda.



Source: Twitter

But China has not yet secured all it wants in Myanmar. A massive hydro-electric power project at Myitsone in the far north of the country was suspended in 2011 by then-president Thein Sein, a former army general. As much as 90% of the power produced was scheduled for delivery to China.

Moreover, the initial \$7.5 billion price tag for the Kyaukphyu port project has been winnowed down to \$1.3 billion amid concerns of a possible Chinese debt trap.

Whether the military rolled back these two big-ticket projects is not immediately clear. Privately, however, sources close to the military's leadership believe Suu Kyi is moving the country too close to China, without taking into consideration what Chinese largesse might mean for national sovereignty.

The Covid-19 crisis may increase that concern as Western investment has been largely shelved and China alone seems to be willing to assist and invest even more in Myanmar during the pandemic.

On May 20, Xi spoke by phone with Myanmar President Win Myint to highlight China's donation of medical supplies and two medical teams to Myanmar to help fight the disease. China's ambassador to Myanmar Chen Hai emphasized in a recent interview with the Myanmar Times that Beijing remains committed to investing in the country despite Covid-19.

But that investment will likely accrue more political benefit to Suu Kyi and her NLD than the military's aligned United Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in an election year, raising the prospect that Beijing's deepening influence could for the first time become a political issue on the campaign trail.

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