

China Grows More Assertive Ahead of Myanmar's Election

By AUNG ZAW -- is the founding Editor-in-Chief of The Irrawaddy > 4 September 2020

Myanmar will hold its general election in November. All signs indicate that the ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), will be returned to power. That shouldn't surprise Myanmar's neighbors and other countries in the region, including China, India and Japan.

With the country currently experiencing a spike in COVID-19 cases, whether it will manage to hold the election on the scheduled date of Nov. 8 remains to be seen. One thing we can be sure of, however, is that China will be betting on the NLD and its leader, State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.



Chinese President Xi Jinping (right) and Myanmar State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi attend an event to commemorate the 70th anniversary of China-Myanmar diplomatic relations in Naypyitaw. / Myanmar State Counselor's Office / Facebook

Indeed, as the election draws near, Naypyitaw has received a series of high-profile visitors.

Japanese Foreign Minister [Toshimitsu Motegi](#) paid a visit, announcing emergency loans and discussing a range of issues including the need for a free and fair election, reopening the country's borders to long-term residents and businesspeople, and financial support to help improve conditions in Rakhine State.

A week later, [Yang Jiechi](#), a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC)'s Central Committee and director of the committee's Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission, was in Naypyitaw, where he met President U Win Myint, State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and armed forces commander-in-chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

The senior Chinese diplomat called for a strengthening of high-level exchanges, and for the consolidation and deepening of political trust between the two countries. The aim of the visit was to promote and speed up implementation of the long-delayed

China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) projects, which form part of Beijing's vast international infrastructure scheme, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Jiechi also said China is also [willing](#) to give priority to sharing a COVID-19 vaccine with Myanmar once it is developed. This month, senior officials from India are also scheduled to visit Myanmar, though no details have materialized yet. China, Japan and India are Myanmar's most important allies in the region and will be keenly following the results of the upcoming election.

The US, too, has a stake in the outcome. Over the past three decades, [it has invested](#) in the democracy movement in Myanmar and gained considerable influence inside the country. Washington cannot afford to see this process reversed.

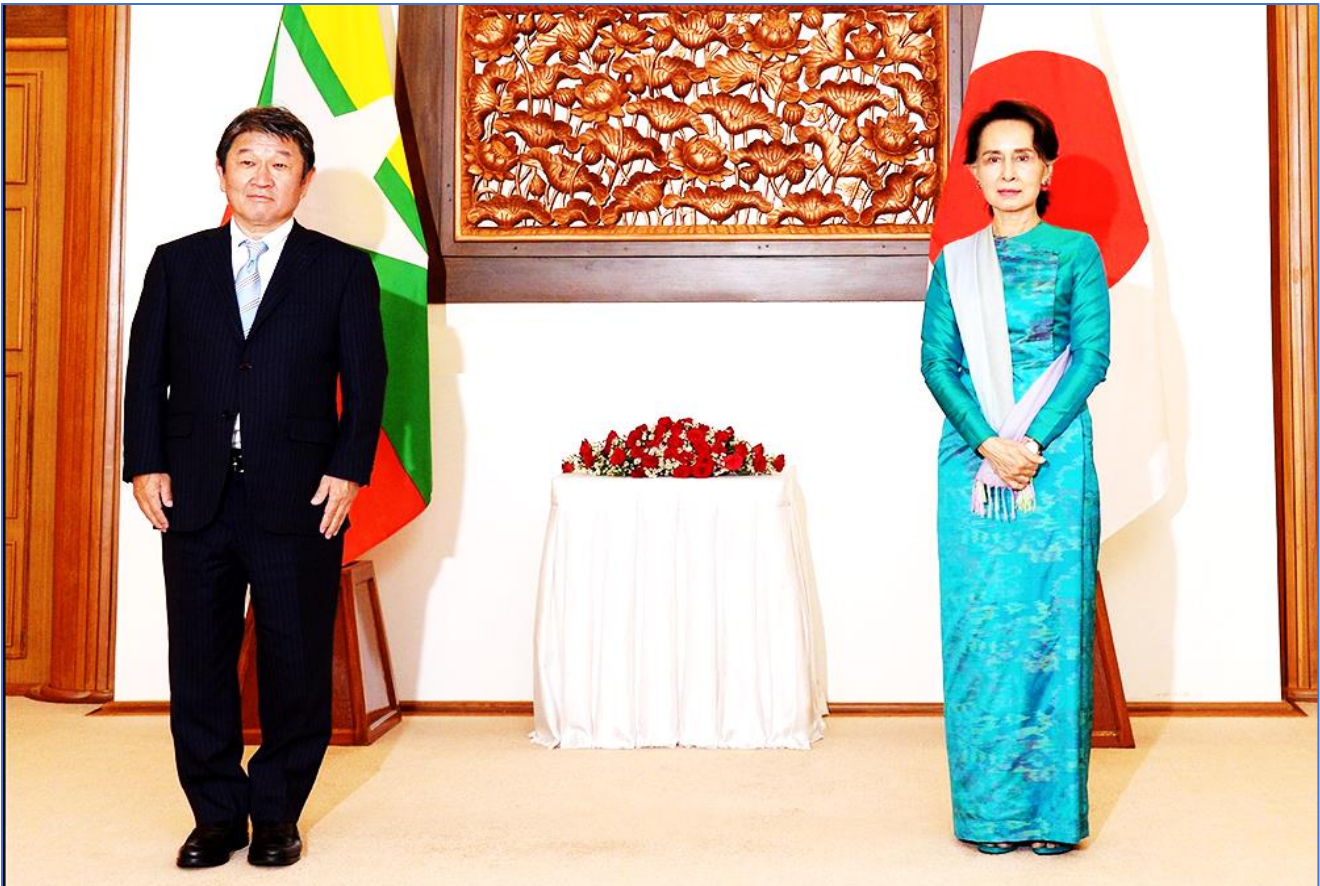
The US Embassy in Yangon announced that the US government has provided more than US\$46 million (61.22 billion kyats) to the Union Election Commission (UEC), civil society groups and political parties to administer and participate in the 2020 election.

China makes a move

Myanmar was the first country to welcome President Xi Jinping on an overseas visit in 2020, as the Chinese leader made the country the first item on his well-choreographed diplomatic calendar for the year.

The [visit](#) was in part timed to mark the 70th anniversary of diplomatic ties between Myanmar and China this year. In an op-ed published in Myanmar's state-run media during the visit, Xi said China supports Myanmar in "safeguarding its legitimate rights and interests and national dignity."

Behind the pomp of the visit, and the accompanying sugar-coated messages and state-sponsored reception, Chinese officials confided that they respect Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her political stance. They also said that compared to the notoriously corrupt generals that ran the previous regime, the Chinese find Daw Aung San Suu Kyi pragmatic and believe she will keep her promises (on Chinese-funded projects in Myanmar).



Myanmar State Counselor and Foreign Minister Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi pose for a photo after their meeting in Naypyitaw in August 2020. / Myanmar State Counselor's Office / Facebook

China made an unmistakable shift in 2015, adopting a pro-active foreign policy towards Myanmar, months before the country held its election in November of that year. [Daw Aung San Suu Kyi](#), then opposition leader and a member of Parliament, was invited to Beijing, where she met with Xi. The NLD subsequently won a landslide election.

By inviting Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to China, Beijing sent a signal to the military and long-time allies in Myanmar, including the military-backed Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP), that it is capable of making new friends in Myanmar. The invitation also sent a message to the West that Beijing is pragmatic in dealing with Myanmar and understands the necessities of geostrategic competition.

For a number of years, the Communist Party of China and the USDP developed close party-to-party relations. In 2012, then Vice President Xi met with [U Htay Oo, then Secretary-General of Myanmar's ruling USDP](#), in Beijing, vowing to boost inter-party ties. "China has always handled its relations with Myanmar from a strategic perspective," the Chinese vice president told U Htay Oo in the Great Hall of the People. This was the last high-profile meeting between the CPC and USDP.

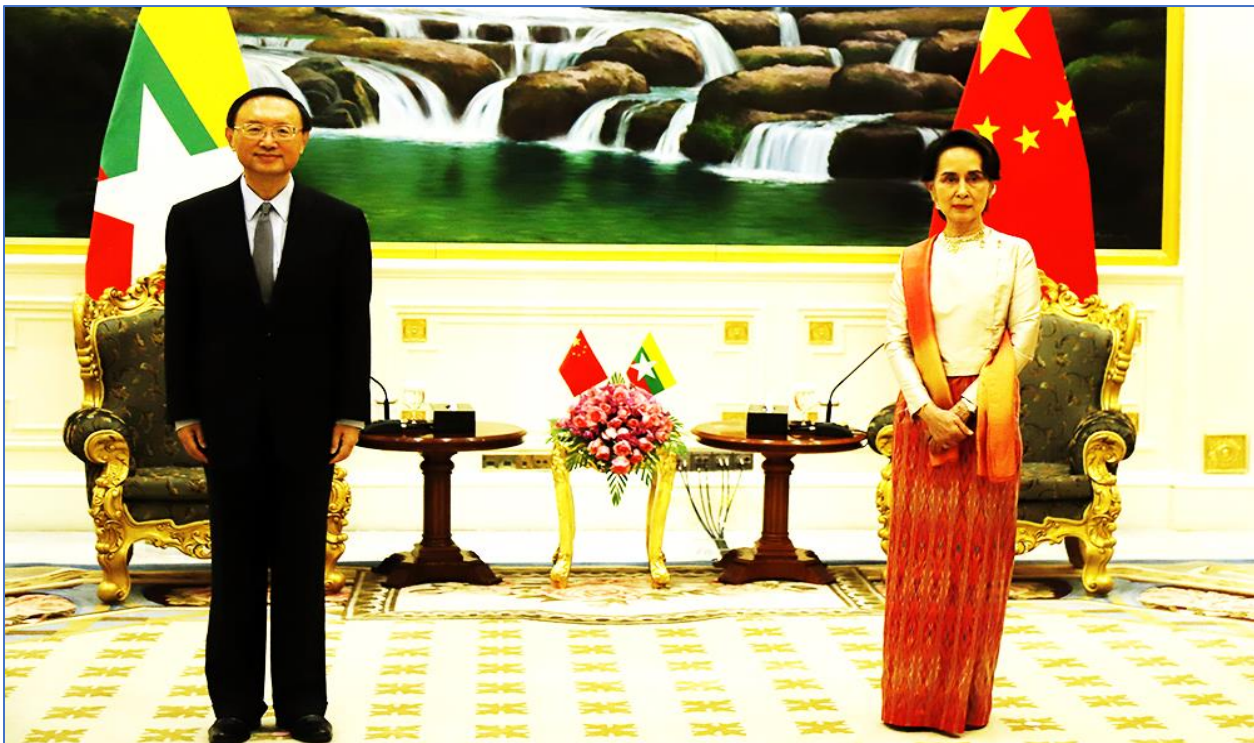
Courting the NLD

In fact, in the past, China cultivated deep friendships with the leaders of the former military regime and the military elite. The Chinese Embassy in Yangon was close to the military regime and in constant contact—reports of a flurry of meetings between the two sides were published in state-run papers. (A downside of the friendship, however, was a rise in anti-China sentiment among Myanmar's oppressed citizens.)

But this has changed since the NLD won a landslide election in 2015. China has taken steps to strengthen ties with the NLD government and the ruling party.

According to NLD sources, more than 100 NLD members including key players, lawmakers and youth wing members [have visited](#) China since 2016. The number of delegates visiting China has outpaced those from the US, EU and Asian countries. Usually they first fly to Beijing and other provinces and end their trips in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, which shares a border with Myanmar.

Along the way, Myanmar delegates study the CPC's leadership model and China's economic and social reforms, according to NLD delegates who have visited the country.



Myanmar State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Yang Jiechi, a member of China's Politburo, pose for a photo after their meeting in Naypyitaw, the capital of Myanmar on Sept. 2, 2020. / Myanmar State Counselor's Office / Facebook

An NLD Central Executive Committee member previously told The Irrawaddy that the NLD has built a constructive relationship with China amid growing tensions with Western countries over the Rohingya issue. Seizing the advantage, China has also promoted its own agenda of investments and projects, showing the visitors mega-dams and other development projects.

There is no doubt that China will continue to bet on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. After the 1990 election, then-Chinese Ambassador Cheng Ruisheng was the first diplomat to call NLD headquarters in Yangon to offer congratulations, though the regime never honored the outcome

Influence with EAOs

Moreover, China maintains regular contact with [armed ethnic minorities](#) in northern Myanmar. In fact, China has far more influence over ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in the north than Myanmar's own mainstream political parties, including the NLD.

Over the past few decades, many ethnic armed groups have become dependent on China for political and economic support, [as well as arms](#). This has left them indebted to the country. Unable to refuse their patron's requests, they have become China's foot soldiers in Myanmar. Through these armed groups China has been able to exert influence—albeit limited—on some ethnic political parties in the ethnic regions.

In Yangon, the Chinese Embassy maintains regular contact with organizations such as the Myanmar Chinese Chamber of Commerce, as well as NLD leaders, top-ranking government officials and the military, though it no longer has the kind of broad-based contacts it once enjoyed among Myanmar politicians, influential writers and “Red China” sympathizers in the 1950s and 1960s.

The US, meanwhile, has built up influence through a network of contacts throughout Yangon and Myanmar in recent years, in the wake of the country's political opening.

Nonetheless, China's influence on Myanmar, both direct and indirect, remains potent, with broad geopolitical implications and requiring of Naypyitaw a delicate balancing act.



Myanmar President U Win Myint (left) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi in February 2020. / Myanmar President's Office

Influence on the election

China has the ability to exert its influence in other countries and elections in the region. This comes in many forms, from economic measures like buying up local media and promoting pro-Beijing businesses, to launching “fake news” campaigns on social media and espionage. Unlike Russia, China doesn’t get involved in direct electoral meddling, but the rise of Chinese influence and power projection in Myanmar, and its massive infrastructure investment in the country, have sparked a heated, and unprecedented, debate among not only the elites but also ordinary Myanmar citizens.

In the next 10 years the political and economic influence of China will only increase in Southeast Asia, highlighting the decline of US influence in the region. Myanmar must prepare to face these challenges.

China is growing more assertive in trying to influence elections in the region. For instance, in Cambodia several years ago, China took assertive and bold steps to help [Hun Sen](#), one of Beijing’s staunchest allies in Southeast Asia, win the country’s election in 2018.

In Sri Lanka, China [welcomed](#) “old friend” Mahinda Rajapaksa’s landslide election victory in August this year and assured him of its full support, as Beijing looked to advance its strategic cooperative partnership with the island nation. Since 2015, after Rajapaksa became the president of Sri Lanka, China has substantially increased its engagement and investment there; the election victory no doubt strengthened China’s influence in the country.

A similar story can be seen in Nepal. In 2017, [communist parties in Nepal](#) with close ties to neighboring China emerged victorious in the country’s largest democratic exercise ever. China poured investment into the building of airports, highways and hydropower projects in Nepal, while Chinese diplomats have worked to increase ties with Nepali political leaders.



National League for Democracy delegates meet with Song Tao, the head of the International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China, in Beijing in 2018. / NLD / Facebook

Anti-China sentiment

A similar pattern can be seen in Myanmar. Chinese influence is visible in the country, but equally, anti-China sentiment is strong and persistent. No political leaders—and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is no exception—want to be seen as too close to China in

an election year. (In 1967, Myanmar saw anti-Chinese riots, stemming from the spread of China's cultural revolution ideology among Chinese expatriates in Myanmar.)

Another example of this phenomenon can be seen in Indonesia, where President Joko Widodo appeared to distance himself from Beijing and downplay the importance of Chinese-funded projects in the country, when seeking re-election last year.

Overcoming the perception of being too close to China is a difficult task that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and many other Myanmar politicians face. As she has been accused of being a pro-China politician in the recent past, the State Counselor will have to walk a tightrope.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who has embraced China's BRI projects, will also be well aware of the [recent spat](#) between the US and Chinese embassies in Yangon. It is a politically delicate, and diplomatically awkward, moment for her.

Understandably, the Myanmar government does not want to be seen taking sides in an extended tussle between China and the US amid rising geopolitical competition. On the other hand, a majority of Myanmar people have a [negative view](#) of Chinese-funded projects in the country.

November's election will have significance for the country's relationship with the major powers and its often-delicate geopolitical alignment with its giant neighbors, including China.

Whoever leads the next government in Naypyitaw, it would be foolish to expect an administration that is overtly pro-China, Japan, India or US. As such, we can expect Myanmar's strictly neutral foreign policy to be maintained.

Topics: China



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<https://www.thedailystar.net/world/south-asia/news/myanmars-suu-kyi-vows-victory-election-campaign-starts-despite-virus-surge-1957877>

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Myanmar's Suu Kyi vows victory in election as campaign starts despite virus surge



A mother and her son hold a flag of National League for Democracy (NLD) party, amid coronavirus disease (COVID-19) spread concerns during an election campaign rally in Yangon, Myanmar, September 8, 2020. Photo: Reuters

Reuters, Yangon : Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi launched her re-election bid on Tuesday ahead of polls set for November, vowing victory at a scaled-down ceremony in the capital after her original plans were scuppered by a surge in coronavirus cases.

"Today, our victory campaign has begun," she said, before hoisting the party's flag at the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) headquarters in Naypyitaw at an event broadcast on her Facebook page.



Myanmar's de-facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi wears a face shield and mask as she attends a flag-raising ceremony for the National League for Democracy (NLD) party to mark the first day of election campaigning in Naypyidaw on Tuesday (Sept 8). Myanmar's election campaign began Sept 8 with Aung San Suu Kyi's party tipped for victory, with the Nobel laureate much loved at home despite her reputation shattered overseas, as she is appealing for a landslide to counter the still mighty military.

The election is set to serve as a test of the country's first democratic government in half a century and is seen by analysts as an important test of Myanmar's transition away from direct military rule as it grapples with crises on multiple fronts. Suu Kyi, who rules as state counselor, had planned to launch her campaign in the commercial capital of Yangon but cancelled the trip on Monday on advice of the health ministry.

Wearing a red mask decorated with a peacock, the emblem of the NLD, and a plastic face shield, she thanked supporters for flying the party's red flag at their homes across the country. "I'd like to say that to make our victory flag long-lasting means making the nation's peace, development, and prosperity long-lasting," she said.

The NLD, which won a landslide at 2015 polls that ended half-a-century of military and military-backed rule, is expected to win again though by a lesser margin. The party remains overwhelmingly popular despite criticism over its failure to curb the power of the army or end escalating ethnic conflicts. It has also faced international condemnation over a 2017 military crackdown on the Rohingya Muslim minority.

Preparations for the November 8 polls have been overshadowed by a worsening outbreak of the novel coronavirus, which is adding pressure on the economy. The World Bank has predicted economic growth to drop from 6.8 percent to just 0.5 percent this financial year.

The country had gone weeks without a local transmission and many regulations had been relaxed until mid-August when cases were detected in the western state of Rakhine. The number of cases has tripled since to 1,562 and eight deaths. The health ministry reported 93 new cases on Tuesday. Authorities have enforced a second partial lockdown in Yangon, issuing stay-at-home orders for select townships and banning dine-in services at restaurants and bars. Schools across the country have been closed and flights in and out are limited.

Last week, officials sealed off the capital, Naypyitaw, where the government is based, imposing mandatory quarantine and coronavirus tests for any visitors. Gatherings of more than 50 people have been banned, and political parties say they are planning smaller campaign events.

Source: <https://www.thedailystar.net/world/south-asia/news/myanmars-suu-kyi-vows-victory-election-campaign-starts-despite-virus-surge-1957877>