

Understanding China's Response to Ethnic Conflicts in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, China has been playing a proactive and assertive role in neighbouring Myanmar's internal conflicts, most of them driven by tensions between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups. Current scholarly studies examine the factors responsible for China's increased role, identifying, amongst them, Beijing's concerns on border stability and nationalist pressure from within. These analyses, however, neglect to delve into the role of geostrategic issues in shaping China's response. This paper fills the gap, and examines China's intervention in Myanmar's ethnic conflicts by focusing on the surrounding geostrategic factors. It argues that for China, a key motivation is regaining lost ground in its ties with Myanmar .

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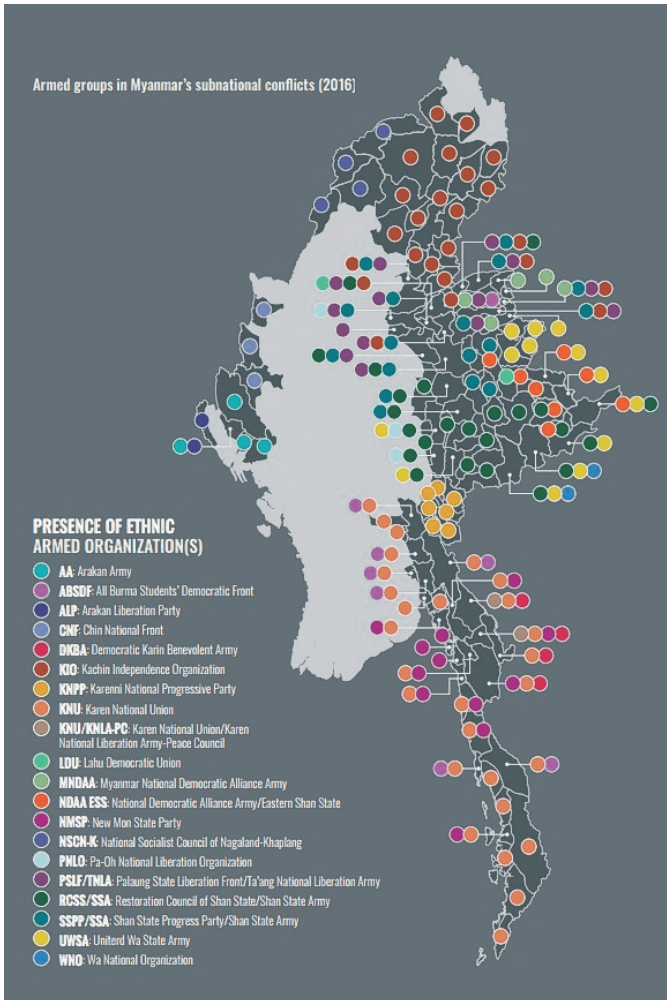
INTRODUCTION

Ethnic conflicts have emerged as one of the most challenging issues in Myanmar's ongoing political transition. Continued violence has left hundreds of thousands displaced and fatalities estimated in the hundreds. It is also, consequently, proving to be a major test in its relations with its northern neighbour China. Beijing's role in Myanmar's internal conflicts involves the management of militarised conflicts between the Myanmar armed forces (or the *Tatmadaw*) and ethnic armed groups along China-Myanmar borderlands, as well as supporting Myanmar's quest for peace. What explains China's proactive role in Myanmar's ethnic conflicts? Some analysts have explained it by exploring the factors determining the variations in China's responses. Some are of the view that the level of China's response is proportionate to the intensity of conflicts and its effects on the Chinese side of the border, while others see a link between Chinese domestic nationalism and its foreign policy.

Yun Sun of the Henry L. Stimson Center, for one, argues that the level of Chinese intervention in Myanmar "directly correlates with the intensity of the conflict and its spill over effect."¹ This line of thinking suggests an element of reluctance on the part of Beijing and its role is essentially to minimise cross-border effects of the conflicts and to ensure border security and stability. For his part, Enze Han of the School of Oriental and African Studies, while recognising that Myanmar's foreign policy behaviour and China's geostrategic interests play a role in shaping China's response, examines the question by focusing more on the role of Chinese domestic nationalism. Han argues that the Chinese government allowed "domestic nationalism" to "fester without censoring them" so that it could use it "to act tough" in its diplomatic ties with Myanmar.² Indeed, other scholars besides Han have argued that China uses nationalism as an instrument of foreign policy. For instance, Suisheng Zhao observed that Chinese "[p]ragmatic nationalism

involves adaptation to the changing world.”³ Pragmatic nationalism allows China to use popular nationalist sentiments to avoid confrontation against “perceived provocations” when it calculates that it is not in its national interests. With the same logic, China also uses domestic nationalism to take a hard line when it serves its national interests, as gleaned in the case of Myanmar.

Map 1. Myanmar's subnational conflicts



Source: Adapted from *The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development*, (2017), The Asia Foundation, <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ContestedAreasMyanmarReport.pdf>

While these studies provide interesting insights, they cover developments only up to mid-2015 and therefore fail to examine the ensuing period. Indeed, Myanmar's conflict situation changed drastically beginning mid-2017 as focus shifted to the Rakhine crisis in the country's north-west, involving the Muslim Rohingya community. In the face of the crisis, Naypyidaw's foreign policy behaviour underwent a turnabout.

Under the changed circumstances, the assumptions that China was a reluctant player and that its domestic considerations informed its approach are no longer sufficient in explaining Beijing's approach. This paper examines the shifts in China's approach towards Myanmar's internal conflicts, particularly the role of geostrategic factors. The paper argues that the adjustments in China's Myanmar policy are driven by the desire to reclaim its influential position in Myanmar that has weakened in recent years. Three strategic objectives are at the forefront of China's approach: to play a leading role in managing the conflicts; to build goodwill with the Myanmar government; and to push forward China's projects in Myanmar.

CHINA-MYANMAR RELATIONS: AN OVERVIEW

The Myanmar-China relationship presents an interesting case of how bilateral ties between China and its neighbours developed in the post-independence period. The early evolution of the relationship was informed by the concept of *Pauk-Phaw*, a Burmese term meaning "kinfolk" that Myanmar reserves only for China. Explaining the meaning of the concept in an attempt to understand China-Myanmar relations, scholars have identified some key elements.⁴ The initial conception of *Pauk-Phaw*, as the term suggests, was to respect and protect "each other's nationals residing in the other country" as stated in the joint communique issued during Myanmar's Prime Minister U Nu's

visit to China in December 1954. The key elements of the concept were broadened a year later when U Nu played a key role in bringing China to the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. Chinese leader Zhou Enlai visited Yangon after the conference to celebrate Myanmar's New Year. Some believe that the "Bandung spirit based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence began to symbolize the new Sino-Burma relationship and the concept of Pauk-Phaw relations consolidated as a result."⁵ The question is why the Burmese leadership wanted such a concept to define the country's relationship with China. Soon after independence, Myanmar's major challenge in dealing with China revolved around a border dispute, the presence of the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) troops in Myanmar's bordering Kachin and Shan states, and incursions into Myanmar by Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces in pursuit of the KMT troops. Within this context, the Burmese leadership was wary of invasion by Communist China in its northeastern border. In their search for a "key to unlock the relationship stalemate",⁶ they conceived the *Pauk-Phaw* concept to manage ties with China.

Despite the normative concept that was supposed to guide the relationship, Myanmar's relations with its northern neighbour was not trouble-free. In fact, for over a decade from the late 1960s to 1978, China supported the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) that fought a power struggle against Myanmar's central government. Majority of the CPB cadres were made up of ethnic groups in Sino-Myanmar border regions such as the Kachin, Shan, Wa, and Kokang, driven more by their ethnic identity and their anti-Myanmar government sentiments rather than communist ideology.⁷ While China officially stopped assisting the BCP in the late 1970s, many of these ethnic armed groups in northern Myanmar sprung up as offshoots of the BCP. Chinese opening up strategy in the late 1970s created a new chapter in the relationship and the *Pauk-Phaw* concept was revived to define the relationship. Two

events cemented relations between the two countries in the late 1980s: In 1988 Myanmar's military regime brutally suppressed the pro-democracy uprising, and in 1989, the Chinese army cracked down on the Tiananmen Square protests. Both countries faced international isolation, as a result.

As the relationship deepened in the 1990s, Myanmar's dependence on China grew to a point where the Burmese leadership began to reassess the strategic implications. Democratisation was initiated partly to bring about structural changes that would allow Myanmar to diversify its engagements with other major powers while reducing its dependence on China. China-Myanmar relations entered a difficult period when Myanmar initiated political reforms in 2011. Although Beijing welcomed Myanmar's democratisation, it miscalculated the pace of Myanmar's political transition and Naypyidaw's engagements with the US.⁸

China's Strategic Interests in Myanmar

China's interests in Myanmar in the context of ethnic conflicts in the borderlands are in alignment with its long-term strategic interests. One of the oft-stated policy objectives of China in Myanmar is "border stability". For China, stability along its shared border with Myanmar is vital from the strategic, security and economic perspectives. For many years, the borderlands of China and Myanmar have been a source of tension between Beijing and Naypyidaw. Myanmar has long harboured suspicion of China's role in its subnational conflicts where strong ethnic armed groups have deep historical, cultural and economic linkages with China, particularly with its landlocked Yunnan province. Instability in the shared border regions creates two key strategic challenges for China. The borderlands are inhabited by ethnic groups sharing cultural affinities: the Kachin in Myanmar and the Jinphos in China are of the same ethnic stock. Similarly, the Wa⁹ are found on both sides of the

border, while the Kokang¹⁰ are ethnic Han Chinese and speak Mandarin. Given these ethnic linkages, a critical concern for China is the potential of conflicts spilling over to its side of the border.

Another strategic interest is to seek and preserve access to the Indian Ocean, where Myanmar is seen as a 'land-bridge'. Instability along the borders creates obstacles in the smooth implementation of China's mega infrastructure projects that include road, rail and energy pipelines as part of its massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines connecting Myanmar's Rakhine state off the coast of the Bay of Bengal and Chinese Yunnan provincial capital Kunming transport imported energy from the Bay of Bengal, West Asia and Africa to Chinese hinterlands. Overland trade through China-Myanmar borderlands comprises of over half of the US\$11 billion bilateral trade. Cross-border trade with Myanmar is vital for Yunnan province.¹¹ Myanmar shares a 2,204-km land border with China's Yunnan province and Tibet Autonomous Region; of this, Yunnan alone shares 1,997 km, making it an important player in China's Myanmar policy.¹²

The above factor is often highlighted in discussions about China's strategic interests in Myanmar, and rightly so. However, there are other geostrategic interests and concerns of China particularly in the context of the ethnic conflicts of Myanmar that need closer examination, as they appear to play an equally significant role in shaping Beijing's policy. The first is Beijing's wish to play a leading role in Myanmar's internal conflicts. China considers the ethnic minorities inhabiting the borderlands as a buffer against external threats. China worries that increased conflicts in the border regions may invite its adversaries to access the borderlands. The second strategic interest is to use its role in the ethnic conflicts to earn the goodwill of the Myanmar government; the desire is to arrest Myanmar moving closer to the US and to protect its investments in the country, as well as to push forward new strategic projects in Myanmar.

CHINA'S RESPONSE TO MYANMAR'S INTERNAL CONFLICTS

China's response to Myanmar's internal conflicts in the reforms era may be categorised roughly into three phases based on its changing objectives and strategies: the first phase from 2011 to 2012; the second phase, 2013 to 2015; and the third phase, 2016 to 2018. The initial months of 2011 began with Beijing sending a high-level official to Myanmar soon after President Thein Sein was sworn in. In keeping with tradition, President Thein Sein made China his first foreign visit in May 2011. During this visit, the two countries elevated their bilateral relationship to a "comprehensive strategic partnership."¹³ China's key objectives towards Myanmar's ethnic conflicts during this early phase appears to have been limited and primarily concerned with border security and stability. To achieve these objectives, the strategy was largely a continuation of the past policy that emphasised the principle of non-interference and "persuading for peace and facilitating dialogue".¹⁴ Beijing appeared confident that the political changes inside Myanmar would not affect its strategic interests in the borderlands.

A Confident China with Limited Interests in the Borderlands (2011-2012)

The first major bilateral issue, with direct implications on Myanmar's ethnic groups, was the China-funded Myitsone dam in northern Myanmar's Kachin state bordering China. In early 2011, the Kachin Independence Organisation's (KIO) sent a letter to the Chinese government to withdraw from the Myitsone dam because of local resentment against the project. In June that year, fighting erupted between the Kachin Independence Army's (KIA), the armed wing of the KIO and the Tatmadaw after a decade-long ceasefire. According to an observer: "The Myitsone Dam, and the Burma Army's security of it, appeared to be one of the main factors used by the KIO to resume

hostilities.”¹⁵ Even those who do not view Chinese dams as “the root cause” of the conflict, agree that “Chinese dams might have aggravated the situation.”¹⁶ During President Thein Sein’s visit to China in May 2011, Chinese President Hu Jintao stressed the need for better coordination between the two countries in maintaining “stability on the border.”¹⁷ From the limited objective of border stability, Beijing’s interests began to acquire greater geostrategic significance as the issue of the Myitsone dam attracted international attention. Soon after President Thein Sein announced the suspension of the Myitsone dam, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar in December 2012. In the same month, the then US Ambassador Derek Mitchell visited Kachin state. These developments created concerns in China about American role in Myanmar’s ethnic conflicts.¹⁸

China continued to use high-level exchanges to air its concerns. In February 2012, Jia Qinglin, who chairs the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), met Myanmar’s Speaker of the House of Representatives Thura U Shwe Mann during the latter’s visit to China. Jai told Shwe Mann that “China hopes to work closely with Myanmar to boost bilateral mutually beneficial cooperation and properly settle problems in cooperation so that China-Myanmar friendly cooperation will bring more benefits to both peoples.”¹⁹ In September, during President Thein Sein’s trip to four Chinese provinces, the then Vice President Xi Jinping told Thein Sein that “both sides should work hard to guarantee the smooth progress of certain important cooperative projects.”²⁰ Scholars assessing Myanmar-China relations in the initial years of Myanmar’s reforms suggested at that time that Myanmar’s ongoing political transition and the issue of ethnic armed groups could create obstacles in Myanmar-China relations, but expressed confidence that the political changes in Myanmar would not affect China’s economic cooperation with Myanmar.²¹

Developments in the latter part of 2012 further created anxiety and tension in China-Myanmar relations as conflicts along the border intensified, while Myanmar increasingly reoriented its foreign policy towards the US. In November that year, then US President Barack Obama made a historic visit to Myanmar. In December, Myanmar army launched airstrikes against the KIA, three bombs landed on Chinese territory and thousands of Kachin refugees crossed over into Yunnan. Beijing assessed that Myanmar's military actions in the border regions amounted to testing China's response. China's wariness increased as the conflicts might open room for the US and other Western powers to access the border areas. Expectedly, Beijing reacted strongly and began to get involved directly in the Myanmar's ethnic conflicts. China's anxiety increased as the KIA's engagements with the US developed rapidly in the following years.

Exhibition of Position and Power (2013-2015)

The second phase began with China increasingly viewing Myanmar's ethnic conflicts through the geostrategic prism. Even as its objective of border stability was emphasised, it was no longer limited to border security and stability. A key goal was to position itself as the leading player in Myanmar's peace process. The strategies adopted were intended to remind Myanmar of China's position and power. This was demonstrated by not only using ethnic armed groups such as the Wa and the Kokang but also scaling down its economic and military assistance to Myanmar during this phase. On 4 February 2013, China hosted a new round of peace talks between representatives of the KIO and the Myanmar government in the border town of Ruili in China's Yunnan province—this established its first formal role in Myanmar's peace process. Beijing pressured both sides to attend the meeting and was actively involved in the peace talks that was attended by a senior official from the foreign ministry in Beijing. China proposed to chair the

meeting, but was rejected by both the Myanmar government and the KIO and had to settle with an observer role. Despite its failure to take the official lead, China in fact dictated the terms on who could attend and what should be included in the minutes of the meetings.²² China did not want any mention of humanitarian aid and ceasefire monitoring in the minutes of the meeting, as these issues might invite international concerns and possible presence of international observers and humanitarian agencies on its border.²³

In the second round of peace talks held in the Thai city of Chiang Mai on 20 February 2013, China again offered to chair the meeting, but was rejected anew by the Myanmar government and the KIO.²⁴ The leadership position was instead given to Yohei Sasakawa, who chairs Japan's Nippon Foundation: he was appointed Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar a day before the meeting, and thereafter hosted the talks. The next round of peace talks was initially scheduled for 6 April in the same year in Myitkyina, the capital city of Kachin state, but had to be postponed because China refused to accept the KIO's invitation of international observers from the United Nations, the US and the UK. As a result, the KIO withdrew from the meeting, leading to widespread criticism against China for creating obstacles to the progress of the peace talks. The meeting was finally held in May after a compromise was reached, with China agreeing to the participation of the UN as the only international observer, while the KIO received assurances from US and UK that they would continue to "follow developments closely."²⁵ On 19 November 2013, Maj-Gen Gun Maw visited the US Embassy in Yangon and met Ambassador Mitchell and sought American involvement in the peace talks.²⁶ In April 2014, Gun Maw visited the US and met senior state department officials and UN representatives.²⁷

At a time when differences were growing, two developments involving the Wa and the Kokang demonstrated Beijing's ability to cause

trouble for Myanmar. On 29 April 2013, a report by defence and security analysis firm IHS Jane's through its Bangkok-based correspondent alleged that China supplied "several Mil Mi-17 'Hip' medium-transport helicopters armed with TY-90 air-to-air missiles" to the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in late February and early March" the same year; the report cited "Myanmar ethnic minority and Myanmar government sources."²⁸ Both Beijing²⁹ and the UWSA³⁰ denied the allegation. According to Bertil Lintner, the objective of Beijing was to remind Myanmar that "unlike the US, [China] is Myanmar's immediate neighbour and has the means to interfere in its internal conflicts - and that it can, and is willing to, step up the pressure if Naypyidaw moves too close to Washington."³¹ Others have suggested that the intensive media coverage of the story might have been "designed to bring the Wa into conflict with the Government."³² Whatever the truth is, the report further raised questions about the nature of China's role in Myanmar's ethnic conflicts.

In February 2015, renewed conflicts started in the Kokang region bordering China when troops of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) led by Pheung Kya-shin³³ (Peng Jiasheng) attacked the Myanmar army, returning after almost six years since he was ousted in 2009 by a rival Kokang leader with the help of the Tatmadaw. During the offensives, the Myanmar military's airstrike killed five Chinese citizens on 13 March 2015.³⁴ Myanmar officially apologised to China after Beijing demanded explanation from Naypyitaw.³⁵ Conflicts intensified in the China-Myanmar border regions in mid-2015 and Myanmar's dependence on China in dealing with the ethnic conflicts only increased. Beijing began to use the management of ethnic conflicts to reach out to Myanmar's opposition parties, particularly the National League for Democracy (NLD). For instance, on 11 June, as Aung San Suu Kyi arrived in Beijing, the

MNDAA suddenly announced a unilateral ceasefire, ending four months of fierce fighting.³⁶ A statement issued by the MNDAA noted that one of the reasons for declaring ceasefire was Beijing's "strong calls for restoring peace in the China-Myanmar border region."³⁷

Even as it used the ethnic conflicts to win over opposition political parties, China became more assertive in Myanmar's peace process. A report citing a Myanmar senior official involved in the peace process accused China of trying to "derail" Myanmar's peace process.³⁸ Min Zaw Oo, director of Ceasefire Negotiation and Implementation with the Myanmar Peace Centre, said China wanted "to wield influence on the groups along the Chinese border."³⁹ He accused China of stopping the UWSA and the KIO from signing the peace pact unless Myanmar invites the MNDAA into the process. The official also alleged that China objected to the inclusion of Western nations and of Japan among international observers in the signing ceremony of the peace process. China denied the accusation and Min Zaw Oo later clarified that it was merely "misreport(ed)" by media.⁴⁰ The Myanmar government and eight ethnic armed groups out of 15 involved signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Accord (NCA) in Naypyidaw on 15 October 2015 in the presence of international witnesses from the UN, the European Union, China, India, Thailand and Japan.⁴¹

From being the largest investor in 2010-2011 at US\$ 8.2 billion, China went down to the 8th position in 2014 when its FDI flow in Myanmar recorded US\$56.1 million.⁴² China's arms sales to Myanmar dropped significantly in 2014 to less than US\$100 million.⁴³ A reason could be that China wanted to send a signal that Myanmar would have to pay a price if it moves closer to the Western countries and "appears to be using arms sales to this end."⁴⁴ Traditionally, China has been the largest supplier of weapons to Myanmar. Even when there was diplomatic tension in the reforms era, China remained the largest

supplier of weapons to the country. As EU member states and the US impose arms embargoes on Myanmar, China accounted for 68 percent of Myanmar's arms imports between 2013–17, as China's arms supplies to Myanmar steadily increased after 2015.⁴⁵

In Search of Convergence of Interests (2016 to 2018)

China-Myanmar relations improved after the NLD came to power in early 2016.⁴⁶ This coincided with increasing international condemnation of Myanmar over atrocities against the minority Rohingya community that intensified after August 2017. As Myanmar came under increasing international scrutiny, the Myanmar government looked towards China for protection and Beijing willingly extended support. A key policy objective of Beijing in the current phase has been to build goodwill with the NLD government and positioned to play a leading role in Myanmar's internal conflicts. Beijing's calculations appear to be primarily to minimise the role of other external players, particularly the US and use its support to the Myanmar government to push forward strategic projects in Myanmar. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was the first foreign guest received by Aung San Suu Kyi after the NLD government assumed power. On the eve of Wang Yi's visit to Myanmar, a commentary in *The China Daily* noted Beijing's eagerness to improve relations with the new NLD government. It said, "Wang's visit, which comes less than one week after the inauguration of Myanmar's new government, shows the two neighbours *continue* to attach great importance to bilateral ties" and goes further to say that "both countries are *seizing the opportunity* to engage and connect with each other after Myanmar's political transition (emphasis added)".⁴⁷ In July 2016, Chinese minister of state security, Geng Huichang visited Myanmar and in August, Aung San Suu Kyi visited China. Myanmar military chief Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing visited China in November and met Chinese political and military leaders. The following year, President U Htin Kyaw

paid an official visit to China at the invitation of President Xi Jinping in April.

Since 2016, China has increased its role in Myanmar's peace process by scaling up financial contributions and political support. Beijing's role was geared towards pressuring ethnic armed groups to participate in the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference initiated by Aung San Suu Kyi. On 27 July 2016, Sun Guoxiang, China's Special Envoy for Asian Affairs attended the Mai Ja Yang summit of ethnic armed groups that was hosted by the KIO. On 2 August 2016, China sent Song Tao, the chief of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party to Myanmar to meet Aung San Suu Kyi and other political and military leaders. Sun Guoxiang also visited the UWSA and the National Democratic Alliance Army-Eastern Shan State (NDAA-ESS) to ensure their participation in the first session of peace conference. An analyst has noted that "...to build goodwill with Suu Kyi and the NLD government early on, China provided unprecedented support of and cooperation on the nationwide peace process and the Union Peace Conference in August 2016."⁴⁸ In late 2017, China pledged to donate US \$3 million in assistance to promote peace in Myanmar.⁴⁹

Since China improved relations with the NLD government, a strategy adopted by Beijing has been to find convergence of interests with the Myanmar government; the Rohingya crisis presented itself as one such issue for Beijing to demonstrate its "desire to be seen as supportive" to Myanmar government.⁵⁰ In mid-2017, as new exodus of Rohingya refugees fled to neighbouring Bangladesh creating tension between the two countries, China offered to mediate. It was rejected by Myanmar. Zaw Htay, spokesperson of the State Counsellor's Office said that "[Myanmar's] policy is to resolve [the Rohingya] problem bilaterally between Myanmar and Bangladesh."⁵¹ Even as China could not play the role of a mediator, it stepped up its role in supporting Myanmar at the

UN Security Council. On 6 November, China refused to negotiate on a potential UNSC resolution on Myanmar over its handling of the Rohingya crisis. The presidential statement adopted had no “references to statelessness and citizenship for the Rohingya and a UN-fact-finding mission were removed, while the request for a special advisor on Myanmar was weakened.”⁵² On 19 November, China also proposed a “three-point plan” that involved ceasefire and repatriation of Rohingya refugees; economic development in Rakhine state; and called on the international community to focus on investment of the state during the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Myanmar.

During this visit, Wang Yi also “announced plans for a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, stretching from Yunnan via Mandalay to both Kyaukphyu and Yangon.”⁵³ An analyst has observed that China was looking for “concessions on its Rakhine infrastructure in exchange for continuing to shelter Myanmar from the much-deserved international opprobrium.”⁵⁴ On the Rohingya crisis, China’s position has three aspects: Myanmar’s sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected; minimum involvement from the international community in Myanmar’s national reconciliation process; and the international community should facilitate dialogue between Bangladesh and Myanmar.⁵⁵ In August 2018, when a UN report called for the UNSC to impose an arms embargo on Myanmar, subject its officials to targeted sanctions, and set up an ad hoc tribunal to try suspects or refer them to the International Criminal Court in the Hague, China took the stance that any “unilateral criticism or exerting pressure is actually not helpful to resolving the problem”.⁵⁶ In December, China, along with Russia, boycotted discussion on a UK-drafted resolution that aimed to push Myanmar to work with the United Nations to address the Rohingya refugee crisis or else face UNSC’s action including sanctions.⁵⁷ As the Western countries stepped up pressure and re-imposed sanctions, China positioned itself to protect Myanmar.

Conflicts intensified with several ethnic armed groups that have remerged along China-Myanmar borderlands engaged in clashes with the Myanmar army in different places.⁵⁸ Among the ethnic armed groups, China's role and engagement with the Northern Alliance—a coalition of four ethnic armed groups comprising the KIA, the MNDA, the Ta-ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Arakan Army (AA)—has been the most intense, apart from the UWSA. Since the formation of the Northern Alliance in 2016, much of Chinese involvement in Myanmar's ethnic conflicts has revolved around these armed groups, collectively or individually. In one of the several meetings with members of the Northern Alliance, the Chinese special envoy, Sun Guoxiang urged the Alliance to end fighting as it was “causing instability along China's border.”⁵⁹ After a meeting in Kunming in November 2018, the Northern Alliance and the Myanmar government agreed to reduce clashes and hold a meeting of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee, a coalition of ethnic armed groups formed in April 2017 led by the UWSA that includes the Northern Alliance as well as the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N). The effort is to take forward negotiations with the government.⁶⁰

During the 2016 China visit, Aung San Suu Kyi agreed to establish three border trade zones as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) were signed when she again visited China in May 2017 that included Cooperation within the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative and the establishment of the China-Myanmar Border Economic Cooperation Zone.⁶¹ In July 2018, Myanmar approved three economic cooperation zones on the Myanmar-China border, namely Kanpiketi town, in Kachin State's Special Region 1 which is under the control of the New Democratic Army-Kachin militia, a border guard force allied with the Tatmadaw; Chinshwehaw, in Shan State's Laukkai Township which is part of the Kokang Self-Administered

Zone; and in Shan State's Muse Township.⁶² Furthermore, the China-Myanmar high-speed railway project or the Kunming-Kyaukphyu Railway that was earlier abandoned in 2014 was revived when China and Myanmar signed an MoU in October 2018 to conduct feasibility study of a railway linking Muse, with Mandalay in central Myanmar which would, according to the Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar, "inject new energy into the development of China's Belt and Road initiative and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor."⁶³ In June, while attending the 3rd Belt and Road Summit held in Hong Kong, Myanmar's Union Minister for the Ministry of the Office of the Union Government and the Chairman of Myanmar's Investment Commission Thaug Tun claimed that the railway would be extended to Yangon and Kyaukphyu.⁶⁴ Earlier in March, China and Myanmar signed an MoU to conduct feasibility studies for the construction of the Mandalay-Tigyaing-Muse Expressway Project and Kyaukphyu-Naypyitaw Highway Project.⁶⁵ China has emphasised the role of economic cooperation zones in boosting "peace and stability" in the border regions.⁶⁶ However, the significance of these zones boosting the BRI initiative cannot be underestimated, as they would serve as key gateways from China to Myanmar.

Chinese wariness towards the conflicts in the borderlands increased alongside more frequent US official visits to conflict regions in Myanmar. In early December 2018, Scot Marciel, US ambassador to Myanmar and Daniel Chugg, the UK's ambassador to Myanmar visited the IDP camps in Kachin State and met officials of Kachin state government, CSOs, and religious organisations, ethnic leaders, the leaders of ethnic political parties.⁶⁷ Scot Marciel made similar visits to Kachin State in October 2016⁶⁸ and another in November 2018 when he accompanied Richard Albright, the U.S. State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration to Kachin and Rakhine States.⁶⁹ A statement of the US embassy said that these visits were part of "the U.S. Embassy's regular

travel to look at our humanitarian assistance programs throughout the country and to better understand the conditions on the ground.”⁷⁰ After his October 2016 visit to Kachin State, Ambassador Marciel was quoted by media as saying that “[t]he US embassy wants to inform stakeholders its action and intention to support the ongoing peace process [and that]...[i]t will support the building of a federal union and most assistance will be done under USAID program. Furthermore, it will not put any pressure on any group that has not signed the NCA.”⁷¹ This was seen as a response to alleged reports about his role in urging the KIO/KIA to sign the NCA when he met them during the Kachin visit.⁷² In January 2017, Scot Marciel also visited Chin State of Myanmar and met government officials and the Chin State Ceasefire Monitoring Team.⁷³

On 29 December 2018, Chinese ambassador to Myanmar, Hong Liang visited Kachin State and met several political and civil society leaders. The visit followed increased US high-level officials to Kachin and other conflict affected ethnic areas including Rakhine State and Chin State. Kachin leaders who met the Chinese ambassador said they discussed issues including Myanmar’s peace process, the Chinese BRI, the controversial Chinese-backed Myitsone dam project and Chinese labourers working illegally in Kachin State.⁷⁴ One of the participants in the meeting, Chairman of the Kachin democratic Party, G. Aung Khan, has been quoted as saying that China may be able to “handle Myanmar’s peace process, but we want other countries to be involved”.⁷⁵ The desire to involve other external players in the peace process for the Kachin leader comes from the assessment that “China is thinking [only] about its interest in investing in Myanmar” and that Beijing is “apprehensive about Myanmar having closer ties with Western countries, especially the US and the UK.”⁷⁶ The Chinese ambassador reportedly told Kachin leaders that “if the West enters, there will be more problems.”⁷⁷ Hence, “[g]iven this fear of Western countries, China’s desire to control the country is greater than that of other countries,” Aung Khan added.⁷⁸

GEOSTRATEGIC FACTORS IN CHINA'S INTERVENTION

China's intervention in Myanmar's internal conflicts are motivated not only by its concerns about a potential spillover effect of the conflicts, nor by the need to respond to domestic pressure. As this analysis shows, a key motivation is its geostrategic interests. Building goodwill with the Myanmar government has been a key objective of China, and Beijing has used its intervention in the ethnic conflicts towards this end. Whether by pressuring the ethnic armed groups to join the Myanmar government's peace initiative particularly since the NLD government came to power in 2016, or aligning its position with the Myanmar government in the case of the Rohingya crisis. China also increased political and financial assistance to the Myanmar government to demonstrate its support. In the UN, China provided the strongest diplomatic support to Myanmar and protected it from severe action from the UN Security Council. All these moves were aimed at wooing the Myanmar government with goodwill.

In the management of ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, Beijing has demonstrated on several occasions that it wanted to take on a leadership role. Beijing's desire has been to minimise the role of other external powers in the peace process, particularly the US.⁷⁹ Border instability involving militarised conflicts attract external players in its backyard as issues of human rights abuses and refugee crises give international humanitarian agencies access to affected areas. China's refusal to "endorse a UN-led investigation into the [Rohingya] crisis also ensures that a coordinated, Western-led action does not occur on China's doorstep".⁸⁰ China's reservations on the role of external players in Myanmar's peace process or the appointment of China's first Special Envoy for Asian Affairs to focus on Myanmar's peace process soon after Japan appointed of special envoy, indicate Beijing's desire to be in the driver's seat of Myanmar's peace process.

Since mid-2017, increased international pressure with new threat of economic sanctions from the Western countries and the deterioration of Myanmar's relations with the West gave "a better bargaining position" for China vis-à-vis the Myanmar government.⁸¹ It was during this period that Beijing extracted major strategic projects from Myanmar—whether it was the Chinese-led Kyaukphyu deep-sea port project, that Beijing re-negotiated with the Myanmar government to reach a deal, although the scale of the project was reduced. Beijing also signed MoUs with Myanmar on the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), the China-Myanmar Border Economic Cooperation Zone, the feasibility study of a railway linking Muse with Mandalay and the feasibility studies for the construction of the Mandalay-Tigyaing-Muse Expressway Project and Kyaukphyu-Naypyitaw Highway Project as part of its BRI project.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA AND THE REGION

China's intervention in Myanmar's internal conflicts has created both challenges and opportunities for India. For one, China's extraction of major strategic projects from the Myanmar government have long-term strategic implications for India. With the agreement to build the CMEC as part of the BRI project, China may want to extend it to include Bangladesh at a time when the BCIM Economic Corridor has not been making progress. Such a trilateral idea has been muted earlier and with Bangladesh and Myanmar both part of the BRI initiative, the idea may soon be revived. However, without finding some resolution in Rakhine state, an overland route will remain problematic, although a maritime connectivity linking ports of Bangladesh and Myanmar is possible. For India, any connectivity development that undermines its role in the neighbourhood is problematic. With growing strategic projects in Kyuakphyu, China's inclination in securitising these projects, and by extension, the wider Bay of Bengal subregion would gain greater salience

in Beijing's calculations. Even though the so-called "strategic encirclement" of India may not have been the key motivation, the by-product of these developments—with China's BRI projects already linking other regional countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka—are only going to sharpen New Delhi's apprehensions of being encircled.

The role of India and other countries is critical in providing alternative options to Myanmar in counter-balancing China. Japan, for instance, has been playing a key role in strategic infrastructure projects in Myanmar. India and Japan have agreed to jointly develop connectivity projects in the region including in Myanmar. The imperative for such collaboration assumes greater prominence at a time when Myanmar's ability to manoeuvre is limited in the face of Myanmar's increasing tense relations with the West. Up until about 2014, scholars have viewed a potential of US-China cooperation in Myanmar.⁸² However, recent trends suggest that frictions and suspicions have marked US-China interactions in Myanmar. With the ethnic issues unlikely to find resolution in the near future, US-China interactions in Myanmar is likely to remain problematic. Far from working together, Myanmar remains a source of tension in US-China relations.

Unlike the Western countries and Japan, China has not openly objected to India's participation in Myanmar's ethnic peace process. This could be because of Myanmar's insistence on India's involvement. New Delhi has been increasing its involvement in Myanmar's peace process at the invitation of Naypyidaw as well as expanding socio-economic development assistance in Rakhine State and other ethnic areas including in Chin state, Sagaing region and Kachin state. For India, settlement of ethnic conflicts in Myanmar is critical, as this will have a huge impact on its side of the border. As China-India cooperation in conflict situations in the region is being experimented in Afghanistan, Myanmar provides an opportunity for China and India to work together

in finding solution to regional issues. Such a possibility, however, looks unlikely in the near future.

As the West distances itself from Myanmar over the Rohingya issue, Naypyidaw's diplomatic balancing is increasingly coming under stress. One may argue that Aung San Suu Kyi government's prioritisation of the ethnic peace process over economic development may have been a strategic mistake as this has pushed Myanmar to depend on China in dealing with the ethnic armed groups in China-Myanmar borderlands. Indeed, this strategy has minimised the government's ability to leverage international goodwill for the much needed economic development. In the wake of the West adopting an increasingly hard stand on the internal conflicts in Myanmar and Naypyidaw's dependence on China to deal with the ethnic issue has been pushing the country into China's strategic designs. This line of argument sounds convincing in the benefit of hindsight. However, to be fair to the Aung San Suu Kyi government, the choice of making ethnic peace process as its priority has merits in that the opening up of the country provided an opportunity to find resolution to the vexed ethnic question. While the Myanmar government underestimated the complexity of the issue, its intention was to find a solution to the decades-old issue in the new era of democratisation.

China's active involvement in Myanmar's ethnic conflicts for over six years have not brought about any major success in minimising militarised conflicts between the Myanmar army and the ethnic armed groups along China-Myanmar borderlands or in taking forward Myanmar's peace process. In fact, new dimensions of ethnic conflicts have emerged in recent years including new political or military alliances such as the Northern Alliance or the UWSA-led FPNCC as well as renewed clashes between ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar army. The spread of militarised conflicts involving ethnic armed groups that


has long remained dormant such as the Arakan Army in Rakhine state have emerged as new security challenges. It is unclear why the AA decided to move its activities to Rakhine and Chin states since 2015. One possible reason could be China's growing pressure on the ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar army to reduce conflicts along its borders. In December 2018, the Myanmar military declared a unilateral four-month ceasefire for the first time since renewed conflicts began in 2011.⁸³ The ceasefire covered the northern regions bordering China, but Myanmar's western border regions was excluded where active clashes between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military has been on the rise. According to the Myanmar army, the reason not declaring ceasefire in Chin and Rakhine region was because of the activities of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)—the Rohingya insurgent outfit. As the Arakan Army shifted the battleground southward away from the China-Myanmar borderlands, this has also shifted international attention away from the China-Myanmar borderlands—a key geostrategic interest of Beijing, as discussed earlier, has been to keep external powers away from its borders. Such a move may serve short-run strategic interests, but it is problematic in the long-run as Rakhine state is the site of ongoing key projects under the Chinese BRI initiative as well as new projects being planned. Continued trouble will affect the implementation of these projects.

In the face of growing regional suspicions towards the BRI projects, the current situation provides Beijing an opportunity to push forward its projects in Myanmar that could be presented as success stories to build confidence among countries in the region. As strategic projects under the BRI initiative further develop in Myanmar, Beijing's role and influence in China's Myanmar policy is likely to grow. Yunnan's relationship with Myanmar is multifaceted and will remain an important factor in China-Myanmar relations. The BRI initiative has helped narrow Yunnan's provincial government's interests and Beijing's

interests as the biggest beneficiary from these projects will accrue to Yunnan, though Myanmar policy will be increasingly shaped by Beijing as Myanmar's strategic value increases for China under the BRI, perhaps, at the cost of the provincial government.

CONCLUSION

From this analysis of China's intervention in Myanmar's ethnic conflicts, one can draw a few observations. As far as regional conflict situations are concerned, three broad trends are discernible. First, the level of China's intervention in conflict situation will be determined by the degree of its strategic interests in a particular conflict. Second, China's involvement in conflicts is driven less by the desire to solve the problem and more to use it for its strategic interests. Third, China's preference to lead and seek "Asian solutions" will guide its approach to conflicts in the region. Lastly, the future relations of China and Myanmar will remain problematic as long as it remains a "marriage of convenience" that has its own limits.

As in the past, the emerging China-Myanmar bilateral relationship may not be sustainable as it hinges heavily on the foreign policy behaviour of the Myanmar government. Growing local protests against Chinese projects, particularly in ethnic areas such as Kachin and Rakhine states, are driven largely by the fear that the Myanmar government may allow China to restart stalled projects. The current relationship is bereft of the spirit of *Pauk-Phaw*, the concept of mutual respect that once permeated their ties. 

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