

Commentary

# China Once Again on Wrong Side of History in Myanmar

Sunday 26 March 2023, by [Aung Zaw](#) (Date first published: 25 March 2023).

**As the US steps up its engagement with Myanmar's shadow government and signals a willingness to support the democratic opposition and ethnic armed groups, neighboring China is taking steps to counter any increase in US influence. But is it adopting the right strategy?**

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China's newly appointed special envoy [Deng Xijun has visited Myanmar](#) twice since December; his itinerary included a meeting with coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyitaw.



*Myanmar regime chief Min Aung Hlaing and Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar Chen Hai (right) celebrate the Chinese Lunar New Year in Yangon on Jan. 21, 2023.*

He also [traveled to the northern border](#) where he held separate meetings with representatives of the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), the Arakan Army (AA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). These ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) are under the sway of China and three of them—the KIA, TNLA and MNDAA—based in northeast Myanmar's Shan State are actively fighting the regime.

China's position now is that it wants them to talk to the regime, and wants to see an end to the fighting along the border.

After a recent meeting in the Wa Region, the ethnic armed groups [issued a press release expressing their appreciation for Beijing's efforts](#), saying they “welcomed China's mediation role in Myanmar's internal conflict” and promising to work with it.

This is all music to the ears of the regime leaders in Naypyitaw.

Following Deng's first low-key visit to Naypyitaw in December, something interesting happened. The regime pulled three military operations commands, or around 30 battalions, out of the area under its North-Eastern Command, redeploying them to Kayah and Chin states, as well as to Sagaing and regions in the south, to launch major offensives against insurgents and civilian populations in those areas.

One theory is that the Chinese special envoy promised the Myanmar junta it would bring about a de-escalation of military tensions in northern Shan State, where China is eager to build the Ruili-Mandalay railroad. When meeting ethnic rebels in the north, the Chinese envoy told them to stop fighting along the border.

## **Burma Act**



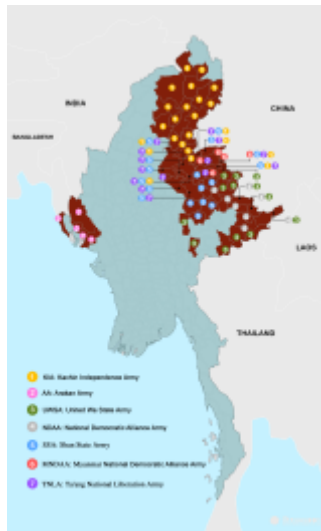
*Deng Xijun is welcomed by EAO representatives in Mong La on Feb. 20, 2023.*

Analysts see the Chinese special envoy's shuttling between the regime leader and ethnic armed groups in the north as a response to the Burma Act, part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) recently passed by the United States Congress. The Burma Act authorizes funds and technical assistance for anti-junta forces in Myanmar, including EAOs. But no actual assistance has arrived yet. In any case, China doesn't want to see the spread of Western influence on its border and will intervene to block it.

Myanmar's shadow National Unity Government (NUG) recently opened an office in Washington. While there is no such office in the Chinese capital, NUG officials have reached out to Chinese officials in Beijing and Yunnan Province. The NUG was among an alliance of pro-democracy forces and EAOs that [sent a congratulatory message to the Communist Party of China](#) and the Chinese people during the party's 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress in October.

Furthermore, senior defense officials from the NUG have traveled to the north, holding a series of meetings with allied northern EAOs including the Wa. At the moment Deng was visiting the northern border, some senior NUG defense officials were staying in Pangsang, the headquarters of the UWSA.

Recently, powerful Wa leaders pledged to support the NUG, and the MNDAA has been providing arms and training to NUG and PDF forces since last year. The regime in Naypyitaw wants to split this growing alliance—and to achieve that it needs China's support.



*Locations of China-backed ethnic armed groups in Myanmar*

## China's new game?

Deng, a former Chinese envoy to ASEAN, unceremoniously replaced Sun Guoxiang, who visited Myanmar after the coup.

In September 2021, Sun met coup leader Min Aung Hlaing but his request to meet detained ousted civilian leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was denied.

Opposition sources said Daw Aung San Suu Kyi wanted to meet with the envoy, but insisted that ousted President U Win Myint and Mandalay chief minister U Zaw Myint Maung also be present at the meeting. Both, like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, are currently detained by the junta. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi also reportedly sought to consult with her top party leaders but was not allowed to do so. Thus, the meeting with the Chinese envoy did not take place.

Why was China interested in talking to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi? At the beginning of her trial at the hands of the regime in 2021, the Nobel Peace laureate reportedly asked aides who accompanied her in the courtroom to contact China.

Officials of the ousted Myanmar government now in hiding believe the Chinese wanted to clarify her stance in relation to the radically altered political landscape. They wanted to hear the words “from her mouth”.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was a special guest of Chinese President Xi Jinping, who invited her to Beijing months before Myanmar's 2015 national election, in which her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won a landslide victory.

During a visit to Myanmar in 2020, Xi said practical cooperation by both sides was important for implementing the development projects that make up the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). He stressed that both sides need to promote the three pillars of the CMEC, namely the Kyaukphyu SEZ, the China-Myanmar Border Economic Cooperation Zone, and the New Yangon City project. All stopped after the coup, but China has slowly been taking steps to resume the projects since last year.

Then in July 2022 Chinese [Foreign Minister Wang Yi was in Myanmar's ancient city of Bagan](#) in

Mandalay Region to attend the 7<sup>th</sup> Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Foreign Ministers' meeting. However, the planned Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) summit in Myanmar did not take place as China did not respond to an invitation from the junta, which faced international isolation, growing instability, and armed insurrection.

More importantly, last year China abstained from voting on a UNSC resolution condemning the regime. It showed that China's limited support for the regime stopped short of lending it the legitimacy it craves. In Lunar New Year greetings, the Foreign Ministry of the [NUG thanked China](#) for standing by the people of Myanmar at the United Nations, in particular on the UNSC.

Regional grouping ASEAN has also shunned the regime leader, not inviting him to its summits. China does not want to undermine ASEAN and has followed its stance. Then this year China refrained from sending a congratulatory message to Myanmar on Jan. 4, Independence Day. Beijing again showed its engagement with the regime has limits.

### **Myanmar's anti-China stance**

These limits on its public embrace of the regime notwithstanding, China has long-term strategic interests in Myanmar beyond those of other countries, and has always interfered in Myanmar's internal affairs.

For decades, Myanmar citizens were exposed to anti-China propaganda rhetoric, and now they are witnessing resource-hungry China's mega projects in their country. It is safe to say the majority of Myanmar citizens are distrustful of their northern neighbor.

In 2012, then President's Office Minister Aung Min openly admitted that "we are afraid of China" during a public meeting in Monywa, Sagaing Region, where he and other senior government officials met local people protesting a controversial Chinese-backed copper mining project.

Like many Myanmar citizens, the military leaders themselves also dislike China.

In 2019, in a meeting with then Chinese Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Sun Guoxiang, [Min Aung Hlaing reportedly told the envoy](#) that rebels based in the north were buying weapons from China. Since the coup, the regime has turned for friendship to Russia, which is now a major arms supplier.

In 2021, China refused to condemn the coup and the regime's bloody crackdowns on anti-coup protesters, while Western democracies denounced the junta. Massive anti-China protests erupted in Myanmar; opposition forces including the People Defense Force (PDF) made threats to blow up a Chinese gas pipeline.

Indeed, Myanmar is one of the key countries in China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, amid this instability and protracted armed conflict, the BRI projects in Myanmar are in question.

But there are signs that the Chinese want to resume these projects, even though the junta has admitted that it still can't fully control the country. The question is whether the regime is capable of delivering with respect to China's strategic economic plans?

China wants to resume its Letpadaung copper mining project, which has been suspended since the coup. [Chinese companies also signed a contract just this month to install wind turbines](#) in Rakhine, western Myanmar, and the project is scheduled to start in December. Another top priority for Beijing

is construction of the Ruili-Mandalay-Kyaukphyu railroad linking China's Ruili with Kyaukphyu in Rakhine, an important part of the BRI. Given the instability in Myanmar, however, this ambitious project is unlikely to start soon. Looking to get it off the ground, China will be pushing EAOs in northern Myanmar to enter ceasefires with the regime.

China has begun shifting gears, moving towards more explicit support for the criminal regime in Naypyitaw. Historically, China has always been on the wrong side in Myanmar, supporting and working with regimes that the Myanmar people loathe. More importantly, China's investment projects in the country have always been unpopular. Unless it changes its priorities, China can't win in Myanmar.

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- The Irrawaddy. 25 March 2023:  
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/china-once-again-on-wrong-side-of-history-in-myanmar.html>
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