

# Unrestricted Warfare Beyond the South China Sea

What we can learn about China's pursuit of strategic influence from its engagement with Burma

by Capt Wayland Blue

China's increasingly assertive stance in the South China Sea along with a growing and mutually hostile relationship with the United States has brought the western Pacific into focus as a primary concern for U.S. security policy. The significant attention given to the western Pacific and prioritization of China as a primary pacing threat for the Marine Corps, with impacts for force design, is well justified. At the same time, we must observe that China is pursuing its regional strategic objectives along multiple lines of effort and often beyond the South China Sea. The Indian Ocean is one such area, and it is here we can observe China's complex employment of multiple instruments of national power to pursue its strategic interests.

A key component of China's strategy in the Indian Ocean is Burma (also known as Myanmar). Burma remains overlooked and often misunderstood because of its history of isolationism under military rule until the civilianization of its government beginning around 2010. Additionally, the government of Burma continues to receive intense and well-justified international pressure for ongoing human rights abuses perpetrated primarily by the country's independent military amid its long-running internal conflicts. However, Burma's extremely negative international image and ongoing instability have created a critical gap in a region otherwise significantly aligned with U.S. interests.

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China's area of interest and influence in the Burma region. (Map Source: Nikkei Asian Review.)

Burma, as a formerly British colonial possession, experienced major combat during World War II and was intended as a staging point for Japan's planned invasion of British India. Now, it is a strategic land avenue from Southern China to the Indian Ocean and the focus of significant diplomatic, infor-

mation, and economic engagement on the part of the Chinese government.

### China's Three Key Interests in Burma<sup>1</sup>

- Security and uninterrupted trade along the shared border between northern Burma and China's Yunnan province.

- Economic cooperation and access to natural resources.
- Direct access to the Indian Ocean to diversify supply lines from the Persian Gulf and increase energy security by bypassing the Malacca Strait.

Burma is also critical in Chinese president Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It has received significant direct investment in BRI projects such as the China/Myanmar economic corridor linking Yunnan province with central Myanmar and the deep-water port of Kyaukpyu.<sup>2</sup> Access to Kyaukpyu on the coast of Burma's northeastern Rakhine State also holds the potential for force projection in the eastern Indian Ocean.

### Background

Engagement with a newly civilianized Burma was a cornerstone of the Obama Administration's pivot to the Pacific.<sup>3</sup> However, prospects for reform have proved disappointing. Long-running conflicts between the central government and multiple Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) primarily operating near the border with China escalated in 2011 and remain intractable.<sup>4</sup>

These EAOs nominally represent the interests of large non-Burmese ethnic groups and have as their stated objective autonomy and ethnic self-determination in the context of a more decentralized federal system. Several major EAOs, such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA) also engage in narcotics trafficking to fund their operations.<sup>5</sup> Due to broad local support and significant defensive capabilities possessed by many EAOs, defeating them outright would likely be a pyrrhic victory for the central government. However, the Burmese military, which remains legally autonomous from the civilian government and has significant authority in internal security issues, is chronically heavy-handed in its counter-insurgency operations causing collateral damage and large-scale civilian displacement.

In particular, actions against the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in Rakhine state, an Islamic insurgent group, lead to mass killing and large scale displacement of predominantly Muslim civilians commonly referred to as Rohingyas.<sup>6</sup> The resulting Rohingya

crisis triggered renewed targeted U.S. sanctions against key Burmese officials and a negative ruling against Burma in the International Court of Justice. However, the justifiable international condemnation presented a renewed opportunity for the Chinese government to further its influence.

### China Leveraging Isolation and Instability

The strategic importance of Burma and the opportunity presented by its isolation for the Chinese government are longstanding. Although China supported the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) engaged in an insurgency in the north along the Chinese border until its collapse after the withdrawal of that support in the late 1980s, China avoided directly threatening the Burmese government. This strategy was paradoxically to maintain Burma as an avenue to the outside world by avoiding U.S. intervention in a possible Communist takeover during the height of the Cold War when China perceived itself being encircled elsewhere in Asia.<sup>7</sup>

in border security. It also allows China to intervene in Burma's internal politics by using EAOs as proxies when the central government is uncooperative. Although the bilateral relationship between the two countries is old, Burmese political ideology is generally realist and suspicious of foreign intervention owing to the long history of isolationism under military dictatorship. Burma's joining of ASEAN in 1997 and increasing security cooperation along the shared border with India can be understood as efforts to balance against China's influence in the region.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the newly civilianized government outright defied Chinese interests by suspending the Chinese-backed Myitsone dam hydroelectric project in 2011.<sup>10</sup> China's dual engagement is comparable to the concept of indirect means to achieve strategic objectives explained by Sun Tzu.<sup>11</sup>

After the BCP's collapse, the Burmese government reached ceasefire agreements with several EAOs. Some, including the agreement with the UWSA, remain intact but often tenu-

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In 1988, China increased engagement with Burma by withdrawing support to the BCP and increasing trade at the same time Burma was receiving international condemnation after pro-democracy protests and subsequent military crackdowns. Ongoing criticism and economic sanctions allowed China to become Burma's primary trading partner and important source of investment, as well as the biggest arms supplier. However, at the same time, the Chinese government maintained relations with some BCP descendant EAOs, most importantly, the UWSA.<sup>8</sup>

The pattern of dual engagement with both the central government and opposing sub-national groups continues to the present and serves China's key interest

ous. The UWSA, which allegedly also receives arms from China, controls territory along the borders of both China and Thailand.<sup>12</sup> Armed with extensive defensive capabilities, including artillery and anti-air systems, the UWSA is essentially autonomous.<sup>13</sup> However, its leadership maintains it does not wish to formally secede from Burma. Nevertheless, as the most powerful EAO it has significant ideological influence with other groups engaged in direct conflict. This is especially the case for those that form the Brotherhood Alliance, active in northern Burma, and which consists of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and Arakan Army (AA).<sup>14</sup>

A major conflict in northern Burma threatens China's border security and BRI projects to which China has responded by leveraging its relationship with both the Burmese government and the UWSA, and others, to position itself as the primary international peace broker in the conflict. Chinese facilitated negotiations have met with some success by bringing previously excluded groups to the negotiating table and leading to some reductions in conflict.<sup>15</sup> However, the most influential EAOs, the KIA and UWSA, continue to challenge the central government's limited offers while kinetic engagements with Brotherhood Alliance members are ongoing.<sup>16</sup>

Critically, the AA, which is the newest EAO and has received significant backing and logistical support from the KIA and UWSA, poses the greatest threat to the central government by its ongoing offensive in the Chin and Rakhine states.<sup>17</sup> The AA's activities have met with severe retaliation from the Burmese military causing significant civilian casualties. Additionally, the AA is active in areas near the Chinese-backed Kyaukpyu port project. Although there is no official contact between the Chinese government and the AA, the AA has signaled its interest in maintaining good relations with China, as well as shown preferential treatment by threatening Indian-backed investment projects.<sup>18</sup> The lack of direct intervention does not exclude the possibility that Chinese policymakers are apathetic to Burma's internal sovereignty and prioritize access regardless of who happens to be locally in control.

### Way Ahead

China's immediate intentions in Burma, particularly its strategy of dual engagement with the central government and EAOs, remain opaque. However, its significant economic involvement and role in peace negotiations facilitate, as Machiavelli counsels, the impression of good faith while pursuing ulterior motives.<sup>19</sup> Heavy conflict may be bad for business, but peace likely means decreased access.

Burma is a critical case both as a current line of effort for China's strategic objectives in the Indian Ocean

and as an example of how China may leverage instability to pursue its interests elsewhere in the developing world. The model of non-kinetic interventions in an unstable environment aligns with the concept of unrestricted warfare.<sup>20</sup> The conflict domains are blurred, but China's behavior remains inherently competitive—preparing space for follow-on operations.

A critical challenge is, as Sun Tzu said, to know the enemy.<sup>21</sup> To do so more comprehensively, we must look beyond the immediate problem-set of the South China Sea in deciphering our primary pacing threat's subsequent phase-lines in a still ambiguous but very real competition.

### Notes

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