

Explaining Myanmar's Response to China's Belt and Road Initiative: From Disengagement to Embrace

Lee Jones and Khin Ma Ma Myo

Myanmar's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has changed from cool disengagement under the Thein Sein government (2011–2016) to an increasingly warm embrace under the National League for Democracy (2016–). This article explains this development with reference to the changing nature of domestic authority relations, which conditions how Myanmar's governments manage their asymmetric relations with China (as outlined in the special issue's introduction). Thein Sein's attempt to cultivate democratic authority in the wake of military rule entailed significant concessions to opponents of Chinese megaprojects in an effort to distinguish himself from previous military rulers. Aung San Suu Kyi's unparalleled popularity and democratic legitimation required no such concessions and engendered greater confidence that the risks of Chinese megaprojects could be mitigated through stricter regulation and the renegotiation of contracts to secure greater local benefit.

Keywords: Myanmar, China, Belt and Road Initiative, authority, asymmetry.

SINCE CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI) WAS LAUNCHED, Myanmar's government has shifted from a position of cold disengagement to one of relatively strong, albeit still cautious, support. Along with the Philippines and Malaysia, then, Myanmar presents one of the most obvious "puzzles" which this special issue addresses: the geostrategic situation has not fundamentally changed, yet the government's attitude toward the BRI has altered substantially. As this special issue argues, the causes are not to be found principally at the international system level. Rather, it is domestic politics that shapes the government's attitude toward China: domestic authority relations condition the management of external power asymmetries.

Asian Perspective 45 (2021), 301–324

© 2021 Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University

The shift in attitudes over 2013–2019 is clear. When Xi Jinping launched the BRI, Sino-Myanmar relations were already in deep trouble. Following a partial transition from direct military rule, the new “democratic” government of President Thein Sein (2011–2016) suspended the Chinese-led, US\$3.6 billion Myitsone dam project in Myanmar’s Kachin state, citing public opposition. This plunged bilateral relations into crisis. Chinese investment collapsed from US\$1.5 billion in 2010 to just US\$70 million in 2014 (ASEAN Secretariat 2015), and Chinese analysts widely bemoaned Myanmar’s “loss” to the West (Sun 2012).

Although Thein Sein’s government did not openly reject the BRI, it responded coldly. Myanmar was a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), taking a 0.3 percent share in June 2015, and it continued to participate in discussions under the Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-China (BCIM) initiative, a forerunner of (and now incorporated into) the BRI, launched by China’s Yunnan province in 1999. However, no bilateral agreements were struck to implement the BRI, and existing investment deals languished. An April 2011 memorandum of understanding (MoU) to build a US\$20 billion, 810-kilometer China-Myanmar railway lapsed in 2014. The construction of a deep-sea port and special economic zone (SEZ) at Kyaukphyu, the proposed railway’s terminus—and the starting point of oil and gas pipelines supplying China, built from 2009 to 2013—was notionally agreed in 2013, but quickly stalled. A US\$3 billion oil refinery at Dawei was delayed, then canceled in November 2017. A US\$20 million AIIB loan to cofinance a gas-fired power plant in Myingyan in 2016 paled alongside the withering of large-scale Chinese investment.

Conversely, Thein Sein’s successors have formally embraced the BRI. Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide electoral victory in 2015, forming a new semicivilian government in 2016. Aung San Suu Kyi visited China in August 2016, commenting positively on the BRI. In April 2017, President Htin Kyaw visited Beijing, signing four agreements and three MoUs, and exchanging two Letters of Implementation. The latter initiated the flow of oil and gas through the Sino-Myanmar pipelines and, more importantly, committed Myanmar to resuming the stalled Kyaukphyu projects (Myanmar President’s Office 2017). Next, Aung San Suu Kyi participated in the BRI Forum in May 2017, signing five agreements, including an “MoU on Cooperation within the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative,” formally aligning Myanmar with the BRI. Other contracts covered economic and technical cooperation, transportation, the

establishment of a China-Myanmar border economic cooperation zone, and a loan agreement for the redevelopment of Yangon's airport (*China Daily* 2017). In November 2017, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi proposed a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a framework to aggregate and kick-start various existing and stalled projects. The two governments signed an MoU to implement CMEC in September 2018. Another memorandum signed in February 2019 identified nine priority sectors for cooperation: electricity, roads, bridges, telecommunications, basic construction, transportation, agriculture, research, and technology (Chan Mya Htwe 2019). During President Xi's state visit to Myanmar in January 2020, the two sides further endorsed CMEC and signed thirty-three additional agreements.

This bilateral rapprochement has unlocked major BRI projects. In July 2018, the two governments agreed to establish border economic zones in Muse, Chinshwehaw, and Kanpiketi. In November 2018, two long-stalled projects were downsized but progressed, with a framework agreement on the Kyaukphyu port and SEZ project, initiating a first phase worth US\$1.3 billion, and a new feasibility study on a 431-kilometer railway linking Mandalay to Muse, which was completed in January 2020. The medium-speed (160 kph) railway, which would cost around US\$8.9 billion, would compose half of a proposed 1,215-kilometer link between Kyaukphyu and Kunming, and eventually form part of the fabled trans-Asian railway project linking to Yangon, Bangkok, and eventually Singapore. In 2018, a local government vehicle, Yangon City Development Company, agreed to develop a US\$5 billion New Yangon City real estate project with China Communication Construction Company. This has subsequently been incorporated into CMEC, with an initial \$800 million phase put to public tender.

This striking turnaround stems from the different authority relations underpinning the two administrations, which shape how Myanmar manages its asymmetric relations with China. Domestic authority in Myanmar is strongly—even violently—contested, with ethnic-minority armed groups (EAGs) struggling for autonomy or even independence, while civilian and military factions tussle within the dominant Bamar ethnic group. Myanmar's China policy is intimately connected to these struggles. During the period of direct military rule (1988–2011), during which Myanmar faced mounting Western sanctions, the regime depended heavily on China. Subsequently, President Thein Sein—a creature of the military junta—sought to rebalance Myanmar's external relations in order to cultivate popular support for his new “democratic” regime and to pursue Myanmar nationalists' long-standing desire for greater

international autonomy. In contrast, thanks largely to Aung San Suu Kyi's overwhelming popularity, the NLD government has not needed to pursue an anti-Chinese foreign policy to win legitimacy. The NLD also recognizes that Chinese support is critical for ending Myanmar's ethnic-minority insurgencies. Consequently, the NLD has embraced the BRI, while also seeking to secure greater benefits from BRI projects.

This argument is developed in three sections. The first describes Myanmar's domestic authority relations. The second identifies how ruling elites perceive the risks and benefits of relations with China through the prism of domestic authority concerns. The third explains the Myanmar governments' changing attitudes to the BRI.

Myanmar's Domestic Authority Relations

Authority in Myanmar is highly and often violently contested. Since independence in 1948, the country has seen armed conflicts between the ethnic Bamar—who have dominated the postcolonial state—and various EAGs.¹ Simultaneous struggles exist between military (Tatmadaw) leaders and prodemocracy civilians, predominantly within the Bamar ethnic group.

Today these struggles occur within a constitutional order created by the previous military regime. The army seized control in 1988 amid widespread prodemocracy protests and EAG insurgencies. After crushing the democratic opposition and tempering the insurgencies through a combination of cease-fires—backed with lucrative business concessions—and the doubling in size of the army, the junta imposed a new constitution in 2008 and stage-managed elections in 2010, won by the promilitary Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Although formal governmental power thus transitioned to a civilian government in 2011, the constitution reserves command over the military and the key ministries of home affairs, defense, and border affairs, and 25 percent of parliamentary seats, for military appointees. This entrenches a *de facto* Tatmadaw veto on further constitutional change and swathes of government policy.

President Thein Sein's regime was the first semicivilian government to attempt to consolidate its authority within this new dispensation—a very challenging task. Headed by an ex-general and former prime minister under the junta and stuffed with former military personnel, his administration was widely seen as a thinly disguised version of the military regime, with most citizens still supporting the democratic opposition.

Moreover, although Thein Sein's administration had been midwived by the military, he could not control the Tatmadaw directly but needed their cooperation to remain in power. Furthermore, relations with the ethnic minorities had deteriorated during the transition, with several cease-fires breaking down due to the military's demand that EAGs convert into border guard forces (BGFs) under army command.

Thein Sein tried to build his regime's authority using material concessions, ideological projects, and coercion. First, to maintain the Tatmadaw's loyalty, he increased military spending while challenging none of their privileges. Second, he positioned his administration as radically "reformist." Through 2012, the government introduced extensive economic reforms, including through reengagement with Western donor agencies and the international financial institutions. While not fundamentally challenging the interests of dominant military and crony capitalist conglomerates, these reforms triggered an influx of aid and investment, facilitating improved employment and especially middle-class consumption in urban centers. The USDP also promoted development projects to cultivate rural support (Jones 2014b). Thein Sein also lifted long-standing restrictions on freedom of assembly and association, allowing civil society organizations (CSOs) and trade unions to operate legally, and engineered the NLD's entry to parliament through by-elections. Thus, the regime pursued both *performance* and *procedural* legitimacy, seeking to persuade domestic and foreign audiences that it really was a departure from the junta.

Simultaneously, however, the regime cultivated—or at least embraced—a *particularist* mode of legitimation: xenophobic Buddhist nationalism (see Walton and Hayward 2014). Although this movement has roots in the colonial period, Thein Sein's government allowed its main proponents—the monk-led Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, or MaBaTha—free reign, formalizing their ascendancy through four "protection of race and religion" laws in 2015. This starkly worsened conditions for Myanmar's long-persecuted Muslim minority, the Rohingya, with communal violence breaking out in 2012. Simultaneously, Thein Sein reinitiated the ethnic peace process, inviting EAGs to sign a National Ceasefire Accord (NCA) before negotiating a lasting political settlement. This largely replicated past practice, with EAG leaders being lured with business concessions while recalcitrant groups faced continued military offensives.

Ultimately, this strategy failed to consolidate Thein Sein's authority, leading to the USDP's defeat in the November 2015 elections. Although the military remained loyal, it did not intervene to prop up the USDP,

as many anticipated. Instead, the NLD swept the board, winning 86 percent of the contestable national parliamentary seats with 57.1 percent of the vote. A majority of citizens in all of Myanmar's ethnic-minority states, except Rakhine, backed the NLD. The NCA had stalled, and they had more faith in Aung San Suu Kyi to bring about lasting peace.

The NLD government enjoys far greater popular authority than its predecessor. Its main strength is its clear procedural legitimacy, which ultimately stems from the personalist authority of Aung San Suu Kyi, who retains a cult-like following among the urban and especially rural poor. This was demonstrated in the November 2020 elections, when the NLD took 83.2 percent of the contestable national parliamentary seats. Her government has also sought to enhance its performance legitimacy by promoting broad-based economic growth. However, its economic policy has been vague and, hampered by resistance from bureaucratic and business interests,² reform has effectively “stalled” (International Crisis Group 2018). Ideologically, the NLD ostensibly relies on appeals to democracy and the rule of law. However, it has failed to challenge Bamar-Buddhist nationalism. Following a brutal army assault on Rohingya communities in August 2017, which prompted over 800,000 to flee to Bangladesh, Aung San Suu Kyi declined to criticize the military, and ultimately defended Myanmar against accusations of genocide at The Hague. While disappointing her naïve foreign admirers, this has bolstered her popularity among nationalist Bamar. The government's Bamar chauvinism has also extended to its relations with other ethnic minorities, including its imposition of NLD elites as chief ministers of ethnic-minority states and its continued “Burmanization” of minority areas, including the controversial construction of monuments to Aung San Suu Kyi's father, Aung San.

The main challenges to the NLD's authority are the military's autonomous power and the ongoing EAG insurgencies. The Tatmadaw remains Myanmar's dominant sociopolitical force, immune from civilian control and able to retake power if the elected government breaches the 2008 constitution's “red lines.” Aung San Suu Kyi has wooed the army with material and ideological concessions: maintaining high military spending, emphasizing Aung San's role in founding the Tatmadaw, and visibly cozying up to the generals (Jagan 2016), even describing them as “rather sweet” (Aung San Suu Kyi 2018). She has also effectively sided with the military over the Rohingya crisis. However, this has failed to persuade the generals to support any of the NLD's proposed revisions to the 2008 constitution, which it regards as crucial for further democratization. Meanwhile, the rebooted ethnic peace process—the so-called

Twenty-First Century Panglong Conference—has largely replicated earlier failed approaches, leaving substantial parts of Myanmar's territory in insurgent hands.

Managing Asymmetry in Sino-Myanmar Relations

Given this extreme contestation of political authority, Myanmar's Bamar elite has always focused heavily on state formation and insulating domestic opponents from external support. This has underpinned a striking consensus on the importance of international neutrality and equidistance, even among bitter enemies (Haacke 2006). However, Western policies in the 1990s and 2000s disabled this posture, forcing the junta to rely increasingly on China to maintain and extend its authority. Both postmilitary governments have sought—without total success—to restore greater balance in Myanmar's external relations, reflecting their preoccupation with consolidating their weak domestic authority.

For Myanmar's ruling elites, managing the asymmetric relationship with China has always been intimately connected to their struggle to establish authority over the entire national territory and population. The countries share a 2,000-kilometer border, which, on Myanmar's side, has been heavily controlled by EAGs since the 1960s. Several of Myanmar's ethnic minorities have kinfolk on the Chinese side. China's importance for domestic order was felt as early as 1949, when retreating Kuomintang forces established a micro-state in Burma's Shan state, running drugs and weapons with US and Thai support to finance periodic raids into communist China (McCoy 2003). The Kuomintang eventually relocated to Thailand, but Chinese influence persisted through Mao's support for the insurgent Communist Party of Burma (CPB), based in northeastern Burma. This dwindled in the 1980s with China's turn toward capitalism, and in 1989 the CPB splintered into several EAGs, many of which signed cease-fires with the military regime. Nonetheless, some Chinese party-state actors retained close ties to several EAGs, notably the ethnic-Han Wa, who use the Chinese language, money, and—it is often alleged—weaponry.

The Bamar elite—under both civilian (1948–1958, 1960–1962) and military/military-backed one-party rule (1958–1960, 1962–1988)—have tried to manage these challenges by pursuing strict neutrality (Haacke 2006; Maung Aung Myoe 2016). This partly reflects their xenophobic nationalism, originating in Burma's experience of British and

Japanese colonialism, which was later harnessed to deflect blame for the failures of postindependence state-building (Gravers 1999). But it also was also an attempt to insulate Burma from the Indochina War, which demonstrated the danger of internationalizing domestic conflicts (Maung Aung Myoe 2016). Accordingly, successive regimes largely “hid” from the Cold War, refusing to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and even quitting the Non-Aligned Movement as it moved leftward in the 1970s, to avoid compromising its neutrality and inviting external (especially Chinese) interference.

This posture changed dramatically after the 1988 uprising. Western powers imposed mounting economic sanctions on Myanmar's military regime, aligning themselves openly with Aung San Suu Kyi, making equidistance impossible (see Jones 2015, chap. 3). The regime joined ASEAN in 1997, where it hoped to enjoy respect for sovereignty and noninterference, but actually came under mounting pressure as ASEAN was harried by the West (Jones 2012, chap. 8). The junta also sought balance in relations with India and China, though the latter ultimately proved most essential to consolidating the regime's authority. Beijing supplied most of the US\$2.48 billion of arms purchased to strengthen the military against its opponents (Jones 2015). It provided cover in international forums—most importantly, vetoing (with Russia) a US-led United Nations Security Council resolution in 2007. And China became both the most important source of capital and a crucial export market for jade, timber, and gas.³ This economic dependence has persisted post-2010. Despite improved diplomatic ties (at least before the 2017 atrocities in Rakhine), Western trade and investment have never substituted for China's (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Approved Foreign Investment in Myanmar: Volume (US\$ Millions) and Share

	1988/1989–2010/2011		2011/2012–2019/2020	
ASEAN	12,761.1	35%	26,600.2	54%
China (incl. Hong Kong)	15,905.3	44%	14,918.6	30%
European Union (incl. UK)	3,471.2	10%	3,671.2	7%
South Korea	2,916.9	8%	1,076.3	2%
Japan	211.9	1%	1,675.4	3%
US	243.6	1%	275.3	1%

Source: DICA (2020).

Table 2. Myanmar's Key Trading Partners: Share of Total Trade

	Exports		Imports	
	1995–2010	2011–2019	1995–2010	2011–2019
ASEAN	43%	34%	6%	40%
China (incl. Hong Kong and Macao)	10%	34%	26%	32%
South Korea	1%	3%	27%	5%
Japan	5%	6%	0%	9%
India	14%	8%	2%	4%
European Union (incl. UK)	14%	8%	6%	2%
US	4%	2%	3%	1%

Source: UNCTAD (2020).

Although Sino-Myanmar relations were continually called *pauk-phaw* (kinship) ties (Maung Aung Myoe 2011), in reality this was an uncomfortable position for the nationalist military. Sinophobia was common among top military leaders before the 2011 transition (Min Zin 2012), with some even (mistakenly) claiming that a desire to terminate dependency on Beijing prompted the regime shift.⁴ Anti-Chinese sentiment had become widespread under the junta, for four reasons. First, China was widely seen as propping up a deeply unpopular military regime (Min Zin 2012). Second, Bamar elites felt deeply uneasy about Chinese government ties to EAGs, seeing these as a source of leverage over Myanmar's government or, at least, an enduring challenge to Myanmar's state-building project (Hameiri, Jones, and Zou 2019). Third, the arrival of some two million Chinese immigrants shifted the demographic balance of northern Myanmar and concentrated much of the economy into Chinese (or Sino-Burmese) hands, causing widespread racialized resentment (Steinberg and Fan 2012). Fourth, Chinese megaprojects were frequently associated with land grabbing, forced displacement, minimal local job creation, militarization of project sites, and environmental degradation. While military leaders, crony capitalists, and EAG elites benefited from this "ceasefire capitalism" (Woods 2011a), most people did not. This prompted mounting resistance, particularly from long-oppressed minorities in the resource-rich ethnic-minority regions where Chinese projects were concentrated (Buchanan, Kramer, and Woods 2013).

The contradiction between the military's growing reliance on China and the maintenance of the regime's authority is best demonstrated in Kachin state. Kachin's most powerful EAG, Kachin Independence

Organisation (KIO), maintains a 10,000-strong militia, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). It entered a cease-fire with the Chinese-stiffened Myanmar military in 1994, surrendering some territory in exchange for control over key border checkpoints and access to lucrative business opportunities. This led to an explosion of Chinese-backed concessions for mining, logging, agribusiness, and hydropower dam building in Kachin state, the benefits of which were tightly concentrated among Chinese investors, army generals, crony capitalists, and KIO elites (Transnational Institute 2011; Woods 2011a, 2011b). This enabled Bamar elites to extend state power and authority into territory where it had never previously existed, yet also undermined this authority in the long term (Jones 2014a). Rapacious, extractive investments with scant local benefit caused mounting anger among Kachin youths, villagers, townspeople, Christian churches, and CSOs, who eventually formed a support base for the dissatisfied, mid-ranking KIO officers who eventually seized control of the organization from the corrupted leadership (Brenner 2015). A key catalyst for these developments was the Myitsone dam project, which threatened to flood forty villages around a site the Kachin consider sacred (Kiik 2016). When the military pressed the KIA to convert into a BGF, they refused. In 2011, the long-standing cease-fire collapsed.

For several reasons, then, including long-standing nationalist commitments to neutrality and the contradictory impact of Chinese engagement on ruling elites' domestic authority, both post-2011 governments have sought to reduce their reliance on China. Reflecting the military's basic preference for equidistance, the 2008 constitution committed Myanmar to "an independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy," as in the 1974 version. President Thein Sein pledged fealty to these principles and, consonant with his overall "reformist" strategy, sought to rebalance toward Western states by asking them to support his reforms and end economic sanctions (Maung Aung Myoe 2016, 133–135). This intersected with President Obama's "pivot to Asia" to generate a rapid rapprochement with Washington and other Western governments during 2011–2013.

Despite Aung San Suu Kyi's role as foreign minister, the NLD government's foreign policy changed relatively little from the USDP's, demonstrating the salience of structural, domestic determinants over that of individuals. As noted earlier, the NLD confronted essentially the same domestic challenges as the USDP, and its Bamar-nationalist leadership largely shared the long-standing elite preoccupation with neutrality and state-formation. Its foreign policy statements echo the long-standing themes of nonalignment, neutrality, and equidistance (Maung Aung

Myoe 2017). Accordingly, the NLD government did not simply “defect” toward the West; it declared continued friendship with China. Crucial here was China’s continued support for Myanmar’s internal peace process, which Foreign Minister Wang reiterated when visiting Naypyidaw in April 2016. The Rakhine crisis, which has elicited substantial Western pressure on Myanmar, has only reinforced the ruling elite’s preference for equidistance, with China again helping to shield the government at the UN (Maung Aung Myoe 2017, 117).

Explaining the Myanmar Governments’ Attitudes to the BRI

Having outlined Myanmar’s domestic authority relations and how they relate to ruling elites’ perceptions of asymmetry with China, we can now explain the shifting response of Myanmar’s two post-junta governments to the BRI. On balance, the BRI was a threat to the authority of Thein Sein’s government. Chinese investments were already precipitating unrest, and a de facto moratorium on new megaprojects would bolster the regime’s “reformist” strategy to expand its authority. Moreover, it would evoke little resistance among Myanmar’s dominant powerbrokers—the military and allied business interests—as long as existing ventures were protected. Indeed, greater international equidistance would please the nationalist establishment. Conversely, because the NLD government enjoyed greater popular legitimacy, the opportunities offered by the BRI outweighed the risks to its authority. BRI projects still risked social opposition and unsustainable debt, but NLD elites felt these were manageable through stricter regulation and renegotiating contracts. This was aided by greater flexibility on the Chinese side, and by growing Chi-nese efforts to reassure megaprojects’ opponents. This reengagement with China was reinforced, but not caused, by deteriorating relations with the West.

The USDP Government, 2011–2016

The Thein Sein administration’s cool attitude to the BRI was shaped by its struggle to establish democratic authority after military rule. Uncritical acceptance of Chinese megaprojects was now a liability, threatening the government’s “reformist” credentials and the peace process. However, fully alienating China was also implausible, given the interests

of entrenched military-business elites and nationalists' long-standing preference for international neutrality. Accordingly, Thein Sein took a balanced approach, ostensibly welcoming BRI but doing nothing to advance it in practice.

This response was already in train before the BRI existed, thanks to the suspension of the Myitsone dam project in September 2011. Growing resistance to the project—building among the Kachin since its inception in 2002—was enabled by expanding freedoms of assembly, speech, and the media. Campaigners exploited this to connect with Bamar environmentalists, widening mobilization against the dam, eventually drawing in Aung San Suu Kyi herself. Reflecting widespread anti-Chinese sentiment, they framed the Myitsone dam as an “existential threat to the people of Myanmar by Chinese colonialism” (Foran et al. 2017, 626).

Thein Sein had three powerful reasons to concede to this movement. The first, permissive reason was that the Bamar nationalist elite shared much of this anti-Chinese sentiment and wanted a rebalancing of external relations, reflecting their state-building agenda. Counterbalancing this, however, certain elite interests profited from Chinese projects, and these had to be protected (see below). However, beneficiaries from Myitsone specifically were relatively few, represented by the allegedly corrupt energy minister, Zaw Min, who stridently rejected the campaigners' demands (Foran et al. 2017, 627).⁵ This group could be safely marginalized without losing the wider support of powerful military and business elites.

The second, effective reason to concede was that the campaign was the first real public test of Thein Sein's “reformist” credentials. If he responded to his government's first grassroots mobilization dismissively or repressively, his quest for democratic legitimacy would be over. Thein Sein's speech to parliament on September 30, 2011, which announced the dam's suspension, clearly expressed this motive, stressing his government's “emphasis on emergence of good governance, clean government . . . democratic practices, prevalence of law and order, economic reforms and environmental conservation. . . . As our government is elected by the people, it is to respect the people's will. We have the responsibility to address public concerns in all seriousness. So construction of Myitsone Dam will be suspended in the time of our government” (Thein Sein 2011, 1).

The third reason to concede was the breakdown of the Kachin cease-fire, which directly challenged the regime's authority. After stand-offs over the BGF issue, resulting in the KIO being barred from the 2010 elections, the KIO-Tatmadaw cease-fire collapsed in June 2011

amid skirmishes at the Darpein hydropower dam. The KIO swiftly blocked access to the Myitsone construction site, bombing key bridges and frightening off Chinese engineers, halting construction (Foran et al. 2017). Clearly, proceeding with Myitsone under these circumstances would be extremely difficult. Thein Sein's strategy to expand his domestic authority included a renewed peace process, which Myitsone clearly imperiled.

The suspension set the tone for Sino-Myanmar relations under Thein Sein. Beijing was deeply shocked by the decision and demanded respect for its state-owned enterprises' (SOEs) interests. Chinese analysts bemoaned the "loss" of Myanmar to the West, devising conspiracy theories about nefarious American influence behind Myanmar's anti-dam CSOs (Sun 2012). And Chinese investors' confidence in Myanmar collapsed: from 2010 to 2014, Chinese FDI plummeted from US\$1.52 billion (68 percent of Myanmar's total) to just US\$70.4 million (7 percent) and has never exceeded 12 percent since (ASEAN Secretariat 2015).

Nonetheless, Thein Sein had not simply "defected" from China to the West. Powerful military-business interests established under the junta remained entrenched (Jones 2014b), making defection impossible. Other controversial Chinese projects were not, therefore, suspended. The Letpadaung copper mine, for example, a joint venture between a military-owned firm and a Chinese investor, continued despite farmers' protests over land grabs, which were brutally suppressed. Moreover, Thein Sein ostensibly welcomed the BRI at the Sino-Myanmar Dialogue on Partnership and Strengthening Connectivity in November 2014, saying it would bring peace, stability, and prosperity and that he welcomed Chinese investment in Myanmar's infrastructure. He made similar remarks at the April 2015 Asia-Africa Summit, and as noted earlier, Myanmar became a founding member of the AIIB (Li and Song 2018).

Nonetheless, major Chinese projects made little progress under Thein Sein. The Kyaukphyu port and SEZ and connecting railway, now a "flagship" BRI project, was initially approved in 2009 when the junta signed an MoU with China's CITIC Group. However, under Thein Sein, the project languished. Activists opposed it, arguing that it would replicate the land grabs and cronyism associated with previous megaprojects, and the government had to demonstrate receptivity to such concerns. When the railway MoU expired in 2014, the government announced it would not be renewed. Parliamentarians also expressed concerns about the project's costs, noting the substantial debts accrued by the junta and the unfavorable interest rates being offered by China. The government

declined a US\$2 billion sovereign-guaranteed Chinese loan to build a Kyaukphyu-Ruili road, instead demanding a joint venture on a build-operate-transfer model. Parliament only notionally approved the port and SEZ part of the project in December 2015, ostensibly worth US\$14 billion (Miller 2017, 153), by which time the USDP had already lost the November 2015 elections and Thein Sein was preparing to retire.

Rather than courting Chinese investment, Thein Sein sought Western aid to bolster his reformist authority and support broader-based economic development. Shortly after the Myitsone suspension, the international financial institutions and Western donor agencies flooded into Naypyidaw to support his reform agenda. Overseas development assistance soared from US\$249.3 million in 2010 to US\$3.6 billion in 2013 and totaled US\$6.23 billion from 2011 to 2015 (OECD 2019). By contrast, pledged Chinese investment over this period was only US\$5.1 billion (DICA 2020). Thus, Thein Sein's rebalancing of Myanmar's external relations was clearly supported by a favorable external context.

The USDP government's attitude toward China's BRI was thus shaped by ruling elites' assessment of the scheme's impact on its domestic authority. As a creature of the military junta, it enjoyed little democratic authority and confronted direct challenges from activists and EAGs connected to Chinese megaprojects. Thein Sein cooled relations with China to assuage these groups. This also served long-standing nationalist preferences. Existing projects were shielded to protect powerful interests. The West's willingness to support Thein Sein's reforms aided Myanmar's distancing from China and the BRI.

The NLD Government, 2016–Present

The NLD government has been more receptive to the BRI, thanks largely to its stronger domestic authority. Unlike the USDP, which, despite Thein Sein's efforts, was always strongly associated with the widely hated military regime, the NLD—especially Aung San Suu Kyi—enjoyed strong popularity and procedural legitimacy from the outset. Somewhat counterintuitively, this has allowed the NLD regime to risk upsetting some opponents of Chinese megaprojects by engaging the BRI, in pursuit of wider economic objectives. Nonetheless, it also tries to mitigate risks to its domestic authority through tighter regulation and renegotiating project contracts to secure enhanced local benefits. The NLD also recognizes that Chinese support for Myanmar's peace process is crucial to consolidating its own domestic authority. This entails

a cautious embrace of the BRI, aided by China's adaptive strategies in response to setbacks in Myanmar, and by growing friction with the West over the Rakhine crisis.

Before developing this argument, we should address the apparent puzzle of why Aung San Suu Kyi, a long-standing Western darling, did not pursue a far more pro-Western foreign policy, indeed why she ultimately embraced China more firmly than her quasi-authoritarian predecessor. This is less puzzling than it may seem if we shift from the (assumed) preferences of individual leaders to a perspective focused on domestic authority relations. Even had Aung San Suu Kyi personally wished to align with the West against China, this would have severely compromised her government's domestic authority. The military would have opposed this move, risking the civilian government's stability and its ability to secure much-needed cooperation from the Tatmadaw on many domestic issues. More fundamentally, however, a pro-Western lunge would have violated the deep consensus among Bamar nationalist elites—including Aung San Suu Kyi—on the importance of international equidistance from major states to support domestic state building. This orientation necessitates a balanced foreign policy: not strongly anti-Chinese, but also not strongly pro-Chinese.

Nonetheless, the NLD has clearly enjoyed more room for maneuver than the USDP, which reflects its superior democratic legitimation and, more importantly, the tremendous personal authority of Aung San Suu Kyi. To Bamar voters in particular, she symbolizes decades of antimilitary struggles, enjoying unparalleled popularity and a quasi-religious following. Consequently, unlike Thein Sein, she does not need to demonstrate her democratic *bona fides* to win support. The NLD is essentially her personal vehicle: it has weak party structures, minimal internal democracy, and very limited policymaking capacity, and its electoral success hinges upon her popularity. Coupled with her elitist personal style, this entails an intensely centralized, even authoritarian, mode of political leadership. Suspicious of CSOs as potential challengers to her authority, Aung San Suu Kyi has insisted that the government monopolize important issue areas and has even asked Western donors to cease assisting Myanmar's CSOs.⁶ Consequently, CSOs have little direct access to her government, and even NLD parliamentarians have scant influence over foreign policy (Maung Aung Myoe 2017, 115).

The personalist basis of the NLD government's authority explains why it has felt able to reengage China. The government cannot simply ignore public opinion because any serious public backlash would

threaten Aung San Suu Kyi's personal popularity. Consequently, during the Rakhine crisis, for example, she has been unwilling to defy deep-seated Buddhist nationalism, despite her supposed commitment to human rights, presumably because she fears a serious loss of popularity. Similarly, the Myitsone dam remains suspended: given the extensive mobilization against it in 2011, which featured Aung San Suu Kyi herself, restarting it would endanger her authority. As one senior parliamentarian admits, the "NLD cannot take this risk."⁷ However, where opposition is more spatially and socially confined, Aung San Suu Kyi has been willing to suppress critics in favor of "development." For example, even before coming to power, she told monks and farmers protesting the Letpadaung mine to stand down or risk arrest, arguing that Myanmar "needed a lot of development" (Lawi Weng and Thet Swe Aye 2013). Thus, while the weakly legitimate Thein Sein regime's need to build its democratic authority mitigated against accepting Chinese investment, Aung San Suu Kyi's immense personal authority allows her greater leeway to trade off the potential loss of popular support for wider developmental gains.

The NLD regime nonetheless seeks to mitigate any risks to its authority arising from Chinese megaprojects. CSOs, politicians, and officials worry that these projects will continue to be associated with abuses of local populations, environmental degradation, and corruption, and benefit only a narrow circle of elites and the Chinese investors.⁸ Some also worry about a potential "debt trap."⁹ This partly reflects the case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, which is widely (though rather inaccurately) thought to have involved the loss of strategic infrastructure and national territory to China—anathema to Bamar nationalists. However, it also reflects Myanmar's large and growing debt burden. As of January 2019, the Myanmar government's external debt was US\$9.8 billion, US\$2.6 billion of which the junta had borrowed from China, at much higher interest rates than those now available from Western multilateral lenders (Moe Moe 2019).

NLD elites seek to mitigate these threats through tougher regulation and improved benefit sharing. They express confidence that, as true representatives of the people, they can succeed where the military and USDP failed. One senior NLD parliamentarian remarks that "proper management on our side is the key thing. If we can manage it well, we will benefit; if not, we will lose."¹⁰ Another states that while previous governments did not care about whether projects ensured fair benefit sharing, the NLD does, and parliamentary committees are scrutinizing government decisions, making it safer to proceed.¹¹

From early 2017 onward, a small team of senior economic policymakers began renegotiating the terms of various Chinese megaprojects.¹² Their main focus has been increasing Myanmar's stake, reducing costs, and securing greater local benefits. For example, CITIC agreed to increase Myanmar's equity stake in the Kyaukphyu port and SEZ project from 15 to 30 percent, while the scheme was downsized, from ten berths to two, and from US\$7.3 billion to US\$1.3 billion. Similarly, the first phase of the New Yangon City project, initially secured by China Communications Construction Company for US\$1.5 billion, was subsequently put to open public tender, with the project downsized to US\$800 million. At the time of writing (November 2020), nine companies had submitted proposals.

China's more flexible posture has facilitated this reconfiguration of the benefits and risks of BRI projects. After initially protesting the Myitsone suspension and demanding respect for its SOEs' interests, Beijing has gradually recognized that Chinese companies have engaged in serious abuses in Myanmar, and that the country's regime transition was permanent, requiring a change in how China engages there (Jones and Zou 2017; Zou and Jones 2020). This has entailed three major policy innovations. First, Beijing has intervened supportively in Myanmar's peace process (see below). Second, Chinese entities widened their interactions with Myanmar society beyond the usual circle of generals, senior officials, and crony capitalists, seeking warmer ties with opposition parties, CSOs, journalists, public intellectuals, and communities affected by Chinese megaprojects. Third, Beijing has promoted better "win-win" cooperation by tightening SOE regulation, encouraging greater corporate social responsibility and wider benefit sharing from Chinese projects. Although many Myanmar people remain deeply skeptical, this charm offensive has helped to persuade ruling elites that Chinese megaprojects can be adapted to assuage local concerns (Zou and Jones 2020).

China's role in the peace process is especially important for the NLD government's attempts to establish nationwide authority. Since 2011, Beijing has played an increasing role, intervening to broker talks among EAGs and the Myanmar government, albeit with limited success (Sun 2013, 2017). Given the NLD government's lack of control over the military, its dependence on China assistance is arguably greater than that of its predecessor, which seems to have reinforced Aung San Suu Kyi's pursuit of warmer ties with Beijing (Sun 2017, 4). It is unclear whether there has been any explicit "BRI-for-peace" quid pro quo. However, EAGs friendly to China do support the BRI and link it explicitly to the

peace process. For example, the United Wa State Party's "foreign minister" has stated, "Only when there is peace and stability in the region will the One Belt One Road project be implemented" (Kyaw Kha 2017). Some NLD elites also admit that Chinese support for their government's peace process has changed their position on China. One senior parliamentarian, for example, remarks, "I was an opponent of the [military] regime and so I didn't support China-junta relations, but now I am one of the strongest supporters of good relations with Beijing—because they support us." He also insists that the BRI can aid the peace process: "The development corridor [CMEC] will initiate peace."¹³ This view of the relationship between capitalist development and social stability may be extremely naïve, especially in light of recent experience in the borderlands, but it also mirrors the view of many Chinese elites (see Hameiri, Jones, and Zou 2019).

Finally, the NLD's engagement with the BRI has occurred alongside mounting tensions with the West, particularly over Rakhine. The NLD's disappointment with low levels of Western investment after its election was compounded by mounting Western criticism over the treatment of Rohingya Muslims in late 2017. Although Western governments' responses have actually been muted by a fear of undermining the civilian government, Myanmar's hypersensitive Bamar nationalists feel unfairly victimized and misunderstood. Conversely, Beijing—no doubt scenting an opportunity to regain lost ground—was supportive, shielding the regime from a UN Security Council resolution, brokering a bilateral repatriation deal with Bangladesh, and offering modest aid for reconstruction in Rakhine state. This experience led many NLD elites to conclude that they cannot rely on uncritical Western support but need Chinese assistance to realize their objectives.¹⁴

The Rohingya crisis has also transformed the attitudes of some Rakhine nationalists, the dominant political force in Rakhine state, where the Kyaukphyu project is located. For example, one senior Arakan National Party leader who had previously opposed Chinese megaprojects now states that, given "the threat from the West . . . the only option for the development of Rakhine state is Chinese investment." He prefers an SEZ to the hydrocarbon pipelines as they may create local employment, stimulating prosperity and reducing Rakhine emigration—a major Rakhine nationalist concern, given their fear of the demographic expansion of the Muslim minority. He also suggests that China's presence will bolster their struggle against the Rohingyas: "Rakhine people think the so-called Rohingya community, backed by the OIC [Organisation of Islamic Conference] and the West, are trying to invade and annex

the Rakhine. . . . [But] China will not allow this, because it is a very strategic area for China. . . . China will always support, directly or indirectly, the Rakhine people and the Burmese military.”¹⁵ Consequently, for Rakhine nationalists, China’s interests in the hydrocarbon pipelines, port, and SEZ should now be encouraged. This is a striking illustration of how shifting internal struggles prompt changes in actors’ views of asymmetric external relations.

However, it is important not to overstate Myanmar’s cooling ties to the West as the cause of the NLD government’s embrace of the BRI. This would overlook the many other, domestic drivers of this decision, and the timing of reengagement, which began in early 2017, long before the Rakhine crisis erupted. It is more accurate to say that the West’s reaction to the atrocities committed against the Rohingya supported a reassessment of the BRI that was already occurring, reflecting the difference between the authority of the NLD government and its predecessor.

Conclusion

This article has explained why the Myanmar government’s attitude to China’s BRI has changed from an initially cool response to today’s relatively warm embrace. This change reflects the different domestic authority relations of the USDP and NLD regimes. Both faced strong incentives to pursue a balanced foreign policy, avoiding overreliance on any single external power, including China, arising from the intense contestation of authority in Myanmar, and the Bamar elite’s nationalist consensus that consolidating this authority internally requires neutrality in foreign relations.

However, the USDP regime was not only seeking to restore this equidistance after years of growing dependence on Beijing under the military junta but also trying to cultivate a new form of domestic authority as a “reformist,” democratically legitimate government, which entailed conceding to a growing societal backlash against Chinese megaprojects. The NLD government faced many of the same challenges in consolidating its domestic authority, but enjoyed far greater democratic legitimacy, thanks largely to the personal popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi. This has given the NLD administration wider latitude in reengaging China, partly because it can risk alienating some supporters while still maintaining its basic legitimacy and popularity, and partly because its democratic identity generates greater confidence that it can mitigate the risks of Chinese megaprojects and secure more local

benefit. This changing risk/benefit calculation has been supported by China's changing strategy toward Myanmar, Beijing's support for the NLD's domestic peace process, and its support over Rakhine, while relations with the West have soured.

Notes

Lee Jones is Reader in international politics at Queen Mary University of London. He specializes in political economy and international relations, focusing on the politics of intervention, security, and governance. His books include *Societies Under Siege: Exploring How International Economic Sanctions Do (Not) Work* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and the fourth edition of *The Political Economy of Southeast Asia: Politics and Markets Under Hyperglobalisation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). He can be reached at l.c.jones@qmul.ac.uk.

Khin Ma Ma Myo is Professor of international relations at the University of Yangon, Myanmar. She received an MA in international development from International University of Japan and an MA and PhD in international relations from UY. Her research interests include Myanmar's bilateral relations and development cooperation. She has received several fellowships, including the Open Society Research Fellowship in 2014, and the Resident Research Fellowship in Non-proliferation and Disarmament at the Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies in 2016. She can be reached at khinma1@gmail.com.

The authors are grateful to Zhou Yuping and Kham Lin Thu for excellent research assistance. They also thank Zou Yizheng and the journal's anonymous reviewer for advice and comments on earlier drafts. The research was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant (DP1701102647).

1. A communist insurgency also raged from 1948 to 1988, when the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) splintered into EAGs.

2. Personal communication from senior government official, March 2019.

3. Myanmar's notoriously unreliable official statistics vastly understate China's economic primacy. For instance, they suggest that China took 12 percent of Myanmar's exports in 2010, third behind Thailand and India (ASEAN Secretariat 2015). But this ignores extensive cross-border smuggling. For instance, in 2014, while official data showed US\$12 billion of jade imports to China from Myanmar, Global Witness (2015, 6) estimated the true figure at US\$31 billion, equivalent to 48 percent of Myanmar's official GDP.

4. It overlooks the preparations made for the transition from the early 1990s, well before Myanmar's dependency on China became overwhelming (see Jones 2014a).

5. Energy ministry officials accuse Zaw Min of taking kickbacks to approve hydropower projects, including the Myitsone dam (see ZFDB 2012). There are also persistent rumors of kickbacks to senior generals of US\$20–30 million (Miller 2017, 131).

6. Interviews with a government consultant (December 2016), Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar executive committee member (March 2017), and Western diplomat (September 2018).

7. Interviews, September 2018.

8. Interviews, September 2018.

9. Interviews, September 2018.

10. Interview, September 2018.

11. Interview, September 2018.

12. Personal communication with senior advisor to Aung San Suu Kyi, March 2019.

13. Interview, September 2018.

14. Interviews with NLD parliamentarians, September 2018.

15. Interview, September 2018.

References

- ASEAN Secretariat. 2015. "ASEANstats Database." <http://aseanstats.asean.org>.
- Aung San Suu Kyi. 2018. *Democratic Transition in Myanmar: Challenges and the Way Forward*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- Brenner, David. 2015. "Ashes of Co-optation: From Armed Group Fragmentation to the Rebuilding of Popular Insurgency in Myanmar." *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 337–358.
- Buchanan, John, Tom Kramer, and Kevin Woods. 2013. *Developing Disparity: Regional Investment in Burma's Borderlands*. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute.
- Chan Mya Htwe. 2019. "Nine Sectors to Have Priority under the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor." *Myanmar Times*, March 7. www.mmtimes.com/news/nine-sectors-have-priority-under-china-myanmar-economic-corridor.html.
- China Daily*. 2017. "List of Deliverables of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation." *China Daily*, May 16. www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-05/16/content_29359377.htm.
- DICA (Myanmar Directorate of Investment and Company Administration). 2020. *2020/October Foreign Direct Investment Yearly Approved Amount by Country*. Naypyitaw: DICA. www.dica.gov.mm/sites/dica.gov.mm/files/document-files/yearly_country_12.pdf.

- Foran, Tira, Laur Kiiik, Sullivan Hatt, David Fullbrook, Alice Dawkins, Simon Walker, and Yun Chen. 2017. "Large Hydropower and Legitimacy: A Policy Regime Analysis, Applied to Myanmar." *Energy Policy*, vol. 110, pp. 619–630.
- Global Witness. 2015. *Jade: Myanmar's "Big State Secret."* October. www.global-witness.org/en/campaigns/oil-gas-and-mining/myanmarjade/.
- Gravers, Mikael. 1999. *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power.* 2nd ed. Richmond: Curzon.
- Haacke, Jürgen. 2006. *Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Domestic Influences and International Implications.* Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hameiri, Shahar, Lee Jones, and Yizheng Zou. 2019. "The Development-Insecurity Nexus in China's Near-Abroad: Rethinking Cross-Border Economic Integration in an Era of State Transformation." *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 473–499.
- International Crisis Group. 2018. *Myanmar's Stalled Transition.* Brussels: International Crisis Group. www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b151-myanmars-stalled-transition.
- Jagan, Larry. 2016. "Myanmar's Lady Cosies Up to the Generals." *BBC News*, July 23. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-36867412.
- Jones, Lee. 2012. *ASEAN, Sovereignty and Intervention in Southeast Asia.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2014a. "Explaining Myanmar's Regime Transition: The Periphery Is Central." *Democratization*, vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 780–802.
- . 2014b. "The Political Economy of Myanmar's Transition." *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 144–170.
- . 2015. *Societies Under Siege: Exploring How International Economic Sanctions (Do Not) Work.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, Lee, and Yizheng Zou. 2017. "Rethinking the Role of State-Owned Enterprises in China's Rise." *New Political Economy*, vol. 22, no. 6, pp. 743–760.
- Kiiik, Laur. 2016. "Nationalism and Anti-Ethno-Politics: Why 'Chinese Development' Failed at Myanmar's Myitsone Dam." *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 374–402.
- Kyaw Kha. 2017. "The Wa's Zhao Guo An: Suu Kyi Wants to Achieve Peace in Her Lifetime." *Irrawaddy*, May 29. www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/zhao-guo-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-wants-achieve-peace-lifetime.html.
- Lawi Weng and Thet Swe Aye. 2013. "Stop Protests against Copper Mine, Suu Kyi Tells Communities." *Irrawaddy*, March 13. www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/stop-protests-against-copper-mine-suu-kyi-tells-communities.html.
- Li, Chenyang, and Shaojun Song. 2018. "China's OBOR Initiative and Myanmar's Political Economy." *Chinese Economy*, vol. 51, no. 4, pp. 318–332.
- Maung Aung Myoe. 2011. *In the Name of Pauk-Phaw: Myanmar's China Policy since 1948.* Singapore: ISEAS.
- . 2016. "Myanmar's Foreign Policy under the USDP Government: Continuities and Changes." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 123–150.

- . 2017. “The NLD and Myanmar’s Foreign Policy: Not New, But Different.” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 89–121.
- McCoy, Alfred W. 2003. *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Colombia*. 2nd ed. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.
- Miller, Tom. 2017. *China’s Asian Dream: Quiet Empire Building along the New Silk Road*. London: Zed Books.
- Min Zin. 2012. “Burmese Attitude toward Chinese: Portrayal of the Chinese in Contemporary Cultural and Media Works.” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 115–131.
- Moe Moe. 2019. “Loans from China Must Be Repaid ‘as Early as Possible.’” *Irrawaddy*, January 25. www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/loans-china-must-repaid-early-possible.html.
- Myanmar President’s Office. 2017. “Myanmar, China Agree to Oil Pipeline.” www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/news/2017/04/11/id-7474.
- OECD. 2019. “GeoBook: Geographical Flows to Developing Countries.” *OECD Stat*. <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DACGEO#>.
- Steinberg, David, and Hongwei Fan. 2012. *Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Sun, Yun. 2012. “China’s Strategic Misjudgement on Myanmar.” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 73–96.
- . 2013. “China’s Intervention in the Myanmar-Kachin Peace Talks.” *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, February 20. www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/china%E2%80%99s-intervention-in-the-myanmar-kachin-peace-talks.
- . 2017. *China and Myanmar’s Peace Process*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace. www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR401-China-and-Myanmar-Peace-Process.pdf.
- Thein Sein. 2011. “The Government Is Elected by the People, and It Has to Respect People’s Will.” *New Light of Myanmar*, October 1, pp. 1, 7. www.burmalibrary.org/en/the-new-light-of-myanmar-1-october-2011.
- Transnational Institute. 2011. *Financing Dispossession: China’s Opium Substitution Programme in Northern Burma*. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute. www.tni.org/en/publication/financing-dispossession.
- UNCTAD. 2020. “UNCTADStat.” <https://unctadstat.unctad.org>.
- Walton, Matthew J., and Susan Hayward. 2014. *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*. Honolulu: East-West Center.
- Woods, Kevin. 2011a. “Ceasefire Capitalism: Military-Private Partnerships, Resource Concessions and Military-State Building in the Burma–China Borderlands.” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 747–770.
- . 2011b. “Conflict Timber along the China-Burma Border: Connecting the Global Timber Consumer with Violent Extraction Sites.” In Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang, eds., *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 480–506.

- ZFDB (Zomi for Federalization and Democratization of Burma). 2012. "Illegal Money from the Corruption of Some Ministers and Senior Officers." *Soc. Rights.Human* listserv, February 17. <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/soc.rights.human/tHYfAOvk6S4>.
- Zou, Yizheng, and Lee Jones. 2020. "China's Responses to Threats to Its Overseas Economic Interests: Softening Non-interference and Cultivating Hegemony." *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 29, no. 121, pp. 92–108.