

Interview

# China's Complicated Game in Myanmar

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## Myanmar regime-appointed Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in China in April 2022

Veteran author and journalist Bertil Lintner has been reporting on Myanmar for decades. In this wide-ranging interview he talks to The Irrawaddy editor-in-chief Aung Zaw about China's goals and strategy in Myanmar—including its relations with the National League for Democracy and the ethnic armed groups—the future of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the most likely scenarios for ending the military's grip on the country.

**Aung Zaw:** Thank you Bertil. I think we will have a long discussion. We've covered the peace process and ethnic states, the ethnic army EAOs [ethnic armed organizations]. Now I want you to talk about China, Burma's powerful neighbor. I want to hear your thoughts on China's political clout and geopolitical ambitions, because we often debate and talk about China's roles in Myanmar's internal affairs and internal conflicts; how China interferes in Myanmar's domestic affairs and also China's geopolitical ambitions and access to the Indian ocean.

**Bertil Lintner:** Well, first of all, if you look at the map of China, it's a huge inland empire with a comparatively short coastline for such a big country. And then China decided to change its economic system from socialism to capitalism—their development model was exports. The export industry was developed in order to give the country income and so on, and lift the living standard. And the coastal provinces took off immediately because, naturally, the ports were there. And that's where the production was taking place. This was Guangdong, there was Fujian, and later on Shanghai. Whereas the landlocked inland provinces were lagging behind. And the difference in income between the coastal provinces and the landlocked inland provinces was becoming so severe that it could actually threaten the entire unity of the country. Because China is actually massive, it's a continent.. it's more than a country. It's huge. And you have many different ethnic groups there as well.

So back in the 1980s, the Chinese started to look at the possibilities for development, export-oriented development in the landlocked inland provinces. And this was published in the official Beijing Review in 1985, the official magazine.



**AZ:** Yes, I have read that one.

**BL:** Well, they mentioned that the three provinces were Sichuan, Yunnan and Guangzhou—with a combined population of 100 million people. There is no way they could develop an industry there and send goods to China's own ports. They had to find an outlet through another country. If you look at the whole of China, the same thing applies. And there are only three countries which border China that have direct access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea and making it easier than promoting exports to China's own ports. That's Burma, India and Pakistan. India, forget about it. There is no way they're going to help the Chinese....

**AZ:** No.

**BL:** Pakistan, yes. There is a highway there, the Karakoram Highway. But it's one of the most dangerous highways in the world. And then of course, you have all the political turmoil of Pakistan, which is, you know, can be quite frightening. So you see, there is actually only one country that provides easy and convenient access to the Indian Ocean for China, and that is...

**AZ:** Burma.

**BL:** Yes. So, therefore, China has long-term strategic interests in Burma, which other countries don't have. The West can talk about human rights and democracy and this sort of thing, which is of course good, but it wouldn't have any real impact on what's happening in the country. And India is of course worried about Chinese influence; so far they haven't been very successful in countering it. Whereas China has gone full speed ahead in developing relations with the country. Actually, regardless of who is in power, even when Aung San Suu Kyi was becoming State Counselor, the Chinese Embassy was the first to congratulate her on her election victory at that time. And it was sort of....

**AZ:** And she was invited to China even before the election in 2015, and she met with President Xi Jinping.

**BL:** Absolutely. I think the Chinese, they would prefer to have a "stable" military government in power.

**AZ:** But weak.

**BL:** Yeah, but not too strong.

**AZ:** Not democratic.

**BL:** No, they wouldn't like that. But even when Aung San Suu Kyi was... not running the country—it was still being run by the military, we have to remember that, but she was at least running the government—the Chinese made an effort to establish very close and cordial relations with her and the NLD as well. So, my only point is that if you look at China's long-term strategic interest, they would prefer a government which they can deal with more easily, a non-democratic government; but if it's a democratic government, they will deal with that too, in their own way of course. And China's relations with the various EAOs follow the same kind of...

*[Video]*

**AZ:** Yes, that's my next question. You know in the past communist China exported revolution to neighboring countries including Burma. But today China wants to export goods and wants to trade with neighboring countries, and we are part of the Belt and Road Initiative—gigantic projects. We have the China Myanmar Economic Corridor [CMEC] ... China and Burma have signed an agreement to implement so many mega projects. Some of the projects have started in Shan State. There have

been feasibility studies done as far as we understand and there are so many EAOs and militia active in Shan State. A lot of CMEC projects will start from Shan State and in these areas with EAOs like the Wa, Kokang, TNLA [Ta'ang National Liberation Army] and even the Arakan Army [AA]. China has been providing arms to support those groups; this northern part seems to be part of [a Chinese enclave]. So the last five years or six years we also saw China aggressively involved in the Myanmar peace process, can you tell us more on this subject and also I want to ask you a quick question: Can China be trusted?

**BL:** Well, this question is very easy to answer. No. Trust in the sense that they are interested in the genuine peace of the country. They are not. Because it's not in their interests. If you look at the United Wa State Army, and Kokang as well... They are basically successors to the CPB, the Communist Party of Burma. They received massive support from China from the late '60s, '70s to until the 1980s. At that time, China was exporting revolution. Now they're exporting consumer goods. But it would be foolish of the Chinese to give up the foothold they had inside the country to the CPB because of the 1989 mutiny. They probably have even better relations with some of the Wa leaders than they ever had with the CPB. Because they speak the same language, to begin with. And most of the Wa leaders speak Chinese as a second language, whereas very few of the CPB leaders ever did that. And if you look at the arms that the Wa have, they're more sophisticated, they're more heavily armed than the CPB ever was. And all of those guns are all coming from China. Period. There's no discussion about that. Doesn't matter how much China's think tankers deny that. But then if you look at the broader picture; let's say for argument's sake that tomorrow all the ethnic groups sit down and they agree that, 'Yes, we want to have a federation or a confederation that looks like this, sign an agreement, there is no more fighting in the country, there is peace, and all the armed groups will become local police forces or something else.' Who would be the first to lose? China. It's not in their interest to see that. China wants to have a certain degree... they don't like total chaos because it would mean refugees coming into Yunnan and so on. But they are not interested in [total] stability either because they can't control anything. And they want to have a certain degree of stability, over which they exercise some degree of control. And that is actually the situation now.

**AZ:** They want to keep the forces against each other.

**BL:** Yes, definitely. It's not in their interest to see them give up the struggle. Not now. Maybe someday, in the future, you don't know but certainly it's not in their interest today. China is not interested in peace, it is interested in a kind of situation that makes the country... it shouldn't be too stable because they can't control it. And they have connections with everybody. But China has a very peculiar foreign policy. They differentiate between government-to-government relations, and party-to-party relations, and it's quite ridiculous for the country where there is only one political party and that party controls the government in China. So, they have government-to-government relations with whoever is in power—in Yangon, previously, but now in Naypyitaw. But party-to-party relations—they can have that with anyone. So they have party-to-party relations with the Wa, the Kachin, with the NLD [National League for Democracy], with the USDP [Union Solidarity and Development Party], everyone. And they would say, 'Oh this is different. This is party-to-party; not government-to-government.' But of course, it's all part of the government strategy mapped out by the party, which controls the government.

