

Burmese army clashes with separatist militia near Chinese border

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Heavy fighting between the Burmese (Myanmar) army and the separatist ethnic-Chinese Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) has claimed at least 130 lives during the past fortnight in the Kokang region of the northern Shan State. An estimated 100,000 people have fled their homes and some 30,000 have crossed the border into China's southern Yunnan province.

After the MNDAA launched an offensive around the border town of Laukkai on February 9, the military-dominated Burmese government imposed a curfew. On February 17, it put the Kokang region under martial law for three months. The new military administration has sweeping powers, including dispensing summary justice. The death penalty can be imposed for a broad range of offences, such as treason, libel, murder, robbery and corruption.

The military announced on Saturday that 61 soldiers and police officers had been killed in the fighting, along with 72 MNDAA fighters. An unknown number of civilians have been killed or injured. A local parliamentarian, Haw Shau Chen, told the media that about 50 civilians had died.

The clashes will fuel tensions between Burma and China. Burmese President Thein Sein, a former army general, visited wounded soldiers on February 17 and vowed not to “lose an inch of Myanmar’s territory.” According to the government-backed *Global New Light of Myanmar*, he said the military would continue “protecting sovereignty and ensuring territorial integrity.”

While not directly accusing China of backing the separatist militia, the comments clearly implied that the country faced an external threat. A BBC report noted last week that Burmese army chiefs referred to “foreign powers” supporting the insurgency.

In a Facebook post last week, presidential official Hmuu Zaw was more explicit. He called on Beijing to order its officials in Yunnan to prevent “terrorist attacks” from Chinese territory and to arrest and hand over MNDAA leaders inside China.

The immediate cause of the fighting seems to have been the MNDAA leadership’s return to Burma with the aim of regaining control of territory lost in clashes with the Burmese military in 2009. The MNDAA was one of the militias to emerge from the collapse of Stalinist Community Party of Burma in 1989.

The MNDAA postures as a defender the rights of the Chinese ethnic minority in Kokang, but its offensive is bound up with sordid material interests. It is seeking to regain control of the region’s lucrative opium and amphetamines trade, as well as the smuggling of timber, wildlife and other commodities into China.

Pro-government media outlets in Burma claim that three other ethnic militias have joined in the attacks on the military—the Ta’ang National Liberation Army, the Kachin Independence Army and a faction of the Shan State Army.

In an interview in the Chinese state-owned *Global Times* in December, MNDAA leader Pheung Kya-shin declared his determination to recover control of Kokang and appealed for Chinese support. The interview sparked commentary in the Western media and among Chinese Internet users comparing Kokang with Crimea, suggesting China could annex the region.

A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said last week that China “will not allow any organisation or individual to carry out activities undermining China-Myanmar relations... [from] within Chinese territory.” Chinese security forces have stepped up border patrols.

A *Global Times* editorial on February 16 dismissed comparisons of Kokang with Crimea, stating that China

had no territorial issues with Burma and that the intimacy and sympathy felt for the Kokang Chinese “are not decisive elements determining Beijing’s policy.” Referring to Thein Sein’s plans to sign peace deals with all ethnic insurgent groups, the editorial hoped that the 2015 Burmese elections would pave the way for “national reconciliation.”

Beijing clearly wants to avoid any further deterioration of relations with Burma. Since 2011, the Burmese regime has reoriented its foreign policy away from Beijing and toward the United States and its allies. Washington has ceased denouncing Burma as a “rogue state,” eased its economic sanctions and hailed the country’s token democratic reforms.

As the *Global Times* editorial indicated, Beijing has more at stake in Burma than the fate of the ethnic Chinese minority. China has invested heavily in plans for a port facility on the Burmese coast, linked by oil and gas pipelines to southern China. Such an energy and transport corridor through Burma would ease China’s reliance on US-controlled shipping routes through South East Asia for its vital energy imports from the Middle East and Africa.

The Obama administration’s efforts to undermine Chinese influence in Burma are part of its broader “pivot to Asia” that includes a military build-up in the Asia Pacific region in preparation for war against China. A key component of the Pentagon war plans is the ability to mount an economic blockade against China and cut off its supplies of energy and raw materials.

Washington’s response to the Kokang fighting has been markedly low-key. A US State Department spokesman appealed “to all sides to exercise restraint and return to dialogue,” saying the conflict would “undermine the ongoing national reconciliation process.” In the past, the US might have denounced the army’s heavy-handed tactics and imposition of martial law. Now the fighting and rising tensions with China suit its strategic aims.

Significantly, Burma’s pro-Western opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, head of the National League for Democracy, has fully backed the military. “The Tadmaw [army] has to defend [the country]. I think [the martial law order] is necessary to fulfill the military objectives,” she said.

Suu Kyi has previously sided with the military-

dominated government in the suppression of protests by local land owners over the Letpadaung copper mine, the crackdown on ethnic minorities in Kachin State and its communal discrimination against the Rohingya Muslim population in Arakan.

Following the 1949 Chinese Revolution, elements of the defeated Kuomintang (KMT) retreated to northern Burma, established bases and, in the 1950s, staged attacks into southern China in the hope of re-establishing KMT rule. The CIA funded and supplied these operations, which were also financed by the KMT’s involvement in the flourishing opium trade.

While the US might not be directly involved in the current intrigues and fighting, the border region’s instability is bound up with the broader tensions being generated by Washington’s aggressive bid to counter Chinese influence in every corner of the Indo-Pacific.



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