

China-Burma tensions rise after bomb kills Chinese citizens

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Tensions between China and Burma (Myanmar) have flared after a bomb, which Beijing insists was dropped by a Burmese warplane, killed five people and injured eight inside Chinese territory close to the border. The dead and wounded were working in a sugarcane field near the border city of Lincang.

The incident follows renewed fighting last month between the Burmese army and the separatist Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) militia, which is based in the largely ethnic-Chinese Kokang region of northern Burma. The MNDAA launched an offensive around the border town of Laukkai on February 9, and Burma's military-dominated regime responded by imposing martial law.

The Burmese army has ignored appeals from Beijing for a ceasefire and peace talks with the MNDAA and other ethnic-based separatist militias in the region. Fighting has continued, resulting in the deaths of at least 70 soldiers, along with an unknown number of MNDAA fighters and civilians. A flood of refugees, estimated by the Chinese media at 60,000, have crossed the border into the southern Chinese province of Yunnan.

Last weekend Chinese Premier Li Keqiang blamed last Friday's explosion on a Burmese military aircraft that strayed over Chinese territory while attacking MNDAA fighters. Describing the incident as "deeply distressing," Li warned: "We have the responsibility and the capacity to firmly safeguard the security and stability of the Chinese-Myanmar border."

China called in Burma's ambassador to Beijing last Friday and issued a formal protest. The Chinese military has stepped up border patrols and air defences in the area. Air force spokesman Colonel Shen Jinke said its fighter jets would warn off and chase away any Burmese aircraft approaching or entering Chinese

territory.

The Burmese regime denied responsibility for the bombing, while expressing "deep sorrow" over the deaths and offering to conduct a joint investigation. A statement published in the state-backed *Global New Light of Myanmar* yesterday suggested that the inquiry should focus on "whether the Kokang insurgent group is involved in this incident to have a negative impact on the friendship between Myanmar and China and to create instability along the border area."

While seeking to ease tensions, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said: "The facts are clear that a bomb from a Myanmar military plane caused the death of Chinese people." He called on all parties to treat "China's concerns seriously, maintain restraint, quickly pacify the situation and recover peace and stability in northern Myanmar."

China is deeply concerned about deteriorating relations with the Burmese regime, which since 2011 has shifted out of Beijing's orbit and established closer economic, political and military ties with Washington. The Obama administration's rebranding of the Burmese "rogue state" as a "developing democracy" is bound up with its broader "pivot to Asia," which is aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

Closer ties with Washington have encouraged the Burmese military to take a more pronounced anti-Beijing stance in accusing China of supporting the MNDAA militia. On February 21, Burmese military spokesman Lieutenant General Mya Tun Oo asserted that the MNDAA was using "Chinese mercenaries" and receiving aid from other ethnic separatist militias. In a March 1 radio broadcast, Burmese President Thein Sein pointedly declared: "I stress that I will not tolerate any country or group infringing on the sovereignty of

Myanmar.”

There is significant sympathy in China, particularly in Yunnan Province, for the ethnic Chinese across the border in Kokang. Beijing, however, has blocked support for the MNDAA in an effort to defend its broader economic and strategic interests in Burma, including large investments in port facilities and energy pipelines from the Indian Ocean to southern China.

The Burmese regime has ignored China’s reassurances, as well as Beijing’s call for stability in the border areas, and continued to attack the MNDAA. While Washington has largely remained silent on the conflict, it is undoubtedly following events closely. Since 2011, the US military has re-established ties with the Burmese military under the pretext of engaging on “human rights” issues.

The Taiwan-based *WantChinaTimes* reported that a high-level US diplomatic and military delegation, including Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence David Helvey and US Pacific Command deputy commander Lieutenant General Anthony Crutchfield, visited Burma from January 11 to 15.

“Crutchfield and other high-ranking military officers made a low-key visit to Myitkyina in Kachin State, meeting with members of the General Staff Department, the Myitkyina Military Region command and front line brigade-level officers of Myanmar’s armed forces,” the article stated. “The officers also got briefed on the conflict between government forces and civilian militias currently ongoing in the region, as well as the performance of the first batch of Myanmarese soldiers to receive military training from the US on their return to the front line. There was also discussion on a second batch of soldiers receiving military training in the US.”

No further details were provided. However, it is highly significant that a top American military officer should visit frontline Burmese troops, in this case fighting ethnic Kachin fighters. Nominally at least, Washington has called for the Burmese regime to reach peace agreements with various ethnic groups. It is also worth noting that during a previous visit, in June 2014, Crutchfield insisted that US military-to-military assistance would not include training combat forces—such as those deployed in Myitkyina.

In Kokang, Washington is making no effort to rein in the Burmese military’s operations against the

MNDAA, which is creating a significant crisis for China on its southern border. While the current fighting began with a MNDAA offensive in early February, there are indications that the Burmese army may have encouraged the MNDAA’s actions to provide the pretext for its own heavy-handed intervention.

MNDAA leader Peng Jiasheng gave an extensive interview to the China-based *Global Times*, indicating that he would launch an offensive to regain his dominant position in Kokang. The MNDAA while nominally posturing as a defender of ethnic Chinese, has been heavily involved in drug running and other smuggling operations.

In a comment last month, Phuong Nguyen, an analyst with the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, suggested that the Burmese army decided to allow Peng to proceed, in order “to tap into widespread nationalist sentiment and renew its image as the only actor that can prevent the disintegration of Myanmar.” The military is positioning itself for elections due to be held later this year.

Whatever exactly happened in last Friday’s explosion inside Chinese territory, the Burmese military is provocatively continuing its operations close to the Chinese border, and doing so with Washington’s tacit support.



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