



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

129/16

CHINA'S TOUGH STANCE ON ARMED CONFLICTS IN NORTHERN MYANMAR

Dr. Puyam Rakesh Singh
Research Associate, CAPS

On the very eve of independence, the then Myanmar leadership had made many attempts to unify the country starting with the Panglong Conference of January 1947. But every attempt has failed to address the complex issues related to the ethnic minorities. As a result, over the last many decades, some ethnic armed groups in Myanmar have been fighting for independence or larger autonomy under a federal system. As Myanmar moves towards political transition since the end of the Myanmar National Convention in September 2007, the pressure on the armed groups is increasing manifold. At the same time, Beijing is committed to play a key role in the peace process in Myanmar as the China-Myanmar relationship is getting entangled in the ethnic problems.

Marking the end of the ceasefire era signed in the late 1980s, in August 2009, a faction of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) rejected the proposal to transform the group into a border guard force (BGF) under the



control of the Myanmar military. This led to military offensives which left over 37,000 refugees taking shelter in China.¹ As a result, the era of relative stability under the ceasefire agreements with the ethnic armed groups came to an end. It also disturbed the border trade with many Chinese businessmen and workers fleeing to China.²



As the situation in the Kokang region cooled down, the collapse of the 17 year-long ceasefire pact between Myanmar government and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) on June 9, 2011 caused further instability. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the armed wing of the KIO, attacked the Chinese-funded hydro projects including the Myitsone project.³ In fact, the hydro projects in Kachin State funded by China and the KIO's rejection of the BGF proposal caused the conflict. The clashes had affected border trade, transport infrastructures, and construction of hydropower projects, in addition to the refugee problem.

In a surprise move, the former Myanmar President Thein Sein suspended the US\$3.6 billion worth Myitsone project on September 30, 2011. Under the 'go global' strategy, Beijing promises to safeguard the interests and rights of the Chinese companies abroad.⁴ But it is against this posture that the KIO sent an open letter to China to shelve the Myitsone project while requesting Beijing for mediation in the conflict.⁵ After the end of Thein Sein's tenure, the issue of the Myitsone project has again taken a centre stage. In June 2016, a Chinese delegation held meetings with the local government in Kachin State.⁶ Again, the issue came to the fore during Aung San Suu Kyi's China visit in August 2016 and the two sides agreed to resolve the Myitsone Dam issue.⁷

When it comes to mediation, China hosted rounds of peace talks between Myanmar authorities and the KIO, starting with the first round held on November 29, 2011. Taking note of the situation, in January 2013, China sent its special envoy to Myanmar leading to the announcement of unilateral ceasefire by Myanmar government on January 18, 2012. After some failed attempts to de-escalate the violence, on February 4, 2013, Myanmar and the KIO issued a joint statement towards restoring normalcy. Later, China appointed its first special envoy for Asian Affairs in March 2013 to secure its interests in Myanmar through engagement in peace talks. Subsequently, the Kachin conflict showed de-escalation after signing an agreement in May 2013 between Myanmar authorities and the KIO.

Though China is willing to play an important role in the Myanmar peace process, the KIO's invitation to the US to take part in the peace process was not well received in Beijing.⁸ The Christian Kachins had allied with the Western allied forces during WW II. Under the US 'rebalancing strategy', Washington began engagement policy towards Myanmar leading to changes in regional security environment.⁹ Against this backdrop, the first China-Myanmar strategic security consultation meeting was held in January 2013, and China called for settling the Kachin conflict through peaceful means.

Moreover, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted exercises including air defence and reconnaissance training to boost border surveillance.¹⁰ Meanwhile, protest rallies were organised by the Jingpo people (Kachins are officially recognised in China as 'Jingpo' people) in Yunnan Province, in solidarity with their brethren in Myanmar.¹¹ To manage the situation, China strengthened entry and exit regulations, and took measures to deal with any emergency situation. Even after the signing of an agreement in May 2013, the issue of inclusive peace deal and political dialogue framework continues to threaten stability in the Kachin areas.

Worsening the security situation further, on February 9, 2015, an armed conflict broke out in the Kokang region once again. In the past, China had close connections with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) which broke up into several ethnic armed groups, including the MNDA. Moreover, the 'open letter' sent by the MNDA leader appealing to the Chinese people to support their cause created further mistrust.¹² The Kokang people are ethnic Chinese of Yunnanese descent and they mostly inhabit the Kokang self-administered zone in Myanmar. To alleviate mistrust, the issues of shared ethnic populations, border management and the spillover of conflict were discussed during Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to China in June 2015.¹³

Because of the conflict, over 60,000 Myanmar refugees took shelter in China.¹⁴

Moreover, in the wake of the Lincang bombing incident in March 2015, China deployed missile units and fighter jets to protect its sovereignty.¹⁵ Also, China warned that it will take a "firm and decisive action" in the case of any similar incident.¹⁶ In June 2015, live-fire exercises were conducted along the border with the declaration of a 'no-fly zone'.¹⁷ It was preceded by another drill in March.¹⁸ Towards mitigating the situation, in September 2015, the second strategic security consultation meeting was held to enhance military relations and also to resolve the Kokang conflict.¹⁹

Though the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed on 15 October 2015, the security situation in northern Myanmar remained uncertain as some armed groups belonging to the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) had abstained from the pact.²⁰ Eventually, since November 20 this year, the combined forces of the KIA, Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Arakan Army and MNDA began launching coordinated attacks threatening to cut-off flow of trade and transport services between China and Myanmar.²¹ In June 2015, China and Myanmar agreed to resolve the suspended Myitsone project which is strongly opposed by the KIO. Moreover, Beijing has strengthened cooperation with Myanmar on border areas management and control of illegal border trade.²² Controlling the illegal cross-border trade which constitutes a major source of

funding for the armed groups is a strong message to the non-signatory groups.

As Beijing extends support to Myanmar government to deal with the armed groups, the unfolding events indicate activities of the armed groups to influence or change the course of the peace process. As a result of the escalation of conflicts, China has expressed concern for stability in border areas and security of the energy pipelines and hydro power projects in Myanmar. It is against this backdrop that the first China-Myanmar Diplomacy and Defence “2+2” Consultation was held in November this year.²³

Evidently, China has responded to the ethnic armed conflicts in Myanmar to secure its economic and strategic interests. The major factors driving Chinese policy towards national reconciliation includes border security, protection of Chinese-funded projects in Myanmar, maintenance of stability in Myanmar to implement various connectivity projects, the US rebalancing strategy and strengthening strategic partnership with Myanmar. Moreover, Beijing has to deal with its history of supporting the CPB and the shared ethnic populations across the border. The China-Myanmar strategic security consultation meetings, military exercises along the border and the Diplomacy and Defence “2+2” Consultation meeting reflect China’s tough stance on northern Myanmar armed conflicts.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily

reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Yun Sun, “China’s strategic misjudgement on Myanmar,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2012):73-96, p. 75.

² “Myanmar clash triggers exodus into China,” *China Daily*, August 28, 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2009-08/28/content_8625895.htm, accessed on November 29, 2016.

³ “Bomb blasts hit hydropower plant project site in Myanmar,” *People’s Daily*, April 18, 2010, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90851/6954619.html>, accessed on December 5, 2016.

⁴ Report on the work of the government, delivered at the Fifth Session of the 11th National People’s Congress on March 5, 2012, *China Daily*, March 16, 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-03/16/content_14847640.htm, accessed on June 12, 2012.

⁵ Yun Sun, “China’s strategic misjudgement on Myanmar”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2012):73-96, p. 76.

⁶ “Myanmar official urges to resolve China-Myanmar dam project issue,” *People’s Daily*, June 3, 2016, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0603/c90883-9068045.html>, accessed on December 5, 2016.

⁷ “China, Myanmar agree to solve suspended dam issue,” *Xinhuanet*, August 19, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-08/19/c_135612323.htm, accessed on December 4, 2016.

⁸ Yun Sun, “China and the Changing Myanmar”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 31, no. 4 (2012): 51-77, p. 77.

⁹ Song Ronghua, “What are the difficulties in China’s peripheral diplomacy?,” *People’s Daily*, November 26, 2012, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/8033393.html>, accessed on December 4, 2016.

¹⁰ Patrick Boehler, “China military further tightens Burma border control,” *The Irrawaddy*, February 27, 2013, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/china-military-further-tightens-burma-border-control.html>, accessed on November 30, 2016.

¹¹ Echo Hui, "Chinese Kachin protest against Burma's Kachin War," *The Irrawaddy*, January 11, 2013, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/chinese-kachin-protest-against-burmas-kachin-war.html>, accessed on November 30, 2016.

¹² "North Myanmar peace imperative for China," *Global Times*, February 16, 2015, <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0216/c90883-8851288.html>, accessed on December 5, 2016.

¹³ "Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi wraps up China visit," June 14, 2015, *The Star*, <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/regional/2015/06/14/myanmar-opposition-leader-aung-san-suu-kyi-wraps-up-china-visit/>, accessed on December 5, 2016.

¹⁴ "Over 60,000 Myanmar refugee arrivals in China since conflict outbreak," *Xinhuanet*, March 7, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/07/c_134046681.htm, accessed on December 5, 2016.

¹⁵ "Troops stationed on China-Myanmar border after bombing incident," March 17, 2015, *People's Daily*, <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0317/c90786-8864204.html>, accessed on December 5, 2016; "Chinese fighter jets patrol China-Myanmar border after bombing," *People's Daily*, March 14, 2015, at <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0314/c90883-8863016.html>, accessed on December 5, 2016.

¹⁶ "China has responsibility, ability to safeguard China-Myanmar borders stability," *People's Daily*, March 15, 2015, <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0315/c90883-8863243.html>, accessed on December 5, 2016.

¹⁷ Bi Shihong, "Exercise sends message to whole of Asia," *Global Times*, June 14, 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/927002.shtml>; "PLA to hold drills near Myanmar," June 2, 2015, at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-06/02/content_6518349.htm.

¹⁸ Andrea Chen, "PLA holds night live-fire drills near border with Myanmar," *South China Morning Post*, March 26, 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1747370/pla-holds-night-live-fire-drills-near-border-myanmar>, accessed on November 29, 2016.

¹⁹ Shannon Tiezzi, China, Myanmar talk border security at military consultation, *The Diplomat*, September 23, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/china-myanmar-talk-border-security-at-military-consultation/>, accessed on December 1, 2016.

²⁰ "Myanmar peace negotiator meets armed ethnic group alliance," *Radio Free Asia*, February 22, 2016, [http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-](http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-peace-negotiator-meets-armed-ethnic-group-alliance-)

[peace-negotiator-meets-armed-ethnic-group-alliance-02222016163040.html](http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-peace-negotiator-meets-armed-ethnic-group-alliance-02222016163040.html), accessed on November 27, 2016.

²¹ "State counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi dismayed over Shan State violence," *Global New Light of Myanmar*, November 24, 2016, p. 1.

²² "VP U Myint Swe meets with Vice Chairman of Central Military Commission of the PRC," *Global New Light of Myanmar*, September 8, 2016, p. 3.

²³ "China, Myanmar hold first diplomacy & defence '2+2' consultation," November 26, 2016, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-11/26/content_7377721.htm, accessed on November 27, 2016.