

A Dangerous Calculation

The Northern Alliance – Burma (NA-B) Offensives in Shan State

As the Myanmar Government continued to prepare for its ongoing Union Peace Conference to be held in February 2017 a number of attacks occurred in border areas of northern Myanmar's Shan state on 20 November 2016. An alliance of four ethnic armed groups launched simultaneous attacks on government military outposts and police stations in Muse and Kutkai townships as well as Muse border trade centre. Their attacks also covered Monekoe, Kyukoke, Phangsai, Pangsang, Manken and Kyinsankyawk (Honang).

Led by the Kachin Independence Organisation/Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA), the Northern Alliance – Burma (NA-B), which also comprises Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) ostensibly launched the attacks in response to a continuing military offensive launched against its members in August 2016 by the Myanmar military. In a statement released on 21 November 2016, the alliance said,

The Burmese armed forces have been launching offensive attacks in the ethnic territories of Kachin, Kokang, Ta'ang, Arakan and Shan and military pressures are increasingly mounted. The Burmese armed forces have also intensified not only shelling 105 – 120 mm heavy artilleries targeted at innocent civilians but also arresting, torturing and killing indigenous peoples.

Although there are holding discussions between Ethnic Armed Organizations and the Burmese government for a nationwide peace, the Burma army has continued launching more offensive attacks that can break Myanmar's internal peace. The Burma armed forces have been assaulting to destroy all political and military struggles of the ethnic peoples because they have no will to solve the Myanmar's political problem by politically peaceful negotiation methods.¹

Although largely in response to the continued offensives, there also appeared to be on behalf of those groups, TNLA, AA, and MNDAA, that had been excluded from the peace process, an attempt to finally force Suu Kyi and the military into accepting them. With little capitulation on behalf of the military, which had used its offensives against the KIO to try to force it to sign the nationwide ceasefire agreement, the KIO and the other groups thought they had little alternative. TNLA spokesperson Tar Bong Kyaw told the Irrawaddy,

The main objective is to [make the government] solve political problems through political means. We hate that the [military] urges ethnic groups to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement [NCA] on one hand and attacks the Kachin [Kachin Independence Army-KIA] on the other hand. We launched the joint offensive to [pressure the military] to cease fire and to solve the root cause of the problem through political means.

He added,

We had to make hard choices in the face of Burma Army attacks and we think [the offensive] is the best option. The so-called democratically elected civilian government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been silent about the Burma Army's massive offensives [in ethnic regions]. We don't think forcing us to join the NCA through military offensives will solve political problems. Inevitably, we had to launch joint military operations.²

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According to KIA General Gun Maw, the attacks were in response to continued offensives against the KIO, in relation to the fall of the KIA's strategic Gideon outpost on 17 December,

Gideon for example, had been under Tatmadaw attack for almost three months, and so we conducted a counter-offensive in one place, which lasted only 15 days, and which started on Nov. 20. If you criticize this particular KIA counter-attack, then you also must be aware of how the government army has been initiating offensives in the region for many months and with much greater military strength.³

Although the attacks, were said to be in response to efforts by the military to get the armed ethnic groups to sign the NCA it is also possible that the NA-B was looking to bring China further into the equation. The attacks which disrupted Chinese trade led to Chinese authorities having to provide shelter to more than 3,000 displaced in Wanding, a border town in China's Yunnan Province. Additionally, the Dehong Dai Border Defense Base, a unit of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), delivered a letter detailing 13 explosions in the area of Wanding and Manghai towns on Nov. 20. According to the PLA letter, all 13 explosions were caused by heavy weapons fired from inside Myanmar. One Chinese civilian was injured by the shelling.⁴

The KIO has consistently sought to strengthen its bargaining power with the Government by supporting other groups in its area to fight against the Myanmar Army. The TNLA, AA and MNDAA were all trained and given support by the KIO. Although most recently, prior to the October attacks, the TNLA and AA had seemingly gravitated more towards the UWSA. Both the TNLA and AA offered their resignation to the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) and its Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) on May 4, during ceasefire talks attended by 12 ethnic groups in the United Wa State Army (UWSA) stronghold of Panghsang. The reason given was, according to Lieutenant Colonel Nyo Tun Aung, deputy commander-in-chief of the AA,

The government forced the ethnic leaders not to invite us [to peace talks], and it has ignored us in politics. . . We have to raise our political standard, and we also have to do many other things. That's why we have applied to resign from the NCCT.⁵

In an interview with the Irrawaddy, General Gun Maw of the KIO stated there were two distinct entities in relation to the NA-B,

We call the groups that are included in northern region operations the Northern Alliance. But also there is another collaboration known as the "Northern Alliance Army" in which three groups—the TNLA, AA, and Kokang [Ta'ang]—are members. The whole KIA has not joined them; only KIA Brigade 4 and Brigade 6 are in the alliance, because we [Brigades 4 and 6] are their allies, and also our regions are connected. Most importantly, if we did not join this operation, it could affect the trust between groups and could lead to an unnecessary political mess.⁶

The Federal Union Army

The KIO had previously sought to encourage other armed members of the UNFC to resist the government. From 28-29 November 2014, the KIO convened the first meeting of the Federal Union Army (FUA), the armed wing of the UNFC on the Thai-Myanmar Border.

The meeting was attended by 15 people including eleven officers from various ethnic armed groups of the UNFC.

While the formation of the Federal Union Army has been a major objective of the UNFC since its transformation from the Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union (CEFU), actual planning for

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the FUA had been sporadic and while numerous statements of its proposed founding had appeared since 2011, the most recent announcement, which came during continuing ceasefire negotiations and not long after the shelling of a training academy in Laiza which killed 23 cadets, further posed an obstacle in the peace process.

The origins of the Federal Union Army began in November 2010 shortly after the Myanmar election. Three ceasefire groups - the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) alongside three non-ceasefire groups, the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Chin National Front (CNF), formally announced the creation of an organising committee known as the Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union (CEFU). The Committee's purpose was to consolidate a united front at a time when the ceasefire groups faced perceived imminent attacks by the Myanmar Army after refusing to join the Border Guard Force Program. At a conference held from 12-16 February 2011, CEFU declared its dissolution resulting in the formation of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC).⁷ The UNFC, which was at that time comprised of 12 ethnic organisations,⁸ stated that:

The goal of the UNFC is to establish the future Federal Union (of Burma) and the Federal Union Army is formed for giving protection to the people of the country.⁹

Nai Han Tha, then UNFC General Secretary, stated in relation to the FUA:

We want to solve the political conflicts through dialogue between ethnics and the government as it will never end if we have to solve the conflicts with arms . . . We will prepare ourselves to protect our people and their properties if the government does not accept solving the problems politically . . . Every ethnic-armed group included in the Federal Union Army will perform military offensive actions accordingly.¹⁰

According to Circular #1 / 2011, the Federal Union Army's aims and objectives are:

- To defend the Union
- To achieve peace
- To restore democratic rights and fundamental rights of the people
- To struggle for Equality and Right of self Determination
- To oppose human rights violations and war crimes committed by some elements of the Burma Army
- To serve as a rally point for Burma Army members who wish to stand by the people
- To become a part of the armed forces of the future federal union¹¹

The circular also designated the following as allies: the Arakan Liberation Army (ALA), the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and the Shan State Army (SSA) 'South'.

A number of armed ethnic groups remained outside of the Federal Union Army plan, specifically the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest armed ethnic group in the country, the National Democratic Alliance Army – Eastern Shan State (NDAA-ESS) and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS).¹²

While there had been strong hopes for the FUA, especially as a symbolic alliance of ethnic unity, there was little evidence of any concerted involvement by groups other than those in the north of the country. A further blow to perceived ethnic unity occurred with the signing by eight armed ethnic organisations of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement on 15 October 2015.

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The KIO which had attended the 21 Century Panglong Summit remained concerned about the lack of inclusiveness and therefore saw the failure of the Government not to insist on the Military accepting the TNLA, MNDAA, and AA as negotiating partners as a serious affront. While it was unlikely that the Military would be swayed by the NLD-led government it would appear that the KIO banked on China to increase its bargaining power.

Representatives of the Northern Alliance and officials from Myanmar's National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC) met on 1 December in Kunming, China to try and resolve the conflict. However, the dialogue collapsed after the NRPC insisted that discussions be held separately with the TNLA, MNDAA, and AA, a request that was refused and ended with Col Tar Phone Kyaw saying,

Now let's go back to our territory and launch this war again.¹³

On 4 December, the Northern Alliance released a statement,

Until now the intensive fights continue since our Northern Alliance (Burma) has launched unavoidable joint operations against the Burma Army's offensive attacks that have ever been intensified in the ethnic territories of Kachin, Kokang, Ta'ang and Arakan.

Notwithstanding the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been attempting to install peace, the Burma Army has been launching their offensive attacks by non-stop shelling artilleries targeted at innocent civilians whilst the Burma Army helicopters and Fighter Jets have been bombing every day in the ethnic territories.

In order to end the flame of the civil war of Myanmar genuine political dialogues must be conducted after nationwide ceasefire. Thus, political problem solved by the means of political dialogues must be implemented to end the current flame of the civil war of Myanmar forever. For the ending of the current civil war of Myanmar, We, Northern Alliance (Burma), therefore, call for the following demands:

1. To announce a nationwide ceasefire by the Government of Myanmar
2. To retreat their troops from the ethnic territories after stopping the Burma Army's offensive attacks
3. To immediately start the means of political dialogue to terminate armed conflicts
4. To urgently negotiate and mediate by the Republic of China since most of the current fights are breaking out along the Myanmar-China border
5. We, Northern Alliance (Burma), are ready for a genuine and equal political dialogue to end these fights¹⁴

Dr. Tin Myo Win, leader of the NRPC delegation, also met with the Chinese foreign minister while he was in Kunming to discuss the Shan State conflict. How far China is prepared to endure such a situation is unclear. The state run Global Times stated in an editorial,

Conflicts will jeopardize the China-Myanmar relationship as well. Border trade is frequently suspended by clashes. This upsets the economic development of both countries, and is to blame for the slowed development of the border area. In addition, as governmental forces and ethnic armed groups have their respective spheres of influence, it is difficult for China to have large-scale cross-border economic cooperation with Myanmar.

Clashes will impede China's programs in Myanmar and pose security threats to the China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines and a number of other cross-border projects. The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor which goes through northern Myanmar will be affected as well.

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Conflicts may arouse public dissatisfaction and harm people-to-people friendship. On the one hand, some observers and media outlets from Myanmar accuse certain Chinese of supporting the ethnic armed groups to counter their government. Conflicts in northern Myanmar bring no good to China. The Chinese side supports Myanmar's national peace and reconciliation, and there is no reason for it to support Myanmar's ethnic armed groups. Peace is the only solution beneficial to both sides.¹⁵

There is a strong belief that local authorities in Yunnan have supported armed ethnic groups in Myanmar often at a local, rather than national, level, however, the disruption caused to China this time may see that policy change. Most recently, it was reported that on 11 January, Chinese Police refused to allow refugees fleeing fighting in Kachin State's Waingmaw to cross the border leaving them stranded in the war zone.¹⁶ This claim was later refuted by the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar.¹⁷

The cost of the conflict not only to local people but also the KIO as an organisation is huge. The offensive has resulted in the Myanmar Army being able to capture a number of strategic KIA outposts. Most recently, government forces captured the 12th battalion of the KIA's third brigade in the town of Mansi in Bhamo district. According to the office of Myanmar commander-in-chief, the Myanmar army seized 20 buildings, 108 tons of logs, four logging trucks, two jeeps, one motorcycle, five weapons, and some receipts related to logging at the base.¹⁸

Offensives following the 20 November attacks, have resulted in KIO territory further decreasing and resulted in the Myanmar army moving closer to the KIO HQ at Laiza. If anything, the 20 November attacks have further legitimised the Myanmar Army's offensive against the KIO with politicians on 2 December calling for the lower house to label the northern ethnic alliance as a coalition of "terrorist organizations." A move that was rejected by the Union parliament but passed by Myanmar's Shan State parliament. The reason given for the move was the fact that, by 7 December, more than 10 civilians had been killed and 40 injured during the conflict.¹⁹

The decision to launch the attacks on 20 November with the hope of either stopping the Myanmar Army or bringing further Chinese influence into peace negotiations has regrettably backfired. Instead, it would appear that it has given the Myanmar Army further incentive to crush ethnic resistance in Kachin State and to a degree has provided them with more legitimacy in the eyes of some to do so.

Notes

¹ Statement by Northern Alliance, Arakan Army (AA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) | November 21, 2016

² <http://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/tnla-spokesman-the-joint-offensive-is-necessary.html> accessed 20 December 2016

³ 'KIA General Gun Maw: 'To Talk and Live as Equals, That is Genuine Peace'', The Irrawaddy, 17 January 2017

⁴ <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burmese-and-chinese-officials-hold-talks-over-shan-state-conflict.html> accessed 20 December 2016

⁵ 'Three Armed Ethnic Groups Want to Pull Out of Myanmar Peace Deal', RFA, 5 May 2015

⁶ 'KIA General Gun Maw: 'To Talk and Live as Equals, That is Genuine Peace'', The Irrawaddy, 17 January 2017

⁷ See BCES Briefing Paper No.6 for further information

⁸ Chin National Front, Kachin Independence Organisation, Kachin National Organisation, Karen National Union, Karenni National Progressive Party, Lahu Democratic Union, National Unity Party of Arakan, New Mon State Party, Palaung State Liberation Front, Pa-O National Liberation Organisation, Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army, Wa National Organisation.

⁹ 'Statement of Expanded Meeting of the Political Leading Board and Central Executive Committee of UNFC', 14 May 2011

¹⁰ 'Former Mon Political Party Welcomes Federal Union Army', Kyae Goe, IMNA, 18 May 2011

¹¹ 'UNFC: Federal Army formed, better late than never', SHAN, 23 December 2011

¹² Formerly Shan State Army – South and sometimes referred to as the Rehabilitation Council of Shan State.

¹³ 'Shan State Peace Talks Fall Apart', Lawi Weng, The Irrawaddy, 2 December 2016

¹⁴ The released statement of Northern Alliance (Burma) in order to end civil war in Myanmar, 4 December 2016

¹⁵ 'China a sincere supporter of Myanmar's pursuit of peace and reconciliation', Song Qingrun, Global Times, 11 December 2016

¹⁶ 'Kachin IDPs Turned Away at China Border', Nyein Nyein, The Irrawaddy, 11 January

¹⁷ 'China denies refusing Myanmar refugees entry', Global Times, 18 January 17

¹⁸ 'Myanmar Military Captures Key Ethnic Army Command Base in Kachin State', RFA, 19 January 2017

¹⁹ 'Myanmar's Shan State Lawmakers Approve Proposal to Brand Ethnic Armed Groups Terrorists', RFA, 7 December 2016