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Sections

What role did China play in a rebel group's victory in northern Myanmar?

Ethnic-minority armies couched their campaign as an effort to rid the region of criminal organizations that had frustrated China.

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2024.01.16

Members of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army hold the group's flag atop a captured Myanmar army armored vehicle, Oct. 28, 2023.

When the Three Brotherhood Alliance of rebel groups in Myanmar started a campaign against junta forces in the northern part of the country they chose a slogan designed to win support from a fourth potential ally: China.

"Wipe out the scammers, rescue our compatriots," the group declared in the message.

China, which shares a border with Kokang, a region in Shan state in northern Myanmar, had expressed increasing frustration with organized crime rings that had been allowed to operate in the area by junta-aligned forces. An estimated 120,000 people are being held in Myanmar against their will. Chinese nationals have both been trafficked by these groups and fleeced by them.

The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army – which along with the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Arakan Army make up the Alliance – had tried and failed twice before to retake the region. This time, however, Kokang's capital of Laukkai fell into rebel hands on Jan. 4.

Since then, China has played a clear role in mediating a truce between the two sides. But the initial success of the rebel campaign has led analysts to speculate that it had, in fact, received Chinese backing.

China's leaders may have sought to kill "two birds with one stone," according to Deng Yuwen, a political commentator and former journalist – strengthening China's position in the region while removing the destabilizing threat presented by the scam compounds.

"The Chinese government can use the scamming operations as a way to secretly support local forces … and control the area that way," Deng said.

"They solve the scamming problem and cultivate bold agents of the Chinese state at the same time," he said, meaning China believes the new leaders of Kokang will better reflect its interests.

A 'king' and a coup

Kokang has long been in China's orbit, and many of its residents are ethnically Chinese. In the mid-20th century, Kokang served as a base for Myanmar communists.

With the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma in 1989, local warlord Peng Jiasheng – whose nickname was "the king of Kokang" – switched his allegiance to the junta. The military granted the region autonomy and allowed Peng to keep his military presence in the area, though China remained an important patron

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Chinese police arrest Chinese nationals allegedly involved in online scamming operations in Myanmar, Dec. 10, 2023. (Kokang officials)

In 2009, Peng was ousted in a coup led by his second-in-command, Bai Suocheng, who consolidated his family's control over the state. Bai allowed government troops to be stationed in Kokang for the first time while residents were granted Myanmar nationality.

Bai offered sanctuary to criminal groups in return for huge payouts that also benefited the junta. Eventually, massive, organized scam operations began to thrive in Kokang.

China pushes back

Last year, the Chinese government appeared fed up. In August, it took part in a joint operation with Myanmar and Thailand targeting the scam centers.

Over the intervening months, more than 40,000 Chinese nationals were arrested in Shan state for involvement with online scams, according to data collected by RFA.

A number of powerful Kokang business people were arrested at a trade fair in China in October, and in November, Beijing issued arrest warrants for a well-connected Kokang politician and three family members on allegations of masterminding an online scam ring.

China's Ministry of Public Security issued arrest warrants for 10 people, including the former chairman of the Kokang self-administered region, Bai Suocheng [top row, first left], his son Bai Yingcang [top row, second left] and his daughter Bai Yinglan [top row, third left]. (The Kokang)

On Dec. 10, China's Ministry of Public Security put out another wanted list, naming 10 individuals in connection with the scams, including Bai Suocheng, his grown children and a few junta officials.

The move not only showed Beijing's growing impatience with Myanmar's handling of the scam rings, but signaled that China favored leaders in Kokang more closely aligned with its national interests.

The prince's plans

After he had been dethroned as the king of Kokang, Peng Jiasheng resurfaced as the leader of the MNDAA, fighting Myanmar forces on occasion without significant success.

When he died in 2022, his son, Peng Denren, took over and immediately made plans to reclaim control of his father's lost territory. The Alliance launched "Operation 1027" – so-called for the on Oct. 27, 2023, date – offensive against Myanmar military strongholds in northern Myanmar.

Even though the Alliance remained outnumbered by government troops, the rebel forces scored several significant victories early on. Its soldiers have since seized more than 300 military bases, around a dozen towns, and won control of several key

more than 300 military bases, around a dozen towns, and will control of several key trade routes with the neighboring Chinese province of Yunnan.

Members of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army walk past a Myanmar military base after seizing it during clashes near Laukkaing township in Myanmar's northern Shan state, Oct. 28, 2023. (Kokang Information Network/AFP)

Suspicion over 'foreign' experts

Myanmar's junta chief in November claimed that the ethnic-minority armed groups were getting outside assistance, according to a report by Agence France-Presse.

He said the rebels had been using "drones with advanced technology" to attack junta positions and were aided by "foreign drone experts," although he didn't specify which country they came from.

Li Jiawen, a spokesman for the MNDAA, denied the offensive was aided by the Chinese. "The situation we have today is the result of nearly 70 years of tyranny by the junta," Li said.

Even China's tacit approval of the operation is important, Yun Sun, the director of the China Program at the Stimson Center, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, said in an interview with RFA.

"The biggest support that China has lended to this organization is to not stop them," she said.

Rebel forces were able to retreat over the border to avoid junta artillery barrages. China allowed the flow of money and goods in Shan state that helped to sustain the rebels to continue, Sun said.

And there was likely a psychological effect: The morale of junta forces would have suffered when they realized the difficulty of sustaining control of the area without China's approval.

"The fact that China did not stop them carries a lot of currency," she said. "It sends a message … that China is not completely happy with the junta at this time."

China mediates

Beijing has indicated that its chief priority in Myanmar is stability, which has meant supporting the junta in the broader struggle for control of the country.

"China's position is very clear," ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said in a late December press conference. "China will not support any party in provoking trouble. A ceasefire and negotiation are in the interests of all relevant parties in Myanmar and will also help maintain peace on the China-Myanmar border."

After a stray missile landed in a Chinese border town in Yunnan – injuring three Chinese citizens and prompting a strong rebuke from Beijing – China's vice foreign minister, Sun Weidong, flew to Myanmar on Jan. 4. He met with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and held talks with his Myanmar counterpart, Lun Wu, about the situation in northern Myanmar.

On the day of Sun's arrival, the junta announced it would transfer control of the Kokang Autonomous Region headquarters to the MNDAA.

The months-long struggle for Laukkai had come to an end.

"The formal cessation of hostilities began two days ago," MNDAA's Li Jiawen told RFA on Jan. 6. "You could still hear some artillery sounds on Jan. 5, but as of today, the artillery has stopped."

Videos provided by sources close to the MNDAA show Myanmar military personnel, with the Myanmar flag on their chests, handing over weapons and ammunition to the MNDAA before lining up for withdrawal. Kokang chairman and junta Brig. Gen. Tun Tun Myint engaged in what appeared to be friendly conversations with his recent enemies.

Ta'ang National Liberation Army fighters prepare to launch a drone during an attack on the Myanmar military’s camp in Namhsan township in Myanmar's northern Shan State, Dec. 12, 2023. (AFP)

The analyst Deng Yuwen said the scene might be an example of junta realpolitik: concede a hard-to-defend territory and appease a powerful neighbor in the process.

“This place still needs to develop its economy before it can finally be safe,” Deng said. “If the economy doesn't grow, other issues will arise over time ... which China doesn't want to see.”

Scam crackdown

The MNDAA emphasizes the restoration of law and order in laying out its plans for Laukkai. Li Jiawen said that efforts to crack down on scam operations are ongoing, while most members of the Bai family and their associates have fled to Myanmar's capital.

“Telecommunications fraud in Laukkai has been largely eliminated, with only a small number of remnants,” Li said. “We will continue to investigate and completely root out telecommunications fraud.”

Smoke spreads following a missile strike in Nansan, Yunnan province, China, Image released Jan. 3, 2024. (Image from video obtained by Reuters)

He also expressed gratitude to China: “This has definitely been fruitful, and China's mediation and involvement will continue in our negotiations with the Myanmar military. I believe that, under the vigorous mediation of the Chinese government, we will have a favorable outcome to those, too.”

The junta military meanwhile seems intent on getting back on China’s good side.

After Taiwanese voters backed a political party that supports an independent Taiwan in the recent presidential race, the junta issued a statement declaring its commitment to a “one China policy.”

Myanmar’s military rulers oppose “any separatist activities aimed at ‘Taiwan independence’ and foreign interference in the internal affairs of other states,” the junta said in the statement.

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