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The Conflict in Northern Myanmar: Another American Anti-China Conspiracy?

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Myanmar has been a hot topic among Chinese media, general public, and policy experts recently. The arrest of 155 Chinese illegal loggers, together with the resumed conflict in the Kachin State last month and in Kokang this month, pushed Myanmar higher up on China's priority list. While the ethnic groups and the government military accuse each other of instigating renewed hostilities, China is more concerned with the safety of Chinese citizens and potential border security challenges.

In the midst of all the fighting and finger-pointing, an interesting theory has emerged from ethnic groups that portray an anti-China conspiracy by the Americans as the source of the conflict. According to KIA Commander Gam Shawng, "[The attacks on the Chinese] happened around the time when the deputy commander of PACOM and senior military officers of U.S. Department of Defense arrived in Myitkyina for secret dialogues with the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw). This is no coincidence. The Tatmadaw's campaign against the Chinese was to show the Americans Tatmadaw's strong capacity and to position itself for a political bargain with the U.S." Commander Gam Shawng comment was made during an interview with China's prominent nationalist government mouthpiece, "Global Times." And it was echoed by the Kokang group leader Peng Jiasheng in an accusation of the Myanmar military serving "American strategic interests" in the border region. After the reports came out, they quickly went viral in Chinese cyberspace and raised further speculation about U.S. support for the Tatmadaw to undermine China's influence and national security.

Speculations of U.S. sabotage in Myanmar are particularly popular in China because it supports China's long-held suspicion that U.S. policy toward Myanmar is part of a grand China containment strategy. This theory has been skillfully deployed in the past by Chinese media and analysts to exculpate China for its failures and obstacles in Myanmar. A well-known example is the reference the Chinese constantly make to the U.S. Department of State's funding of anti-dam advocacy groups in Myanmar leading to the suspension of the Myitsone dam in 2011. To the Chinese, the case unequivocally proves that the U.S. is indeed the "black hand" thwarting China's economic and strategic endeavors in Myanmar. In this context, the causality drawn between the visit by U.S. military officials and the conflict in northern Myanmar is plausible and convincing.

However, the conspiracy theory could not be more mistaken and in fact demonstrates an astounding ignorance of U.S. policy on military engagement with Myanmar. The visiting PACOM and DOD officials were in Myanmar to participate in the second U.S.-Myanmar human rights dialogue. The military component of the dialogue had no China focus, but was to encourage the Tatmadaw to transform into a professional security

Yun Sun, fellow of the Stimson Center and the Brookings Institution, explains that "Great powers like China and the U.S. should be particularly careful and guarded against manipulations from local players. Washington and Beijing are seeking cooperation on many important fronts and progress in Myanmar should not be sabotaged by manufactured stories about each other's policies."

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force that adheres to international humanitarian law with civilian oversight. Given the Tatmadaw’s critical role in the country and in the democratic process, the U.S. aim is to use engagement to establish dialogue, instill new ideas, and change behavior, including encouraging the Tatmadaw to relinquish its 25 percent of seats in Myanmar’s parliament. China is naturally displeased with the U.S. agenda as its vested interests in Myanmar are associated with the Tatmadaw, but U.S. engagement with the Tatmadaw at this stage by all definition serves the goal of democratic reform.

The Chinese have cited the “interesting” inclusion of DOD officials in the human rights dialogue to argue that the dialogue must have had a hidden military agenda beyond the original human rights purpose. However, they fail to understand that many human rights violations in Myanmar are attributed to the Tatmadaw, such as those against ethnic minorities. The respect of human rights and humanitarian laws is an intrinsic component of the democratic reform process and the professionalization of the Myanmar military. Since the Tatmadaw prefers dialogue with other militaries and such engagement has been the most effective way to convey and demonstrate the military’s appropriate roles and behaviors in a democratic society, the inclusion of senior U.S. military leaders in the dialogue is not an option, but a necessity.

The speculation and exaggeration of the U.S. military’s engagement in Myanmar also fundamentally neglects the constraints the Obama Administration faces that are a key factor limiting the degree and scope of the U.S. military engagement with Myanmar. As a legacy of the sanctions regimes, the U.S. still implements a strict arms embargo on Myanmar and engagement has been confined to seminars on human rights, rule of law, and institutional reform. Most recently, a defense bill that would allow “consultation, education and training” on humanitarian and disaster relief and medical and health standards ran into fierce criticisms from human rights organizations and opposition in light of the “stalled” political reform in Myanmar. To assume that Washington could forsake all domestic political constraints and form a cozy relationship with the Tatmadaw just to undermine China is not only simple-minded, but also ignorant and self-serving.

The ethnic groups in northern Myanmar have ample ulterior motives to portray the U.S. military as cooperating and conspiring with the Tatmadaw to serve their own benefits. On a strategic level, it increases China’s anxiety and sense of strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis the U.S. It would change China’s threat assessment because a Tatmadaw emboldened by the U.S. would be more likely to heat up military operations against the ethnic groups, creating border instability and refugee flows into China. As a result, China will most likely press the Myanmar government and the Tatmadaw to decrease military pressure on the ethnic groups. Some ethnic groups might even hope to convince China to provide political or material support to the ethnic groups to counter-balance U.S. influence, an agenda the groups have been working on for a long time but is consistently rejected by the Chinese policymakers and mainstream scholars.

The selfish incentives and manipulations serve the ethnic groups’ purpose well. Deception, hedging, and balancing are all means to an end—improving the ethnic groups’ leverage in negotiations with the Myanmar government. However, great powers like China and the U.S. should be particularly careful and guarded against manipulations from local players. Washington and Beijing are seeking cooperation on many important fronts and progress in Myanmar should not be sabotaged by manufactured stories about each other’s policies.

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