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China's Intervention in the Myanmar-Kachin Peace Talks

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Peace talks between Myanmar's government and the rebel Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in Ruili, China, on February 4, finally rendered a glimpse of hope after 17 months of bloody conflict. Although the two sides still need more time and further dialogue to reach a peace agreement, major breakthroughs were achieved on key issues such as strengthening communications, easing tensions and holding further talks before the end of February.

Yun Sun, Visiting Fellow with the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution, explains that “[t]hese latest talks set a new precedent because of the central role that China played in the process and signify a major intervention by Beijing that is unique.”

Peace talks are not unusual for the KIO and the Myanmar government. Since the most recent outbreak of the conflict in 2011, the two sides have engaged in multiple rounds of informal talks, including at least three rounds in Ruili. However, these latest talks set a new precedent because of the central role that China played in the process and signify a major intervention by Beijing that is unique.

China was instrumental in arranging the latest round of dialogue between the two parties. Due to the lack of trust between the KIO and the Myanmar government, both preferred a third party location rather than Laiza—headquarters of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA)—or Naypyidaw. During the talks, China not only provided the venue, but also explicitly guaranteed the security of all participants. On the substance of the talks, China played a quiet, behind-the-scenes role of coordinating and mediating under the guidelines of “persuading for peace and promoting dialogue” (劝和促谈). A Chinese expert on Myanmar's northern affairs commented publicly that China “carefully listened to the demands and conditions of both sides and actively mediated between them,” according to the *Global Times*. China has never before played such a public role in an internal conflict between the central government and a local rebel group of another sovereign nation. Ambassador Luo Zhaohui, director general of the Department of Asian Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, met with representatives of both sides and participated in the meetings as a “witness.”

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China's participation is perhaps the most important factor that led to the success of the talks. Given its distrust of Naypyidaw, the KIO has consistently called for a third party big power to mediate the dialogue, and China's intervention is also reportedly welcomed by Naypyidaw according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry. China has refused such a role in the past, fearing it would be perceived by Naypyidaw as interference in its internal affairs. But this time, Beijing's new policy completely changed the landscape, paving the way for peace talks. By acting as coordinator and “witness” between the KIO and the central government, China has positioned itself openly as a mediator and a tacit guarantor of any agreement

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reached between the parties. Privately, some analysts in Washington have expressed recognition and appreciation of China’s stepping up to assume its “big power responsibility” in maintaining regional peace and stability.

Nevertheless, China’s intervention is hardly altruistic but rather reflects multiple considerations of China’s own national interests. First, the Kachin conflict has imposed tremendous pressure along China’s border. Since the escalation of tensions in late 2012, several Burmese artillery shells have exploded inside China, resulting in economic disruption, political disturbances and rising dissatisfaction regarding Naypyidaw’s careless military actions among Chinese citizens. In addition, thousands of Kachin refugees have fled into China. As Beijing strives to maintain a stable border, there has been mounting domestic pressure for authorities to take action and press for a ceasefire.

From China’s perspective, the persistence of the Kachin conflict threatens the security and profitability of Chinese investments in the region. China’s efforts to improve its energy security through diversification of transportation routes have created new strategic oil and gas pipelines that are scheduled to become operational before the end of May. As these pipelines transit areas immediately adjacent to the conflict zone, the ongoing conflict casts a shadow over the security of this expensive but vulnerable strategic investment. Other than the pipelines, China has also invested in hydropower projects in the area, including the suspended Myitsone dam and the Dapein dam, which was forced to shut down since the beginning of the conflict. Overall, the conflict has taken a heavy toll on Chinese investment projects throughout Northern Myanmar and China also has significant commercial interests in future natural resource projects in Kachin state.

China’s decision to step up its intervention in the conflict was also partially motivated by a potential US role. As Washington grows increasingly wary about Myanmar’s ethnic conflicts and their impact on the country’s future, there were voices from within the United States and other ethnic groups calling for US intervention and mediation. This scenario was particularly troubling for Beijing. Such a move would further enhance the US role in Burmese politics; it could potentially insert a US presence right along China’s border in an area critical for Chinese pipelines and other strategic interests in South and Southeast Asia. Beijing understood that had it declined to intervene, the United States could well have become involved, resulting in negative consequences for China’s geopolitical interests. Therefore, soon after US Ambassador to Myanmar Derek Mitchell’s visit to Kachin state in mid-December, China decided to act and offered to host the peace talks to preempt a similar move by Washington.

Finally, China also intervened partially out of fear of a complete defeat of the KIA and the consequences that could entail. Immediately before the peace talks, the Myanmar military was gaining ground against the KIA, taking control of Hka Ya Bum, a strategic mountain shield near Laiza. As a result, the KIA was forced to relocate its headquarters. Beijing is fully aware of the fact that the disintegration of the KIA is not in China’s interests. Rogue Kachin guerrillas would no longer be restrained and might potentially attack any target they identify. Therefore, this most recent round of peace talks not only saves the KIA, but also potentially protects China.

Therefore, China’s intervention in the Kachin dispute casts new light on China’s traditional non-interference principle. As long as the intervention has the consent from both sides of a conflict in the host country and China has significant interests at stake, Beijing seems to be willing to demonstrate some flexibility, to experiment and to adapt. As China’s national interests expand and diversify, so too will its foreign policy principles.

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