

Will Myanmar's Northern Alliance Join the Peace Process?

As of February 2019, Myanmar's Northern Alliance (NA) is a key player in the country's armed conflicts. Prodded by China, the Myanmar government has engaged in informal talks with the NA's four members, who are part of a broader political alliance: the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC). On 21 December 2018, the Myanmar Army (Tatmadaw) declared a four-month unilateral ceasefire in the areas where three of the four NA armies operate. Yet the army is engaged in a major counter-insurgency operation against the fourth member: the Arakan Army (AA), who carried out a surprise attack against Border Guard Police in Rakhine State on 4 January. On 5 February 2019, Facebook closed down the accounts of the Northern Alliance and its members, calling them "dangerous organizations". What is the Northern Alliance? Can its members become full participants in Myanmar's peace process?

Brief Points

- The Northern Alliance (NA) is a coalition of four armed groups
- In 2017, its members joined a seven-member political alliance (FPNCC)
- The NA's cohesion is put to the test in 2019 as the government cracks down on one of its members, the Arakan Army (AA)
- China and Myanmar have agreed to build an Economic Corridor from Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal as part of China's Belt & Road Initiative
- The stability of the Economic Corridor would benefit from peace between the Myanmar government and the Northern Alliance

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What is Myanmar's Northern Alliance?

The Northern Alliance (NA) is a military coalition of four armed groups, each of which also has a political wing: Arakan Army/United League of Arakan (AA/ULA); Kachin Independence Army/Organization (KIA/KIO); Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army/Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party (MNDAA/MNTJP); and Ta'ang National Liberation Army/Palaung State Liberation Front (TNLA/PSLF). None of these groups have a ceasefire agreement with the government.

In April 2017, the four groups formed the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) together with three groups who do have bilateral ceasefire agreements with the government: Shan State Army/Progress Party (SSA/SSPP); Shan State East National Democratic Alliance Association/Peace and Solidarity Committee (NDAA/PSC); and United Wa State Army/Party (UWSA/UWSP). However, none of the FPNCC members have signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) from October 2015, which formulates the basic principles for Myanmar's official peace process. The government insists that only NCA signatories can be full participants in the Union Peace Conferences in the capital Naypyidaw. Ten groups, with the Karen National Liberation Army/Union (KNLA/KNU) and the Shan State Army/Restoration Council for Shan State (SSA/RCSS) as most important, have signed the NCA.

When the NA was formed, its immediate task was to attack the Tatmadaw (Armed Forces of Myanmar) in Monekoe town, near China. In 2015, the MNDAA had almost overrun the Kokang capital Laukkaing, and in March 2018 it attacked police stations and a casino there. These offensives were motivated by a shift in the Tatmadaw's tactics from ground battles to using artillery and aerial bombardment. The NA needed to show military initiative.

We shall now present the seven FPNCC members, before assessing the likelihood that they may join the peace process.

Kachin

The KIA was founded in 1961 and has upwards of 5,000 regular troops. From 1994–2011 it had a bilateral ceasefire with the government, and its political wing, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), governed substantial parts of Kachin State from its capital Laiza. The KIO/KIA is predominantly ethnic Kachin

and dominated by Christian Baptists. Its main forces are in Kachin State, but at least one brigade operates in northern Shan State.

In 2008, the KIO became frustrated as the government ignored it in the consultations for Myanmar's new constitution. This frustration grew when a sympathetic party was prohibited from taking part in the 2010 elections. In June 2011, armed conflict broke out between the KIA and Tatmadaw, and has continued since. In December 2012, the Tatmadaw launched an offensive against the KIO capital Laiza, taking control of the hills overlooking it. Yet, President Thein Sein ordered the Army to stop short of invading it, perhaps to leave room for talks.

The KIO took active part in the talks that led to the NCA but did not sign it. The leaders in Laiza may have anticipated Aung San Suu Kyi's victory in the November 2015 elections, and hoped that she would offer better terms. In June 2016, she met KIO leader N'Ban La. Later on, she established a new National Reconciliation and Peace Center and a Peace Commission, but maintained the existing NCA as an entry ticket to the peace process. Three Union Peace Conferences were held in 2016–18, but the KIO could only attend as observer.

The KIA's reasons for joining the NA and FPNCC in 2016–17 were pragmatic. Just a small river separates the KIO capital from China. By co-operating with the China-oriented groups in Wa, Mongla and Kokang, the KIA hoped to avoid isolation. The resumption of armed struggle in 2011 had been popular among the Kachin youth, who were tired of a ceasefire that failed to bring much benefit and allowed land grabbing and exploitation of resources. By 2017, however, the Kachin again seemed war weary. The KIA had lost much territory and faced recruitment challenges. Lately, however, there have been few clashes, and the KIO and government plan again to talk.

Kokang

The main force in the Monekoe and Laukkaing offensives was the MNDAA, which has 2–3,000 regular troops. Its leaders were driven out of Myanmar in 2009, and their attempt in 2015 to make a comeback failed. They may now want to negotiate their return to Laukkaing.

Palaung

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) was founded in 2009 with KIO support. Its

predecessor, the Palaung National Liberation Army, had agreed to a ceasefire in 1991 and disarmed in 2005. From the outset in 2009, the TNLA has enjoyed vast public support, and is likely to have 4–5,000 active fighters. It recruits them from the scattered villages in the Palaung highlands of northern Shan State, and taxes road transportation. The TNLA rarely clashes with the Tatmadaw, but in 2018 it fought the SSA/RCSS (SSA-South), which, after signing the NCA, moved north from its southern strongholds, entering TNLA territory. This exacerbated ethnic suspicions between the highland Palaung and lowland Shan; thousands of civilians were displaced. The Tatmadaw did not intervene except when its own positions were threatened. The SSA/SSPP (SSA-North) has joined the TNLA in a fighting alliance aimed at pushing the RCSS back south. This has spurred an internal Shan conflict.

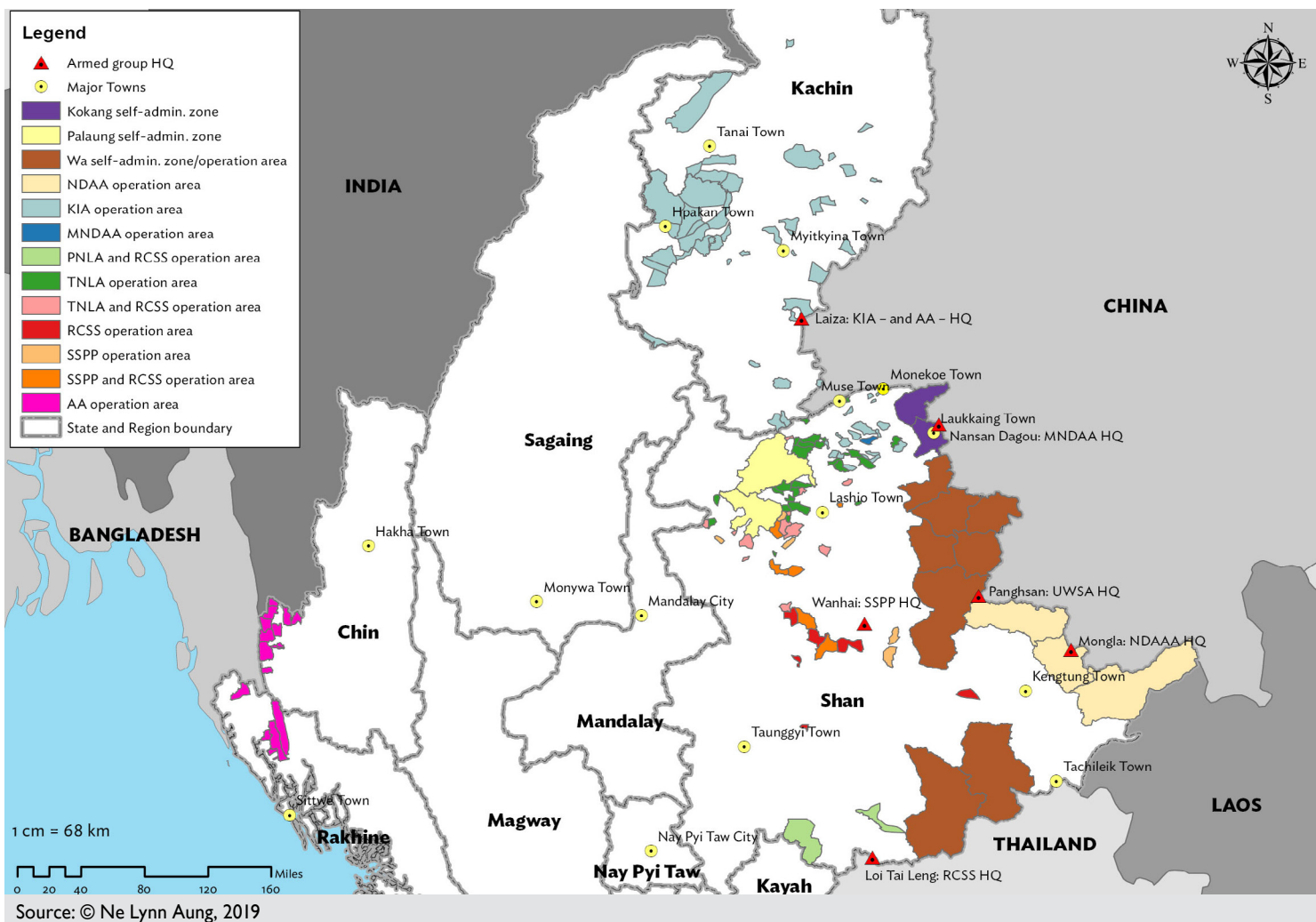
Rakhine

The Arakan Army (AA) was formed in 2009 by the charismatic Tun Myat Naing. Since its homeland is in the west, it seems paradoxical that it belongs to a northern alliance. Its first fighters, however, were recruited from among migrant workers in the Kachin jade mines and were trained by the KIA, and its headquarters remain on KIA-held territory. Only since 2015 has AA moved troops into Rakhine and southern Chin State. A rapidly growing number of AA-Tatmadaw clashes took place there during 2015–19.

The Tatmadaw's expulsion of Rohingya to Bangladesh in 2017 seemed dangerous from the AA's perspective: It could make people believe that the Rohingya – not the Tatmadaw – were their main adversary. The AA wants to resurrect the ancient Arakan, which was conquered by Burma in 1784.

In February 2018, the police fired into a Rakhine crowd who were marking the anniversary of the 1784 defeat, killing seven. Their martyrdom and the government's detention of Rakhine nationalist MP Aye Maung helped the AA gain support. It has close informal ties with the Arakan National Party, which in 2015 won 22 seats in the Rakhine State parliament.

On 4 January 2019, the AA raided four police posts in northern Rakhine, killing fifteen officers. This provoked a joint decision by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing to send reinforcements and crush the AA. They are



willing to negotiate with the AA leaders but do not accept any presence of their fighters in Rakhine.

Wa

Just like the MNDA and NDAA, the UWSA was founded amidst the Burmese Communist Party's collapse in 1989 by people who had been the backbone of a four-decade rebellion. The UWSA is said to have 30,000 active troops, but the actual number may be closer to 20,000. On 9 May 1989, it agreed to a ceasefire with Myanmar's military junta. This was one of many bilateral ceasefires: NDAA, 11 March 1989; MNDA, 30 June 1989; SSPP, 2 September 1989; Palaung State Liberation Army, 21 April 1991; and KIA, 24 February 1994. The UWSA controls two separate territories on the borders to China and Thailand. The Wa use the Chinese language, Chinese currency and Chinese mobile

phones. They do not seek independence but want to secede from Shan State and have their own ethnic state in Myanmar. Hence their most obvious adversary is not the Myanmar government but the SSA/RCSS, which fights for Shan unity. The Wa's reputation suffers from their trade in drugs. Yet, the 1989 ceasefire has never been broken. The Wa did not take part in the NCA negotiations but want to change it. They influence other groups through the FPNCC.

Shan

The Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) was formed in 1971 as the political wing of the Shan State Army. Shan is the largest of Myanmar's ethnic states. Ethnic Shan form a clear majority but have never been united politically. Historically, the Shan States were run by local lords, some of whom paid allegiance to the

Burmese king in Mandalay. Shan State contains a great number of ethnic minorities: Wa, Pa'o, Palaung, Kachin, etc.

The rivalry between the SSA/SSPP and SSA/RCSS is a Cold War remnant. Leaders close to China took a leftist position, while those closer to Thailand opted for an ethno-nationalist program, after first having served the drug-lord Khun Sa. The RCSS envisions an ethnic Shan homeland with many minorities, while the SSPP sees a Shan territory with multiple ethnic groups. The Shan National League for Democracy, one of the few ethnic parties that did well in the 2015 elections, is closer to the SSPP than to the RCSS. Many Shan are dissatisfied that their armed groups fight each other.

Mongla

The NDAA's 3–4,000 troops guard a

mountainous triangle along the border to China and Laos, between the two Wa territories. In August 2016, the Mongla sent observers to the first Union Peace Conference and commented positively on the NCA, while the UWSP staged a walk-out. Shortly afterwards, the UWSA conducted an exercise with 600 troops entering Mongla territory. Since then, the NDAA has coordinated its policies with the Wa. Like the UWSA, the NDAA enjoys a bilateral ceasefire with the government, which was reconfirmed in 1991.

The FPNCC and the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

At the first Union Peace Conference in August–September 2016, the UWSP (Wa), NDAA/PSC (Mongla), SSPP (Shan) and KIO (Kachin) were observers, while the MNTJP (Kokang), PSLF (Palaung) and ULA (Arakan) were not invited. The Wa delegation walked out on the first day. Only the NCA signatories were accepted as full participants. Just before the second Union Peace Conference in May 2017, the FPNCC was established at a meeting in Wa State with the aim to negotiate changes in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).

The NCA's name is misleading, since it is neither nationwide nor a mere ceasefire. It might be called a “partial peace process agreement”; partial because less than half of Myanmar's armed groups have signed, “peace process” because it is more than just a ceasefire. It defines the basic principles to guide the process, with paragraphs reflecting at once the ethnic quest for autonomy, the democratic aspirations of the whole nation, and the Tatmadaw's concern for unity. Paragraph 1a thus reads (with ethnic words in italics, democratic words underlined, and military words in bold):

“Establish a union based on the principles of *democracy and federalism* in accordance with the outcomes of political dialogue and

in the *spirit of Panglong*, that fully guarantees democratic rights, national equality and the right to self-determination on the basis of liberty, equality and justice while upholding the principles of **non-disintegration of the union**, **non-disintegration of national solidarity** and **perpetuation of national sovereignty**.”

The NCA is meant to serve as the foundation for a nationwide peace process, but was signed before any nationwide agreement had been reached. This provoked a division between (southern) signatories and (northern) non-signatories. The division now manifests itself in deadly clashes in Shan State and a Rakhine insurgency in the west.

Can the North Be Included in the Peace Process?

The fact that the FPNCC members were invited as observers to the second and third Union Peace Conferences opened up a prospect for them to become full participants. In 2018, however, the cooperation between the government and the NCA signatories ran into a crisis. The Tatmadaw demanded that everyone commit to non-secession before real talks could begin. It also moved troops into areas where the KNU claims control, and it criticized the RCSS for moving troops to northern Shan. The KNU and RCSS then suspended their participation in ceasefire monitoring. The whole process seemed in shambles.

Can the NA/FPNCC remain united? This must be difficult if one or two members are left to face the Tatmadaw alone on the battlefield. On 12 December 2018, the AA, MNDAA and TNLA declared a willingness to pursue a ceasefire. On 21 December, the Tatmadaw declared a four-month unilateral ceasefire in the north and east but not in Rakhine and Chin States, where the AA operates. Then, just as the new year had begun, the AA launched its 4 January raid. The Tatmadaw is now trying to root out one NA

member in its homeland.

The whole peace process thus seems to be in jeopardy. Yet China needs stability along the economic corridor it will be building through Shan State, Mandalay and Rakhine to a port and a new industrial zone on the coast. China has told the FPNCC that stability at the border is essential. At the time of writing, the Tatmadaw's unilateral ceasefire seems to hold in the north, while the fighting goes on in the west. China tries to persuade the northern groups and the Myanmar government to make peace. These pressures are welcomed by some, while they worry others. They could have the potential to bring all relevant parties to the negotiating table. ■

List of Acronyms

- AA/ULA:** Arakan Army/United League of Arakan
- FPNCC:** Federal Political and Negotiation Consultative Committee
- KIA/KIO:** Kachin Independence Army/Organization
- KNLA/KNU:** Karen National Liberation Army/Karen National Union
- MNDAA/MNTJP:** Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army/Truth and Justice Party (Kokang)
- NA:** Northern Alliance
- NCA:** Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
- NDAA/PSC:** Shan State East National Democratic Alliance Association/Peace and Solidarity Committee (Mongla)
- PNLA:** Pa'o National Liberation Army
- SSA/RCSS:** Shan State Army/Restoration Council of Shan State (SSA-South)
- SSA/SSPP:** Shan State Army/Progressive Party (SSA-North)
- TNLA/PSLF:** Ta'ang National Liberation Army/Palaung State Liberation Front
- UWSA/UWSP:** United Wa State Army/Party

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THE PROJECT

'At the Fringe of Myanmar's Peace Process: The KIA and the Northern Alliance' is a PRIO project led by Dr. Marte Nilsen with funding by Norway's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It aims to engage stakeholders in Myanmar's peace process in discussion about the inclusion of those ethnic armed groups that have not yet signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement.

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