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The Importance of Kachin State to Myanmar's Revolution



Four years on, Myanmar's civil war has spread to all 14 regions and states, as well as the major cities of Mandalay, Naypyidaw, and Yangon. According to the [analysis](#) of the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, opposition groups have effective control over 34 percent of the country's landmass, including all but one of the border townships. Townships under opposition control form a crescent that arcs from Rakhine State in the west, through Chin State, Sagaing Region, across Kachin State, and into Shan State in the east. Almost all of the cross-border towns with neighboring Bangladesh, China, India, and Thailand are under the administration of opposition forces.

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and its affiliated People's Defense Forces (PDFs) have reportedly [captured](#) more than 300 military installations and 15 towns in Kachin State, Shan State, or Sagaing Region since the 2021 coup. The KIA and its allies have also taken control of all but one of the border crossings into China. In addition, they control most of Kachin's valuable mining region, including its rare earth mines.

The KIA's [latest military offensive](#) is Bhamo, a strategically important city in eastern Kachin State. If the KIA can capture Bhamo, it will effectively control all of eastern Kachin State. Myanmar's military junta has reinforced its estimated 3,000 troops in Bhamo; it's also conducting up to 50 airstrikes each day to help defend the city. In addition, the junta has [launched](#) a counteroffensive in an attempt to retake control of some of Myanmar's valuable jade mines.

The People's Republic of China has stepped up its military assistance to Myanmar's military junta, in part to help the defense of Bhamo. China is apparently concerned that the loss of Bhamo will significantly weaken the junta and could lead to another state—in addition to Chin State and Rakhine State—falling under the control of the anti-junta opposition.

China is also encouraging some of the ethnic armed organizations (EOs) to negotiate ceasefire agreements with the State Administrative Council (SAC). China reportedly [adopted](#) a softer approach with the KIA after it took control of the rare earth mines. The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) has been under [pressure](#) from China for several months, but the SAC's demands for territorial concessions are proving to be a major hurdle to progress.

Beyond its assault on Bhamo, the KIA and its allies continue to mount military attacks at junta bases and outposts in other parts of Kachin State, Shan State, and Sagaing Region. In northern Shan

State, the KIA officially maintains its alliance with the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the TNLA. However, there are [occasional reports](#) of conflict between the three alliance members.

The fighting between Myanmar's military and the KIA and its allies predates the 2021 coup. In 2010, the military demanded that all the EAOs submit to the authority of the military and be transformed into border guard forces or face possible military consequences. The KIA, like most of the other EAOs, rejected the military's ultimatum, and on June 9, 2011, the military [attacked](#) KIA units, breaking a 17-year-old bilateral ceasefire agreement. Sporadic fighting between the KIA and military continued throughout the following decade when Myanmar was ostensibly governed by a mixed civilian-military government in accordance with a 2008 constitution drafted by the military.

The fact that the KIA had been fighting the military for nearly a decade may explain its initial ambivalence to the 2021 coup. The KIA initially treated the coup as a power struggle between two Bamar forces—the military and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. However, after the outbreak of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), the KIA joined other EAOs in expressing its support for the CDM and the struggle to overthrow the newly created military junta, the SAC.

Although the KIA, like many of the EAOs, supports the overthrow of the SAC, it has been less transparent about its goals and objectives for post-revolutionary Myanmar. The KIA previously had joined the Chin National Front, Karen National Union, and the Karenni Army in discussions with the self-declared Government of National Unity regarding possible terms for a federated republic in Myanmar, but those discussions did not result in a clear agreement for the future.

A source close to the KIA leadership has provided some insights into the KIA's thinking regarding the intermediate future. In terms of its military objectives, the KIA intends to liberate all territories that it considers part of the Kachin homeland as it existed prior to British annexation. This may include portions of the neighboring Sagaing Region and Shan State. In addition, the KIA intends to promulgate an interim constitution for the Kachin homeland, with the eventual goal of establishing an autonomous Kachin State. This is very similar to efforts already underway by the Arakan, Chin, Karen, and Karenni. According to the source, the KIA will consider discussions about forming a federated republic in Myanmar after it has created an autonomous Kachin State—a position similar to those of the Arakan, Chin, and Karen. The source also indicated that the KIA will likely postpone consideration of international trade agreements regarding its jade and rare earth mines until the military situation has stabilized and a number of logistical issues have been resolved.

If accurate, the source's portrayal has important implications for U.S. policy in Myanmar. If the U.S. goal remains to seek the reestablishment of an integrated Myanmar, support should be provided to the EAOs and civil society in the seven ethnic states for the design and establishment of autonomous ethnic states with mutually acceptable borders. In addition, consideration should be given to direct and indirect ways by which the United States can provide military assistance to the EAOs and their affiliated PDFs, including primary and secondary sanctions on companies and countries providing military supplies and training to the SAC and its military.

The creation of an autonomous Kachin State would mark a significant milestone in Myanmar's revolutionary struggle. The EAOs in Arakan, Chin, Karen, and Karenni may be nearing the end of their war of liberation for their homeland. The struggles in Mon and Shan are in their early stages, while the battle for control over central Myanmar, the traditional homeland of the Bamar, is underway. Greater pressure by the United States, as well as the European Union and other nations, may be sufficient to tilt the balance of power in Myanmar.

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