

China Building Great Wall on Its Soft Southern Underbelly

Some suggest border barrier aims to contain Covid-19 contagion from Myanmar but what Beijing really fears is US sabotage

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Political observers and Western diplomats are confounded over why China, in sharp contrast to its various, proposed connectivity initiatives in Myanmar such as superhighways and high-speed rail lines, is building a high-tech wall along its 2,227-kilometer border with Myanmar.

Is the wall, replete with high-voltage fences, surveillance cameras and infrared sensors, to contain the spread of Covid-19, which is running rampant in Myanmar after an initial period of denial of having any infections? In September, the Chinese border city of Ruili went into near-lockdown after people who had crossed the border from Myanmar tested positive for the virus.

Or is it, as the US-based broadcasting station Radio Free Asia reported in mid-December, to prevent Chinese dissidents from fleeing the country? Or does Beijing aim to contain the cross-border trade in drugs, wildlife products and other illegal items?

Or is it mere muscle-flexing against a weaker neighbor, as Lower House lawmaker **Sai Tun Aye** suggested in an interview with the Myanmar website The Irrawaddy on November 26: “Our country is weak on all sides. We always experience some kind of bullying [from China].”



China and Myanmar share a long and volatile border. Image: Twitter

While Covid-19 and drug-smuggling cannot be ruled out as motives for building the wall, local sources along the border say they are not aware of any case in recent years of dissidents trying to escape to Myanmar from China.

It is much more likely that China wants to control the possible flow of “anti-state activities” — as any challenge to the supremacy of the ruling Communist Party is usually called — in the other direction.

While most of the border between China and Myanmar’s Shan state is controlled by ethnic armed organizations such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and a local force in the ethnically Chinese district of Kokang, which all have close relations with China’s security agencies, it is a different story in Kachin state in the north.

On November 27, the popular, privately-run but still strongly nationalistic Chinese website Toutiao published a long, unsigned [article](#) headlined “Speaking English and believing in Christ, is Kachin State in northern Myanmar pro-American?”

The article, which has all the hallmarks of state-approved propaganda, points out that the Kachins, called Jingpo in China, are the same people and, erroneously, that the Kachin Hills were once Chinese but “before 1941”, included in the then British colony Burma.

The border areas controlled by the UWSA, the NDAA and the Kokang group are not a problem, the author asserts, because they want to remain part of Myanmar.

The “hidden goal” of the Kachin rebels, though, is independence, the author wrote — and the Kachin people have always been close to the Americans.

They got their written language, based on Roman script, from American missionaries and they fought alongside US forces against the Japanese during World War II. The article has a picture of a statue of a “Kachin ranger” and an American soldier at the US embassy in Yangon.

The establishment of a Kachin state after Myanmar’s independence from Britain in 1948 was done with US and British support, the author claims and, in April 2014, **General Sumlut Gun Maw**, then deputy commander of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), was “invited” to the United States.

“In recent years,” the author wrote, “The KIA’s ties with the United States have continued unabated.” In fact, the author asserts, a Kachin organization identified as “the Wenbang League”, which is headquartered in Thailand, “is supported by the US Central Intelligence Agency” and wants to establish an independent nation which would include the Jingpo-inhabited areas of Yunnan in China.

“Wenbang” must be the Chinese way of writing “Wunpawng”, a name that the Kachins in Myanmar use to denote all their various tribes. The group is most likely the Kachin National Organization, a political Kachin NGO which does have a presence in Thailand and is made up mainly of Kachin exiles living in Britain and the United States.

Therefore, it is clear, the author writes, that “the Americans want to stir up trouble in southern China using the Kachin as pawns.” Relations between the KIA and the Vatican are also close — the overwhelming majority of the Kachins are actually Baptists — and European and American organizations are involved in helping people in Kachin state who have been displaced because of the war between the KIA and Myanmar government forces.

More worryingly, if the author is to be believed, is that Kachins in Myanmar have “continuously conducted intelligence operations in China and secretly recruited troops and cadres from the Jingpo ethnic group in China.”

That, the author says “is annoying China”, and so is the KIA’s support for the Arakan Army in Rakhine state, which, indeed, was set up with help from the Kachins in 2009. But there seems to be light at the end of the tunnel, the author suggests, as many Kachins now are learning Chinese and Chinese investment is propping up the war-hit economy of Kachin state.

The Toutiao article could be dismissed as ramblings by an ill-informed freelance writer, but the prominence it was given on the website — and positive responses in the commentaries’ column — suggests tacit approval from at least the government’s censors, which monitor everything that is published in China.

It also fits into a broader pattern of concern about the activities of Christian groups and communities on both sides of the Myanmar-Chinese border. Western Sinologists point out that community-based faith movements - whether they are Christian, Muslim, or Falun Gong - are seen as a more serious threat to the moral authority of the ruling communists than political dissidents, who can easily be imprisoned or sent off into exile in the West.

In September 2018, the UWSA’s political wing, the United Wa State Party, issued a statement — written in Chinese and in a language resembling that normally used by Chinese communist institutions rather than hilltribe Wa — instructing all its military officers

and administrators to “find out what the [Christian] missionaries are doing and what their intentions are.”

The announcement also banned the construction of new churches and religious teaching in schools in the Wa Hills.

The announcement came after John Cao, an ethnic Chinese pastor and permanent US resident, was arrested in China in March 2018 and, in June, sentenced to seven years in prison for “illegally crossing the China-Myanmar border.”

According to Christianity Today, a US-based website, Cao had helped to build 16 schools that served around 2,000 children in the Wa Hills. With the help of Christians in China, Cao had also been able to bring in 100 tons of clothing and other supplies to the desperately poor region.

Christianity was introduced into the area in the 1920s by American Baptist missionaries and, although not a majority among the Wa, the church has a considerable following. In the early 1970s, the Wa Hills were taken over by the China-supported Communist Party of Burma, but following a mutiny among the mainly Wa rank-and-file of its army in 1989, the UWSA was formed.



United Wa State Army soldiers in a collective salute. Photo: Twitter

The end of communist rule released a Christianity renaissance in the Wa Hills with, at least in the beginning, some Thailand-based American missionaries, some with a military background, playing a vital role.

In more recent years, Cao may be the only “foreign” missionary who made it to the Wa Hills, but many other church workers there are Kachins from Myanmar, which could explain the belief that the Americans are behind it all – and not only for spreading the Christian gospel.

It would be too facile to say that the concerns expressed in the Toutiao article are the only reason for China building yet another wall, but, local sources say, it is certainly a plausible explanation — and a more relevant one than the fear of Chinese dissidents fleeing to Myanmar.

If everything goes to plan, the construction of the wall will be finished by October 2022, which also belies the notion that it is being built to contain the spread of Covid-19.

China wants to secure its soft, southern underbelly which is one of few frontier areas through which “reactionary ideas” and other undesirable, foreign ideas can enter the country.

In future, the long and hitherto porous Myanmar-Chinese border will be fortified and — for the sake of Beijing’s national security — anyone crossing it will be clearly identified and likely closely monitored upon entering China.

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Featured image: A still image taken from a social media video in September, 2020, shows a section of a fence erected by China in the town of Wanding, Yunnan, on its border with Myanmar. Image: Twitter

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