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(The Kachins have over 500 Kms of border with India mainly in Arunachal Pradesh. Of the border with Myanmar, the Kachin border is the most peaceful and stable on both sides of the border in India and Myanmar. Unfortunately, it is the least developed both in terms of infrastructure and inter action. This needs to change)

Little noticed but most significant was the sudden departure of Kachin Independent Organisation- the KIO and its armed wing Kachin Independence Army -KIA from the United Nationalities Federal Council just before the Second Panglong Congerence held in the last week of May.

Equally significant was the entry of this group into a new alliance by the Chinese backed and led by UWSA after a meeting at Pangshang their headquarters between April 15-18.

The KIA is not a small unit and is only second to the largest armed insurgent group in Myanmar- the UWSA. To subordinate itself to a secondary position and accept the leadership of the Wa group is significant and yet perplexing.

The new alliance led by Wa has called itself- the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee. The Political leadership Committee of this alliance will be led by UWSA chairman Bao Youxiang and for all practical purposes it looks that the Wa group would take the lead in negotiation with the government and in the peace talks.

The Wa group has declared that it does not agree with the path suggested by the Myanmar government and the Tatmadaw and is opposed

to the National Cease fire agreement (NCA) put forward by the previous Thein Sein Regime. It has proposed its own three stage proposal for talks which it is believed has been signed by the KIA representative also though reluctantly!

It has only been six years that the United Nationalities Federal Council was formed to represent the ethnic armed groups in the peace process in a collective manner and the KIO/KIA was a Co-founder and Co- Chair of the organisation. The present acting Chief Gen N'Ban La was once the chairman of the Council. It was meant to build ethnic unity, establish a genuine multi-party system and towards building a peaceful federal system. What made it leave the organisation that had the support of Japan and the European Union?

Many reasons have been put forth for this sudden decision to leave the council and join hands with the UWSA. One was that there was a division of northern and southern groups and that the minor groups from the south were dominating the decision making process. The KIO being the largest and the most powerful constituent felt ignored and thus left. There was no effective voting mechanism either and no aggregate opinion of the Council as a whole could be taken.

Another reason mentioned was that the UNFC was planning to join the NCA framework and therefore the KIO did not want to be a "hindrance" for other organisations in the UNFC to join the peace process. There is no evidence that other organisations were eager to join the UNFC and all they wanted was that the group should take a collective decision. In the end, the UNFC did not join the Second Panglong Conference whereas the KIO did attend the meeting though on an "observer status" along with the other six members of the new alliance of the Wa group.

A third reason given was that there were internal divisions within the top three leaders of the Kachin organisation- namely Gen N'Ban La, Gen Gam Shawng and Gen Gun Maw and the decision to move over to UWSA was the result of a "power struggle" within the group.

The decision to join the alliance of the Wa group was taken perhaps only after the offensive undertaken by the Northern Alliance group (the KIA, the Kokang, the Mongla group and the Arakan Army) was a near failure.

After almost sixteen years of peace and stability, a civil war erupted again on June 9 2011 and the KIA has been steadily losing ground and losing important strategic heights to the Burmese Army. The latest loss was of the Gidon and Lai Hpwong and other minor nearby posts. It had resulted in immense loss of lives, destruction of property and displacement of civilians on a very large scale.

After remaining on the defensive for many years, the KIA appeared to have changed its tactics and initiated an offensive in a new area near the Chinese border in a newly formed 6th brigade close to the Shan area and in coordination with three other members of the Northern Alliance.

The KIA was outgunned and outmanned in this offensive and the Myanmar Army was not too far from their headquarters at Laiza. The

Myanmar army for inexplicable reasons did not advance further towards the headquarters of the KIA either.

It must have dawned on the KIA that the only way to strengthen itself is to join hands with the Wa group. The Wa group having around 30000 armed fighters is the most powerful of the ethnic insurgent groups and fully equipped by China. The Wa group which calls its region as a “State” have people mainly of Chinese origin and are said to have Chinese advisers. With its strong support from China, the UWSA cannot be ignored in any cease fire process. The Myanmar government as well as the Chinese are fully aware of this position.

The KIA is neither historically or ideologically close to China and has a proud history of fighting for its independence on its own. The Myanmar Army by its offensive on the KIA has apparently forced the latter to join hands with the Wa group and thereby the Chinese.

It is not clear whether the move of KIA has the approval of its people or its church leaders. Allowing itself to be led and tutored by the UWSA would only exasperate the people and most likely cause further divisions within the political and the military leadership.

The best way for the Kachins would be to directly deal with the Myanmar government. After all they had long given up on an independent state. They want to be treated with equality and respect and given full autonomy. One of the discussion points in the agenda in the Second conference of the Panglong meeting was for the States to devise its own constitution- a radical step indeed! Weakening the KIA at the expense of other groups does not appear to be a good option for the peace process to proceed smoothly.

Here is an opportunity both for the Government led by Counsellor Suu Kyi and the Tatmadaw to find a new strategy to deal with the Kachins.

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