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Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt | October 3, 2010 10:00 Updated October 3, 2010 10:00

# Opinion: Beijing wary of Myanmar elections

Blocking ethnic minorities from elections increases likelihood for violence down the line.

BEIJING, China — While the West would like Myanmar’s November elections to lead toward democracy, China is seeking something far more straightforward: stability.

When the leader of Myanmar’s military government, Than Shwe, visited Beijing earlier this month, he sought to reassure Chinese leaders that elections would not produce any negative fallout along their 2,192-kilometer shared border.

Conflict along the border has been an enduring characteristic of post-independence Myanmar, where a handful of ethnic groups maintain their own territory, militias and political representation.

But Beijing has just cause for concern after the Myanmar military’s August 2009 offensive into the Kokang region shattered a 20-year cease-fire and sent more than 30,000 refugees into China’s Yunnan province.

The military campaign caught China’s capital by surprise, even though its provincial leaders may have seen it coming. Tensions on the border remain high as the election commission has blocked one major ethnic group (the Kachin) from registering parties and barred even their independent candidates.

One Kachin leader warned that failure to find a political solution to their legitimate concerns makes war more likely. Such hardball politics by the regime in Naypyidaw worry the Politburo even more than the White House.

Unlike Washington’s cautious engagement, Beijing has taken matters into its own hands. After the Kokang offensive, the center lost trust in provincial Yunnan’s ability to report timely,



Delegates from ethnic minority northern Shan state listen to a speech of Lieutenant General Thein Sein, the fifth-most powerful man of Myanmar's ruling junta, at an opening session of the National Convention in Yangon, Oct. 10, 2006. (Saeed Khan/AFP/Getty Images)

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accurate information to the capital and dispatched officials to gather intelligence.

Beijing directly engaged with the border ethnic groups, a domain mostly reserved for Yunnan. It has brokered private mediation between the Myanmar government and the border groups in an effort to keep both sides talking and prevent conflict.

Earlier this year, China forced the leader of the Wa, the ethnic group with the largest militia and most contentious relationship with the government, to attend negotiations with Naypyidaw officials despite his repeated refusals.

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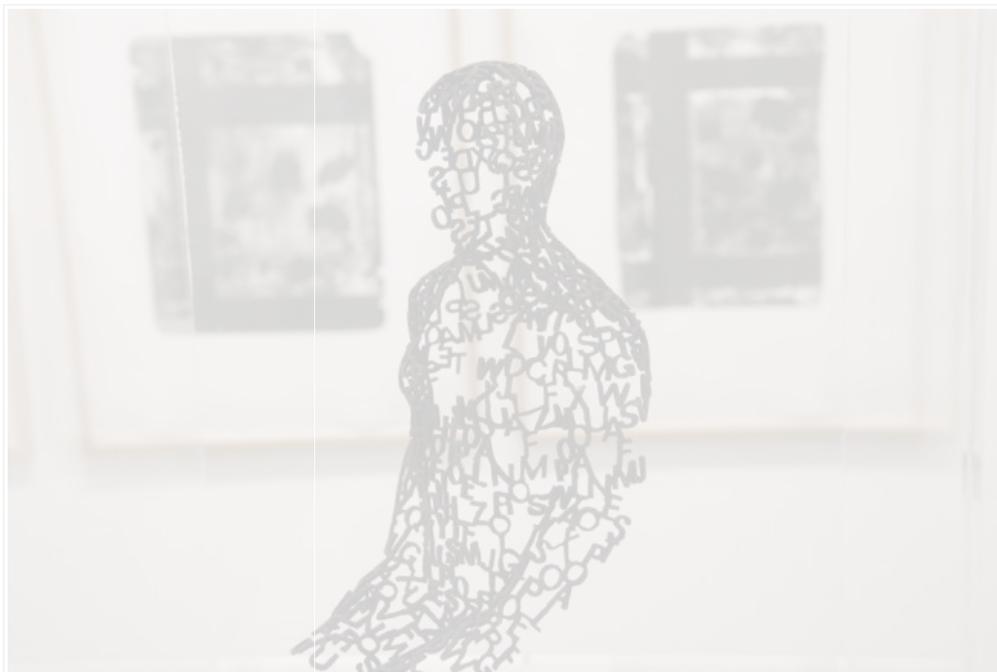
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Elections, which are expected to be neither free nor fair, are only raising the stakes. Beijing had hoped to see broad participation by the ethnic groups to boost the poll's credibility and to decrease the risk of confrontation. But the Wa have refused to allow elections in their territory, and the Kachin have been disenfranchised.

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In the long-term, this may well make the already precarious situation between the ethnic groups and Naypyidaw even more fragile. And as Naypyidaw pressures the groups to transform their militias into government-controlled border guard forces, the resulting stand-off increases the possibility of another military offensive.

Beijing wants to avoid this scenario at all costs. But managing its relationships with Naypyidaw and the ethnic groups is a fraught exercise. Both sides are suspicious of [China](#). The government worries about China's long-standing support to the ethnic groups on its border.

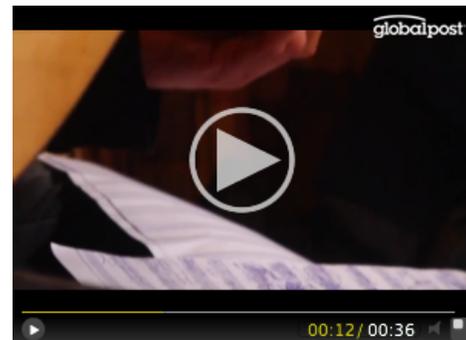
And while some of these groups appreciate China advising Naypyidaw against military action, others feel that Beijing, by forcing them to the negotiation table, has abandoned them to protect its own security and commercial interests.

The groups also increasingly resent large-scale Chinese investments — including in Kachin, Shan and Rakhine states. Many projects are increasing popular resentment towards China due to unequal distribution of benefits, environmental damage and harmful impacts on local communities and traditional ways of life.

Many believe such ill-will motivated the April 2010 bombing of China's Myitsone hydropower project. Activists see some large-scale investment projects in cease-fire areas as China playing into Naypyidaw's strategy to gain control over ethnic group territories, especially in resource-rich Kachin state.

For risk-averse Beijing, it all makes for a volatile mix in an election year. At a time when China is pushing border stability in Myanmar, elections lacking participation from major border ethnic groups — the Wa, Kachin and others — may set the stage for potential conflict.

Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt is North East [Asia](#) project director at the International Crisis



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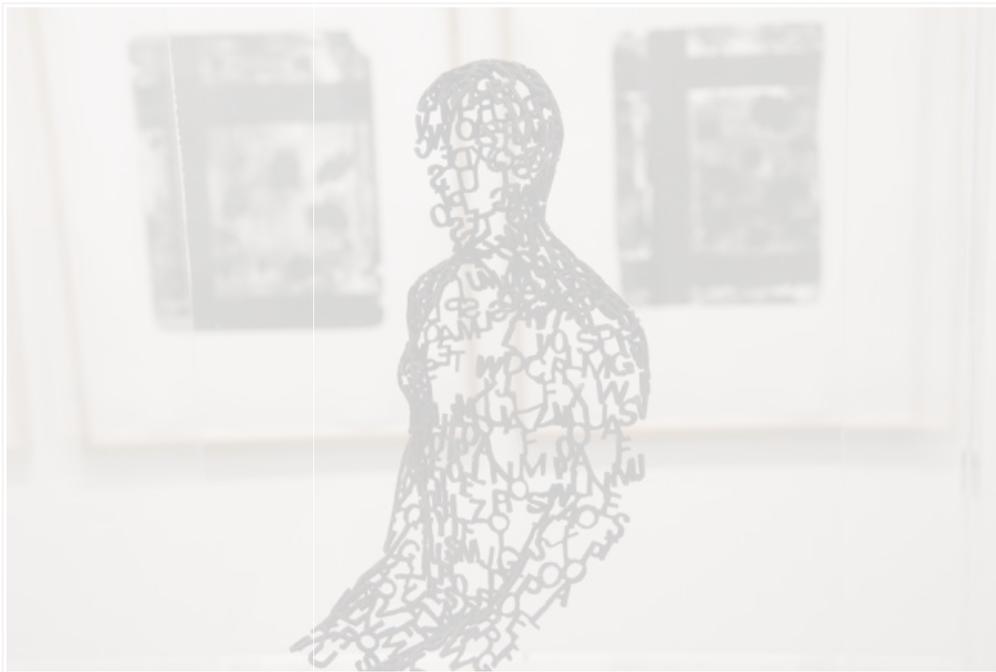
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