

China's new fence on Myanmar border shows shift in strategy along complex frontier

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China's construction of a fence along parts of its varied border with Myanmar has prompted questions about Beijing's changing approach to the frontier.

Editorial

The land border between China and Myanmar stretches for 2,227 kilometers, through the steep mountains in Myanmar's Kachin State, past semi-autonomous territories of ethnic armed groups and along rivers in the valleys of Shan State. In October, Chinese authorities [began](#) construction of a fence along a portion of the border in Shan State, with the stated aim of preventing illegal border crossings.

As of mid-December, at least [650 kilometers](#) of the fence have already been completed and the project is slated for completion in October 2022. According to Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the fence will [only](#) be built along "populous areas". [A government administrator](#) for Shan State's Laukkai township said the fence is only being built in the areas most commonly used for illegal crossings.

The Chinese government has not made a statement elaborating its reasons for constructing the fence, according to [VOA](#), but the project has drawn complaints from local and military officials in Myanmar who say China did not consult with them before beginning construction.

Analysts have speculated as to whether this effort to control the historically porous border is about slowing the spread of COVID-19, preventing Chinese nationals from leaving the country illegally or regulating access to casinos on the Myanmar side. Longtime Myanmar analyst Bertil Lintner [wrote](#) that the barrier may be more about China preventing "reactionary ideas" (or actors) from crossing into the country via its southern border.

Myanmar officials object to Chinese fence project on southern border

Myanmar government officials [say](#) eight portions of the new fence in Shan State violate a 1961 treaty that banned any construction within 10 meters on either side of the border.

In November, a Myanmar military battalion sent a letter to Chinese authorities taking issue with the building of the fence in northern Shan State's Laukkai township, in the Kokang Self-Administered Zone (SAZ). [According](#) to Zhao Te Chang, president of the Kokang SAZ, Chinese authorities suspended the construction of the fence in Laukkai following the letter from the military.

Chinese officials have reportedly explained that the fence is intended to stop illegal border crossings that could worsen the spread of COVID-19 and said the fence would be removed after the pandemic.

Since 2018, disputes over the Shan State border have increased, [according](#) to *The Irrawaddy*, as China has frequently built fences and border markers without consulting with Myanmar authorities. In 2019, the two sides agreed to review the official boundary for the first time since 1995, but the process has yet to be completed.

Historically, the Myanmar-China border has existed far from centers of state power, with local populations and goods armed flowing back and forth. Today, the Chinese government maintains close ties with the ethnic armed groups that hold much of the Myanmar-China border, including the militia that control the Kokang area as well as the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and the United Wa State Army (UWSA), one of the most heavily armed groups in Myanmar with a reputation for drug production and trafficking.

To date, English-language media reports have [said](#) the border fence is primarily intended to stem the spread of COVID-19; the Chinese border city of Ruili saw severe restrictions imposed in September after a number of people with COVID-19 [crossed](#) over the border. But as the fence may not be completed until late 2022, pandemic concerns appear to offer only a partial explanation.

Coverage from US media outlet *Radio Free Asia* [says](#) the border barrier is also meant to prevent Chinese citizens from leaving the country without authorization.

As for Kokang, other analyses point towards Chinese authorities' concern about illegal activity in the area. The Kokang SAZ has become a hub for illegal gambling in recent years, as local leaders [look](#) to make the area the "next Macau" despite frequent violence and the fact that none of the casinos are currently legal under Myanmar law. The Kokang area is run in large part by Myanmar military-backed militia and its current status is a product of a contentious political [history](#).

Priscilla Clapp, who previously served as permanent charge d'affaires at the US Embassy in Myanmar, [told](#) VOA that the Chinese authorities may be concerned about Kokang's trajectory.

"There's a lot of criminal violence going on, and I think the Chinese, since it's really right there on the border with Kokang, aimed at shutting off the border point," Clapp said.

Myint Khine, general secretary of the Kokang Democratic Party, remained open about the future of the barrier.

"I don't know what their intentions are. We've got nothing to protest about if they comply with the border treaty, regardless of what their intentions are," he [told](#) *Radio Free Asia* in December.

While the complete reasons behind the barrier remain unclear, its construction indicates a shift in China's approach towards governance along the border. Though the fence will leave much of the border open as before, the project represents a tangible piece of infrastructure that adds to Beijing's complex political approach to its southern boundary.

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