The expansion of the gold mining industry in Blue Nile State has drawn this borderland into a transnational industry.

The increased commercialization of the mining industry is also clearly evident in Blue Nile State. Gold mining has shifted from being part of a long-term, family- and community-based livelihood strategy to a short-term entrepreneurial
pursuit. Mining is increasingly dominated by the private sector, with the military now a leading player—this reflects the long-standing dominance of military power in Sudan, including in private or parastatal companies. The growth of the industry is also connected to the long-term militarization of the state due to the war against the SPLM.

Sudanese originally from Blue Nile State fled into Ethiopia during Khartoum’s conflict with the SPLM-N (2011-2020) and became involved in the mining industry there. With the 2020 Juba peace agreement in place, many refugees may want to return—the links solidified through their years in Ethiopia are likely to further contribute to the general permeability of the border in this region.

While border demarcation (coupled with militarization) has been the primary tool promoted to tackle problems, particularly insecurity, it has generally been ineffective and ultimately aborted. These strategies have done little to address the fundamental issue that the border is the result of a colonial geopolitical deal between Britain and the Abyssinian Empire in the early twentieth century that ignored existing social relations and land ownership.

While the Blue Nile–Benishangul-Gumuz borderland is not free from conflict, it provides an example of relatively stable cross-border relations that have been limited by regime-instigated civil wars and border restrictions imposed by central governments. Lessons from this borderland, and RVI’s research, could be applied more widely, including in other contested regions between Sudan and Ethiopia.

International border lines are only one aspect of social, economic, and political life in the areas they cross. These lines are far from irrelevant, since border regimes actively interfere in the free exchange of people, goods, and ideas. But they are just one part of the multifaceted dynamics of boundary making and boundary crossing in these regions.
By Seng

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar woke to the news that its military forces, known as the Tatmadaw, had re-taken power in a coup d'état after a decade of democratic government. The coup followed weeks of tensions between the military and the civilian government, as the former laid claims of fraud in the 2020 election. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, many elected lawmakers were arrested. Mass demonstrations and nationwide uprisings were organised, with doctors, teachers and civil servants engaging in a civil disobedience movement.

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Most of these projects have faced difficulties that were exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, competition between the three neighbouring countries, which has also polarized Iraqi domestic politics, means that opening new border crossings and establishing road and railway connections is increasingly a political decision. Rampant corruption, the dysfunctional nature of the state, and the influence of nonstate actors will continue to raise doubts about Iraq's ability to take advantage of such opportunities.

Border areas would benefit economically from the opening of new border crossings and expanded links with neighbouring countries, which would decrease the pressures on Iraq's urban centres. Indeed, linking Iraq to China's Belt and Road Initiative and turning it into a node connecting Asia, Europe, and the Mediterranean have become important goals for Iran's Iraqi allies and part of their political narrative to counter U.S. influence or growing Saudi interest in Iraq. The recent $400 billion deal between China and Iran has led some of these groups to reinforce their message over the advantages of connecting Iraq to the East rather than the West.
around the country’s political system, demanding representative political institutions and future federal arrangements. One such ethnic-majority area, Kachin State in the country’s northeast, is a useful case study for understanding how national protest movements in reaction to the 2021 coup have connected with much broader historical struggles waged for decades by ethnic communities in Myanmar’s borderlands. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), with an estimated strength of 20,000 combatants, is one of the most powerful ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) in Myanmar. Established in 1961, the KIA has waged war against the Tatmadaw in resource-rich Kachin State for decades.

Following the coup, mass protest campaigns in the Kachin State capital of Myitkyina were met with the same violent crackdowns by security forces as those in Yangon and other parts of the country. The KIA stepped up to warn the regime against the use of excessive force on protesters. Growing political tensions gave way to an escalation in conflict, with KIA offensives against key Tatmadaw command posts as well as military-run mining sites and transport infrastructure in Kachin State. Meanwhile, violent crackdowns in majority ethnic Bamar regions led to growing calls by broad segments of civil society for EAOs to join opposition movements and engage the Tatmadaw militarily. As the KIA continued to launch offensives against the Tatmadaw, aiming to re-take territory it had lost following the collapse of a long-standing ceasefire, its actions were increasingly celebrated by protesters.

Calls for joint armed forces between Bamar and ethnic groups have continued to grow, with the KIA becoming an active participant in discussions with ousted lawmakers and government actors in exile. Joint armed forces have been established to ensure the representation of Kachin interests in political discussions around future governance scenarios in a peaceful Myanmar. At the same time, security forces’ crackdowns on protests and civilian opposition have become more violent. Large groups of young protesters primarily in urban areas around Yangon and Mandalay posit that armed insurrection is inevitable and seek combat training in EAO-controlled territories in the borderlands.

Like many EAOs, the KIA is now in a position of having support from many ethnic Bamar populations which for decades cast EAOs as rebel groups at the source of Myanmar’s many conflicts. The shift in public perception, and gradual alignment of EAO objectives for autonomy and protesters’ desires for an end to Tatmadaw supremacy, have opened up new spaces for discussion around historical ethnic grievances. This has also caused a shift in the broader political economy of Myanmar’s conflict landscape. EAOs actively engaged against the Tatmadaw now occupy powerful positions within national-level protest politics and state-building debates, while the political capital that some ceasefire-signatory groups had built over years of formal peace dialogue with the Tatmadaw is waning. This is particularly the case for smaller EAOs that today have limited fighting capacity.

Escalating conflict in the northeast has put pressure on armed group revenue-raising activities, including the lucrative extraction, transportation, and cross-border trade of natural resources. Amid the foreign currency crunch brought about by the banking crisis and international sanctions, the Tatmadaw, through proxy militia groups, and the KIA are fighting for control over jade, amber and rare earth mines in Western Kachin State. This is cause for concern in neighbouring China, whose government has thus far refrained from interfering in what it claims are Myanmar’s ‘internal affairs.’ Undoubtedly, China’s priority will be conflict management in the area, whereby active fighting is reduced, and the security situation stabilized, without actually addressing conflict drivers or seeking a sustainable resolution. Popular opposition to the Tatmadaw makes it unlikely that China will unilaterally back the military regime. Chinese actors are likely most concerned about the potential involvement of Western actors in the border areas, as well as safeguarding the billion-dollar investments they have made in energy and infrastructure projects there.

With strong popular support in the nationwide protest movement, and its legitimacy bolstered through its consultation with ousted civilian leadership, the KIA is in a position not only to influence the direction of national political discussions, but also to reinforce and expand its territorial control in the northeast. This includes parts of neighbouring Shan State that is home to large ethnic Kachin populations, which have long been contested by the Tatmadaw and local militia. In this new conflict landscape in North-Eastern Myanmar, as the KIA continues to assert itself against the Tatmadaw to achieve its long-held ambitions, it is certain that local communities will bear the burden of increased violence.

The crisis wrought by the coup overlays the Covid-19 pandemic, with political turmoil amplifying looming economic and humanitarian crises. The United Nations predicts that, as a result, up to half of Myanmar’s population risks sliding into poverty and experiencing food and fuel shortages this year. Conflict-affected areas, including Kachin State, already face significant vulnerability with many communities regularly displaced by fighting, large illicit economies operated by myriad armed actors, and weak public service and support infrastructure across contested territories. As the KIA seeks to expand its territory and consolidate its influence in the northeast, it will have a stronger say in the management of regional governance and mitigating the effects of national crises on the ground. These developments are being replicated in different ways across many EAO-controlled territories as the political fallout from the coup re-shapes Myanmar’s conflict landscape. Historical conflicts are being reignited and altered, ushering in a new chapter in Myanmar’s seven decades of civil conflict, and clear solutions remain as elusive as ever.

The X-Border Local Research Network – a component of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s Cross-Border Conflict: Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) program – is a partnership between The Asia Foundation, the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center and the Rift Valley Institute. With support from UK aid from the UK government, the three organizations work with local research partners to improve our understanding of political, economic and social dynamics in conflict-affected borderlands, and the flows of people, goods and ideas that connect them. The project supports more effective policymaking and development programming, leveraging research to advocate for peaceful change. The views in Peripheral Vision do not necessarily represent those of the partner organizations or the UK government.