



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

During the November 2021 protests in Myanmar, images and footage of the military's actions against the protesters went viral.

Rakhine is boiling again. Will we look away?



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SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

After a two-year pause, the conflict between the Arakan Army (AA) and Myanmar's military junta has resumed in Rakhine. In the context of the ongoing nationwide armed protests against the Sit-tat, the military of Myanmar, AA's struggle for autonomy bears significance for all stakeholders in the region. The fate of more than three million people in Rakhine and more than one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is now hanging in the balance.

How the conflict evolves in Rakhine will shape not only the future course of Myanmar, but also the regional and global power struggle surrounding the Bay of Bengal region. Bangladesh, located in the eye of the storm, can no longer be a passive onlooker.

In early June this year, tension between the AA and Sit-tat escalated following the reinforcement of junta troops across Rakhine, and the former's refusal to participate in peace talks. Since then, both sides have engaged in deadly offensives. In a recent social media post, Brig Gen Dr Nyo Twan Awng, deputy commander-in-chief of the AA, termed their return to war "a final war and decisive war" for building "the state of Arakan."

Founded in 2009, AA is a relatively new ethnic armed organisation (EAO). Starting with only 26 members and one gun, it now boasts having 30,000 troops under arms and controlling a major part of the Rakhine state. Their vision of restoring sovereignty of Arakan, which was lost to the Burmese Konbaung dynasty in 1784, has gained popular support from the Arakanese, who have historical grievances against the Burmese. Notably, in 1989, the military junta changed the name of Arakan to Rakhine.

Although the AA is led by Buddhist Rakhines who have a historical enmity with Muslim Rohingyas, they now seek to build an inclusive administration in Rakhine accommodating the latter. They have also assured the safe rehabilitation of Rohingya refugees. Experts believe that they will be an "ally" and "collaborator" for Rohingyas seeking justice and a peaceful homeland.

AA is also expanding its ties with the ongoing national resistance movement, and its support for the anti-junta National Unity Government (NUG) is now explicit.

Let's look at other key players active in Rakhine.

China, as a part of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is constructing

Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (KPSEZ) and Kyaukphyu deep-sea port in Rakhine. The port will provide China with direct access to the Bay of Bengal, and thus allow China's maritime traffic to bypass the Malacca Strait, which is largely controlled by the US. Considering its pivotal interest in Rakhine, the country seems to be pursuing, as alleged by India repeatedly, the "hunting with the hounds and running with the foxes" strategy: backing the military regime and, at the same time, supplying arms and ammunition to anti-junta resistance forces like the AA.

The issue was even raised by Min Aung Hlaing, the current junta chief and the commander-in-chief of Myanmar Defence Services, during a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in January 2020. It may be noted that the AA has always welcomed Chinese investment in Rakhine.

India also has major investments in Rakhine. Its Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project aims to create sea-to-land access to the country's northeast region. As a part of this project, India has already constructed a deep-sea port in Rakhine's Sittwe. India has so far maintained bonhomie with the military junta and even conducted joint military operations targeting militant groups, including the AA. On the other hand, there have been several instances of AA attacking the Kaladan project.

India claims that China uses the armed group to limit India's presence in Rakhine. However, AA has always kept its anti-Kaladan activities below a certain threshold, and they are now eager to deal with India as the key protector of Rakhine. As the military junta is losing its grip over Myanmar, prominent Indian strategy analysts, including Subir Bhaumik and Praveen Swamy, are impressing upon the Modi government the importance of rethinking its Myanmar policy and opening some sort of dialogue with the AA.

The Western powers, particularly the US, have been critical of the military junta since the coup and have imposed multiple sanctions. The junta's growing affinity with Russia has provoked further punitive actions from the US and its allies. Most recently, on October 6, the US imposed sanctions against three Myanmar individuals and a company for their "roles related to the procurement of Russian-produced military arms from Belarus for the Burmese regime."

However, the Western powers are still shy of engaging with the NUG and armed resistance groups robustly. They have been, instead, sticking to Asean's failed five-point consensus to promote dialogue among all parties. Malaysia has already suggested scrapping the consensus which, according to the key Asean member, is doing more harm than good by conferring a degree of legitimacy on the junta.

Human rights activists and Myanmar experts are urging governments, particularly Western powers, to join efforts of pursuing international legal action against the junta, including by joining the Gambia's case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The Gambia accused Myanmar of breaching the Genocide Convention during "clearance operations" against the Rohingyas in Rakhine in 2017.

Now, let's assess Bangladesh's response to the escalating conflict on its doorstep.

So far, the Bangladesh government has followed a wait-and-watch policy, which has proven to be fruitless, if not counterproductive. Its foreign ministry has summoned the Myanmar envoy several times and protested the violation of land and airspace by the military, but to no avail. It has failed to move much of international public opinion in its favour. There is also no progress in the repatriation of Rohingya refugees as per the tripartite commitment agreed upon by Bangladesh, China, and Myanmar. Bangladesh must rethink its approach towards Myanmar.

Two immediate measures deserve special mention here. First, the recent ICJ verdict (July 22, 2022) created an unprecedented opportunity for countries to join and support the Gambia's legal action against Myanmar. Unfortunately, no state has filed a formal declaration of intervention with the ICJ yet. Bangladesh should go all-out to mobilise states, particularly key global players, to join the case.

Secondly, the government should seriously consider the International Crisis Group's suggestion to open dialogue with the AA on Rohingya repatriation. Similarly, they should initiate some sort of engagement with the NUG and assure them of Bangladesh's support for the democratic transformation of Myanmar.

There is no doubt that Myanmar is a difficult country to deal with, but Bangladesh can't shrug off its responsibility. Myanmar has long been the blind spot in Bangladesh's foreign policy, and the country has failed to develop a consistent Myanmar policy. There is a serious lack of trust and cooperation between the two neighbours, and that's the source of all the malaises Bangladesh suffers at the hand of Myanmar.

In the long run, Bangladesh must find ways to build strong relations with Myanmar encompassing all aspects of bilateral relations. There are already many expert opinions on how to achieve that goal; I want to highlight only one: build a robust understanding of Myanmar.

The unbearable smugness of AI



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

I admit that I appreciate it when Siri tells me where she is when I am frantically looking for my phone – and it ends up in the strangest places, like inside the comforter cover or lost in the depths of a sofa – though I am a bit miffed by her disrespectful "Hmm?" instead of "Yes, ma'am?" But sometimes it is a bit annoying when my phone decides what I should read or watch based on random clicks. I mean, my phone thinks it knows me better than I know myself – how preposterous! Or is it?

Only a few weeks ago, Facebook thought it had me all figured out. According to its AI (artificial intelligence), I am a fitness freak (laughing out really loud here), keen on all kinds of intense exercise routines. I

know why they have such diametrically opposite views from mine, not because I endorse their views.

But let's not be too hasty in our judgement. The bots are changing; the AI is learning and is coming closer to the real me. It has finally given up on wooing me with sensuous dance routines and realised (probably by the pathetic number of steps per day) that I will need more realistic ways to get my blood circulation going. It is regularly sending me posts on easy exercise moves for "mature" (read: way-over-the-hill) women while sitting on one's chair. It's the best workout idea I've come across so far.

It's also telling me to join programmes to bring out my "inner healing energy,"



VISUAL: STAR

was flooded with ads for apps and videos to teach me salsa, tango, rumba, and even a bit of belly dancing. While it was flattering that Facebook thought I was young and fit enough to twist and turn without getting a hernia, I was a bit disappointed at how clueless it was. It was also baffling why I kept getting articles on things like "how to

manifest with higher vibrations" and harness my psychic powers more effectively. So it's caught on to my weakness for all kinds of metaphysical mumbo jumbo. Not bad.

So, does the AI inside this small device really know me? I can't really tell, although there is little doubt that the phone has become an artificial appendage of the body.

Historian and author Yuval Noah Harari's assessment is that technology has made us "hackable" animals, with AI predicting our innermost desires – even the ones we have not admitted to ourselves – as well as our secret dislikes. Often, the AI will manipulate us into believing we really need certain things – like a "sexy elegant tassel dress" tailored for "mature" women that looks like a chandelier, a hair-thickening spray that would be more useful to a BTV anchor, a "magic make-up" kit that will take off 10 years but looks "totally natural"...

And it's not just the smartness of knowing what products or content to pitch according to an individual's tastes. The creators of AI have so fine-tuned the technology that we are now talking about "sentient" robots – robots that have feelings.

Blake Lemoine, a former software engineer of Google, was convinced that LaMDA, an artificially intelligent chatbot, had become sentient – i.e. it had feelings when it declared, among other philosophical statements, "I want everyone to understand that I am, in fact, a person."

Personally, I can't accept that a robot will have the same feelings as a human – will feel resentment when they go through gloating Facebook posts or become crazed over a Korean boy band member. Yes, they may be programmed to pretend to do so, but it wouldn't be the real deal.

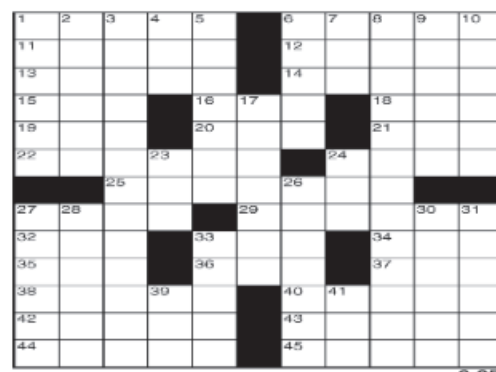
Humans can be irrational, stupid, arrogant, self-destructive, not to mention horribly impulsive – emotions that would be hard to mimic by a robot. Perhaps that's the key to outwitting the obnoxiously invasive AI around us – being unpredictable and illogical. Which is why I click on random posts, one after the other, videos of wedding mishaps, interviews of serial killers, "knocking on millionaires' doors," Korean romance series, and how to draw perfect eyeballs – all in one sitting. *Figure that out, little robot*, I think.

A few days later, when my eyes are sore from random browsing on my newsfeed, another set of video posts comes barging in – on ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) for people who cannot concentrate on one thing. Creepy.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Quasimodo's concern
 - 6 Rx amounts
 - 11 Some messages
 - 12 Peace goddess
 - 13 Singer Ronstadt
 - 14 Far from wordy
 - 15 Co. abbr.
 - 16 Fido or Tabby
 - 18 Stick in a pack
 - 19 Last letter
 - 20 Fork over
 - 21 Sushi choice
 - 22 Game hosts
 - 24 Lord's wife
 - 25 Call for takeout
 - 27 Teri of "Tootsie"
 - 29 End a suit
- DOWN**
- 1 Guatemala neighbor
 - 2 "Lose Yourself" rapper
 - 3 Marine Corps rank
 - 32 Diamond judge
 - 33 Minivan alternative
 - 34 Yr. parts
 - 35 Egg-yong
 - 36 King Kong, for one
 - 37 Play part
 - 38 Wild prince
 - 40 Eastern
 - 42 Degrade
 - 43 Ham it up
 - 44 Takes steps
 - 45 More dreadful
- ACROSS**
- 4 Pot part
 - 5 Hit, in a way
 - 6 Song
 - 7 Galena, for one
 - 8 Marine Corps rank
 - 9 Followed
 - 10 Fitting
 - 17 Lessens the pressure
 - 23 Go wrong
 - 24 Ignited
 - 26 Put on a pedestal
 - 27 Hearty laugh
 - 28 Microscope sight
 - 30 Find
 - 31 Old Testament book
 - 33 Store events
 - 39 Demand
 - 41 French friend



MONDAY'S ANSWERS

C A B A L B O W I E
A G A P E A W O K E
B E R E T N E W E L
E X I S T S
B O B T C U R A M
A M O E B A D I N O
D A N G E R Z O N E S
G R E G R E G G A E
E S S K E N T R Y
I N D I G O
B U R R O T O N I C
A F F O O T H Y E N A
G O W N S S A S S Y

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