

Are tides turning in Myanmar’s civil war?



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Following its independence in the post-World War II period from British colonial rule, Myanmar went under military rule before it could consolidate democracy. For decades, the country has been in turmoil, and the military junta received its legitimacy from the rationale of preventing the “disintegration of the country.” For a brief period, the Western powers were fooled by the “false dawn” of “democratic transition” under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) government.

The February 2021 coup by the military turned that hope into a mirage, as inherited and practised divisive colonial legacy ensued in ethnic conflict, civil unrest, mass human rights violations and systematic persecution of the religious and ethnic minorities by the state apparatus. A parallel government in exile was formed, comprising mostly elected representatives—that were deposed by the coup—known as the National Unity Government (NUG). They called for a “defensive war” against the Tatmadaw, targeting the junta and its economic bases, which resulted in the creation of a resistance force called the People’s Defence Force (PDF). While Myanmar’s military rulers have been fighting anti-insurgency wars against various ethnic armed groups (EAGs) for decades, the addition of another resistance force did not call for any significant shift in the stalemate conflict.

However, on October 27, the civil conflict in Myanmar took a significant turn when three ethnic armed groups (EAGs), Kokang’s Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the Arakan Army (AA), under the banner of “Three Brotherhood Alliance” started an unprecedented coordinated attack against the junta. The primary objective of this assault was to take out forced labour scam syndicates bordering China that targets Chinese citizens from different parts of the world, which has been run

with the blessing of the border guard forces (BGFs) of Myanmar. The lack of meaningful action by the military junta against this multi-billion-dollar crime network left Beijing frustrated, which has helped the Brotherhood Alliance to align their attack with the Chinese cause.

The offensive, named after the commencement date as Operation 1027, has made inroads since it started in the northern Shan State bordering China. Now, it has spread to the Mandalay and Sagiang regions and other territories by targeting key trading routes which generate



Residents flee carrying their belongings across a bridge that connects Myanmar and India at the border village of Zokhawthar, Champhai district, in India’s northeastern state of Mizoram, on November 15, 2023.

PHOTO: REUTERS

much-needed revenues for the sustenance of Myanmar’s military regime. Conceding the strategic town Chinshwehaw bordering China’s Yunnan province to the rebel forces is considered a huge defeat as more than a quarter of Myanmar’s border trade with China passes through this town. In northern Shan State, eastern Kayah State along the Thai border and Chin State, bordering India, the Tatmadaw

took severe body blows as it yielded townships, military barracks and key government installations to the Brotherhood Alliance.

The United Nations (UN) has already termed the offensive as “the largest in scale and most extensive geographically” since the military seized power. The most striking acknowledgement came from Myanmar Junta President Myint

and the international community have been taken aback by the pace of the attack and the noticeable lack of morale among the government forces of Myanmar. But will this coordinated offensive be able to spur and align the opposition resistance forces with the Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs) into a single objective to oust the military regime for good? The answer to this question is connected to the

control is a crucial question. On the other hand, how far the complex inter-ethnic relationship will enable the galvanisation of opposition forces under the leadership of NUG remains to be seen. Should the Myanmar military regime implode, this will have severe geopolitical implications for the region.

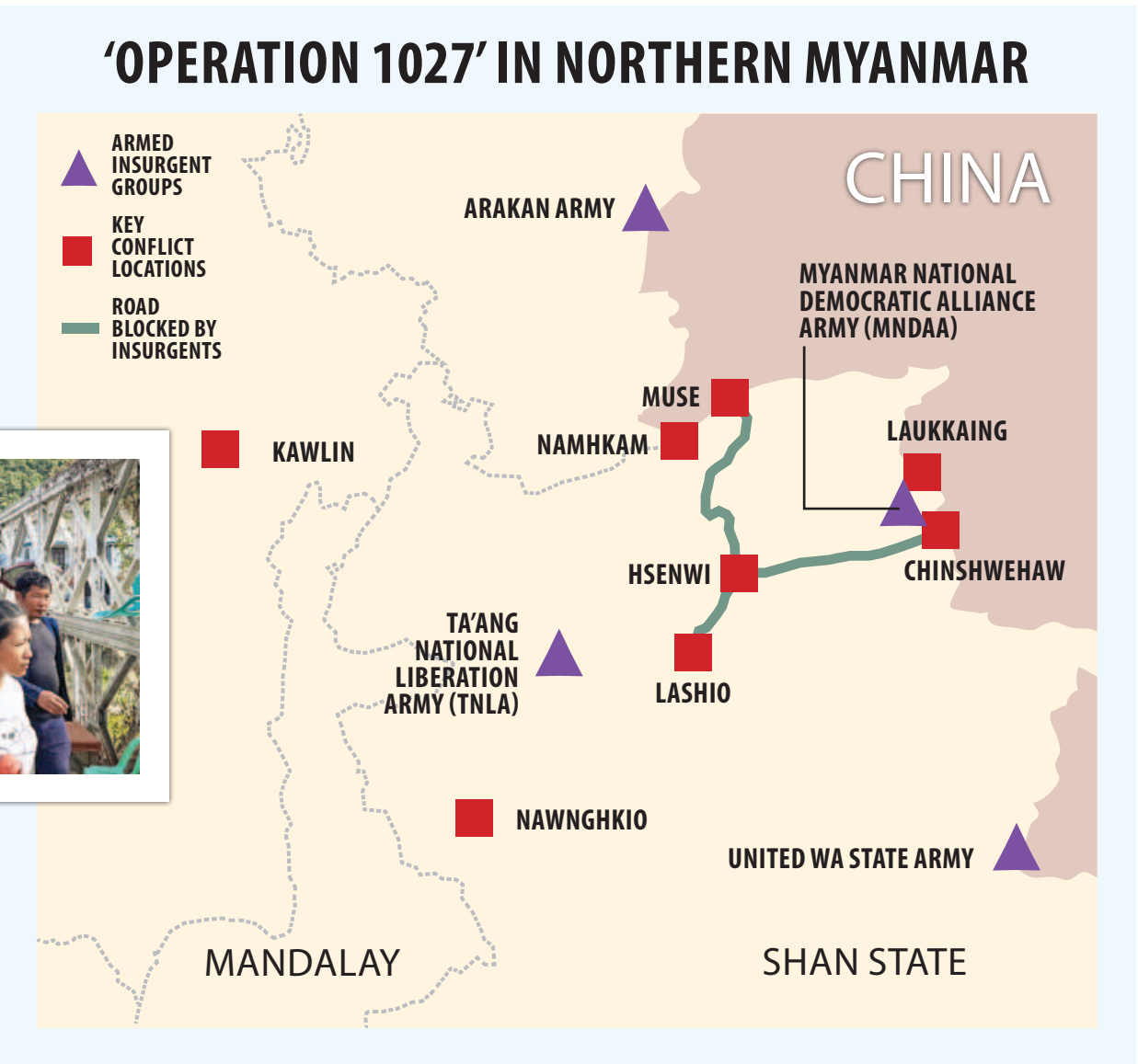
Since the 1970s, Bangladesh has been at the receiving end of

refugees continue to arrive in India’s northeastern and eastern states, this would put immense pressure on New Delhi to manage its already troubled northeast. Given the geopolitical engagement of China and India, two of the biggest neighbours of Myanmar and strategic competitors in the Indo-Pacific region, will be cautious about hedging their bets among the military junta, EAGs and opposition resistance forces under the NUG leadership.

Beijing’s concerns have been visible as China’s PLA started a military drill near the Myanmar border on November 24 aiming to “test the rapid manoeuvrability, border sealing and fire strike capabilities of theatre troops” in the aftermath of Chinese convoy trucks getting attacked in Myanmar. In the bigger spectrum, China’s continued access to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar is crucial for fixing its Malacca dilemma; New Delhi should be worried regarding its India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the central plank of its “Act East policy” to connect Southeast Asia. An uncertain political future marred by civil war in the country will undermine the neighbours’ strategic future.

Since the 2021 coup, both India and China have been among the top four weapon sellers for the Myanmar junta. As a UN report from May 2023 suggests, India sold \$51 million, and China sold \$260 million worth of arms and supplies to the Myanmar army and its defence industries. Should the junta keep losing control of urban centres and strategic locations of the country, it will get difficult for both China and India to balance between the military regimes and opposition forces.

China’s strategic rival, the United States, might also join the game to ramp up pressure in favour of the resistance forces. On October 31, the US issued fresh sanctions on Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, following sanctions to restrict the Tatmadaw’s access to foreign reserves and jet fuel. To shore up more pressure against the junta, whether the US will use the Burma Act to issue fully fledged sanctions instead of more calculated targeted ones remains to be seen. For years, Bangladesh has warned the international community regarding the protracted Rohingya crisis and its possible regional geopolitical implications. The fragile ethnic cohesion that was glued by a brutal military regime has given way to an uncertain future that will have grave geopolitical implications within the region and beyond.



significant fact that since the 1960s, most of these EAGs have been fighting for political autonomy in different states and regions of Myanmar. Often, they have established informal mechanisms for controlling revenue collection and resources in their respective territories. Whether such a limited aspiration for territorial control can be swapped for a larger political ambition to take over state

Myanmar’s internal conflicts over identity politics. Unlike the 2017 influx, other neighbouring countries are also in danger of receiving thousands of refugees due to the millions of displaced civilian populations within Myanmar who are trying to flee the civil war engulfing multiple states. Following the coup of 2021, as many as 40,000 Chin refugees have been sheltered in Mizoram. If

Can we ever find a viable scheme for Rohingya repatriation?



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Bangladesh currently faces a perplexing situation regarding the repatriation of over one million Rohingya refugees to Myanmar. Since 2017, several bilateral attempts, including visits and exchanges, have achieved little success. The diplomatic efforts for repatriation are seemingly running in circles without the prospect of the Rohingya returning to their homeland any time soon. So far, the road map to repatriation is tainted with coercion, violence, intimidation of the refugees at the camps in Cox’s Bazar, and continued disenfranchisement of the Rohingya in Myanmar. To add to that, the recent renewed fighting between the armed rebel groups and the Myanmar junta may further push back the ongoing repatriation plan due to lack of peace and stability inside Myanmar.

As it stands, the recent repatriation deal brokered by China offers very little in terms of restoration of the rights of the Rohingya people. The deal in effect compromises citizenship for the so-called National Verification Card (NVC) for repatriated families. Furthermore, the Rohingya are now being offered “model villages” for resettlement, despite their clear rejection of the repatriation scheme earlier. The Myanmar officials made no commitment for the refugees’ repatriation to their original homes during the recent visit to Cox’s Bazar. In all of this, Bangladesh officials seem indifferent to holding dialogues around reconciliation, security, and Rohingya rights as conditions for repatriation. Instead, many speculate that Bangladesh is looking towards short-term fixes to resolve the crisis bilaterally, with Chinese aid and assistance.



Rohingya refugee children play at Nayapara refugee camp in Teknaf on November 24, 2023.

PHOTO: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/AFP

But will short-term fixes be effective? This is very unlikely. Even if it does happen, such fixes would be unsustainable. Repatriation through the bilateral agreements essentially means moving from one refugee camp to another, without restoring rights and ensuring freedom of movement of the Rohingya. For the Rohingya, citizenship remains key and cannot be substituted by NVC. The Rohingya see NVC not as an instrument of inclusion, but rather as a tool that will perpetuate exclusion and continue cycles of discrimination upon their return to their homeland. Any reasonable repatriation plan must entail the refugees’ access to land and their homes, security, and the restoration of their dignity in Myanmar. The current efforts that eschew addressing

their needs seem rather unproductive.

Repatriation at this time under the pilot project would mean a return to complete uncertainty without justice, rights, and accountability for systematic abuse by the armed forces. Since repatriation can only be on a voluntary basis and without force or coercion, all indications reflect the Rohingya refugees’ unwillingness to return, which is fully justified, under the current

World, that it is “inconceivable” that Operation 1027 could have been carried out without China’s blessing, given that much of the operation also took place along the Chinese border.

The renewed armed conflicts have internally displaced an estimated 200,000 people; another 5,000 Myanmar nationals have taken shelter in Mizoram after fleeing the violence erupting in the nation. These developments have raised further concerns with regard to cross-border fresh influx, and triggered, according to Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, the deployment of additional Bangladeshi forces along the Myanmar border to prevent any fallout from the conflict.

Needless to say, repatriation would require peace and stability to address safety concerns for the returnees; otherwise, the Rohingya refugees will not agree to return. So far, Bangladesh and Myanmar have both failed to engage the Rohingya meaningfully in repatriation decisions except for short visits and meetings with officials during their visits. The task involves many complex and sensitive logistical issues and demands international collaboration to ensure smooth implementation on both ends. During past repatriation efforts, the Cox’s Bazar office of the UN High Commissioner

for Refugees (UNHCR) was not involved in the planning and logistics for any of the pilot projects for repatriation. The UNHCR has always maintained that the situation in Myanmar is not conducive for safe and dignified repatriation.

A viable repatriation scheme can only be fashioned under the sponsorship and supervision of UN systems. A collective international effort is required to reach a just resolution. However, it appears that there is no appetite among the international community for the Rohingya, more so amidst various conflicts worldwide, such as the Russia-Ukraine war and Israel’s genocide against Palestinians since the October 7 Hamas attack. The Western countries are busy with their own kinkfolk and struggles for global power and control.

Evidently, international support for the Rohingya people is diminishing by the day. So far, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has been a great disappointment. The ICJ has taken an inordinate amount of time to come up with a judgment regarding the genocide committed against the Rohingya people. On November 16, several countries such as Denmark, France, the UK, Canada, Maldives, Germany, and the Netherlands issued a joint declaration of intervention in The Gambia’s case against Myanmar at the ICJ. The declaration came years after the case was lodged. Though it does reaffirm an international commitment to accountability and resolution of the dispute peacefully, no one knows how tangibly effective the ICJ decision will be when delivered.

To devise a sustainable strategy, Bangladesh should work with the UN and continue its diplomatic efforts with other nations in developing safe conditions both in Myanmar and Cox’s Bazar to facilitate Rohingya repatriation. The goal must be to remove the pervasive fear of persecution that plagues the Rohingya community both in and outside Myanmar. As the Myanmar military junta loses ground, its response to the offensive threatens the practicality of a repatriation plan in the near future.

Much of the operation took place along the Chinese border and it is unclear what China’s role is in this new offensive; however, many observers speculate that weapons to conduct Operation 1027 were supplied from or through China.