

Operation 1027 in Myanmar: Implications for Bangladesh and the Region

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Introduction

The current conflict between the Myanmar junta and the Brotherhood Alliance started when the three armed ethnic groups, namely Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Arakan Army (AA) and Tang National Liberation Army (TNLA), launched a coordinated attack against the junta forces on October 27, 2023. The operation's name is a shortened version of its launching month and date, 'Operation 1027'.

The success of this coordinated attack has drawn support from other rebel forces opposed to the junta regime. The People's Defence Force and the Communist Party of Burma's People's Liberation Army have increased their resistance against the junta.² Different rebel forces have overrun junta outposts and captured large swathes of land, including several towns and crucial border crossings with India and China. In response to the attacks, the military junta or the State Administration Council (SAC) has attempted to organize ground forces for counterattacks and has launched airstrikes at multiple locations.

Some signs indicate that the rebels have the upper hand in the combat. They have gained access to a considerable amount of arms and ammunition due to their quick seizure of several military stations. The military junta's history of brutality has garnered public sympathy in favor of the

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² Rahman Yacoob, 'Myanmar: The last days of the junta?', The Interpreter, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-last-days-junta>.

rebels. They are also stretched out. In addition to fighting the rebels, they have to deal with anti-junta groups in the territories they control.

Furthermore, there is a clear lack of morale among the military soldiers. Military units have either given up without a fight or put up a weak fight before falling in. Some junta soldiers have been reported to have deserted their positions and made their way to India. Hiring to compensate for these losses is another big challenge for the junta.

The current situation in Myanmar has some crucial geopolitical implications. That is why this commentary will briefly take a look at the context of this conflict and Operation 1027 before moving to its main focus, the implications of this conflict for the region and Bangladesh.



Source: India Map

A Brief Background: Coordination and Preparation

The initial aim of Operation 1027 was to eliminate cyber-scam networks that target Chinese nationals living abroad and are operated with approval from Myanmar's border guard forces (BGFs) along the Myanmar-China borders. Beijing was dissatisfied with the military junta's response against this multibillion-dollar criminal network, which enabled the Brotherhood Alliance to better align its attack with the interest and support of China.

Operation 1027 starts a concerted plan that major resistance organizations have worked on for the past year to confront the military junta on all fronts.³ The Central Command and Coordination Committee (C3C) and Joint Command and Coordination (J2C), established to coordinate the activities of the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and affiliated ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), were two of the coordinating mechanisms that the anti-coup movement had established for waging the ground war against the military junta.⁴

The Alliance Relations Committee (ARC) was established by the civilian National Unity Government (NUG) to facilitate communication with autonomous ethnic armed organizations, such as the Brotherhood Alliance. Beginning in the middle of 2022, NUG ARC members often met with the Brotherhood Alliance, giving military instruction to the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and other groups that shared their views. Early in 2023, the Brotherhood Alliance and NUG started direct talks for a cooperative military strategy. The Minister of Defense for NUG was involved in these talks. Brigade 611 carried out Operation 1027, which involved several resistance organizations and was designed to obstruct critical routes.⁵ Contrary to popular belief, the offensive was planned with NUG and included a full year of training.⁶

Operation 1027

The takeover of Chin Shwe Haw Bridge, a major trade route between Myanmar and China, by the MNDA in northern Shan State was the opening attack on the Military junta on October 27.⁷ It

³ Ye Myo Hein, "Coordinated strikes mark new chapter in Myanmar's anti-coup struggle", *Dhaka Tribune*, December 04, 2023, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/332993/coordinated-strikes-mark-new-chapter-in-myanmar%E2%80%99s>.

⁴ Ye Myo Hein, "Coordinated strikes mark new chapter in Myanmar's anti-coup struggle".

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

was not a single attack but was part of a larger operation to launch an anti-coup movement from all directions. Along Myanmar's border with China, attacks on Kunlong, Mongko, Lashio, Hopang, and Namkham swiftly ensued after the attack on Chin Shwe Haw.⁸

According to the Brotherhood Alliance, Operation 1027 will not end until the military junta is removed from all of Myanmar, not only from the north.⁹ They aim to end the military dictatorship in Myanmar. Spokesman Li Jar Wen for the MNDAA added that the junta is weak and struggling, so negotiations with them are out of the question. Its forces are exhausted, and it cannot recapture the ground the alliance has taken.¹⁰

Armed ethnic groups have clashed with the junta forces in Myanmar's northern Shan State, bordering China. Much of the northern Shan State's Kokang Self-Administered Zone has been taken over by the alliance. They have taken control of nearly 300 junta bases and outposts in total.¹¹ More than 180 of them are located in Shan State Special Region 1.¹²

The Brotherhood Alliance has taken control of dozens of small towns important for trade with China. MNDAA took control of the Kin San Kiat border gate.¹³ Kin San Kiat Gate is one of the most vital trade routes between Myanmar and China. This has come as a major blow to the financially strapped junta. At least 120 cargo trucks were set on fire in front of this gate by the armed groups.¹⁴

⁸ Ye Myo Hein, "Coordinated strikes mark new chapter in Myanmar's anti-coup struggle".

⁹ Hein Htoo Zan, "Operation 1027 Will Not End Until Myanmar's Junta is Removed, Ethnic Army Says", *The Irrawaddy*, December 2, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/operation-1027-will-not-end-until-myanmars-junta-is-removed-ethnic-army-says.html>.

¹⁰ Hein Htoo Zan, "Operation 1027 Will Not End Until Myanmar's Junta is Removed, Ethnic Army Says".

¹¹ "In Its Seventh Week, Operation 1027 Continues Expanding in Myanmar", *The Irrawaddy*, December 9, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/conflicts-in-numbers/in-its-seventh-week-operation-1027-continues-expanding-in-myanmar.html>.

¹² Hein Htoo Zan, "Operation 1027 Will Not End Until Myanmar's Junta is Removed, Ethnic Army Says".

¹³ AFP, "Insurgents take control of key border gate in Myanmar", *Prothom Alo*, November 26, 2023, <https://www.prothomalo.com/world/asia/8dnrnwrp1>.

¹⁴ AFP, "Insurgents take control of key border gate in Myanmar".



Source: A hilltop outpost in Kokang seized by the MNDAA from the junta on November 14. / MNDAA

Alongside the alliance, other ethnic armed groups are attacking military camps in the Karen State and Tanintharyi Region to the south; Chin and Rakhine states in the west; Karenni (Kayah) in the east; and Kachin State and Sagaing, Magwe, and Bago regions in the country's center.¹⁵

In 12 of Myanmar's 14 states and regions, the military is currently facing simultaneous attacks for the first time in history from armed resistance of all kinds, ranging from conventional warfare to guerrilla techniques and from overt to covert operations.¹⁶

According to preliminary reports, since the operation's beginning, the humanitarian catastrophe has only gotten worse in Myanmar. But humanitarian access is still "extremely restricted" despite the requirements.

Implication for the region

As the future of the military junta is unknown, there are debates among the experts if they would collapse or not. Whatever the consequence, this ongoing struggle in Myanmar has some severe implications.

¹⁵ Ye Myo Hein, "Coordinated strikes mark new chapter in Myanmar's anti-coup struggle".

¹⁶ *ibid*

Displacement and Refugee crisis: Millions of civilians in Myanmar are internally displaced. According to the UN, more than 2 million are displaced nationwide. Many are attempting to escape the civil violence that is engulfing several states. This might result in Myanmar's neighboring countries, India, Bangladesh, China, Laos and Thailand, receiving thousands of refugees. As many as 40,000 Chin refugees have already sought asylum in India's Mizoram since the coup of 2021.¹⁷

Role of China: Given its geopolitical connection, China will be cautious about placing its bets in Myanmar.¹⁸ China is the most crucial foreign player when it comes to Myanmar. It continues to be one of Myanmar's largest weapon suppliers and has invested billions of dollars in infrastructure there. China has been tacitly supporting the Brotherhood Alliance to get rid of the drug trade and cyber-scam network along its border with Myanmar. But at the same time, it also has close diplomatic ties with the Myanmar junta. China has been working as a mediator in this conflict and has called for a ceasefire. China's ability to access the Indian Ocean through Myanmar is essential for its maritime access to the Indian Ocean. Though important, Chinese influence in Myanmar does not supersede the socio-political will of the people of Myanmar, which will ultimately determine how the conflict unfolds.

Impact on India: Since the 2021 coup in Myanmar, India has expressed support for democratic reforms in Myanmar, but at the same time, its actions are supporting the rule of the military junta. India has been one of the top four suppliers of weapons to the Myanmar government since the coup.¹⁹ The current conflict in Myanmar would put India under greater strain to handle its already unstable northeast region if refugees keep flooding its eastern and northeastern provinces, especially Manipur and Mizoram. India should also be concerned about the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the cornerstone of its "Act East policy" to integrate Southeast Asia. An unpredictable political destiny tainted by civil conflict in the nation will jeopardize its strategic future.²⁰

According to a UN report, China and India each sold \$260 million and \$51 million in weapons and supplies to the Myanmar army and its defence sector.²¹ It will become more challenging for

¹⁷ ASM Tarek Hassan Semul, "Are tides turning in Myanmar's civil war?", The Daily Star, November 28, 2023, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/geopolitical-insights/news/are-tides-turning-myanmars-civil-war-3480831>.

¹⁸ ASM Tarek Hassan Semul, "Are tides turning in Myanmar's civil war?".

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*

China and India to maintain a balance between the military regimes and opposition forces if the junta continues to lose control of the nation's critical areas and major centers.

Role of the United States: The United States so far has not taken any strong measures to address the conflict in Myanmar. It might take an interest in the conflict in the future to increase pressure on the military junta. In addition to the previous restrictions that limited the junta's access to foreign funds and jet fuel, the US imposed new penalties on Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise on October 31.²² It remains to be seen if the US will use the Burma Act to impose full-fledged sanctions rather than more measured targeted ones in order to bolster greater pressure against the regime.

Implications for Bangladesh

Bangladesh, which shares Myanmar's southwest border, needs to remain especially vigilant about its security given the ongoing crisis in Myanmar. Bangladesh has often found itself caught up in the internal conflicts of Myanmar, especially with regard to identity politics that go back to the 1970s. The conflict in Myanmar can create new challenges for the country. There might be a conflict spillover in the border areas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and Cox's Bazaar.

With an emphasis on the possible geopolitical consequences for the wider area, Bangladesh has persistently tried to bring global attention to the long-running Rohingya crisis. Bangladesh has been housing more than 960,000 Rohingya Refugees as a result of the enormous influx from Myanmar's Rakhine state. Bangladesh's infrastructure, social cohesion, and resources have all been stressed by this humanitarian crisis. The prospects for the repatriation of the Rohingya are now reduced by the current volatile situation in Myanmar. The unstable state of affairs makes it difficult for the displaced Rohingyas to safely return to their country. Diplomatic attempts to address the underlying causes of the crisis and develop long-term solutions are also threatened by the ongoing conflict.

The rise of the Arakan Army, a strong military faction that, as of November 13, established a new front in western Rakhine state, Myanmar, is especially concerning. Concerns are raised by this development's closeness to Bangladesh's borders, especially considering how precarious the Rohingya refugee crisis already is. The actions of the Arakan Army could intensify the current

²² ASM Tarek Hassan Semul, "Are tides turning in Myanmar's civil war?"

humanitarian crisis and make it more difficult for Bangladesh to oversee the security of its people, as well as the Rohingya refugees.

In addition to worsening the current humanitarian issues, the existence of a potent armed group in the area raises the possibility of unintended consequences for Bangladesh. The possibility of violence and cross-border tensions might have a significant impact on security and stability. Bangladesh, which is currently dealing with both internal and external issues, would have to deal with further security risks and financial pressure as a result.

Conclusion

The ongoing struggle in Myanmar has serious implications for the region. The simultaneous attacks on the Myanmar military by multiple ethnic armed groups in different locations present a new challenge for the junta, where its existence is now under question. Since the operation started, there have been reports of displacement and restricted access to humanitarian aid, making the humanitarian situation in Myanmar worse. Bangladesh's national security is also threatened by the situation in Myanmar.

It is imperative that this issue be addressed because of the refugee crisis, the violence that is spreading, and the possibility of instability in the region. While bolstering its border security and defence capabilities, Bangladesh must exercise caution in its relations with the numerous warring factions in northeastern India and Myanmar. Furthermore, to successfully resolve the Myanmar situation and safeguard Bangladesh's interests, close collaboration with foreign partners is essential. The recent events in Myanmar highlight how regional dynamics are intertwined and how important the geopolitical stability is in a region.