

INCREASING CHINESE INFLUENCE IN WESTERN MYANMAR CALLS FOR STRONGER BANGLADESH-INDIA TIES

by

Khandakar Tahmid Rezwan

Myanmar has been facing a civil war since February 2021, when its military [staged a coup](#) and dissolved the democratic government. The [junta-led](#) State Administration Council (SAC) has been running Myanmar since then. This resulted in massive civil unrest and in various armed pro-democratic and ethnic anti-Junta factions engaging in a military confrontation against SAC. The anti-Junta offensive gained momentum, especially after [Operation 1027](#), when three major Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO), collectively known as [Three Brotherhood Alliance](#) (3BA), launched a combined offensive against SAC forces in Shan and Rakhine states. This action precipitated other EAOs of Kayah, Kachin, and Chin states to engage in an ongoing massive anti-SAC offensive.

Under these circumstances, the SAC is [facing humiliating defeats](#), which has resulted in anti-junta forces taking effective control over about half of Myanmar's territory. Amongst these gains, Western Myanmar, comprising Chin and Rakhine states, has been a geopolitically sensitive and significant area where rebels have established their control and dominance. These states border India and Bangladesh. The EAOs taking control of these states have good relations with China but have complicated relationships with Bangladesh and India. Given these aspects, Bangladesh and India must facilitate greater cooperation to achieve stability, security, and geopolitical leverage, especially against these [Chinese-aligned EAOs](#).

Situation in Western Myanmar

Chin and Rakhine states have seen massive successes by EAOs against the SAC. The predominant EAO in charge of the Rakhine offensive is the [Arakan Army](#), which has recently rebranded itself as the Arakha Army (AA) to symbolize the inclusivity of all ethnic groups of Rakhine in its rank and file. Numbering

30 to 40 thousand troops, it is part of the 3BA. The AA currently controls nine townships, which is [more than half](#) the total townships in Rakhine. Besides this, the AA has established a strong presence on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, removing the SAC-controlled Border Guard Police (BGP) personnel, who [fled](#) the fight and surrendered to Bangladeshi Security Forces. On the other hand, in Chin State, the offensive is led by the Chin National Army (CNA). The AA and other smaller Chin EAOs predominantly support the CNA. According to some estimates, the anti-Junta drive in Chin state has also seen massive success, with the resistance forces controlling 90 per cent of the total state territory.

Chinese Interest and Alignment

China has been a predominant [geopolitical player](#) in the current civil war in Myanmar. Historically, Beijing has been the most important and [closest ally](#) of Naypyidaw. It supplies major military equipment and is the most important economic partner. But, China also shares a [cozy relationship](#) with various EAOs in Myanmar. Some of the EAOs, like the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and United Wa State Army (UWSA), predominantly comprise of Ta'ang, Kolang, and Wa ethnic people who share similar socio-cultural values as Chinese people on the other side of the border. China has significant ties with the AA, which has also [previously](#) received help from China. These EAOs receive clandestine arms, logistics, and other support from China. It is also implied that a significant offensive like 1027 would not have occurred without Chinese [support and affirmation](#).

China's ambitions in Eastern and Western Myanmar are different. In Western Myanmar, Chinese interest lies in preventing India from becoming SAC's significant economic partner through its [Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project](#). Chinese strategy lies in supporting EAOs and pressuring the SAC to concede more geopolitical alignment in favor of China. A warm relationship between New Delhi and Naypyidaw will be a nightmare for China. Further, controlling EAOs like AA and CNA can help fuel ethnic instability inside Mizoram and

insurgency inside the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. The rise of the [Kuki Chin National Front](#) (KNF) has also engulfed Bangladesh with the threat of renewed insurgency in CHT. KNF fighters are aligned with ethnic Chin people, and therefore, find shelter, training, and logistics support from the Chin EAOs and also from the AA.

China can use this to play both sides as it is now by all accounts inside Myanmar. It can also gain the upper hand in the already prolonged [Rohingya Refugee Crisis](#), which shows no resolution in the near future. Beijing can play a vital role in the voluntary repatriation of the Rohingyas by leveraging its good relationship both with the EAOs and the SAC in favor of Dhaka if the latter agrees to support China on significant geopolitical policies and actions.

Reinforcing Bangladesh-India Ties

These developments require bolstered India-Bangladesh ties, especially in diplomacy and security. India has already established contact with the AA and has been [engaging](#) in dialogue as it shares [a cold interaction](#) with the AA in the past. Furthermore, there have been incidents where the AA has [attacked Kaladan projects](#). Despite achieving the authority to operate the Sittwe port, the Indian Kaladan project has been regarded by a Burmese opposition leader as [‘nearly dead.’](#)

Given the warm relations with Naypyidaw and New Delhi, it is not hard for the AA to perceive India as a belligerent. The situation for India will be further complicated if the AA gains a foothold in [Sittwe](#), as it has already struck the Myanmar Navy with significant success.

On its part, Bangladesh has failed to take action for fear of diplomatic retaliation by the Junta. Dhaka is in a dilemma about establishing contact with the AA because if the tide of war turns in favor of the SAC, then it might put a halt to the process of Rohingya repatriation. Also, the SAC has now started [enlisting Rohingya people](#) into its armed forces. Besides, establishing contact with the AA can be counterproductive as it has a [bitter relationship](#) with

the Rohingya people. Despite all this, there are actual benefits to engaging and being involved rather than just staying neutral and watching the fight coming close to its borders.

Bangladesh can learn from India, and both countries can work side by side to establish friendly arrangements and trilateral dialogue with EAOs like the AA. Such a step will be a preventative and proactive measure against any Chinese blackmail to attain the upper hand through the EAOs. Joint action in terms of border protection and naval drills can also send a signal to other actors. It can reinforce the notion of both countries’ firm resolve to territorial sovereignty.

New Delhi can also build on its already [warm relations](#) with Dhaka, which can further distance Beijing from gaining a foothold in South Asia. This will be a win-win measure for both countries, especially for India, which seeks to maintain a firm hold on its sphere of influence in South Asia. In conclusion, China is benefiting from the ongoing civil war in Myanmar by [supporting both sides](#) of the aisle, which plays into Beijing’s strategic advantages to influence and intimidate Bangladesh and India in their sensitive border regions. In such a scenario, both countries must rethink and reshape their areas of strategic cooperation to balance the Chinese policy on Myanmar and mitigate such threats.

Khandakar Tahmid Rezwan is a Research Data Analyst at the Bangladesh Peace Observatory under the Centre for Alternatives (CA) and previously was a Research Associate-STT at the World Bank. He is a Graduate Student in Security Studies at the University of Dhaka. He is the co-pioneer of profiling Myanmar’s Ethnic Warlords in the ‘Militant Leadership Monitor’ of Jamestown Foundation. He holds a certificate of completion on Missile Technologies in Southern Asia (Complete Edition) by Stimson’s Strategic Learning Initiative.