



NAVIGATING PROXIES AND TENUOUS PEACE IN RAKHINE STATE

BY A. THEIN

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Since the crisis in Myanmar began in February 2021, the country's military (the Tatmadaw) has fiercely fought resistance forces across multiple conflict theaters. The governing authority in Naypyidaw—the State Administration Council (SAC)—has continued this fight while confronting internal political challenges. These operational theaters have included traditional regions in the north and the southeast as well as those once considered mostly stable, including the “central dry zone”—parts of rural Mandalay, Sagaing, and Magway regions and Kayah State to the east. Resistance forces consist of traditional ethnic armed organizations and newly established People's Defense Force (PDF) units set up under the nominal control of the opposition National Unity Government.

An anomaly over this period, however, has been Rakhine State in the west of the country. While the scene of the heaviest fighting between the military and the Arakan Army (AA) from 2018 to 2020, an [informal ceasefire](#) established between the two prior to the 2020 elections remains largely intact, aside from skirmishes in Maungdaw township in the north and parts of southern Chin State. Government infrastructure remains largely untouched throughout Rakhine State. This tenuous peace has resulted in the state being one of the few areas largely spared widespread violence, although crime remains a significant concern. By contrast, there have been many more armed engagements with military in Chin

State to the north and the Magway region to the east. Rakhine State has also seen far lower levels of civil unrest, compared to the rest of the country.

Complicated conflict dynamics

Several factors have influenced the conflict dynamics in Rakhine State. Neither the military nor the AA has resumed full-scale hostilities, despite the few sporadic skirmishes. For the Tatmadaw, engagement across multiple conflict theaters has led to an overextension of personnel. Over the past few months, troops from Rakhine have been relocated to other conflict arenas, most notably as reserve forces in Kayah State.

For the AA, re-engaging the military would significantly derail progress in expanding their governance and administrative reach [throughout the state](#). This expansion has resulted in judicial and ward administrative personnel of the Arakan Army and United League of Arakan (the AA's political wing) replacing State Administration Council-appointed individuals in several rural and peri-urban areas considered AA strongholds. More populated urban areas in Rakhine State such as the capital, Sittwe, remain under the SAC's control and administration.

Meanwhile, tensions with non-Tatmadaw armed actors have escalated for the AA, most notably a deadly [clash](#) with Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army militants in July. Since then, both AA and Tatmadaw troops have conducted raids to root out alleged ARSA cells implicated in the kidnapping and murder of civilians.

Tensions have also heightened with an older rival Rakhine ethnic armed group, the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), following the assassinations of several senior ALP leaders since the beginning of the year, including the group's commander-in-chief and vice chairman.

Nevertheless, tensions have simmered between the AA and the Tatmadaw. This has involved both armed actors and the deployment of “proxy” units. The military has reactivated village militia groups labeled “Pyu Saw Hti” by media outlets. Consisting of pro-military villagers that have been given training and

arms by the military, Pyu Saw Hti forces double as local intelligence agents and augmentees for the Tatmadaw in individual villages and village tracts, freeing up regular troops to conduct clearance operations targeting resistance cells. These militias are located primarily in the central dry zone (adjacent to Rakhine state) and, more recently, in parts of the south in Ayeyarwaddy and the increasingly restive eastern Bago region.

In addition to these militias, there has also been a greater reliance on the Border Guard Forces and the ethnic and more autonomous People's Militia Forces, with footprints predominantly in Shan, Kachin, and Karen states. Moreover, the Tatmadaw has found allies in ethnic armed groups that oppose resistance units on the grounds of territorial disputes and pre-existing tensions.

Despite the informal ceasefire with the military, the AA has armed, trained, and given sanctuary to resistance forces in territories under its control, as other established EAOs have. Notable groups under the AA's patronage are the Student Armed Force and the Bamar People's Liberation Army—both involved in attacks on military positions and infrastructure. The AA have also trained groups in Chin State, extending their reach beyond its borders, including units of the Chinland Defense Force and the Asho Chin Defense Force.

A key distinction, however, has been the continued non-participation of AA troops in joint attacks with these resistance forces, contrasting with several other EAOs that have integrated the resistance forces to differing degrees in their official combat operations. For example, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army regularly carries out joint attacks on military convoys and personnel with the Mandalay PDF, a group it has [extensively trained](#). Sources have attributed this distinction to the AA's level of trust in fighters they trained, although a secondary reason may be the maintenance of plausible deniability.

The training of Chin-based units is particularly significant. Before 2021, tensions between the AA and the Chin National Front (CNF) over the status of strategically important Paletwa township (de jure part

of Chin State) almost led to full-blown conflict. Since the crisis, however, the emergence of a common enemy has reduced tensions, with AA troops increasing their presence in the town. The training and arming of these groups may be seen as potential force multipliers and bulwarks against any future hostilities with the CNF (and the Tatmadaw) for control of Paletwa.

The proxy problem

Significant challenges confront both the Tatmadaw and AA concerning the use of their respective proxies. For the Tatmadaw, deployment of the village defense militias has seen mixed results. Inadequate training, forced conscription, and low morale are alleged in several units, with pro-resistance media outlets describing them as “fodder.” Defection has been a constant concern for the military, heightened by the [defections](#) of two former BGF units to the resistance.

This narrative, however, neglects the emergence of better armed, trained, and committed militias, particularly in Kanbalu in the southern Sagaing region, where several village tracts are under militia control. Defection rates among the military have also largely come to a standstill after surging in the preceding years. Other than the two BGF units, defections are primarily individual decisions. As with most of the resistance, inter-unit fighting for resources and territorial control remains a persistent risk for the AA. In the central dry zone, for instance, several resistance units have been involved in atrocities inflicted on civilians and non-military personnel that have largely gone unpunished.

Other cracks appearing despite the AA-Tatmadaw ceasefire include the military and AA trading tit-for-tat arrests and abductions of members in the past year. An airstrike launched by the military in July 2022 led to the [deaths](#) of several AA officers at a base in Karen State. More recently, an artillery strike on an AA base near the Kachin Independence Army's Laiza headquarters killed an AA captain, leading the unit to vow vengeance.

Policy implications

The tensions present in Myanmar's west represent a microcosm of the broader conflict between the military and the resistance forces. Peace comes at the price of complex uncertainty. Countries that have significant investments in Rakhine State, including China and India, would prefer the status quo remain.

A thorough understanding of the divergent aims of the area's armed entities is essential to coordinating rapid, region-specific responses to humanitarian and political developments. Western policymakers can explore options in utilizing the current lull in fighting to make the western border a terminus for aid flow to more conflict-afflicted areas in Myanmar, with the partnership of local, on-ground civil society organizations acutely familiar with conflict dynamics and actors. Challenges nevertheless will remain. Establishing a cross-border aid delivery pipeline from Western Myanmar entails risks posed by local actors. These include potential choking of aid-flow by armed entities operating along Rakhine's border with western Magway, as resistance forces seek territorial gains. There is also the risk of renewed aid blockades by the Tatmadaw, which is acutely aware of both existing biases among civil society organizations in the country, and the prospect of donor aid ending in resistance hands.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.