



**MYANMAR'S WIDENING WAR-
HEADING FOR THE JUNTA'S
HEARTLAND**

BY ANTHONY DAVIS

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Recent resistance gains in Myanmar will be difficult to replicate in planned central heartland offensive as military regime digs in for an existential struggle.

Even before the end of a dry season that has dramatically upended the military balance in Myanmar, the broad and profoundly sobering contours of conflict over the remainder of 2024 and into 2025 are already taking shape.

Recent months have seen large swathes of the nation's borderlands fall under the control of powerful ethnic minority armies amid cascading defeats suffered by State Administration Council (SAC) military forces. But the war in the coming rainy season and beyond will almost certainly be waged at increasing intensity in the country's populous ethnic Bamar heartland and will be a very different fight.

Short of a political implosion of the embattled regime in Naypyidaw—a conceivable but still unlikely scenario—the already discernable shift of major hostilities toward the center of national power promises a far less organized and more brutally

destructive conflict than anything seen to date with inevitably dire humanitarian consequences.

A worst-case scenario could involve a descent into a wave of killing and population displacement not seen in Southeast Asia since the Indochina wars of the 1970s.

The scale of the army's recent battlefield losses and its impact on morale offers some ground for hope that the coming phase of the war might, if nasty and brutish, at least be short and that a "strategic offensive" announced by the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) last December will push a weakened SAC regime toward collapse or break the military's cohesion.

It remains to be seen how far opposition-led predictions of regime collapse are justified but the omens are at best mixed.

Certainly, the three distinct campaigns launched by ethnic resistance organizations (EROs) in the dry season ending in May have effectively redrawn the military and administrative map of Myanmar in a manner that a struggling SAC regime will be unable to reverse for the foreseeable future, if ever.

Launched by the tripartite Brotherhood Alliance of ethnic Palaung, Kokang Chinese, and Rakhine insurgent armies, the "Operation 1027" that first opened on Oct. 27 last year and then swept across the north of Shan state, seizing towns from SAC control and severing the most important trade arteries to China.

Operation 1027 overlapped with an equally well-prepared and still ongoing campaign waged from mid-November by the Brotherhood's numerically largest force, the Arakan Army (AA), which in a blistering flurry of assaults has seized most of the center and north of its home state of Rakhine on the Bay of Bengal.

And, in early March, it was the turn of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) to launch a strategic offensive, which in less than two weeks relieved pressure on its "capital" of Laiza on the China border

and rolled up a string of army bases along the strategic road between the Kachin state capital of Myitkyina and the Ayeyarwady river port city of Bhamo.

Devastating rebel blows

SAC forces continue to hold out in major urban centers, notably Lashio in Shan state, Sittwe in Rakhine and Myitkyina in Kachin. But the runaway success of these insurgent campaigns—in all three cases the fruit of months of planning and preparation—dealt historically unprecedented blows to army manpower, munitions, and morale.

Assessments of battlefield casualties in Myanmar have more to do with informed guesswork than statistical certainty but it is reasonable to conclude that since late October the army has lost at least 8,000 and probably more than 10,000 men killed or captured. This toll emerges from a conservative breakdown of losses likely incurred in the overrunning of two divisional-sized Military Operation Command headquarters (MOC 16 in Hsenwi, Shan state, and MOC 9 in Kyauktaw, Rakhine state), at least 30 battalion bases, a large military training complex in Rakhine's Minbya township and several hundred smaller army and border police posts.

It does not include the more than 4,000 troops allowed to return to army ranks following the early January surrender of a Regional Operations Command (ROC) in Laukkai, capital of the Kokang region in Shan state. If in the coming weeks the ROC at Sittwe and another MOC in Buthidaung in Rakhine were also to fall, this toll would obviously rise further.

Unfolding in a matter of weeks, the impact of this debacle on an army already facing a crisis of overstretched manpower has no doubt shaken confidence at command levels to the core and almost certainly triggered the early February decision to activate a national conscription law with a call-up process beginning in April.

The sheer volume of equipment and munitions lost in these serial defeats was no less threatening. In addition to huge quantities of small arms and light weapons, the army has lost scores of heavy 122mm

and a few 155mm howitzers and at least 50 armored fighting vehicles. That's given the Brotherhood's ethnic armies conventional capabilities they have never wielded before.

Superimposing these human and material losses on a map of Myanmar reveals a politically and economically bankrupt regime encircled to the east, west, north, and southeast by aggressively assertive ethnic opposition forces committed to its overthrow while at the same time facing relentless popular resistance across the military's traditional powerbase in the national heartland.

Military logic suggests that in broad strategic terms this correlation of forces can end only in the incumbent coup regime's defeat. The essential issue is how long this process may take and what cost it will exact.

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