



**MYANMAR'S RAPIDLY CHANGING
SECURITY LANDSCAPE AND
OPERATION 1027**

BY AUNG THURA KO KO

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In the three and a half years since the February 2021 military coup, Myanmar has endured political, social, economic, and armed struggles. The opposition National Unity Government (NUG) declared a defensive war in September 2021, establishing the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and aligning with ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to combat the oppressive Myanmar military junta. Over the past three years, the combined efforts of PDFs and EAOs have expanded control over rural territories and engaged in guerrilla warfare in urban areas, severely stretching the military regime's resources.

The anti-regime coalition known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA) composed of the ethnic Kokang Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the Arakan Army (AA) launched a coordinated offensive military campaign in northern Shan State called Operation 1027—named for its launch date of Oct. 27, 2023. This operation shifted security dynamics, as in its first three months the well-prepared 3BHA forces, with close ties to China and access to advanced weaponry like high-tech drones, seized heavy weaponry from the junta and control of significant territories, including major towns and economic hubs bordering China.

The Myanmar military has been weakened to an unprecedented degree by the conflict with resistance

armed forces, as China's support for the regime has wavered and its increasing favor for some opposition groups becomes apparent. Some local debates focus on the 3BHA's goals, with many observers believing the 3BHA fights to gain territory and eradicate online scams in the China-Myanmar border areas (at China's behest) rather than seeking to eliminate military dictatorship. Nevertheless, 3BHA actions are seen as a major blow to the military regime's power. The regime now faces significant setbacks, including a lack of manpower for frontline battles and a notable decline in soldier morale, evidenced by numerous defections and surrenders. In response, the military has activated a conscription law, causing hundreds of thousands of youths to flee the country and resulting in labor shortages across sectors in an already struggling economy and further fueling child labor. News reports indicate that recently captured soldiers who had been fighting for the junta in Pyin Oo Lwin and Lashio were newly conscripted and almost completely untrained, highlighting the junta's severe manpower shortages. As noted by Timor-Leste President Jose Ramos-Horta, "This is the first time in the history of Myanmar when the military are not winning and [will not win](#). They are losing."

Second wave of Operation 1027 and its implications

Eight months after the first Operation 1027 campaign, which ended in a Chinese-brokered ceasefire in January, fighting resumed in northern Shan State, with many calling to this as the second phase of Operation 1027. Although the NUG had limited involvement, the 3BHA is joined by the Mandalay People's Defense Forces (PDF), the Bama People's Liberation Army (BPLA), the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF), and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), capturing over 80 military bases and 60 towns, including recent seizures of Kyaukme, Nawngkhio, and Mogoke in northern Shan, and key border crossings with China.

Additionally, 3BHA's recent attempts to capture Lashio city, a commercial and administrative hub in northern Myanmar, signal that the Myanmar military faces unprecedented challenges on multiple fronts. The military has resorted to aerial shelling to retain

Lashio, which is the headquarters of the Northeast Military Command, one of the junta's 12 military regions. At least 39 civilians were killed within two weeks of fighting in Lashio. Inspired by Operation 1027's success, other EAOs have launched synchronized attacks nationwide.

The Arakan Army (AA) now almost fully controls northern Rakhine State and captured the strategic Thandwe airport on July 5. In northern Myanmar, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) controls all towns that border China. Due to the lost territories in northern Shan, the military cannot reinforce its troops, resulting in repeated losses in the region. While the junta forces try to maintain control in central Myanmar's Bamar-majority heartland, the recent capture of Madaya and Singu townships in central Mandalay by the Mandalay People's Defense Force on July 17 has further shocked the military, leading to heavy artillery strikes.

The role of China

The military successes of the 3BHA would not have been possible without the blessing of the Chinese government, as the 3BHA relies on China for weapons, ammunition, banking, and other support. Beijing appears to have shifted its long-standing support from the Myanmar military to favor the EAOs, partly to eradicate cybercrime syndicates and gambling operations targeting Chinese nationals in Myanmar border areas. This shift also aligns with China's geostrategic and economic interests, including the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor project, which aims to build a deep-sea port in Rakhine State, providing China with access to the Indian Ocean from the southern province of Yunnan. Myanmar plays a vital part in China's Belt and Road Initiative, President Xi Jinping's \$1 trillion project that includes maritime, rail and road projects in Asia, Africa and Europe.

During the 3BHA attempts to capture Lashio, the Chinese-backed United Wa State Army (UWSA) intervened by sending their over 2,000 troops to Tangyan town in northern Shan—a strong indication of expanding its territory. The Wa army is the most powerful EAO in Myanmar, with an army of

approximately 30,000 well-equipped soldiers and sophisticated weaponry including heavy artillery and helicopters from China. The escalating conflict raises concerns for China due to potential revenue losses from border trade with Myanmar. However, China's willingness to punish the Myanmar military regime may be limited, as evidenced by recent visits from senior or ex-military leaders to China.

During former President Thein Sein's visit to Beijing on June 29, it was reported Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had asked Thein Sein to persuade Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to step down and form an interim government to pave the way for elections, reflecting Beijing's belief that dialogue is the only way forward, as the military cannot be eliminated. A week later, following resumption of the 3BHA offensive in northern Shan, the junta Deputy Prime Minister Soe Win embarked on an official visit to Qingdao to attend the Green Development Forum and discussed the border stability, elimination of online scam operations, and the proposed election. This indicates China's significant influence over key actors on both sides in Myanmar.

Time for proactive Western action

While it remains uncertain whether the Myanmar military will be totally dismantled, the security landscape has shifted significantly, especially after Operation 1027. The resistance therefore needs international community support now more than ever. There are fragmentation issues among resistance groups, particularly between the Bamar-majority NUG and minority EAOs, as well as within different EAOs themselves. The international community can play a crucial role in facilitating dialogues among these groups.

The US and broader international community should take advantage of the situation and engage more proactively with the NUG and other pro-democracy EAOs. This could include implementing humanitarian assistance, since Myanmar now has an estimated 3 million displaced civilians, and other efforts in alleviating the suffering of the Myanmar people, reducing civilian casualties, and restoring democracy. ASEAN, the US, and China all desire a

stable and peaceful Myanmar through inclusive dialogue, despite differing approaches. The international community should increase pressure on the junta and encourage more countries to restrict jet fuel imports to the regime. Failure to impose coordinated jet fuel sanctions has allowed the military junta to continue indiscriminate artillery strikes resulting in 359 civilians dead and 756 wounded in 819 airstrikes between January and April, according to local monitoring organization Nyan Lynn Thit Analytica.

The Myanmar military has consistently stated that it will not negotiate with resistance groups, particularly the NUG, even under coordinated attacks across political, military, and diplomatic fronts. This suggests that the military will only consider negotiations when facing existential military pressure. The US and Western governments can further build trust among pro-democracy resistance organizations, strengthening their hand and pushing the regime toward negotiations by undertaking political dialogues with the opposition, strengthening coalition movements, fostering inter-ethnic solidarity, and providing non-lethal assistance, including direct humanitarian aid to war-torn areas and capacity-building programs in local governance and administration for post-conflict contexts.

Western inaction in response to the efforts of pro-democracy movements in Myanmar may result in further struggles for these groups in sustaining their resistance, and even the consolidation of the junta's authoritarian rule. Democratic values will be undermined.

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