

## Recent Steps in Rakhine's State March

By Jacques P. Leider

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### 1. Background to the Current Situation

Myanmar's Rakhine State, best known internationally for the unresolved crisis affecting its Rohingya Muslim minority since 2012, underwent a dramatic shift of territorial control and military power with the rise of the Arakan Army ('AA') and its civil arm, the United League of Arakan ('ULA'), between 2015 and 2020.<sup>1</sup> Events in 2021 and 2022 saw the consolidation of AA/ULA's local rule and the organization's growing role as an ethnic armed actor in the context of Myanmar's nationwide contestation of military rule. The State Administration Council ('SAC') formed after the military coup on 1 February 2021 failed to undermine the group's popular support and lure Rakhine nationalists towards a political compromise with the junta. In fact, the armed conflict between the Myanmar military and the AA resumed in mid-2022 – but like two years earlier, it led once again to an informal ceasefire (November 2022). While the AA/ULA's achievements and recruitment have empowered the group, its self-ascribed identity as defender of the Rakhine people is still being tested.

This policy brief focuses on the challenges posed by the involvement of the AA/ULA in domestic and transregional issues. These challenges encompass chronic insecurity, harsh living conditions, questions about the place of marginalized Muslims, border complications with Bangladesh, the Rohingya repatriation, China's economic presence and India's geopolitical assertiveness.

Buddhist and Muslim ethno-nationalisms have long competed for influence in the region, with their rivalry dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. However, in recent years, these movements have grown to become mass phenomena. The rise of xenophobic currents within Rakhine State's Buddhist society, which played a role in the explosive violence of 2012, is just one facet of a complex socio-political landscape. The recent ethno-national turn in Rakhine politics can be traced back to the interplay of socio-economic and political problems that were either neglected or exploited by the state between 1948 and 2015. The advent of modern technologies along with the gradual improvement of access to electricity in urban areas and advancements in road and air communications between central Myanmar and Rakhine State in the 1990s created new opportunities for organized and vocal opposition.

The rise of the AA/ULA was one of the outcomes of a growing

and more unified mobilization *vis-à-vis* the central state. Its foundation and the group's political ambitions first appeared as a marginal phenomenon, and the international perception changed only when the confrontation with the military reached its peak in 2019. Founded in Kachin State in 2009 with the goal of restoring self-determination for the Rakhine people, the Arakanese, the AA initially focused on building resources, recruiting members and gaining field experience with the help of other ethnic armed groups, such as the Kachin Independence Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army. The AA's active membership in the Northern Alliance, which includes other rebel groups, helped it stand up to the military and the non-approving National League for Democracy ('NLD') administration.

The AA's first attacks on outlying army posts in southern Chin State and northeast Rakhine State in April 2015 marked the beginning of a military phase that allowed the group to gain ground in Rakhine State and carve out a position of influence. When fighting with the Myanmar military ('Tatmadaw') intensified, the conflict entered a new phase in early 2018. Fighting continued throughout 2019 and 2020 and weakened the military's presence in rural Rakhine. The conflict was asymmetric, with the AA lacking air and naval forces to counter the Tatmadaw's bombing and artillery. Its resilience relied on steady recruitment and support from the hard-hit population, with over 200,000 internally displaced persons ('IDPs') estimated by the end of 2020. The banning or restriction of Internet access in conflict zones severely affected the population, particularly after the outbreak of Covid-19. Between 2015 and 2020, hundreds of civilians were arrested on suspicion of having ties to the AA and charged under the Unlawful Association Act and the Counter-Terrorism Law.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. The Quest for Stability (2020–21)

Following the first informal ceasefire in November 2020, Rakhine State experienced a year of relative calm which facilitated the establishment by the ULA of a parallel administration with a public security service, a finance department and a judicial system.<sup>3</sup> The AA further expanded its recruitment and bolstered its legitimacy during the pandemic in mid-2021. Relations with the Rohingya Muslim communities reportedly improved in 2021, and the AA included Muslim villages in Rathedaung in its vaccination campaign

<sup>1</sup> Nakanishi Yoshihiro and Antonio Angotti, "The Arakan Army: Violence in Rakhine State in Myanmar", Policy Brief Series No. 107 (2020), Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher ('TOAEP'), Brussels, 2020 (<https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/107-nakanishi-angotti/>); and Jacques P. Leider, "The Arakan Army, Rakhine State and the Promise of Arakan's Independence", Policy Brief Series No. 128 (2022), TOAEP, Brussels, 2022 (<https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/128-leider/>).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Potter, "Myanmar: New Front in an Old War: How the Arakan Army is Emerging as a Major Player in Myanmar's Civil War", *The Diplomat*, 22 July 2015.

<sup>3</sup> "ULA/AA to Establish Its Own Judicial System in Rakhine State", *Myanmar Now*, 3 August 2021.

to demonstrate equal treatment.<sup>4</sup> The ceasefire agreement initially looked like a step towards a more stable arrangement, but after the military takeover, the AA took a cautious approach. In March 2021, it condemned the coup, though it discouraged local anti-junta protests with reference to its own struggle against the central state. Nonetheless, during the following months, cases brought against people charged with connections to the AA were dropped and AA members were released from prison.<sup>5</sup> The AA accepted vaccines from the military for distribution, but tensions were rising after November 2021 when Tatmadaw soldiers tried to enter villages in Maungdaw township where the AA had stationed troops. In early May 2022, the AA refused to join the junta's ethnic peace talks.

### 3. The Resumption of Armed Conflict in 2022

By mid-2022, clashes between the AA and Tatmadaw resumed in Rakhine State, but on a smaller scale than in 2019–20. Initially, the military reacted to the AA's growing influence by increasing security checks and interrogations of suspected supporters. In April, AA's commander had responded with a warning to the army's Western Command not to interfere in its administration. However, arrests of village administrators continued, and fighting broke out in north-west Paletwa in mid-May. The AA expanded its territorial control in the Maungdaw township and both parties began routinely arresting soldiers and officers of the opposing side. The situation escalated in July when the Air Force bombed an AA camp in Karen State and the AA retaliated by attacking junta troops in Maungdaw. Fighting intensified in August and September 2022, and the number of IDPs rose to 82,000 by October. The military was unable to wage war as before due to its conflicts with other ethnic armies and the People's Defense Forces ('PDFs').

By September, the AA had taken control of 36 military outposts and Border Patrol Police posts along the Bangladesh border and ejected junta troops from a tactical command base in Paletwa after a three-month siege.<sup>6</sup> The military suffered significant losses when the AA ambushed convoys carrying reinforcements and supplies in the Maungdaw and Paletwa townships. Dozens of soldiers reportedly defected to the AA. The blockade of transport routes by the military led to food shortages in northern Rakhine State, and the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations were asked to stop operations in six Rakhine townships.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the informal ceasefire at the end of November did not lead to an immediate reopening of the routes.<sup>8</sup>

### 4. Navigating the Resistance

While the AA and the National Unity Government ('NUG') in exile share the same strategic goal – the fall of the Tatmadaw – they do not share many other goals. During the early phase of anti-coup protests in 2021, AA's Commander Twan Mrat Naing had called on ethnic Arakanese not to import the Civil Disobedience Movement into Rakhine State, arguing that the revolution led by the AA would lead to Rakhine self-determination. When the NLD-dominated Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw established the NUG on 16 April 2021, he politely declined the offer to join. In January 2022, Twan Mrat Naing explained that the AA/ULA would “remain at a

distance from the ongoing struggle for democracy now in Burma” because Rakhine State had not reaped any benefit from its involvement in the Burmese struggle for democracy in the past.<sup>9</sup> But in May 2022, NUG's Alliance Relations Committee reported that it had a cordial discussion with the “Arakan People's Government” led by ULA's Chairman Twan Mrat Naing.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, as Rakhine journalist Kyaw Hsan Hlaing reported, the NUG would not commit to making any promises regarding the AA's demand for confederate status in a future democratic federation.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the AA praised the determination of the anti-junta forces and, in line with other ethnic armed organizations, provided training and support to PDFs in the Sagaing Division and Chin State where fighting has been ongoing. Additionally, AA liaison officers and troops have been seconded to friendly ethnic armed organizations, indicating the growing importance of the group. As a result, the AA has unintentionally evolved into a quasi-national role that it did not originally seek. However, given that Myanmar's civil war significantly increased the status of the country's ethnic armies, anti-junta supporters often lament the absence of a united front against the regime.

The AA is one of seven members of a political consultation group termed the ‘Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee’ (‘FPNCC’) initiated by the United Wa State Army (‘UWSA’) in April 2017.<sup>12</sup> The FPNCC members had refused to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement of October 2015. In mid-September 2022, they held a meeting at the UWSA headquarters in Panghsang that was reportedly facilitated by China. It was presented as an exchange of views on the latest developments in Myanmar, and the FPNCC's secretary, the AA's Deputy Commander, Brig. Gen. Nyo Twan Awng, declined to comment on military matters, saying “People understand what we discuss by looking at the people who we meet”.<sup>13</sup> While China has backed the group for its own interests, the AA/ULA reaps the benefits of investing in alliances, political and military co-ordination, and occasional inter-ethnic mediation.

### 5. International Challenges: China and India

The AA/ULA has repeatedly expressed a desire to engage in international exchange. But a review of the international challenges facing the AA/ULA paints a mixed and preliminary picture. While it is not a state-level actor, the AA/ULA is certainly a key stakeholder in Rakhine State affairs. At the AA/ULA's first virtual press conference in early March 2022, its spokesperson Khaing Thukha made it clear that the AA/ULA wants to pursue the struggle for its “future nation-state in partnership with the international community” if Myanmar's political space does not live up to its ambitions.<sup>14</sup> Alluding to a different context, AA Commander Twan Mrat Naing said that the AA was ready to co-operate with Bangladesh on the Rohingya repatriation issue.<sup>15</sup> But while the group gets domestic

<sup>4</sup> “Rohingya Look on Arakan Army as Saviours in Fight with Myanmar's Junta”, *The Irrawaddy*, 25 October 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Kyaw Lynn, “The Arakan Army, Myanmar Military Coup and Politics of Arakan”, *TNI*, 10 June 2021.

<sup>6</sup> “Myanmar Junta Shelling Kills Two Children in Northern Rakhine”, *The Irrawaddy*, 26 September 2022; “Myanmar Military Airstrike Kills Junta Soldiers Held Prisoner in Rakhine”, *The Irrawaddy*, 29 September 2022.

<sup>7</sup> “Residents Trapped and Going Hungry as Myanmar Military Blockades Villages”, *The Irrawaddy*, 29 September 2022.

<sup>8</sup> “Myanmar Junta Continues to Block Medicines in Rakhine Despite Ceasefire”, *The Irrawaddy*, 8 December 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Altaf Parvez *et al.*, “‘We Recognise the Human Rights and Citizen Rights of the Rohingyas’ – Interview with Arakan Army Chief Twan Mrat Naing”, *Prothomalo*, 2 January 2022.

<sup>10</sup> “AA Says Its Relations with NUG and Military Regime Trending in Opposite Directions”, *Development Media Group*, 14 June 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, “Can the Arakan Army Achieve Its Confederacy Dream?”, *The Irrawaddy*, 2 May 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Nyan Hlaing Lynn and Oliver Slow, “Mixed Results at Latest Panglong Peace Conference”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 30 May 2017. An insightful analysis of the exclusion of the AA and other armed organizations from the peace process is given in Jason Gelbort and Martin Smith, *The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar Promoting Ethnic Peace or Strengthening State Control?*, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> “Myanmar's Most Powerful Ethnic Armies Meet in Shan State”, *The Irrawaddy*, 21 September 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, 2 May 2022, see *supra* note 11.

<sup>15</sup> Parvez *et al.*, 2 January 2022, see *supra* note 9.

recognition as a leader in the fight against the junta, it could be seen as stuck internationally in a trap of semi-official contacts. Its initiatives have not yet led to greater recognition.

Rakhine State and the eastern Bay of Bengal are among the places where India's and China's economic and strategic interests noticeably overlap. The modernized port of Sittwe, situated just 66 nautical miles north of Kyauk Phyu's deep-sea port, and the special economic zone under development by Chinese corporations underscore this point. Bangladesh has a long-standing desire to boost trade relations with its eastern neighbour in addition to its security interests at the border. However, the launch of projects related to Rakhine has been carried out within the framework of state-level international relations, regardless of whether it is China, Bangladesh or India. These projects' anticipated outcomes have been envisioned from a supra-regional and global perspective that serves national and long-term state interests, with minimal input from regional stakeholders or local participants. As a result, the AA/ULA's stance on the internationalization of Rakhine State's fluvial and port infrastructure and China and India's exploration of regional resources becomes significant in this frictional confluence of interests.

China's economic penetration into Rakhine State is a recent phenomenon facilitated by its pragmatic relations with the military and the NLD-led government. After the discovery of offshore natural gas along Rakhine State's coast in 2003, PetroChina signed a deal with the military junta in 2005 to purchase natural gas over a period of 30 years. In 2007, China's National Development Commission approved the construction of oil and gas pipelines linking Kunming to Rakhine State. In 2013, the Shwe Gas field started its production and China became the biggest importer of natural gas from Myanmar. A year later, the oil pipeline started its operations, pumping crude oil shipped from the Middle East to Southwest China. In 2015, China's CITIC won the Kyauk Phyu Special Economic Zone project.<sup>16</sup> Together with a railroad project seeking to link Rakhine State to Upper Myanmar and Yunnan Province, China's investments in Rakhine State are a strategic part of China's vision of a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Since the commencement of construction works in 2009, the development of storage facilities on Made Island, pipelines and the deep-sea port in Kyauk Phyu have resulted in allegations of compulsory relocation, forced labour and abuses perpetrated by the Myanmar military, which was responsible for providing security at the construction sites.<sup>17</sup> The Kyauk Phyu Special Economic Zone was first announced in 2013 as a step toward raising the standard of living of the Rakhine people, but local residents have complained that they have been dispossessed and not compensated for their loss of land. In September 2022, an analyst concluded that the project was facing "significant delays due to local protests and the impact of last year's coup".<sup>18</sup> Besides land disputes, which have led to hostility towards the Myanmar authorities and the Chinese companies involved, fishermen have also protested the scarcity of fish since the launch of the Shwe gas field and the pipelines. Despite the country's instability, China continues to pursue its projects unabatedly. On 10 October 2022, the Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar, Chen Hai, inaugurated the Kyauk Phyu power plant, which cost USD 180 million.<sup>19</sup> The AA/ULA leadership is positive towards these high-level strategic investments as Rakhine State is in dire need of development projects.<sup>20</sup> But the challenge of balanc-

<sup>16</sup> "Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (KPSEZ)", *BRI Monitor*, January 2021.

<sup>17</sup> EarthRights International, "Shwe Gas Project" (available on its web site).

<sup>18</sup> Yan Naing, "China-Backed Port in Western Myanmar Depriving Locals of Land and Jobs", *The Irrawaddy*, 13 September 2022.

<sup>19</sup> "Chinese-Backed Power Plant Opens in Myanmar's Rakhine State", *The Irrawaddy*, 13 October 2022.

<sup>20</sup> "They Have Nothing Against Chinese Projects in Rakhine", *Eleven*

ing conflicting local and foreign interests risks being marginalized.

While the AA's military advances did not impede China's ongoing projects in Rakhine State, analyst Yun Sun argued in 2020 that the AA's rise could contribute to regional instability and insecurity. However, AA's territorial control, popular support and financial resources allowed it to procure arms and resist attempts to eliminate it.<sup>21</sup> The AA's participation at the second round of the "21st Century Panglong Peace Conference" in May 2017 came at the request of China, though it was fruitless because both the NLD-led government and the military rejected the AA's inclusion in the ethnic peace process. The AA/ULA's ability to maintain relative stability in rural Rakhine State after the coup and its efforts towards achieving ethno-religious peace ultimately benefit China. In the short term, the AA's actions align with China's interests. However, in the medium term, the AA will still need China's support, and China holds an advantageous position to influence the negotiations between the Tatmadaw, Bangladesh and the AA.

India's interest in Rakhine State has been focused on the implementation of the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project ('KMTTP') since the conclusion of a framework agreement in 2008. The project aims to link Kolkata to northeast India via the port of Sittwe and the Kaladan River. India relied on its connections with the Myanmar army to facilitate the project's development. Despite the military coup in 2021, India's relations with the Tatmadaw remain strong, and it is likely that India will continue to pursue its strategic interests in Rakhine State through the KMTTP.<sup>22</sup> The implementation of the KMTTP made little progress until 2014 when sub-projects like the modernization of the Sittwe port and the dredging of the Kaladan river began to be carried out.<sup>23</sup> The upgraded infrastructure of Sittwe port was declared operational in March 2021, but the inaugural run of a ship from Kolkata to Sittwe only took place in May 2023.<sup>24</sup>

The AA had hoped to receive a level of recognition from India similar to what it had received from China. However, India saw the AA as a troublemaker rather than a legitimate stakeholder with popular support, and its military co-operated with the Tatmadaw to eliminate AA camps along the border.<sup>25</sup> It seems that India even suspected China to use the AA as a proxy to deliver arms to rebel groups leading their own struggle for autonomy in northeast India.<sup>26</sup> The Paletwa Inland Water Terminal, the river-to-land nexus of the KMTTP, is situated in the Upper Kaladan Valley, a strategic area which saw nearly uninterrupted clashes between the Myanmar military and the AA from May 2018 to October 2020. In March 2019, the AA set fire to a cargo ship moving up the river with construction materials for one of the project's bridges. In November the same year, it stopped two speedboats and briefly detained a group of company workers linked to the KMTTP. One of the five Indians in the group died from a heart attack. As it released the other men, the AA reiterated that it was not opposed to "development projects which

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*Media Group*, 19 April 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Sun Yun, "China, the Arakan Army, and a Myanmar Solution", *Frontier Myanmar*, 9 March 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Jayanta Kalita, "Why India Opposes Sanctions on Myanmar", *The Irrawaddy*, 14 February 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Subir Bhaumik, "The India-Myanmar Kaladan Project: Vision and Reality", Policy Brief Series No. 106 (2020), TOAEP, Brussels, 2020 (<https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/106-bhaumik/>).

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Roche, "Sittwe Port in Myanmar Is Ready for Operations: Mandavijaya", *Mint*, 8 March 2021; and P. Manoj, "India-Funded Sittwe Port in Myanmar Set to Open on 9 May", *The Economic Times*, 23 April 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Nan Lwin Pwint, "Arakan Army Chief Promises Myanmar Military, Govt Eye for an Eye", *The Irrawaddy*, 17 January 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Long Xingchun, "India Eager to Drive a Wedge Between China, Myanmar", *Global Times*, 8 December 2020.



benefit the locals”.<sup>27</sup> The part of the project still missing in 2022 was a two-lane highway of 100 km from Paletwa to Zorinpui at the Indian border.

The resumption of fighting destabilized the Paletwa township once again. Like in 2017, hundreds of Chin villagers fled over the border into India in August 2022. The region is also crossed by one of the “most prolific smuggling routes” where Indian security forces have failed to limit the flow of illegal goods from Myanmar.<sup>28</sup> But the Indian government has been slow to acknowledge local dissatisfaction about the highway on the Myanmar side. Desperate to complete the project after so many years, it decided in June 2022 to hire local contractors to reduce “chances of interference by armed groups”.<sup>29</sup> The hint at the AA in the context of India’s interests in the region is clear. In a less favourable context than its relations with China, it may be challenging for the AA to position itself as a potential factor of local stability in India’s eyes. However, in the medium term, it is improbable that India will be able to disregard the regional role of the AA.

## 6. The Rohingya Repatriation and Bangladesh’s Security Concerns

Unlike other ethnic groups in Myanmar, the Rakhine people have not traditionally relied on international networks to promote their interests through front organizations. The AA’s international outreach has been limited to establishing contacts with the security authorities of China, Bangladesh and India including the crucial issue of Rohingya repatriation. General Twan Mrat Naing has expressed his wish to establish good ties with Bangladesh and work together with its authorities to repatriate the Rohingyas. However, while Bangladesh and India are not inclined to damage their relations with the Myanmar military, events in 2022 have demonstrated that their defense diplomacy has not paid off. During the fighting between the AA and Tatmadaw troops, mortar shells landed on Bangladesh’s territory and a Rohingya boy was killed by aerial fire. Myanmar’s air force also violated Bangladesh’s airspace multiple times in August and September 2022. As a result, Myanmar’s Ambassador in Dhaka was summoned four times before a senior Myanmar officer flew to Bangladesh to provide explanations in late October 2022. Despite China’s apparent support for Bangladesh’s stance against Myanmar, describing the incidents as “unfortunate”, the AA called on Bangladesh and the international community to recognize the ULA as the legitimate authority in Rakhine.<sup>30</sup>

## 7. Rakhine’s State March and Regional Stability and Progress

In 2022, the AA’s progress in achieving its administrative and judicial agenda and expanding its territorial control along the Bangladesh border has contained the threat from the Myanmar military.

<sup>27</sup> “Myanmar Rebel Group Releases Four Abducted Indians, Fifth Dies in Detention”, *Hindustan Times*, 4 November 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Rajeev Bhattacharyya, “India’s Cooperation with Myanmar’s Junta Is Not Yielding Results”, *The Irrawaddy*, 7 September 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Rajeev Bhattacharyya, “Challenges Await New Contractor as India Rejigs Plan for Completion of Kaladan Project in Myanmar”, *The Irrawaddy*, 13 October 2022.

<sup>30</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, 25 October 2022, see *supra* note 4.

Building on its increased popularity, the AA has also staked its claim for wider recognition. However, the closed border with China due to Covid-19 restrictions and the Myanmar military’s control of trade and communication nodes limited the group’s transactions.

The AA/ULA’s political and organizational challenges have also become increasingly complex as it navigates transregional and international issues while pursuing its core ambition of self-determination for the Rakhine people. Its aspirations lie at the intersection of the Myanmar state’s claim to territorial sovereignty, Bangladesh’s security concerns, overlapping Chinese and Indian interests and international legal norms. But its declarations about an inclusive secular state have yet carried limited political weight, though the AA/ULA is now perceived as a linchpin in Myanmar’s unstable governance landscape.

Regrettably, the Rakhine ethno-national movement has been largely absent from discussions on Rakhine State issues, which have mostly centred around geopolitical and economic concerns or the Rohingya conundrum dominated by allegations of genocide after 2017. A review of the AA’s recent pathway highlights the new complexity that observers of Myanmar’s western margins must consider. The question of the future of Rakhine State is a pressing one, particularly in light of the elections projected by the SAC junta. The issue is not solely one of differing political opinions, but rather a lack of consensus on communal cohabitation. Divisiveness has historically characterized the political playing field in Rakhine State and remains a significant challenge. This is also true for competing forces within the Rohingya ethno-national movement. While both the Buddhist and Muslim ethno-national movements have gained strength in recent decades, the rise of the AA/ULA has placed a Rakhine nationalist force at the centre of the region’s political dynamics for the first time in decades. Its role will be crucial for achieving stability and progress in Rakhine State.

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