

PERSPECTIVE

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The Arakan Dream in Post-Coup Myanmar

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This photo taken on 23 January 2022 shows Rohingya vendors selling fish in the market at Thal Chaung camp in Rakhine state. Photo: STR/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Following intense warfare between the Arakan Army and Myanmar's military in recent years, Rakhine State has arguably become the region of the country to make the most promising progress towards greater autonomy.
- The Arakan Army's "Arakan Dream" has been partially implemented through the establishment of a new local administration, including a judicial sector, across the state.
- However, the pathway towards its desired future still faces fluid national politics, not least from the possible resumption of conflict in the wake of the 2021 military coup.
- The Arakan Dream is not related just to national politics but also to the strategic interests of both China and India, ties with neighbouring Bangladesh, and to the Rohingya crisis.
- The situation in Rakhine State has implications that could shape Myanmar's national politics, the allocation of resources and revenues, migration, and the elections that may be held in 2023.

INTRODUCTION

Following the 2021 coup, regions across Myanmar have faced major military offensives mounted by the regime. Resistance forces operating throughout the country in various forms have emerged and grown, both to try to counter such offensives and to pursue a federal democratic future for the country. The nation is confronting a very uncertain future.

However, Rakhine State (formerly Arakan) appears to be a different story. It has secured a negative peace¹ with the Myanmar military since late 2020 and pursued its political goal of greater autonomy, or the “Arakan Dream”, with some success. The Arakan Army (AA) is also participating in the governance of the state. It has established the Arakan People’s Authority (APA) with great public support. These achievements, in such a short period, have inspired many other parts of the nation.

However, the AA’s political dream still faces challenges if conflict is to be avoided. The populace has suffered greatly from Covid-19, warfare, and intercommunal violence. The Rohingya crisis will also loom over any governing mechanisms in the state and test prospects for its inclusive politics. Furthermore, though Rakhine State is among the poorest regions in Myanmar, it is the recipient of multi-billion-dollar international investments, such as projects under the auspices of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The results of these investments will depend on the political options that the AA is now pursuing.

FROM ARMED STRUGGLE TO INFORMAL PEACE

The informal peace deal between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw obtained in Rakhine State² has given hope for a better future to communities in the state and people elsewhere in Myanmar. But the resumption of warfare would affect those communities adversely. The risk of such a resumption needs to be managed carefully now.

The state has enjoyed relative political stability in recent years, a stability that became more evident after the cessation of warfare between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw, or Myanmar armed forces, via an informal peace agreement dating to 2020.³ This agreement left the AA in control of various aspects of life in many parts of the state. The AA, though a newly established armed force relative to other ethnic armed organizations, including the Karen National Union or the Kachin Independence Army, has achieved far more through armed resistance than observers have expected in such a short time.

Promoted by members of a younger generation of Rakhines,⁴ with a fresh sense of the state’s possible future, the AA’s “Arakan Dream” or “Way of Rakhita” is all about moving forward with self-government and protecting security, political, and even cultural interests in its own way.⁵ There has been good progress at the expense of lives and economic and social challenges, including the suspension of school classes during warfare and the Covid-

19 pandemic (2018-2020).⁶ Hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the state have also been unable to return home.

Renewed warfare in Rakhine State is still possible; several clashes have been reported between the AA and the Tatmadaw in some areas of Arakan, including the Maungdaw Township.⁷ There have also been instances of military buildups on the part of both the AA and the Tatmadaw. Instead of the resumption of extensive conflict, what the people of Arakan need is to rebuild their lives with the provision of state services: the rule of law, a functioning judiciary, and policing, education and health services. The AA understands those needs and realizes that much more needs to be done. The first task for the AA is to govern. To provide the necessary services, the AA's own local administration, the Arakan People's Authority (APA), has to be consolidated.

ARAKAN'S LOCAL ADMINISTRATION — A WAY FORWARD

Progress toward the realization of the Arakan Dream is very much evidenced in the area of local administration, in the work of the Arakan People's Authority on the ground. Upon gaining substantive territorial control, the AA has made the establishment of its own administrative system a priority. This is a critical determinant of its ability to achieve the Arakan Dream in the years ahead. The APA, has thus far enjoyed some success: improved public trust in the judiciary sector — in contrast to the State Administration Council (SAC) junta's judiciary, which has been teetering towards collapse. Policing work is also underway. And the AA has pursued the creation of an administrative structure that includes Rohingya communities in governing roles.⁸ But much work remains. For instance, legal reform in line with the Arakan Dream needs to be implemented. That reform could accelerate judicial reform, in the form of dispute resolution, and lead to the realization of the rule of law. This would also improve trust in state and public administration and allow the maintenance of stability in this diverse and troubled region; in Arakan, the different political views of the various communities must be handled with extra care.

The next test for the APA is to expand its reach into southern Rakhine State, believed to be a National League for Democracy (NLD) stronghold⁹ — especially areas such as Gwa and Thandwe Townships which border Ayeyarwaddy Region, which is an NLD stronghold. Those southern Rakhine areas have suffered less from armed conflict than other parts of the state, and they also appear to have better commercial links, as in the commodity trade, to the Ayeyarwaddy Region. While the political views of people in these communities remain unclear, it has been reported that the SAC has arrested a number of Rakhine people with links to the anti-junta People's Defence Forces (PDFs)¹⁰ in such areas.¹¹ The AA must then adopt a strategic approach to the development of local administration mechanisms and to the politics of the Arakan Dream in southern Rakhine State.

RAKHINE POLITICS AMIDST NATIONAL CRISIS

Though the Arakan Dream is literally unfolding, Myanmar's national political crisis has constrained its further development. In this context, the AA has embraced the tactic of allying politically with neither the SAC and nor with pro-NLD elements and their allies. The Arakan political landscape is in a state of transformation, but the 2021 coup has led to the lack of a clear-cut answer to the question of what the next step for the Arakan Dream is to be. Those seeking to further the dream need both to confront the current post-coup crisis and to look beyond it.

It appears that the AA still distrusts both the Tatmadaw and the NLD. The military buildup in the state is evidence of its mistrust of the former. In the case of the latter,¹² the problem goes back to the earlier days of 'bitter' politics. That began with the 2015 elections in which the Arakan National Party (ANP) won 22 out of 29 seats in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, Myanmar's bicameral national parliament, and also secured 23 out of 35 elected seats¹³ in Rakhine State legislature. On the day of the appointment of the state's chief minister, an NLD nominee, Rakhine parliamentarians walked out in protest¹⁴ because they believed that, with its majority, the ANP should be allowed to select their state's chief minister.¹⁵ Another issue is the history of warfare in Rakhine State. In March 2020, the NLD government declared the AA a terrorist group¹⁶ and then praised the Tatmadaw for conducting airstrikes¹⁷ in the state. A local activist recalls the Tatmadaw's offensive as being tantamount to an invasion by foreign troops exploiting all their military power – ground forces, naval assets, and control of the air.¹⁸

In addition, in areas of northern Rakhine State in which Rakhine parties have strongholds, voting in the 2020 elections was largely cancelled for security reasons. According to Rakhine State's sub-national election commission, over 1.2 million out of 1.64 million voters in the state were disenfranchised as a result.¹⁹ The Rohingya crisis represented yet another source of friction between Rakhines and the NLD government. Rakhine stakeholders were upset over the NLD's lack of consultation on the appointment of members of the Rakhine Advisory Commission formed to address that crisis.²⁰

These developments informed AA's response to the 2021 coup. They help explain the AA opting not to ally itself politically with NLD figures and their allies, on the one hand, or with the coup regime, on the other. The chances that it will ally itself with either side in the near future is slim.²¹ It has for instance made clear that it does not want to see Civil Disobedience Movement activities and street protests in Rakhine State.²² Unlike other areas of Myanmar, schools in the state have operated normally during the period of nationwide anti-junta resistance. At the same time, it is reported that the AA is conducting training for or extending support to local PDFs.²³ The organization has also decided not to attend the peace talks in May 2022, to which the SAC regime invited it and other ethnic armed organizations.²⁴ Even so, its diplomatic channels with the coup regime remain open. AA representatives attended the Union Day ceremonies in early February,²⁵ for instance, even when many other ethnic armed organizations boycotted them.

THE ARAKAN DREAM IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL TENSIONS

The relevance of China’s and India’s strategic interests must not be underestimated in any effort to understand Arakan’s circumstances. The risks arising from those interests must be carefully mitigated in an effort to pursue the Arakan Dream. Bangladesh is also a potential game-changer for this dream.

China is a multi-billion investor in Rakhine State — especially in the Kyaukphyu Deep Seaport project, the related special economic zone and the gas pipeline crossing through Arakan and the Myanmar heartland all the way up to China’s Yunnan province.²⁶ Those projects, part of China’s BRI, obviously serve China’s strategic interests, and are carried out with the approval of Myanmar’s central government; Beijing wants access to the Indian Ocean through the BRI infrastructure projects. During the period of intense warfare between

Incidents over “Chinese Investments” in the Myanmar heartland.

Sr.	When	Where	What
1.	9 May 2022	Salingyi and Yinmarbin Townships, Sagaing Region	Attack against security forces protecting Wanbao copper mine companies by local PDFs.
2.	2 May 2022	Salingyi and Yinmarbin Townships, Sagaing Region	Threat against resumption of Chinese mining operations by local and Salingyi PDFs.
3.	20 Feb 2022	Salingyi Township, Sagaing	Drone attack against Wanbao mining sites by Monywa Red Fire, a local PDF.
4.	17 Feb 2022	Natogyi Township, Mandalay Region	Regime troops arrest people linked to attacks against security forces guarding natural gas off-take stations by Natogyi PDF.
5.	14 Feb 2022	Natogyi Township, Mandalay Region	Attack against security forces guarding natural gas off-take stations by Natogyi PDF.
6.	3 Jan 2022	Htigyaing Township, Sagaing Region	Attack against electricity tower at Tagaung copper mine by Fox Army – also known as Htigyaing People’s Defence Force
7.	8 October 2021	Taungtha Township, Mandalay Region	Attack against security forces guarding natural gas off-take station by May Latt PDF and Seven PDF.

This information is collected via local PDF online announcements and local media. While the author cannot verify these data, they clearly demonstrate the high risks facing Chinese investments in the heartland areas of Myanmar relative to the situation in Rakhine State.

the AA and the Tatmadaw in 2016-2020, when the NLD government was in power in Naypyitaw, neither side appeared to have attacked Chinese projects in the state — a contrast to events in other parts of the country during conflict between the Tatmadaw and resistance forces since last year's coup.

As people in the communities around the Chinese project areas in Rakhine State became IDPs, social media users in Myanmar mocked both the AA and the Tatmadaw²⁷ for their shared fright of harming Chinese interests, above all in the 2018-2019 period. They argued that an attack on those projects would at least raise a warning signal to China to change its course of action in Myanmar

But from the point of view of the government in Naypyitaw, this caution had a clear logic. In the wake of the Rohingya crisis, China protected the NLD government and the Tatmadaw by using its veto power on the United Nations Security Council.²⁸ And safeguarding Chinese projects remains critical for the post-coup SAC regime. In an emergency discussion on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the junta reportedly discussed concerns about the possibility of 'China's incursion',²⁹ especially if the SAC were not able to safeguard the projects. Civil society groups in Rakhine State have since the coup criticized several investment projects,³⁰ arguing that the project must be suspended so as not to benefit the regime. And, in practice, many of the project areas are to some degree under the evolving APA administration's control. Their treatment is thus an issue in the state's evolving political situation.

Local comments on the Kyaukphyu project areas in post-coup Myanmar

- “The Kyaukphyu area has faced parallel governing systems imposed both by the AA and the SAC. The AA has been in control of most parts of rural areas and some urban areas there as well. However, this does not necessarily mean that the AA has any voice yet on China’s investments, which, as understood, are still under Naypyitaw’s control.”
- “Most judiciary cases go through the AA’s recently established judiciary process rather than the courts under the authority of the SAC, except that it is rare to find any cases related to the special economic zone going through the AA’s process.”
- “Despite the parallel systems in place, local people feel that there is no one to rely on to raise their concerns [over land, jobs and development, compensation issues] with regard to the multi-billion investments unfolding in their sight. This is because they have limited access to the SAC’s officials while understanding that the AA has nothing to do with what remains a ‘national project.’ They no longer have any representative like members of parliament to speak for them, and may feel helpless in that respect.”
- “The Chinese are currently coming in for the acceleration of the project, which benefits urban residents, especially those who work in the hotel industry and related services. For rural people, no benefits are in sight as yet.”
- “The best expectations that local people have from such gigantic projects are access to job opportunities. Given their low skills and qualifications, they look forward to training in various skills to make their living.”

Note that those voices were collected during the author’s interviews with local activists.

Diplomacy with India also matters for the future of Arakan. Most visible is India’s flagship Kaladan Project, linking Myanmar to India’s landlocked northeast. The project in the remote border areas of Mizoram State in India and around Rakhine and Chin States in Myanmar is aimed at boosting India’s strategic connectivity in its northeast both domestically and with neighbouring countries in order “to balance China’s growing influence”.³¹ The project has already missed two deadlines and it is now set to be completed by 2023.³² A reason for the missed deadlines is obviously instability in the project area, including the warfare in Rakhine State. The AA abducted five Indian workers from a project site in November 2019, and one of them died of a heart attack in custody.³³ Indian media has used the words “a Myanmar-based insurgent group with links to China”³⁴ in characterizing the AA, demonstrating India’s generic view of the group. These factors only underline the degree to which, in the diplomatic realm, the Arakan Dream would face a challenging international context, given Rakhine State’s position between the two great Asian powers, both well connected to the Tatmadaw.

A third international or diplomatic dimension of developments in Rakhine State concerns building relations with Bangladesh. This is significant work. The AA once characterized its relationship with Dhaka as “being so-so”.³⁵ Bangladesh will, however, join China in playing a critical role in the realization of the Arakan Dream. This is because geography matters: Bangladesh is the closest neighbour to Rakhine State, and it will serve many dimensions of

the state's broader development, including border trading. It is also now host to Rohingya communities, members of the second largest population group³⁶ in Arakan, many of whom are due to be repatriated to the state. Successful repatriation will serve the international credibility of the AA, if the latter plays a role in ensuring that Rakhine residents, especially those with strong ethno-nationalistic sentiments,³⁷ accept peaceful coexistence. The AA has its work cut out. Currently, repatriation efforts are under the control of the central government in Naypyitaw, but realization of the Arakan Dream will mean that they will fall under the AA's authority.

RAKHINE POLITICAL UNITY AND THE ARAKAN DREAM

Tackling such national and international issues in pursuing the Arakan Dream, Rakhine stakeholders need to be more united than ever before. Fulfilment of the Arakan Dream demands a shared or collective dream all across Rakhine State. It has been rare, however, to see Rakhine political parties or politicians behave in unity. Differing views among them have often resulted in the emergence of new political parties, making the dream of united action even more of a dream. For instance, a strong Rakhine nationalist party, the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD), boycotted Myanmar's 2010 election, and the resulting political fracture led to the emergence of the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP).³⁸ In 2014, the two parties managed to merge into the Arakan National Party (ANP) in preparation for the 2015 elections. Facing alleged party infighting³⁹ and with its chairman Dr Aye Maung facing treason charges, the ANP then split. Aye Maung went on to found a new party, the Arakan Front Party (AFP), in January 2019. Political unity appears sorely needed in pursuit of the evolving Arakan Dream if it is to inspire people in Rakhine State and beyond.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF DEVELOPMENTS IN RAKHINE STATE FOR MYANMAR

Like all aspects of developments in Rakhine State, the quest for political unity there is not merely a matter of local significance. What is happening in the state has implications for Myanmar as a whole. The first implication is political: the AA's Arakan Dream has inspired not only the population of Rakhine State at large but also people in other ethnic states and beyond. For instance, actors in Kayah (or Karenni) State are taking a similar approach to that of the AA in Rakhine State,⁴⁰ even if there are important differences in the circumstances of the two states. Even ethnic Bamar heartland areas like Sagaing and Magwe Regions may follow suit in their 'liberated areas'.

A second implication is military: the AA's military success demonstrates the role of public support as a critical determinant in military measures regardless of the firepower at hand. At the end of the day, having public support makes a difference.

A third implication more generally concerns resources, or revenues for Naypyitaw. If Rakhine State, where most of Myanmar's offshore gas and oil reserves are located, is able to move towards greater autonomy, a good portion of the revenue from the exploitation of its resources will go to the state itself. This will significantly reduce the flow of revenue to Naypyitaw and place a strain on the national government's finances.⁴¹

A fourth implication of developments in Rakhine State is related to migration. Despite the serious instability throughout Myanmar following the 2021 military coup, Rakhine State appears to be stable. In fact, it could be the one among the country's states and regions with the most potential to enjoy an economic boom, given the multi-billion investments such as the Kyaukphyu Deep Sea Port, the special economic zone and the Sittwe Deepwater Port⁴² project. Tourism and supply chains related to those projects would follow; the emergence of some of them is already evident.⁴³ Foreigners – Chinese and others – will migrate to the state to work, while business communities from Yangon and other areas will seek investment opportunities in there, especially if the current political stability lasts. This trend could transform both the state's political and social landscape⁴⁴ and Rakhine State's significance among Myanmar's constituent parts.

Finally, there is the matter of possible elections in 2023. Whether elections can be held next year remains doubtful for many reasons, one of which is obviously security concerns. But Rakhine State's relatively stability, under the informal peace settlement between the AA and the Tatmadaw, means that the SAC regime could take advantage of that stability to seek credibility by holding an election. How political stakeholders in the state would respond to the organization of such polls remains unclear. The election could, for example, 'divide rather than unite', and exacerbate the cracks within Rakhine politics and thus complicate the Arakan Dream.

CONCLUSION

The Arakan Dream is unfolding before us. However, those who would realize it need to work out many important issues — local, national and international. Myanmar's fluid national politics now constrain the dream. Still facing looming conflict, Rakhine State's ability to maintain an informal peace remains limited. The Arakan Army, as the professed prime mover for changing the situation of Rakhine people, needs to take extra care in managing the international rivals China and India. Significant work in building a relationship with Bangladesh is also required.

At the same time, the economic outlook for Rakhine State appears to be better than that anywhere else in Myanmar, at least in the short term. While the people of Rakhine deserve a better life, an "Arakan" political future may nevertheless remain elusive.

ENDNOTES

¹ Here negative peace refers to the informal ceasefire and lack of fighting while the formal process remains uncertain, meaning suspension of the warfare but no peace deal yet.

² “Rakhine State” and “Arakan” are used interchangeably in this article. The state was formerly known as Arakan, a term that many Rakhine politicians still use with the intention of recalling Arakan’s history of political independence. In total, Myanmar has seven states and seven regions administratively; states usually refer to as ethnic majority while regions as to Burmese majority.

³ Office of the Commander in Chief of Defence Services, “Statement of Ceasefire and Eternal Peace”, 12 November 2020 (<https://cincds.gov.mm/node/9793?d=1>).

⁴ AA’s leader Twan Mrat Naing is 43, and his comrades are also believed to be in their mid-forties.

⁵ For details on the Way of Rakhita, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zQGZ8VE1PY>.

⁶ Schools in conflict-affected areas like central and northern Rakhine State were forced to close down during the fighting.

⁷ Nan Oo Nway, “Junta Searches for AA-linked Administrators, in latest Sign of Rakhine Tensions”, *Myanmar Now*, 10 May 2022 (**Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**

<https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/junta-searches-for-aa-linked-administrators-in-latest-sign-of-rakhine-tensions>)

⁸ Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, “Arakan Army Seeks to Build ‘Inclusive’ Administration in Rakhine state”, *The Diplomat*, 31 August 2021 (<https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/arakan-army-rebels-seek-inclusive-administration-in-rakhine-state/>).

⁹ The graph here explains in detail Rakhine State vote in the 2015 election:

http://www.themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/50-Sector_Map_Gov_IFES_St-Rg_Constituency_Bd_Parties_in_Rakhine-State_MIMU1327v04_3Dec15_A3_0.pdf.

¹⁰ It is very rare to see any PDF-linked activities in Arakan, except in the southern part of the state.

¹¹ Kyaw Lynn, “The Nature of Parallel Governance and Its Impacts on Arakan Politics”, Transnational Institute, 24 Feb 2022 (<https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-nature-of-parallel-governance-and-its-impact-on-arakan-politics>).

¹² The NLD-government appeared to have very limited access to information on military matters, which were of course under Tatmadaw control. Examples were the latter force’s atrocities against Rohingya in 2017 and its attacks on the AA. The NLD’s leadership thus operated with a somewhat flawed understanding of the situation on the ground in Rakhine State. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself was unable to visit the state until several weeks after the Rohingya exodus unfolded in 2017; see <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/02/world/asia/myanmar-suu-kyi-rohingya.html>.

¹³ According to Myanmar’s 2008 Constitution, an additional 12 seats are reserved for unelected military members of the state legislature.

¹⁴ Moe Myint, “ANP Stages Walkout Over NLD Chief Minister for Arakan State”, *The Irrawaddy*, 28 March 2016 (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/anp-stages-walkout-nld-chief-minister-arakan-state.html>).

¹⁵ The appointment of chief ministers of states and regions is the prerogative of the central government, under Article 261 of the 2008 Constitution, which states that the Union President has the right to appoint individuals to those posts regardless of the electoral outcome at the state or regional level.

¹⁶ Myat Thura et al, “Myanmar Govt Declares Arakan Army a Terrorist Group”, *Myanmar Times*, 23 March 2020 (<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/myanmar-govt-declares-arakan-army-terrorist-group.html>).

¹⁷ Nyein Nyein, “In Western Myanmar, State Counselor’s Praise for Tatmadaw Causes Unease”, *The Irrawaddy*, 23 April 2020 (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/western-myanmar-state-counselors-praise-tatmadaw-causes-unease.html>).

¹⁸ Author's interviews with an Arakan activist, 5 May 2022.

¹⁹ Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint, "Myanmar Military Ready to Work with Arakan Army on Rakhine Voting", *The Irrawaddy*, 16 November 2020 (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/elections/myanmar-military-ready-work-arakan-army-rakhine-voting.html>). In the immediate aftermath of the 2020 elections, the AA proposed to hold elections in the constituencies in question by the end of 2021, and the Tatmadaw agreed to this proposal; the coup three months later rendered this plan irrelevant, of course.

²⁰ Ei Ei Toe Lwin, "Anger Over International Experts Appointed to Rakhine Commission", *Myanmar Times*, 29 August 2016 (<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/22187-anger-over-international-experts-appointed-to-rakhine-commission.html>).

²¹ While meetings between the AA and the NUG have been taking place at the time of writing, their results are not tangible. A breakthrough will require more effort from both sides than is likely, as will substantive negotiations.

²² *The Irrawaddy*, "AA Chief Doesn't Want Myanmar's Strikes and Protests in Rakhine State", 12 April 2021 (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/aa-chief-not-want-myanmars-strikes-protests-rakhine-state.html>).

²³ BBC Burmese, "ရက္ခိုင်တပ်တော် အေအေဆီမှာ စစ်သင်တန်းတပ်ရောက်ပြီ ကျောင်းသားလက်ရုံးတပ်တော် SAF ကိုဖွဲ့စည်း" [Upon military training under AA, Student Armed Force (SAF) established], 12 April 2022 (https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=736105574479862&_rdr).

²⁴ At the time of writing, the AA had decided not to attend the junta's peace talks to be held soon.

²⁵ See more details at "Why the Arakan Army Attended Myanmar Junta Union Day Event", *The Irrawaddy*, 15 February 2022 (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/why-the-arakan-army-attended-myanmar-juntas-union-day-event.html>).

²⁶ The initial agreement on investment in the port project was estimated to be for US\$7 billion, but during the term of NLD government term the investment was reduced to US\$1.3 billion, mainly due to fear of a debt trap. For details, see Thompson Chau, "China-led Port Project Inches Ahead in Myanmar", *Asia Times*, 15 July 2019 (<https://asiatimes.com/2019/07/china-led-port-project-inches-ahead-in-myanmar/>).

²⁷ This is based on the author's observation at the time and on the fact that no visible attacks on "Chinese interests" were reported in any media at that time.

²⁸ Reuters, "China, Russia Block U.N Council Concern about Myanmar Violence", 18 March 2017 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-un-idUSKBN16O2J6>).

²⁹ Amanda Batterslay, "Myanmar Junta Concern Over Possible China Incursion", *Upstream Media*, 11 March 2022 (<https://www.upstreamonline.com/politics/myanmar-junta-concern-over-possible-china-incursion/2-1-1180616>).

³⁰ See for example Arakan Oil Watch, "Fanning the Flames: expansion of foreign oil and gas investments despite Burma's military coup", November 2021.

³¹ Abhisek Bhalla, "India Must Enhance Connectivity in North-East to counter China's Influence: Army Chief Gen Naravane", *India Today*, 12 February 2021 (<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-must-enhance-connectivity-in-north-east-to-counter-china-s-influence-army-chief-gen-naravane-1768760-2021-02-12>).

³² *India Today*, "Kolkata to Mizoram: Kaladan Project Likely to be Completed by 2023", 23 March 2021 (<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/video/kolkata-to-mizoram-kaladan-project-likely-to-be-completed-by-2023-1782655-2021-03-23>).

³³ Abhisek Bhalla, "Indian Worker part of Kaladan Project dies in custody of Myanmar Insurgent group", *India Today*, 5 November 2019 (<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/indian-worker-part-of-kaladan-project-dies-in-custody-of-myanmar-insurgent-group-1615819-2019-11-05>).

³⁴ Abhisek Bhalla, “China-backed Arakan Army, military coup in Myanmar not a hurdle for Strategic Kaladan Project”, *India Today*, 23 March 2021 (<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-backed-arakan-army-military-coup-in-myanmar-not-a-hurdle-for-strategic-kaladan-project-1782777-2021-03-23>).

³⁵ See details of the AA chief’s January 2022 comments on the relationship with Bangladesh at <https://www.dhakatribune.com/south-asia/2022/01/19/arakan-army-keen-for-stronger-ties-with-bangladesh>.

³⁶ It is believed to amount to more than one million people, representing a third of the total population in Rakhine State: see <https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2016/04/myanmars-democratic-deficit-demography-rohingya-dilemma/>.

³⁷ There has been deep mistrust between the two communities. The 2012 intercommunal violence will shadow the ‘unified’ efforts attempted on both sides. For details on the violence, see <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18395788>.

³⁸ Ei Ei Toe Lwin, “Rakhine Parties Discuss Possible Merger”, *Myanmar Times*, 20 September 2012 (<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/1647-rakhine-parties-discuss-possible-merger.html>).

³⁹ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Elections or War? The Dilemma Facing Rakhine State”, *ISEAS Perspective*, 14 October 2020 (https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_116.pdf).

⁴⁰ Khun Bedu, “Earning Credentials: A Karenni Perspective on the future of Burma/Myanmar”, Transnational Institute, 17 August 201 (<https://www.tni.org/en/article/earning-credentials-a-karenni-perspective-on-the-future-of-burmamyanmar>).

⁴¹ According to local monitoring group, Arakan Oil Watch (AOW), Naypyitaw earns more US\$ 3 billion dollars annually from the export of natural gas to Thailand and China from four offshore projects: Yadana, Yetagun, Shwe and Zawika. For details, see <https://www.oilwatcharakan.org/fuelling-conflict-investment-exacerbating-turmoil-in-western-burma/>.

⁴² India continues to implement this as part of its strategic interests; see <https://swarajyamag.com/news-brief/sittwe-deep-water-port-built-by-india-in-myanmar-to-be-operational-soon-to-benefit-landlocked-mizoram>.

⁴³ Author’s interview with an Arakan resident studying Rakhine politics, 28 April 2022.

⁴⁴ For more details on the impact of the 2021 coup on migration, see the author’s recent “Migration in Post-Coup Myanmar: A Critical Determinant in Shaping the Country’s Future?” (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-37-migration-in-post-coup-myanmar-a-critical-determinant-in-shaping-the-countrys-future-by-aung-tun/>).

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