

Forging Rebel Alliances

How Arakan Army Expanded Across Myanmar



Center for Arakan Studies

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Contact: info@arakanstudies.org

Website: www.arakanstudies.org

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Executive Summary

- Over the past 16 years, the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) has evolved from a marginal insurgent group of 26 fighters in KIA-held territory to a dominant force with over 50,000 troops and control over 90% of Rakhine State. This transformation marks one of the most significant insurgent ascents in contemporary Myanmar.
- Unlike earlier Arakanese movements, the ULA/AA pursued a disciplined strategy of alliance-building, resource mobilization, and ethnic cooperation. By establishing operational footholds in Kachin and northern Shan States and fostering ties with Kachin, Ta'ang, Kokang, Wa, and Shan groups, the AA navigated ethnic rivalries while securing vital external sanctuaries and logistical networks—including a base in Karen State.
- The AA's partnerships with groups such as the KIA, MNDAA, and TNLA were grounded in reciprocal military support. While acquiring arms and training, the AA deployed thousands of troops to assist in joint offensives, particularly in northern Shan State, bolstering both its battlefield experience and political leverage amid intensifying junta pressure.
- The 2021 military coup catalyzed the AA's national expansion. Leveraging the anti-junta uprising, the AA maintained a ceasefire in Rakhine while supporting and training over 30 People's Defense Forces (PDFs and E-PDFs) across ethnic and Bamar-majority regions—signaling its emergence as a key architect of nationwide resistance.
- Following territorial gains across Rakhine, the AA's influence has expanded into southern Chin, Magway, Bago, and Ayeyarwaddy regions. While alliances in northern Myanmar remain strategically important, these new western partnerships reflect the AA's dual focus on homeland security and a broader political role in Myanmar's future.

Chapter I: Introduction

A. Background of the Report

This report examines the Arakan Army's (AA) activities outside Arakan in Myanmar. Its primary objectives are to trace the AA's emergence in northern Myanmar, particularly in Kachin and northern Shan States; to analyze its activities in these regions; to explore its support for post-coup resistance forces; to evaluate its role in the 'Operation 1027' launched on October 27, 2023; and to assess its growing influence as a dominant actor in western Myanmar and a key player in national politics.

The report is divided into four parts beyond the introduction. The second part details the AA's growth in northern Myanmar, including Kachin, Ta'ang, Kokang, and Wa areas. It highlights how the AA leveraged these regions for external sanctuary, resource mobilization, and ethnic solidarity, reshaping Myanmar's political landscape. The third part explores the AA's expanded role in post-coup Myanmar politics since early 2021. It identifies the newly emerged resistance armed groups supported by AA leaders in both ethnic minority areas and Bamar heartland regions and examines how the National Unity Government (NUG) perceives the AA's role in opposing military rule. The final part analyzes the AA's involvement in 'Operation 1027' and its significance for the AA's territorial control. It also discusses the AA's new strongholds in allied territories, such as southern Chin in Chin Brotherhood areas and eastern Arakan Roma.

This report serves as an initial step in studying an ethnic nationalist movement's activity beyond its homeland and a key contribution to understanding the AA's role in broader Myanmar politics.

B. Literature Review

Around the world narratives of intrastate conflicts, the alliance politics play a critical factor in shaping its trajectory, sustainability and the legitimacy of the armed groups' movement. Most of the reasons for having armed actors inside the country include in complex and dynamic political environments of uneven distributions on material resources, territorial control, legitimacy, and different political goals. In this regard, for the forming armed groups, their alliance strategies and movement at the outsides of the homelands become not just as a tactical necessity but also a strategic matter which will basically support their broader political objectives as a whole. In protracting the internal conflicts situations like Myanmar, its armed groups are rarely operating in isolated ways where they mostly form the networks of alliances, transregional solidarities, helping each other. This chapter particularly brings on why and how the United League of Arakan (ULA)/Arakan Army (AA) moves its footsteps and strategies outside of the Arakan region, seeing under different theoretical narratives.

A number of relevant and different theories with scholarly literature have been developed related to outside footsteps of the armed groups for the success of their goals. This framework analyzes the ULA/AA's activities across Myanmar, particularly their expansion beyond Rakhine State, by drawing on theories of armed movements, conflict studies, and political geography. It posits that the ULA/AA's motivations and strategies can be understood through several key concepts. In the first concept for alliance politics, finding external sanctuaries beyond the homeland has been the main reason for the situations of rebel group formations, mobilizations

and sustaining in the civil conflicts. In the situations of weakly governed areas within the country, sometimes across national borders, the insurgent armed groups search the safer areas for their growth and mobilization while sustaining the operations.

According to Salehyan (2007)¹, having the sanctuaries provides those armed groups with the profits including the reduction of state punishment risks, logistical support, safer recruitments and so on. In the work of Salehyan, cross-border sanctuaries are mostly primarily focused with the likelihood of civil war onset and continuation, this logic can equally be applicable to the internal sanctuaries such as the weak government-controlled areas within the same states such as ethnic armed controlled areas which can also offer safer zones for rising armed organizations. For this situation, Staniland (2012)² spotlighted that insurgent groups rely on the sympathetic regions in terms of political and ethical favours in order to protect and operate in depth. It mostly happens when the state control is fragmented in those areas.

On the other hand, insurgent or armed rebel groups are most likely to form the alliance in the attempt of different necessities against the same enemy in their long-term sustaining. Regarding the concept of alliance formation, Christia (2012)³ mentioned the reason for doing so not just purely for ideological alignment but for the strategic perspectives and necessities of shared power. By forming the alliances, they can coordinate the offensives and build stronger military resources which will help to extend their influence in other areas. Similar idea is raised by Corradi (2023)⁴. Expanded to Christia's expression of alliance formation, Corradi presents the connection between the identity politics⁵ and power politics⁶ under the alliance formation preferences. Corradi's typology categorizes alliances along two dimensions: the goals of the alliance (tactical vs. strategic) and the internal composition (homogeneous vs. heterogeneous). Again, Akcinaroglu (2012)⁷ describes the facts of rebel coalitions which are able to bring significant impacts on the course of civil wars, especially those that are durable and have high cumulative capabilities. During 1946 to 2008, out of 345 groups involved in civil conflicts, 181 (more than 52 percent) have initiated positive associations with each other while fighting with the government.⁸ Besides, she again claims that these strong alliance formations are more likely to raise the rebel victory, underscoring the strategic advantage conferred by credible inter-rebel cooperation.

Similar to this alliance formation concept, Ethnic Solidarity Theory suggests that shared ethnic identity or common grievances foster cooperation among insurgent groups, even outside their traditional territories. Ethnic Solidarity Theory posits that shared ethnic identities and common grievances can foster cooperation among insurgent groups, even beyond their traditional territories. Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug (2013) argue that political and economic inequalities along ethnic lines generate grievances that can motivate collective action, leading to the formation of alliances across ethnic boundaries. These alliances are often sustained by shared experiences of marginalization or common adversaries, highlighting the role of ethnic solidarity in insurgent cooperation.

Furthermore, Topal (2024)⁹ introduces a relational theory of rebel alliance formation, identifying three key relational factors that shape cooperation: rebel-civilian relations, inter-rebel relations, and rebel-sponsor relations. She finds that groups connected through these social networks are more likely to form united fronts, with shared allies or civilian support positively associated with such cooperation. This relational approach adds depth to the understanding of how ethnic solidarity can influence insurgent alliances.¹⁰ Adding a societal dimension, Kruse (2023) explores how perceptions of deservingness influence solidarity across ethnic lines. His study reveals that ethnic-majority adolescents are generally more inclined to support fellow majority members over immigrant or ethnic-minority individuals.

However, increased ethnic diversity can mitigate this bias, particularly by reducing stereotypes that portray minorities as less deserving.¹¹ These findings suggest that shared experiences of marginalization and increased intergroup contact can enhance solidarity, potentially facilitating cooperation among diverse insurgent groups. Resource Mobilization Theory emphasizes the importance of material, financial, and human resources in sustaining insurgent operations. Jenkins (1983) emphasizes that robust organizational structures and access to diverse resource streams are critical determinants of a movement's ability to sustain operations and achieve strategic objectives.¹² Besides, in her 2014 work, Wood (2014)¹³ examines how rebel groups exploit illicit economies, trade routes, and local networks to generate funding in conflict zones. She argues that these economic strategies are essential for sustaining insurgent operations and can influence the trajectory of civil wars. Wood's analysis underscores the importance of understanding the economic dimensions of conflict, as they are deeply intertwined with the political and social factors driving insurgent movements.

Holtermann (2011)¹⁴ examines how local poverty, state capacity, and accessibility influenced insurgent resource mobilization in Nepal. He finds that while most local contributions such as food, money, and labor were driven by rational security considerations, state weakness facilitated insurgent control and shaped local incentive structures. Notably, low state capacity also enabled rebel recruitment through flawed counterinsurgency campaigns, providing both emotional impetus and lowered security costs for participation. However, poverty alone did not uniformly affect resource mobilization, highlighting the complex interplay of local conditions in shaping insurgent strategies.

Based on the four concepts described above, the latter sections will be described on how ULA/AA are in line with the sanctuary theory with finding safer zones outside of Arakan while starting to grow up, making alliance formation and building solidarity with other armed groups in order to share resources and improve military capabilities and, using the resource mobilization strategies to improve materials, financial and human resources which strengthen the ULA/AA's legitimacy and support beyond geographical boundaries.

C. A Brief Background of AA Formation

After 16 years of its establishment, the AA has now controlled at least 90 percent of all territories in Arakan. This includes fourteen townships in Rakhine state and one in Chin. As the group was formed in April 2009 in Laiza, the de facto headquarters of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), it was indeed a deeply symbolic and strategic location providing not only military training but also ideological guidance from one of Myanmar's most politically mature EAOs.¹⁵ Over the years, the AA trained alongside KIA troops and later operated in coordination with the Northern Alliance, which includes groups like the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA).¹⁶

The Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) helped establish the Arakan Army (AA) in 2009 in Kachin State by providing essential shelter, weaponry, and training (Smith, 2017). Most of the original recruits were young Rakhine people who wanted to form a force to push for more autonomy or independence for Rakhine State. The AA began operations in Kachin State and later spread to Northeast Shan State. Through this growth, the AA was able to develop relationships with other ethnic armed groups, obtain experience on the battlefield, and possibly acquire access to more resources and key routes.

From its inception, the AA positioned itself as both a military and political movement under the umbrella of the United League of Arakan (ULA), its political wing. After gaining combat experience with the KIA, the AA troops gradually returned to Rakhine starting in 2014. The group was well-noticed when it attacked the police stations on January 4, 2019 in Buthid Aung. While designated as a terrorist group during Aung San Suu Kyi's led government, they paused fighting for a time but resumed after the 2021 coup¹⁷.

Its presence in Northeast Shan allowed it to gain operational experience, build alliances, and forge a narrative of shared struggle among ethnic minorities. These early years outside Rakhine were foundational not only for military capacity-building but also for understanding the terrain of Myanmar's wider ethnic politics. The experiences in Shan and Kachin would later influence how the AA engaged in broader alliance politics, throughout its starting point in different arenas, especially after the military coup in 2021.

Chapter II: How the AA Grew Up in Northern Myanmar: Finding New Friends and Alliances (2009 Founding to 2020 Ceasefire)

Since its birth in April 2009, the ULA/AA has steadily built up its political and military presence by making strategic alliances beyond Arakan (Rakhine) State. During its formative years, the AA established sanctuaries in Kachin and northern Shan State, working closely with other Ethnic Armed organizations (EAOs) like the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Kokang's Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA).

The key reasons of AA's stronghold in these areas are also relevant as discussed in sanctuary and resource mobilization theories. The AA's foundations in these areas are caused by two basic factors such as closed and unfavorable conditions for an armed insurgency in its homeland of Rakhine state, and hospital and opportunistic grounds in these Kachin and northern Shan state areas. These years marked the foundation of AA's rising influence, both on the battlefield and in the political landscape. Being headquartered in KIA-controlled areas near Chinese border gave a sanctuary or a safe ground for its leaders and members' trainings. Besides, growing business activities along Chinese border provided the AA for mobilizing resources such as arms, ammunitions, budget and troops.

Remark, in 2014, AA's active involvement alongside the KIA and the TNLA gained public and media attention. Starting from that time, the increasing step forward movements and activities of AA in terms of fighting, battle fields, military training can be seen and has been mentioned apparently in the news starting from that time. Notably, RFA described a news on 19th November, 2014 about an artillery shelling incident at a KIA training school near Laiza killed cadets, including those from allied groups like the AA and TNLA. This event signaled the AA's deepening ties within these groups.¹⁸

The military collaboration of the AA further strengthened in 2015 during joint offensives with MNDAA and TNLA against Myanmar military in the Kokang region in Northern Shan State. The conflict resulted in substantial casualties on both sides and displaced tens of thousands of civilians. By that time, the AA had already trained more than 3000 fighters. This cooperation demonstrated AA's commitment to alliance politics and ethnic solidarity in fighting against the government military while excluding from the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) talks.¹⁹ In 2016, AA participated again in coordinated operations during the battles at Monekoe, a joint offensive alongside KIA, MNDAA, and TNLA, highlighting its role as a key player within the Northern Alliance (NA) formed in December 2016.²⁰

While fighting alongside its allies in northern Myanmar, the group also initiated footsteps of fighting with the Myanmar military closer to its homeland, notably in Paletwa area in Chin State, which they considered as formerly a part of Arakan kingdom or British-administered Arakan. An armed clash was reported on Kantharyar Hill in Paletwa township in September 2017. The AA reported inflicting significant casualties and seizing military equipment, while the Myanmar Military described the encounter as part of a clearance operation.

By June 2019, AA's alliance system solidified further under the "Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BTA)," comprising AA, TNLA, and MNDAA, fighting for their rights. Between August and September 2019, the alliance launched coordinated offensives across northern Shan State, and even in government stronghold areas of Pyin Oo Lwin.²¹ Despite declaring a temporary

ceasefire by the Myanmar military in September 2019, ²²intense fighting continued as it was triggered by Myanmar military reinforcements. ²³ These junctures illustrated the dual strategy of AA's armed resistance and tactical pauses while using the alliance formation technique with its brotherhood armed organizations. Beyond military cooperation, AA gradually advanced its political engagement, mainly from 2019 compared to earlier years. A symbolic moment was its participation in Wa State's 30th anniversary celebration in 2019, where AA Chief and Vice-Chief attended alongside other major EAOs and government officials. ²⁴ Reflecting the AA's political ambition, AA leader stated,

“We have expectations not less than Wa. Whether good or bad, what matters is the ability to maintain peace, foster unity, and build trust among our people.”

This statement underlined AA's vision of achieving and seeking a degree of autonomy, political recognition and alliances beyond armed struggles. Furthermore, established in April 2017, AA's role in the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) was pivotal for its political willingness and strategy, while maintaining armed resistance. The FPNCC comprised of seven powerful EAOs became a critical platform for political negotiations with the government and military. Although officially a political alliance, its members, including the AA, KIA, MNDAA, TNLA, and SSPP, were also reportedly engaged in mutual military support, mixing territories between political negotiation and military collaboration. ²⁵

While increasing military activities in its homeland from 2017 to 2020, the AA leaders also promoted its alliance and diplomatic profiles across northern Myanmar. When the AA introduced a de facto ceasefire in Rakhine state by November 2020, its strength increased more than 10,000 fighters. Direct talks were held between AA representatives and the Myanmar military in Panghsang, Wa's territory on December 9, 2020 in its homeland of Rakhine state focusing on ensuring voting rights in Rakhine townships where elections were not held. ²⁶ This showed a reasonably strong tie between the AA and UWSA strong ties and how AA finds the safer nests for their growths and movements before these situations. This moves highlighted AA's ability to leverage its alliances for political negotiation and safe sanctuary.

This period of intensified alliances and political dialogues positioned AA as a rising force in Myanmar's complex ethnic politics, combining military strength with growing political legitimacy. From 2010 to early 2021, the AA's cooperative efforts with key alliance actors not only fortified its military capabilities but also elevated its political aspirations. These collaborations enabled the AA to project power beyond Rakhine State and positioned it as a key player in shaping the future political landscape of Myanmar's ethnic regions.

From 2009 to 2020, the AA's footsteps in northern Myanmar have been the key to its rise. As discussed in the theoretical discussion, the AA leaders applied all four theories of external sanctuary, resource mobilization, ethnic solidarity and alliance formation. Not only that, AA also showed its presence in these regions for all military, political, economic and strategic applications for its movement.

Chapter III: Expanding Activities of the AA: Preparation and Calculation (2021 Military Coup to 1027 Operation)

From 2020 leading up to the 2021 coup, the Arakan Army (AA) enhanced its military capacity and political influence, primarily through forging strategic presences beyond the Arakan region. This long-term strategy was rooted in the ULA/AA's political aspirations for self-autonomy. The military coup in 2021 dramatically altered Myanmar's political landscape, providing the AA an unprecedented opportunity to expand its political leverage and strengthen its military position. The AA's swift actions in engaging both established alliances and newly emerging resistance groups after the coup not only reinforced its own regional objectives but also significantly shaped the broader dynamics of Myanmar's political conflict.

The 2021 coup served as a critical juncture. Shortly after the coup, the 3BTA demanded the removal of the terrorist designation placed on ethnic armed groups, while simultaneously extending their unilateral ceasefire (RFA Burmese, 2020)²⁷. This demand reflected a calculated shift towards gaining greater political legitimacy in the post-coup environment. On March 1, 2021, the military council removed the AA from its terrorist list, citing the group's cessation of terrorist activities (Myanmar Now, March 2021).²⁸ This formal de-listing was not merely symbolic; it opened political space for the AA to operate more openly and reposition itself as a legitimate political and military actor.

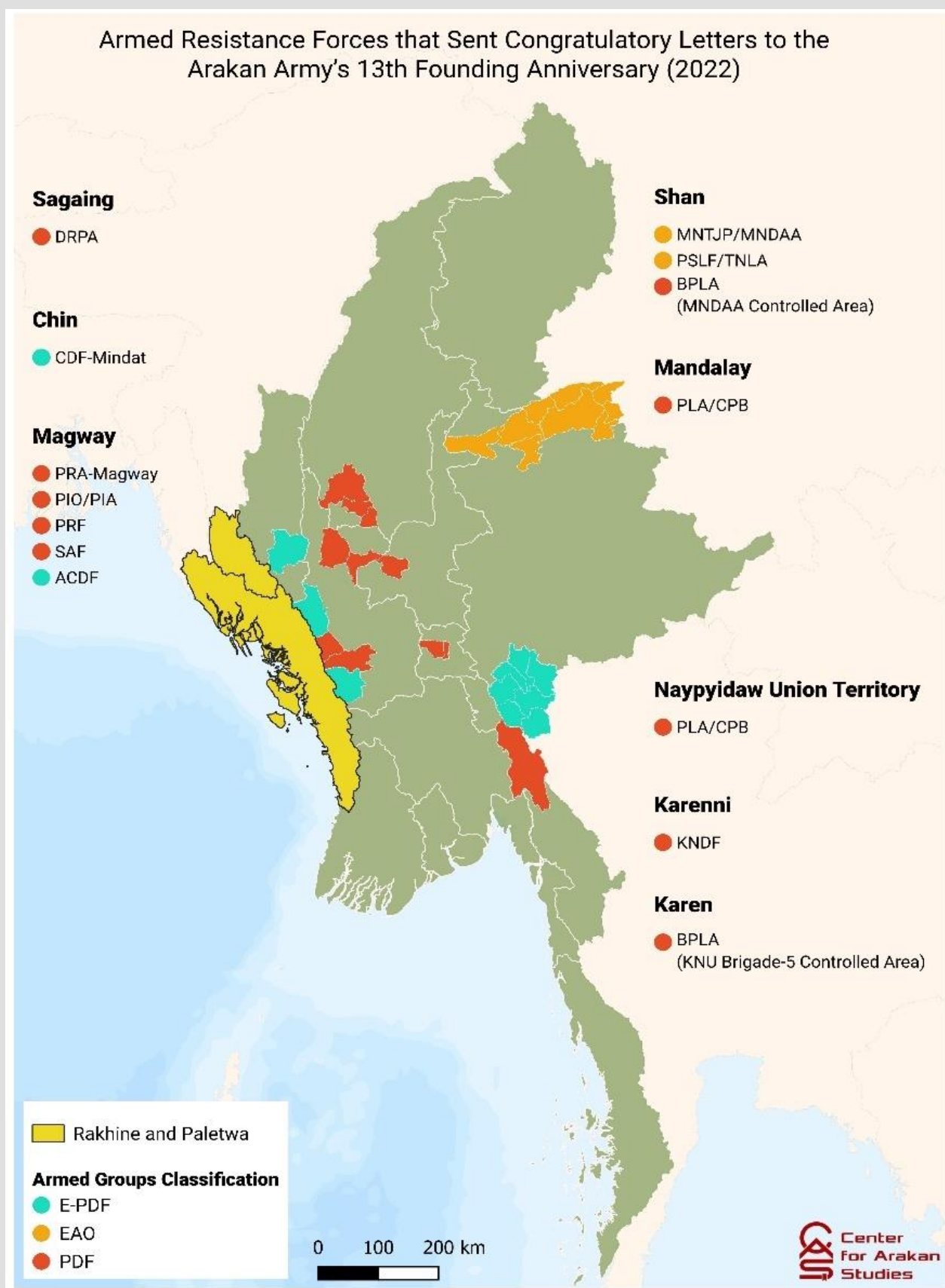
Following the coup, the AA strongly condemned the junta's brutal suppression of civilians and declared solidarity with oppressed ethnic groups and the broader democratic movement. This direct condemnation not only reinforced the AA's moral position but also sent a political message about its alignment with national resistance efforts. The AA's positioning was further emphasized on March 30, 2021, when the Three Brotherhood Alliance publicly warned that continued military violence against civilians would prompt their alignment with the Spring Revolution movement (VOA, March 30, 2021)²⁹. This declaration marked a critical political maneuver that linked the ethnic armed struggle with the wider civilian uprising against the junta. It reflected an evolving strategic vision: from regional autonomy to nationwide systemic change. Throughout 2021, the AA continued strengthening its alliances. It received congratulatory messages from the MNDAA and TNLA on its 12nd founding anniversary, demonstrating sustained solidarity. The statement said;

“In unity and solidarity, we will march for revolutionary goals.”

Likewise, the 3BTAs commemorated Wa State's 32nd peacebuilding anniversary, reinforcing their ongoing political and military cooperation ³⁰. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the ULA systematic collaboration with allied ethnic armed groups had substantially enhanced its military capacity, political legitimacy, and strategic influence since before the early 2021 military coup. These alliances not only advanced the AA's own goals but also shifted the broader ethnic political dynamics within Myanmar, positioning the Northern Alliance as a vital actor in the country's evolving conflict and peace processes.

After the coup, the AA further deepened its political engagements. On January 5, 2022, AA Chief led an online meeting with a delegation from the National Unity Government (NUG), marking the second formal negotiation between the two groups³¹. During an interview with Asia Times on January 18, 2022, he [said](#) that the group has deployed around 5,000-6,000 thousand troops in the allies' areas such as Kachin and northern Shan. When the AA celebrated its 13rd

anniversary on April 10, 2022, at least fourteen resistance groups that consisted of 2 Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), 9 People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and 3 Ethnic People's Defense Forces (E-PDFs) sent congratulatory messages.



These junctures described the degree of AA's influence and involvement in the post-coup Myanmar armed politics. Messages by different PDFs and ethnicity-based PDFs are diverse. While some groups directly mentioned the AA's support for their military training and materials, others admired the AA's movement. For instance, the statement by the Student Armed Force (SAF) described, "We would like to thank the AA for nurturing and supporting the group's building." Other groups that openly mentioned the AA's backing included People's Revolutionary Front (PRF) (presence in Pakokku and Pauk townships in northern Magway), People's Revolution Alliance-Magway (PRA-Magway) (Ngape and Minhla townships closed to the eastern bank of Arakan Roma), Anti-Dictatorship Revolution People's Army (ADRPA) (presence in Kani, Salingyi and Yinmabin townships of southern Sagaing region). Other resistance movements that are highly admired of the AA consisted of Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) whose statement said; **"We consider AA as an ideal and hope for more military and political collaboration in the future."**

As a sign of closer collaboration, both the President Office and Ministry of Defense of NUG sent statements to the AA's anniversary. The latter's statement expressed,

"We hope for more collaboration between the AA and PDFs in the future."

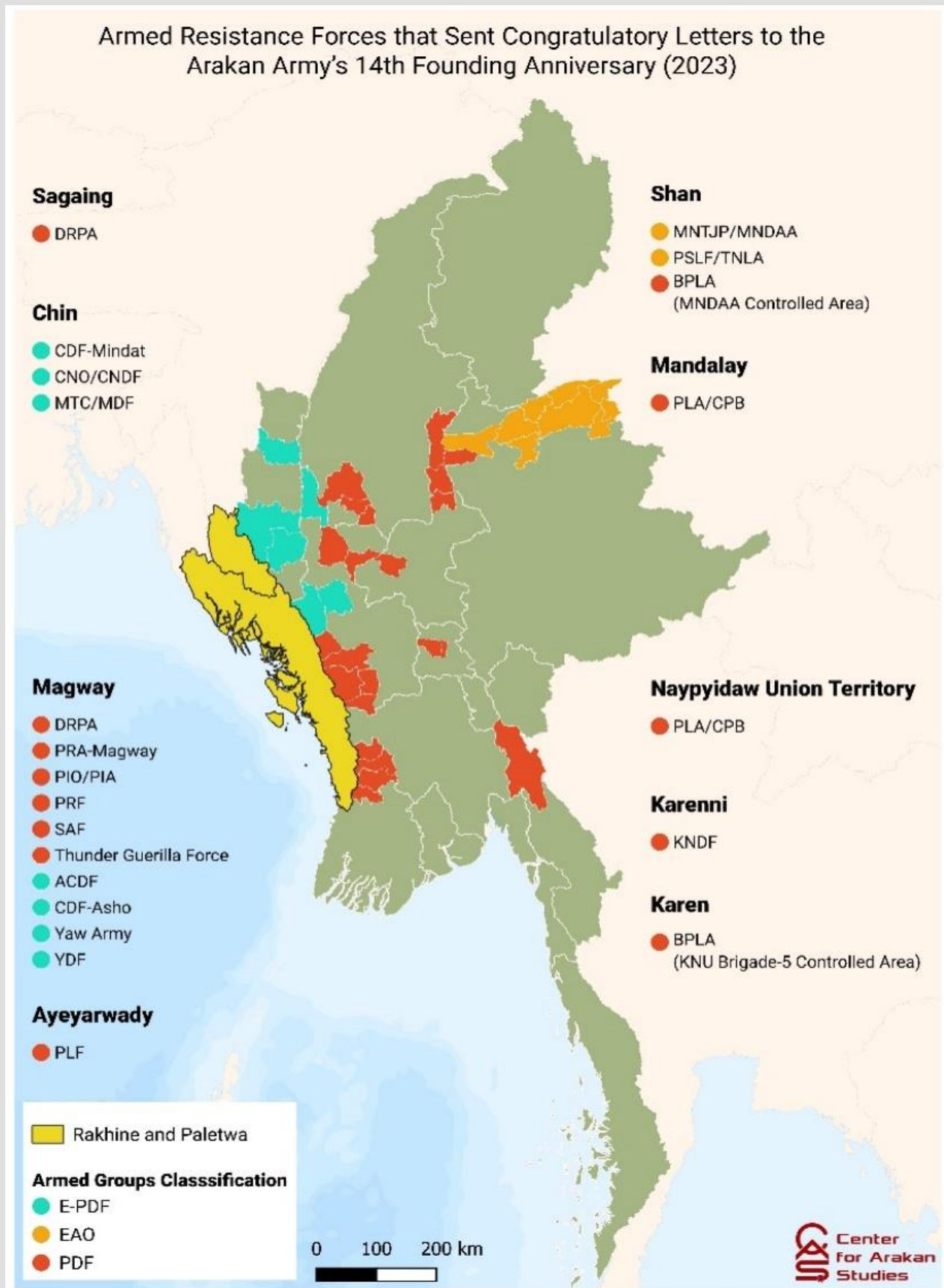
Then, on May 16, 2022, the ULA and the NUG held another official video conference. The NUG referred to the ULA leadership as the "Arakan People's Government" (VOA, July 2022)³², a title that implied rising recognition of the AA's de facto governance in Arakan. According to AA spokesperson Khine Thukha, both sides exchanged perspectives "based on the prevailing situation at that time," indicating a pragmatic and dynamic approach to alliance-building.

The AA also demonstrated solidarity with other ethnic revolutionary groups. On May 31, 2022, it sent congratulatory messages to the KNDF on their first anniversary³³, symbolizing continued revolutionary camaraderie. However, the risks of collaboration remained high. On July 5, 2022, six AA members were killed and others injured in a Myanmar military airstrike on an AA camp inside KNLA Brigade 5 territory.³⁴ Indeed, the AA's presence in that territory was not a secret as the group has used the military camps in Karen state for purposes of recruitments, training, and logistics.

Following this, on July 27, 2022, the 3BTA condemned the junta's execution of four political prisoners, solidifying their unified moral and political stance.³⁵ Then, armed clashes broke out in Arakan when the Myanmar junta attacked against the AA in August 2022. Amid escalating clashes in Rakhine, the AA issued statements in September 2022, warning that continued military attacks would force retaliation.³⁶ At the same time, the AA also sought to fortify its external alliances. On September 16, 2022, senior AA leaders reportedly met with United Wa State Army (UWSA) officials, indicating a broadening network of strategic relationships.³⁷ The temporary ceasefire reached in late November 2022 was described by the AA as necessary to "ease the hardship on civilians," though many remained skeptical about its sustainability.³⁸

On **5 February 2023**, during the commemoration of the 62nd Kachin Revolution Day, the AA also delivered a special message. When AA reached its 14th founding anniversary on April 10, 2023, the number of resistance groups that sent statements to the AA increased to 19. This included 2 EAOs, 11 PDFs and 6 E-PDFs. What it is more interesting to observe from these statements is the wording and expression. For instance, statements from 3BTAs members such as TNLA, MNDAA described.

“We will stand and fight together, and be healthy, AA soldiers!” signaling the upcoming ‘1027 Operation’ in late 2023.



Moreover, the NUG's MOD openly expressed that AA was also assisting the resistance movement nationwide and prayed that AA can achieve its military and political objectives at the same time. Another critical sign among the statements was the joint statement delivered by eight resistance groups such as Chin Defense Force-Asho (CDF-Asho), Asho Chin Defense Force (ACDF), People's Liberation Army (PLA/CPB), People's Independence Organization/People's Independence Army (PIO/PIA), People's Revolution Alliance-Magway (PRA-Magway), People's Revolutionary Front (PRF), Students Armed Force (SAF), and Thunder Guerrilla Force. Geographically, these groups operated their activities in Magway and along the eastern bank of Arakan Roma. Their statements said,

“We will always acknowledge the support and teaching of the AA and apply it for the good of the people.”

The number of resistance groups delivering congratulatory messages for the AA's anniversary increased from 14 in 2022 to 19 in 2023, as depicted in the accompanying map. In turn, the AA maintained strong ties with newly formed revolutionary groups like the BPLA, which celebrated its second anniversary on April 17, 2023³⁹, demonstrating the AA's continued emphasis on ethnic solidarity beyond Rakhine. Importantly, the AA also engaged in broader political dialogues. In May 2023, representatives from 3BTA attended FPNCC meetings in Pangsang, Wa region, to discuss future cooperation.⁴⁰ On June 1, 2023, peace talks facilitated by China between NA and the junta's Peace Committee highlighted the AA's persistent balancing act between armed resistance and political negotiation.⁴¹

Overall, the ULA/AA's strategy after the coup—marked by strengthening old alliances, supporting newly formed resistance groups, and participating in political dialogues—reflected a calculated preparation for a broader confrontation with the military. These efforts set the foundation for the AA's assertive role in Myanmar's evolving civil conflict, including the preparation for major operations like the 1027 Offensive.

Chapter IV: The Arakan Army's Domination in Western Myanmar: Becoming A Nationwide Player: (From 1027 Operation to Onward)

A. The Arakan Army and 1027 Operation

The Arakan Army's (AA) participated in the 'Operation 1027', launched and led by its 3BTA members in northern Shan state marked a turning point in Myanmar's internal conflict. The operation, which began on October 27, 2023, quickly evolved from a localized offensive into a nationwide reshaping of power. For the AA, this moment was not only a tactical success but also a strategic breakthrough that elevated the group from a powerful regional actor in Western Myanmar to a nationwide political and military player.

During the 'first wave' of operation, key zones included [Namtu Township](#), the areas between [Hsenwi and Kwanlong Townships](#), as well as [Laukkaing Township](#) and [Lashio Townships](#). There were also reports of joint operations extending into parts of Kachin [State](#).⁴² A notable event occurred on October 31, 2023, when the AA captured a military council camp located between Sinni and Kwanlong in northern Shan State, near Nati village. According to Li Kyar Win, spokesperson for the MNDAA, the camp was seized on the evening of October 30, as part of the ongoing Operation 1027. The assessment of weapons and ammunition recovered, as well as casualties on the junta side, was ongoing at the time of reporting (People's Spring, October 2023) ⁴³ The MNDAA also stated that approximately 10 battalions of the Arakan Army, including Battalion 33 and Battalion 113, had recently joined the alliance's coordinated offensives.

“At around 10 p.m. yesterday, I received news that our ally, the AA, had captured the militia camp near Nati village,” said Li Kyar Win. ⁴⁴

During the statement on 27th October, 2023, mentioning the principle of ***“One group's problem is the problem of all three”*** deeply highlighted the mutual trust, shared political goals, and collective defense of the Three Brotherhood Alliance (AA, TNLA, MNDAA). Moreover, the statement gaslighted that Operation 1027 was a unified military campaign to protect civilians, resist junta attacks, and eliminate the military dictatorship, while also targeting criminal networks, reflecting a decade-long fraternal alliance. (3 Brotherhood Alliance (AA+MNDAA+TNLA)⁴⁵ Interestingly, other Bamar based resistance groups like the BPLA also announced their participation in the operation. Indeed, this reflected how the AA and its allies are playing a mentorship and coordination role, allowing newer resistance forces like the BPLA to build operational capacity and political legitimacy through shared struggle against the junta. Operation 1027 not only strengthened anti-junta alliances but also served as a training ground for emerging groups, further diversifying and decentralizing resistance efforts across the country.

⁴⁶

Apart from the areas of northern Shan State and Kachin, during those months of October, November and December in 2023, AA and its partners have extended their military fights in [Htee Chaint of Sagaing](#) and [Htee Lin of Magway regions](#). The alliance partners through those fights have included the People Defense Force (PDF), local defense forces and other NA members. This expansion of the AA troops beyond AA and northern Shan demonstrates AA's growing role as a nationwide military actor, capable of operating in distant conflict zones and building alliances with both established ethnic armed groups and newly formed resistance forces.

B. Building New Strongholds Beyond Arakan

Key stronghold areas that the AA extended its operations and presence beyond the northern Shan and Kachin included southern parts of Sagaing, northern and western parts of Magway and western parts of Bago and Ayeyarwaddy regions. Indeed, the growing power of the AA in the year of 2024 is obviously different from the previous one.

On its 15 years of existence, the group has occupied nine townships on Arakan military front such as Paletwa, Pauktaw, Mrauk-U, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Myebone, Ponnagyun, Rambree, Rathedaung, and on the way to conquer more. In this way, on its anniversary on April 10, 2024, at least 25 resistance groups sent congratulations statements. These groups included 3 EAOs, 14 PDFs and 8 E-PDFs. Among the EAOs, the message delivered by the most powerful EAO of the United Wa State Party (WUSP) is unconventional. It read,

“Wa and Rakhine are friendly people and hope to help each other in achieving self-determination, socioeconomic development for their respective regions.”⁴⁷

This is the first time that the UWSP sent a message to the AA’s anniversary and also unearthed the clear diplomatic connection between the two movements. In addition to this, the message by 3BTA members is also quite straightforward as it mentioned that we will go to the ultimate goal together with the AA.

The most prominent grouping of E-PDFs that delivered statement was the Chin Brotherhood just established on December 30, 2023 that includes six Chin E-PDFs such as 1) Zomi Federal Union, 2) Chin Defence Force-Mindat, 3) Chin National Organization/CNDF, 4) Maraland Territorial Council /MDF, 5) Chin Defence Force-Kanpetlet, 6) Chinland Defence Force- Matupi (Brigade-1). They said,

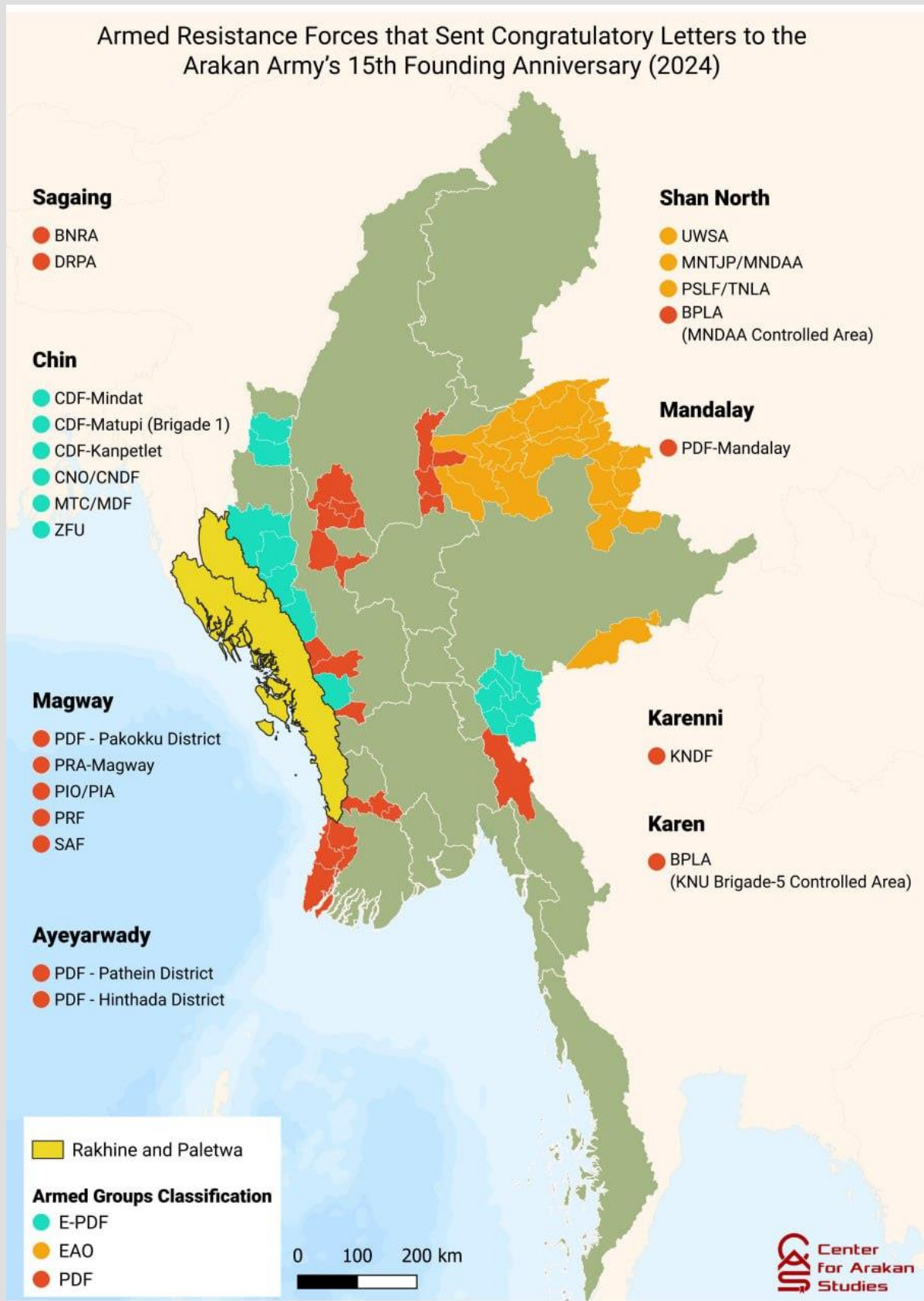
“We will match together with the AA to achieve ultimate goals for both regions.”

One of their officials also stated in the next day.

“What we mean is not just cooperation during this revolution, but rather the long-term goal of improving the relations and trade between the Chin and Rakhine people.”⁴⁸

Among the ethnic Bamar-based resistance groups, People's Defence Force-Pathein District and People's Defence Force-Hinthada District, are unusual groups whose operated areas are close to the eastern bank of Arakan Roma. Research showed that their activities are based in these townships such as Pathein, Kangyidaunt, Thabaung, Ngapudaw, Hinthada, Zalun, and Lemyethna. Their statements mentioned that as neighbors, we have recorded mutual assistance and cooperation.

Twenty-five resistance forces that delivered statements on the AA's founding anniversary can be seen as follows:



Besides, showing the solidarity alliances, in December 2024, the AA's symbolic gifting of three cows to the MDF for Christmas fits well into your analysis of alliance-building, ethnic diplomacy, and soft power under ULA/AA governance. ⁴⁹ This alliance underscores AA's growing role not only as a military force but also as a trusted political partner across ethnic revolutionary movements in Myanmar. Also, in the battlefield of Mindat and Falam, major offensives were launched under "Operation CB" beginning November 9, 2024, spearheaded by the CB but guided by the 3BTA members.

During that operation CB in Chin state, at least 12 junta camps were seized, over 170 junta soldiers and police surrendered, and hundreds of weapons were confiscated. Reports mentioned that the AA provided critical logistical and military support, including arms, ammunition, and tactical planning. ⁵⁰ On December 21, 2024, the Mindat District was fully captured and the CB publicly credited the AA's support—especially in weapons supply and military strategy—for the success of the campaign. ⁵¹

“The Arakan Army (AA) provided military advice and necessary assistance, as well as weapons, ammunition, and reinforcements, in the operation to capture Minta Township,”

the Chin Brotherhood Alliance said in a statement. ⁵² The AA's backing helped bolster the Chin resistance's capacity to coordinate complex military offensives and maintain territorial control, significantly contributing to the weakening of junta presence in Chin State. Furthermore, the December 25, 2024 statement from the Mon and Pa-O armed groups such as Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO), Pa-O National Federal Council (PNFC), New Mon State Party-Anti-Military-Army (NMSP-AD) and Mon State Federal Council (MSFC) highlights the growing regional legitimacy of the Arakan Army (AA). Praising the AA's military successes, the groups emphasized that AA's victories were seen as a broader ethnic achievement in the struggle against Myanmar's military junta⁵³.

This acknowledgment from other ethnic armed groups underscores AA's rising role in the national resistance, positioning it as a legitimate and influential force in the region. By fostering alliances with key groups, the AA strengthens its political standing and legitimacy beyond Arakan, contributing to its broader efforts for regional recognition. Apart from political and military activities, the social and humanitarian support from the Arakan Army (AA) highlights its strong foundations and recognition as a powerful armed force in 2024. Notable efforts include their humanitarian aid to displaced communities in Muse of northern Shan State, where AA provided essential supplies to religious sites and civilians.⁵⁴⁵⁵⁵⁶ This also showed AA leaders eyed these areas as of their strongholds beyond Arakan.

A. Toward the Eastern Bank of Arakan Roma

Entering 2025, the Arakan Army (AA) has proven itself a nationwide player following the strategic success of Operation 1027, which significantly extended its influence and military footprint. Beyond controlling Arakan, the AA has expanded its operations into the Magway, Bago and Ayeyarwaddy regions. This territorial expansion has solidified its position as a dominant force across the western parts of Ayeyarwaddy river.

In early 2025, the AA ramped up its offensive operations, attacking junta bases across critical locations. The conflict areas include the [Gwa-Ngathaing Chaung Road](#), Ma Gyi Zin Village and Baw Mi Village in Patheingyi Township, and parts of [Thabaung](#) and [Yegyi Townships](#) in the Ayeyarwady Region. In the Bago Region, fighting has taken place in the Bago-Rakhine border, [the](#)

[Arakan Mountains](#) near Pandaung Township, as well as along [the Ann-Minbu Road](#) and the [Ann-Padan Road](#). With the strong offensive military operations in 2025 starting from 3rd January, AA has attacked the junta's Bada checkpoint near Ngathaing Chaung in Yegyi in Ayeyarwaddy region (DGM, January 3, 2025)⁵⁷. Meanwhile, other reports mentioned that since January 1, 2025, AA has attacked the junta's fortified Taung Pon Gyi base on the Rakhine-Bago border, one of the last remaining outposts after AA seized Taungup on December 14, 2024.⁵⁸

Since January 8, 2025, the Arakan Army (AA) and allied forces have advanced along the Ayeyarwady coast, capturing Makyee Zin village and several surrounding areas near Shwe Thaung Yan in Patheingyi Township (*Myanmar Peace Monitor*, 13 Jan, 2025)⁵⁹. The capture of Makyee Zin on January 13 marked a significant victory, pushing the AA closer to key junta-controlled areas. A local source said that the Arakan Army (AA) and allied forces captured the junta's Kyarkhaung base on the Makyee Zin-Thit Phyu road.

Moreover, the allied forces of the AA such as PRA-Magway, SAF, and CDF-Asho, captured the junta's Nat Yae Kan base near the Ann-Padan Road in Ngaphe Township on February 16. The base, heavily fortified by the junta, had been a key strategic position. Following the attack, AA forces seized several other nearby bases, significantly shifting the military balance in the region (DMG, 2025).⁶⁰ Those captured and gained control over several fortified junta positions alongside allied groups like PRA-Magway, SAF, and CDF-Asho, shifted the military balance in their favor.

Culminating this growing nationwide influence of the AA on April 10, 2025, on its 16th anniversary, at least 32 resistance groups sent statements to the AA. These included 4 EAOs, 16 PDFs and 10 E-PDFs. As the expanding activities of the AA grew, so did the number of resistance groups send statements to the AA. More importantly, there are some new groups sending statements to the AA and these include Mon Liberation Army (MLA), United Kuki State Council (UKSC), Myeik Bamar Defence Force, Bamar Army, Peacock Soldiers Column, Yaw Army, and even Interim Khumi Affairs Consultative Council/Chin Defence Force-Paletwa (CDF-Paletwa).

Among the statements, the message sent by the People's Defence Force-Mandalay (PDF-Mandalay) is quite comprehensive. It said,

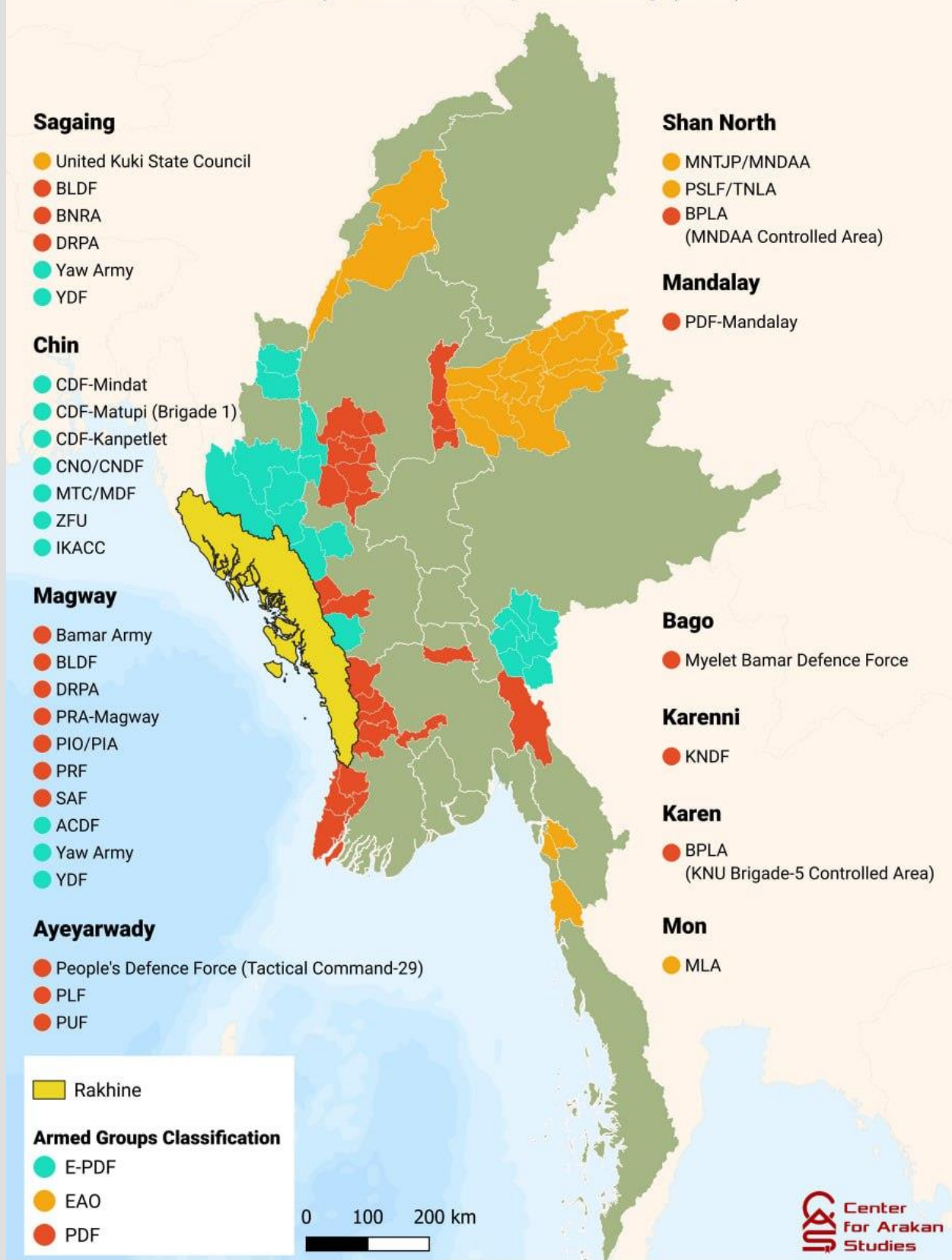
"AA's success is a great motivation for all fighting against the dictatorship, and we are also admired by AA's organizing, training, and courage."

At the same time, as the CB with the help of AA has liberated Matupi, Mindat and Khaydwae, Kanpalet, their statement mentioned clearly the role of AA as the followings;

"We would like to thank to AA for help in liberating towns in Chill hills including training, arming and political supports and hope for mutual benefits in the future"

Following the 2021 military coup, the number of groups sending congratulatory statements to the AA rose from 2 in 2021 to 14 in 2022, 19 in 2023, 25 in 2024, and 32 in 2025, as illustrated in the accompanying map.

Armed Resistance Forces that Sent Congratulatory Letters to the Arakan Army's 16th Founding Anniversary (2025)



The expansion of AA's influence and its growing partnerships, military, political and social, confirm its standing as a central player in the nation's ongoing conflict, with significant ramifications for regional governance and stability in western Myanmar. The victorious and consequential '1027 Operation' lifted not just to the nationwide role of the ULA/AA but also paved the way to have more regional control and domination in the western part of Myanmar.

While the stronghold of the AA in northern Shan state became firmer, its influence in southern Chin and eastern bank of Arakan Roma is also getting more foothold. It means the growing power of AA in western Myanmar is not an isolated phenomena but a consequential factor for new military and political dynamics in the related regions.

Chapter V: Conclusion

This study traces the Arakan Army's (AA) activities beyond Arakan, spanning Kachin State, northern Shan State (notably Ta'ang, Kokang, and Wa areas), Bridge-5 in Karen State, southern Chin State, southern Sagaing Region, and western parts of the Ayeyarwaddy River in Magway, Bago, and Ayeyarwaddy Regions. The AA's growth in Kachin and northern Shan State from 2009 to 2020 was foundational. These regions provided external sanctuaries, resources, ethnic solidarity against the Myanmar military, and alliance formations in 2016, 2017, and 2018. Consequently, the AA's operations in these areas were pivotal for its military, political, and economic development.

Following the 2021 military coup until the notable 'Operation 1027' in October 2023, AA leaders strategically capitalized the national political crisis. While maintaining a de facto ceasefire in Arakan, the group supported and nurtured over 30 People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and Ethnic PDFs (E-PDFs). Operation 1027 enhanced territorial control in Arakan, while support for these groups expanded AA influence in southern Chin and eastern Arakan Roma. Unlike its alliances in northern Myanmar, the AA's support for groups in southern Chin and western Ayeyarwaddy regions is primarily driven by strategic and military objectives. As of late 2024, the AA controls over 90% of Arakan's territory, strengthening its dominance in western Myanmar. From a marginalized ethnic armed group, the AA has emerged as a key national player in Myanmar's future security and political landscape.

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