

INAUGURAL ISSUE

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



WATER FESTIVAL RECOGNIZED BY UNESCO

*Examining the tensions of the
China-Myanmar relationship*

*Why are EAOs fighting each
other in northern Shan State?*

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DIGITAL MAGAZINE

Our relaunch of Mizzima Weekly – with Issue 1 released on 11 April – will provide readers with a more focused read on what matters in Myanmar and the wider region, with an emphasis on analysis, insight and providing key talking points.

WELCOME TO THE NEW MIZZIMA WEEKLY

Mizzima Media Group is pleased to announce the relaunch of Mizzima Weekly. Mizzima is dedicated to helping our readers and viewers keep up to date on the latest developments in Myanmar and related to Myanmar by offering analysis and insight into the subjects that matter.

Our websites and our social media channels provide readers and viewers with up-to-the-minute and up-to-date news, which we don't necessarily need to replicate in our Mizzima Weekly magazine. But where we see a gap is in providing more analysis, insight and in-depth coverage of Myanmar, that is of particular interest to a range of readers.

Hence, we made the decision to revamp our long-running weekly magazine to provide material for the busy reader who wants to keep abreast of developments in Myanmar, related to Myanmar, and in the broader sphere of Asian and international geopolitical and cultural developments.

Our relaunch of Mizzima Weekly – with Issue 1 to be released on 11 April – will provide readers with a more focused read on what matters in Myanmar and the wider region, with an emphasis on analysis, insight and providing key talking points.

COVER STORY

Every issue will have a topical cover story about Myanmar or another important regional news item for our readers to focus on.

Given the timing, we are starting out with a story that offers an insight into the yearly Water Festival, with a focus on Thailand's recently-won UNESCO status for this festival.

Coming soon we will also have an insightful look into why blanket sanctions on Myanmar, in the wake of the 2021 coup, may be putting female garment workers out of work and subjecting them to worse

workplace treatment. Another cover story will be on the horrific incarceration of a famous Myanmar film maker and journalist, jailed for life.

ANALYSIS & INSIGHT

A key section of Mizzima Weekly will be our Analysis & Insight section, which will be of invaluable use to Myanmar and regional watchers seeking to keep track of developments.

CORE DEVELOPMENTS

Our core developments section on Myanmar and subjects related to Myanmar will hone in on what matters, for instance developments concerning the Myanmar military conscription drive that is causing so much chaos for Myanmar youth today.

ASIAN & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Another important section focuses on international affairs as Europe, North America and Australasia gradually wake up to the importance of developments in Asia as the world geopolitical axis gradually shifts eastwards. Particular attention will be paid to developments in India and China, and the Southeast Asian region. This section will be of particular interest to policymakers in Europe as they increasingly turn to the east.

WEEKLY COLUMNS

In addition, the magazine will provide weekly columns tracking the junta and social media, profiling important players in modern-day Myanmar, and providing a link to our partner Insight Myanmar and their insightful podcasts.

In conclusion, the new-look Mizzima Weekly looks set to become a must-read for all those interested in Myanmar and Asian geopolitical developments in what are challenging times.

EDITORIAL

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Cover photo of water festival players by AFP





Even mums and dads take to the street to do battle during the Thai water festival. Photo: AFP

WATER FESTIVAL RECOGNIZED BY UNESCO

Renford Davies

Arguably one of the world's wildest street parties, Thailand's iconic Songkran water festival has achieved new heights of fame. In December, UNESCO announced that Songkran would henceforth be recognized as an event of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).

Its recognition, according to UNESCO, underscores the cultural significance and enduring value of Songkran, promoting "community, cooperation, unity, and forgiveness."

Celebrated from April 13 to 15 each year to mark the Thai New Year, Songkran's rituals are known for the splashing or sprinkling of water – symbolizing a cleansing and purification process. Buddha images are gathered and washed, and it's a time for paying respect to one's elders, giving alms to monks, and appreciating traditional Thai food and music.

Thailand is not alone in celebrating with a water festival. Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia also take to throwing water – though the exuberance has been dampened in Myanmar since the 2021 coup and outbreak of conflict.

CROWDED VS DESERTED

The contrast between Thailand and Myanmar will be extreme in this "water-throwing season". The Land of Smiles will see raucous celebration with millions on the streets – and millions of tourist dollars injected into the economy, whereas the streets of the Golden Land are likely to be deserted, with military-junta "street parties" poorly attended, as the population make clear their dislike of the post-coup status quo.

Thailand's success and Myanmar's failure to score the UNESCO badge of honour for this cultural heritage event or season that both countries share is an indicator of how differently the two countries have weathered military political interference.

Both countries have experienced political instability – including coups and deadly street protests – but Thai juntas have tended to be business, tourism and media friendly, whereas Myanmar juntas have been heavy-handed with restrictions, as some tourists remember prior to 2010 when they were only able to obtain "Seven Day Visas". Today, only a few Russian and Asian tourists venture into crisis-hit Myanmar.

SO, WHAT IS THE SECRET OF THAILAND'S SUCCESS?

REGIONAL & WORLD FESTIVITIES

Thailand's Songkran and the regional water festivals join a long list of distinguished ICH-recognized social practices, rituals, performing arts, and festive events around the world, such as Belgium's Beer culture; Spain's Festival of the Patios in Cordova; shadow puppetry in China; and even the whistled language in Turkey's Çanakçı region.

The UNESCO recognition is a proud moment for Thailand and will contribute to elevating Songkran on the calendar of world tourism events.

The current Pheu Thai-led government has wasted no time in laying forth a plan to extend Songkran celebrations throughout the entire month of April. Called the 'World Water Festival', the tourism

campaign aims to transform Songkran into a global event and promote it as the country's soft power. The festivities are expected to be rolled out gradually with the aim of boosting arrivals to 35 million foreign tourists over the year – generating significant revenue.

UNESCO's recognition of Songkran may surprise some people, given the festival's evolution over the last two decades, with wild water fights and unabashed revelry, seeming a far cry from the more conservative, traditional family values that lie in its roots.

Tracing Songkran's beginnings is challenging, but it is believed to have its origins in a Hindu spring festival that marked the arrival of the new harvest season in ancient India. Called the Makara Sankranti festival, it celebrated the sun's entrance into the water sign Aquarius, marking a new astrological period.

Undoubtedly, the 'Indianization' of Southeast Asia played a crucial part in bringing the festival to Thailand. This influence was transmitted through various means, with maritime trade playing a major role.

From the beginning of the second century C.E., trade from India and Sri Lanka moved into the region via the isthmus of the Malay Peninsula, spreading along the coast of the Gulf of Siam, and then through maritime trade routes across the gulf to southern parts of Vietnam.

KHMER EMPIRE

There is evidence that the festival was later adopted by the Khmer Empire, which ruled vast regions of Southeast Asia. Like the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, and Egypt, the Khmer Empire was a

society of rich and complex rituals involving elements of what could be described as paganism – the worship of natural elements, including the sun and water.

The city of Angkor itself – heart of the Khmer Empire – incorporated elements of sun and water worship in the architectural alignment of its temples and man-made baray reservoirs. People of the Khmer Empire bathed under the sun in the belief that it cleansed the soul of bad karma. They called it “Sangkran” or “Songkran,” derived from the ancient Sanskrit language, and the word “sa kr nti,” meaning “astrological passage.”

Over several centuries, from the 13th century onwards, the primarily Hindu Khmer Empire began its transition to Buddhism. The focus of the festival shifted towards merit-making, with people presenting offerings of food and prayers to monks and temples throughout the region. The element of ‘making merit,’ which Thais call ‘tam bun,’ remains a key part of the Songkran festival today.

The earliest evidence of Songkran in Royal Family Law appeared during the reign of King Baromatrailokkanat in the 15th century, during the Ayutthaya Kingdom, the precursor state to modern Thailand. Processions full of pomp and ritual were led by the king to the temple, where he would offer symbolic gifts to Buddha, followed by a ritual ‘Washing of the Buddha.’

No record of water splashing and revelry has been documented from the Ayutthaya period, and as journalist and cultural scholar Sujit Wongthet has pointed out, even as recently as King Rama III (1824-1851), a poem about Songkran from that period makes no mention of people splashing each other with water.

WILDER ANTICS

Some scholars speculate that the origins of water splashing began in 1889, when King Chulalongkorn moved the Thai New Year to April 1; however, it is more likely that this is an attempt by Thailand’s more conservative elements to give the festival’s contemporary water-splashing antics more respectability.

In fact, Sujit, who has also criticized Thailand for its excessive materialism and what he calls the Americanization of Thai culture, suggests that the festival’s water fights are a modern development, stating, “The water fights were encouraged and adopted in modern times to promote tourism.”

This is perhaps the most likely explanation. Over the last three decades, Thailand has campaigned hard to promote tourism in the country. In the late 1990s, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) launched its highly

successful ‘Amazing Thailand’ tourism campaign, showcasing the country’s diverse attractions.

Thailand has sought to leverage everything from their tasty food to the flurry of punches and kicks in the popular spectacle of Muay Thai boxing – the latter a contrast to Myanmar’s martial art called Lethwei, which has a low profile internationally.

While the Amazing Thailand campaign did not specifically promote Songkran, as one of the country’s most important festivals, it was highlighted as an important cultural event “embodying the spirit of Thai hospitality, fun, and community.”

DISCOVER THAINESS

In its more recent campaign ‘Discover Thainess,’ launched by the TAT in 2015, visitors were encouraged to “immerse themselves in authentic Thai experiences,” including participating in cultural activities like Songkran, visiting historical sights, enjoying Thai cuisine, and interacting with local communities.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism accounted for 11 percent of the kingdom’s GDP, a significantly large percentage of its industrial output. Thailand’s innovative and relentless tourism campaigns, promoted by the government and pushed by a powerful tourism industry lobby, have been very successful in positioning Thailand as the region’s tourism gateway, while elevating events like Songkran to heights of success that its regional neighbours could only dream of.

Sujit Wongthet’s claims of excessive materialism are therefore, perhaps not such a far stretch from the truth. While the Thai government has on the one hand promoted family values and community in its tourism campaigns, it has not discouraged the wilder side of Songkran, with its brazen water fights, wild street parties, and alcohol-fuelled road safety issues.

STREET CELEBRATIONS

The epicentre of these Songkran street celebrations could be considered some of Bangkok’s key tourist areas. Khao San Road is perhaps the most well-known. In the 1980s and early 90s, Khao San was a sleepy little street, with a few cheap hostels and guesthouses, but by the beginning of the new millennium, the street and surrounding Banglumpu district, was fast becoming a bohemian tourist destination of chic restaurants, boutique hotels, and chain stores, drawing in significant revenue from tourism, as well as from the young Thai middle-class, looking to escape Thai society’s conventional, conservative norms, and expectations.

Many local and international corporations like Coca-Cola and Pepsi now get in on the Songkran act, holding branded music events and other forms of commercial entertainment. Throughout Thailand and even in some parts of the region, the new commercial Songkran formula has been eagerly adopted, but can Thailand truly claim Songkran as a Thai cultural event? Does Thailand deserve the UNESCO crown for Songkran, as a social practice of intangible cultural significance, exclusive to Thai culture?

For most visitors to Thailand, the assumption is that Songkran is indeed a Thai cultural phenomenon, but that is a misconception. Songkran is part of a shared Buddhist culture that is celebrated throughout the region. In countries like Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka, where Theravada Buddhism is predominant, the Buddhist calendar and the Songkran new year festival have been celebrated for centuries.

In Myanmar it is known as Thingyan; in Cambodia, they call it 'Khmer New Year,' or Choul Chnam Thmey. In Laos, it's Pi Mai – also meaning 'new year.' In fact, the festival is also known by its ancient name, Songkran, in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

DAMPENED IN MYANMAR

Political and economic stability have, of course, played an important role in enabling Thailand to promote the Songkran festival so effectively. Regionally, political

upheaval has dampened celebrations, particularly in Myanmar, where the Thingyan new year festival has become a casualty of the military junta's repression of its people.

Following the military coup in February 2021, the Thingyan water festival was a muted affair in many cities as people boycotted the holiday celebrations in an act of defiance against the junta regime's murderous repression. Instead of celebrating, the Thingyan festival was marked with protests against the military's unjustified power grab. However, the peaceful gatherings were not spared, with the military regime turning the water festival's holiday into a bloodbath of violence – opening fire on protesters in several locations.

Last year, Thingyan again took place amidst the backdrop of the military regime's campaign of widespread violence. The festival is usually a time of renewal and an opportunity to reflect on the values of peace and prosperity, but in the last several years, the military junta has shown just how much disdain they have for the peace and prosperity of the Myanmar people.

It is likely Thingyan celebrations will be muted for a fourth year running this year, as the junta has ominously named the end of the holiday, as the beginning of its official military conscription drive – forcing thousands of youths to undergo military training, and serve in the



junta's Armed Forces against rebel forces, who since the beginning of Operation 1027 led by the Three Brotherhood Alliance reinvigorated the resistance, liberating many towns and cities from the junta in the north.

TRADITIONAL CELEBRATION

As is the case in Thailand and Myanmar, the water festival celebrations in Laos and Cambodia mark traditional New Year's Day in the Buddhist calendar. Like their neighbours, the rituals and traditions in the two countries are similar: A time of family gatherings, paying respect to elders, and visiting temples to make merit. Cambodia, once the centre of the powerful Khmer Empire, continues to face unique economic and social challenges compounded by the failure of successive governments, since the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979. Under Pol Pot, traditional festivals like the Khmer New Year were severely suppressed. The regime sought to eradicate cultural and religious practices, considered to be remnants of a decadent past – a threat to their radical ideology. Buddhist temples and shrines were destroyed, and anyone caught participating in traditional festivities could face harsh punishment.

While this tragic past has had a lasting effect on the Cambodian people, Songkran has become a

much-anticipated holiday in this rural country, with traditional rituals involving the family and merit making taking place at local temples. In the capital, Phnom Penh, and larger cities, the water fights mimic those in Thailand, although more subdued – reflecting the more conservative nature of a people, still stepping cautiously out of a not-too-distant past of repression and tragedy.

Laos has perhaps been the most successful of its mainland neighbours in finding a balance between traditional social practices and rituals, and the Americanized party culture of the West that has taken over Songkran's street celebrations in Thailand, and to a smaller extent, Cambodia.

Ironically, Laos' one-party communist state, which dominates all aspects of politics and harshly restricts civil liberties, has shielded the country from direct western influence. As a result, Laos has found a unique niche in the tourism industry – marketing itself as a boutique destination of historical and cultural interest. Its cultural events – like Songkran – are a charming showcase of tradition: Street markets, local cuisine, crafts, and traditional temple processions, costumes, and dance – all conjure up the delicate aesthetics of The Orient in a past age of spiritualism and worship.



The festival helps people let off steam during the hot season.
Photo: AFP

UNESCO CRITERIA

There are what UNESCO describes as “five broad domains” under which Intangible Cultural Heritage is “manifested.” Thailand falls into the third domain, covering “social practices, rituals, and events.” UNESCO describes this domain as “habitual activities that structure the lives of communities and groups and are shared by and relevant to many of their members.”

It is not publicly known how UNESCO arrived at selecting Thailand as the champion of Songkran, but its decision may appear to be somewhat of a distortion of the event’s shared cultural and historical significance in the region.

In the face of ASEAN’s historical failure to unite the region, and condemn human rights atrocities, war crimes, and even a genocide perpetrated by one of its own members, some might have considered it would have been refreshing to see UNESCO award the Intangible Cultural Heritage flag to the Southeast Asian region – not just to Thailand. After all, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia celebrate and honor their water festival culture.

Its decision is, after all, based on Songkran’s ability to promote “community, cooperation, unity, and forgiveness,” – qualities that are lacking in the region’s

slow progress towards civil liberties and prosperity for all its people.

At the end of the day – putting the UNESCO award to Thailand aside – much of the Southeast Asian region will take time out to celebrate this water festival season and welcome a dousing with water in what is turning out to be a particularly hot “hot season”.



Myanmar kids having fun during Thingyan Water Festival prior to the military coup. Photo: AFP



Kachin fighters. Photo: Supplied

KACHIN

INDEPENDENCE ARMY CAPTURES KEY BORDER TOWN - INC KAREN, RAKHINE, SAGAING, NEW UN ENVOY

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) has entered Lweje, a Myanmar border town in Kachin State across from the Zhangfeng region of China.

Since launching attacks on March 7, the KIA has captured three towns: Lweje, Dawthponeyan, and Sinbo. They have also seized over 50 junta military camps and outposts, mainly located along the Myitkyina-Bhamo highway, which connects to Bhamo-Lweje.

Lweje is one of Myanmar's five official trade posts with China and a significant trade hub for transporting goods and commodities between central Myanmar and China, although smaller than the Muse trade zone in Shan State. Lweje is connected to Laiza, another border town in Kachin State and serving as the KIA's headquarters and capital.

Some of the captured army camps were long-lasting bases of the Myanmar Tatmadaw, including the strategic Simlum Bum (Simlum Mountain) tactical command base, which had been under junta control for over 60 years on the Bhamo-Lwegel Road.

More than 200 junta troops were stationed at Simlum Bum and had previously threatened KIA's second headquarters, Mongjaryang, with short-range artillery strikes.

On March 7, the KIA launched a coordinated assaults on positions in the Myitkyina city outskirts, the Bhamo-Dawthponeyan road, Mansi, and Waimaw. Some of the now captured military camps were originally KIA bases but were surrendered to junta troops during the period of intensified airstrikes and

The junta's Military Operation Command 21 (MOC 21), similar to mechanized infantry divisions in Western armies, and two regular infantry battalions, the 321st and 58th based in Winemaw town, are still operational in the area between Myitkyina and Bhamo.

Several factors contribute to the Kachin victories. These include tactical advancements, gaining manpower and collaboration from allied forces and the People's Defense Forces (PDF), groups supported by the majority Burman population. Additionally, the production of small arms and ammunition has bolstered their efforts, while the junta's troops are overstretched, fatigued from multiple battles, and have low morale.

The Karenni Nationalities Defense Force, All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), and Arakan Army (AA) are also involved in the Kachin offensive.

While the Kachin State PDF or KPDF was established by the opposition National Unity Government (NUG), they follow the KIA's military command during operations. The KIA provides arms, ammunition, and salaries to the KPDF. It is estimated that there are around 4,000 PDF fighters in Kachin State, trained by the KIA.

Following the military coup in Naypyitaw on February 1, 2021, the KIA increased its troop numbers. KIA commanders reported having 16,000 regular troops and 10,000 reservists in October 2010.

KIA'S ROLE IN MYANMAR'S RESISTANCE

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) was one of the early Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) to train young men from central Myanmar who were armed after the military coup on February 1, 2021.

The KIA became involved in the Spring Revolution when its troops attacked and captured the strategically located Alaw Bum military base in Momauk Township, between Laiza and Maijayang, on March 25 after an 11-hour battle with the junta's troops.

They then trained small groups from central Myanmar, particularly Sagaing Region, to form the Kachin People's Defence Force (KPDF). The KIA provided close training and supervision to this PDF, the armed wing of the National Unity Government (NUG).

Lt. Gen. Hkawng Lum, Chief-of-Staff of the KIA, also serves as the Chief Commander of No. 1 Military Region, comprising Kachin State, Sagaing Region, Magwe Region, and Mandalay Region.

In the first two years after the military coup, the KIA and PDF's military tactics focused on guerrilla warfare, aiming to weaken the junta's forces physically and mentally, and threaten their control. By 2023, they had progressed to a "Phase of Strategic Equilibrium," prior to the final phase, the "Phase of Strategic Counter-Offensive."

Before March 2024, the KIA and the PDF's No. 1 Military Region maintained a defensive position but gradually expanded their military activities. PDF forces emerged in Sagaing and upper Magwe Regions.

Since June 2023, the junta launched an anticipated assault on Laiza, but their objective seemed to be containment of KIA movement and activities rather than seizing the KIA's capital. However, the junta's inability to deploy sufficient offensive forces due to fighting on multiple fronts led to the failure of their Laiza offensive.

Following the junta's defeat at Laiza, the KIA launched a counter-offensive in northern Shan State, around Laiza and Kachin State. This was followed by the famous Brotherhood Alliance's Operation 1027, starting in October 2023, which inflicted heavy losses on the junta. After Operation 1027, the KIA resumed its offensive on March 7, 2024.



PDF fighters in Sagaing. Photo: AFP

ARAKAN ARMY MAKES GAINS IN RAKHINE

As of 2 April, the Arakan Army (AA) has captured a number of towns in Rakhine State including Minbya, Mrauk U, Kyauktaw, PawkTaw, PonnaGyun, Myebon, Ramree, and Taung Pyo Letwe. Of crucial importance is what happens in and around the KyaukPhyu Special Economic Zone and deep-sea port. This development is of major concern to China and India who are both invested in the area.

In a statement, the AA said “.. the Arakan People Revolutionary Government would appreciate and welcome all foreign investments that we deem to benefit Arakan and its development, and vow to safeguard their projects and operations as well as security and safety fo their personnel. ...”

The Myanmar junta appears to be growing more desperate over their loosening hold over Rakhine State and Sittwe. As part of efforts to fight back, the junta has been using artillery to target civilian offices including hospitals, and demolishing bridges and roads used by civilians. In addition, the junta has been conscripting Muslim Rohingya from villages and IDP camps. In one incident, 97 Rohingya conscripts were reported killed in a clash with the AA in Angumaw village. Attempts to conscript Rohingya IDPs from Kyauktalone camp resulted in 21 of the conscripts running away. One elder from the camp told local media: “They (the junta) are using us to clash with Rakhine community. They want to show to Rakhine people that Rohingyas are backing them.”

An Indian MP Mr. Pu Valalvena recently visited the area under the security of the AA, to discuss safeguarding Indian investment in the Kaladan project.

Fears have been voiced about the growing number of civilian casualties due to the clashes between the AA and military junta forces. Artillery shelling and airstrikes were particularly severe in MraukU, Minbya, Kyauktaw, and Ponnagyun towns. The AA and the junta started to clash in Ngape township which is located in Magway Region and close to Ann township, the State Administration Council (SAC)'s northern command military base.

AA seized Hkamaya 552, under the command of MOC (15) (Military Operation Command) on 25 March in Buthitaung. The AA has accused the junta of instigating social and religious tensions by manipulating Rohingya protests against them. Hundreds of Rohingya protested in Sittwe and Buthidaung, holding banners expressing “We don't want AA!” and “No war!”. Both the Arakan

and Rohingya communities are feeling anxiety about past tragedies and potential for further conflict in the region.

FIGHTING CLOSE TO THE BORDER IN KAREN STATE

As of 2 April, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), KNU's arm wing and the People's Defense Force (PDF)s have seized two of the State Administration Council's (SAC) Light Infantry Battalions (LIB-355, 356) and the Thingannyinaung police station on 9 and 15 March. They are continuing to fight against the SAC's strategic military base and LIB (357) in the same town, located adjacent to the major Thai-Myanmar trading city of Myawaddy.

On 26 March, KNLA and allied resistance forces successfully captured and secured Hpapon town. They have also taken control of SAC's No. 19 Light Infantry Battalion and No. 642 Weaponry Battalion headquarters. Notably, the KNLA along with NMSP-AD (New Mon State Party - Anti-Dictatorship), seized a police station in Kawkareik township on the same day. This is the very first military cooperation between Karen and Mon revolutionary forces in fighting against SAC's forces since the 2021 coup.

Within a span of three days, between 19 and 21 March, 120 SAC soldiers fled with their weapons to Thailand in three separate groups as KNLA and other revolutionary forces attacked their bases.

On 31 March, SAC's air force bombed a monastery in Hpapon town, where approximately 200 displaced civilians had sought refuge. This attack resulted in the deaths of eight civilians and left fifteen others wounded.

PDFS SEIZE THREE TOWNS IN SAGAING

The People Defence Force (PDF) operating under the command of the National Unity Government (NUG) has seized control of three towns—Khampat, Shwe Pyi Aye, and Mawlu—in the Sagaing Region, as of going to press. This follows the capture of Kawlin town in November, 2023. However, the junta, which had suffered significant defeats in Northern Shan State during Operation 1027, attempted to retake the town several times and managed to retake it in the second week of February. They achieved this through the deployment of their own troops and participation of Pyu Saw Htee, pro regime militia.

The SAC troops and Pyu Saw Htee have burned down over 58,000 civilian houses in Sagaing region since the 2021 coup. In total, the SAC and its allies have torched over 78,000 of civilian houses across Myanmar. The destruction in Sagaing makes up 76 per cent of these scorched earth attacks.

The junta has been using airstrikes to target villages and schools. Significant airstrikes include the attack on Pazi Gyi village in Kantblu township, killing 170 people including 30 children, and Let Yet Kone school in Depayin township killing 13 people including seven young students.

Junta repression is significant in Myanmar's Bamar heartland. The Monywa People's Strike Committee noted an incident in which two political prisoners who had been arrested and imprisoned by the military in Monywa Prison. They were reported taken out of the prison by a military group on 28 March and tortured, one of whom was killed.

NEW UN MYANMAR ENVOY JULIE BISHOP FACES UPHILL STRUGGLE

It is the job, it would appear, that nobody wants. The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on 4 April appointed former Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop as his new envoy for Myanmar. The post has been vacant since Noeleen Heyzer departed in somewhat of a cloud in June 2023. Bishop, currently the chancellor of the Australian National University,

may bring extensive Australian government experience to the role but bringing peace to Myanmar is a tough nut to crack.

Her predecessor Heyzer tried hard to be an interface between the international community, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the military junta that grabbed power in a coup in February 2021. But she came in for heavy criticism from Myanmar opposition supporters after the wording of some of her speeches sought to include the junta at the negotiating table. Khaled Khiari, the UN assistant secretary general for the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, said 4 April that the aim of installing Bishop was to allow "member states and all stakeholders to advance toward a Myanmar-led political solution to the crisis."

That is all well and good. But it is almost guaranteed that as soon as Bishop in her role as Myanmar envoy steps foot in Naypyidaw and meets with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing, the critics will be lambasting her for attempting to include the junta – the very idea an anathema to the opposition Spring Revolutionaries – in a negotiated settlement. Myanmar's opposition, including the National Unity Government (NUG), appear to seek a solution in which the current military generals are ousted and not allowed to sit at the negotiating table.



IN THE SPOTLIGHT: Former Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop (R) speaking to Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (C) and his wife Wan Azizah Ismail (L) during an event at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra on March 7, 2024. Photo: AFP

'KAMIKAZE' DRONES

ATTACK ON NAYPYIDAW MILITARY AND AIRPORT INDICATE RESISTANCE NET TIGHTENING

Drones used in attack.

People's Defence Forces (PDF) and PDF Insight claim the Myanmar resistance used drones to target the Military Council military headquarters and the international airport in Naypyidaw on the morning of 4 April.

According to a statement from a PDF representative, the attacks were carried out in accordance with directives from the Special Operations Department of the Ministry of Defense of the opposition National Unity Government (NUG).

"We are doing it according to the instructions of the Special Operations Department of the Ministry of Defense, and the details will be released by the MOD (National Unity Government, Ministry of Defense)," said a member of the PDF, who requested anonymity due to lack of authorization to comment on official reports.

At approximately 9:00 am, 16 drones, referred to as suicide drones or kamikaze drones, struck the military headquarters overseeing the entire Military Council, while 13 drones targeted Naypyidaw International Airport, also known as Ela or Ayelar airport. The airport is utilized by both military and commercial aircraft.

Security measures are stringent in Naypyidaw, the capital and headquarters of the Military Council or Myanmar military junta, although previous attacks by defense forces employing heavy weaponry on Military

Council installations have occurred.

Currently, communication with the entire military headquarters is disrupted, making it difficult to assess the extent of the damage. However, sources indicate that Ayelar airport,



Ayelar air force base.

housing the Ayelar airport, housing the Ayelar air force base, is experiencing fires.

Meanwhile, the junta claims to have shot down 13 "terrorist" drones over the military-built capital Naypyidaw, in what appeared to be a rare attack on the junta's centre of power by its opponents. Four drones approaching Naypyidaw airport and three drones approaching Zayarthiri township in the capital "were successfully shot down and destroyed", the junta's information team said in a statement, adding there was no damage or casualties.



Activist Igor Blazevic

ACTIVIST CLAIMS PDF ATTACK ON THE MYANMAR CAPITAL UPS THE ANTE FOR THE JUNTA

Activist Igor Blazevic claims Naypyidaw was in a panic following the drone attacks on the capital last week, the attack being an unwanted disruption for the Myanmar generals just prior to the Thingyan water festival. Blazevic says this will be a significant shock within the military and their supporters.

This is exactly what is needed, he says:

1) On one side military is exposed to constant losses of bases, soldiers and parts of territory across the country. This is keeping military stretched over huge country and not being able to concentrate troops and military hardware to either defend themselves or to undertake successful offensives.

Those losses still do not and cannot topple down military as the whole, but they are making them constantly "bleed". By constantly "bleeding", they are becoming weaker and weaker;

2) At the same time on the ground guerilla units are constantly harassing and disturbing junta troops and junta's administrative structures wherever they are. Small PDF guerrilla units hitting them on roads and small posts and offices anywhere and everywhere across the country. This is like thousands of bees attacking and biting a big wounded animal.

This dimension of resistance is significantly undermining the movements of military, it is cutting their supply lines, it is disrupting their governing and policing capacity and is making them feeling insecure everywhere as soon as they go out from fortified bases.

This is making them feel insecure and mentally mad;

3) Spectacular well-prepared attacks at the heart of military power (in Naypyidaw, or Yangon or important military airports, or fuel depots and similar) are inflicting major psychological blows to military control.

In the kind of warfare which we have in Myanmar, it is not possible to totally defeat regular military force in conventional way, in frontal offensives and direct fight of resistance military against junta military. The way how to defeat them is to make them overstretched and weak to the breaking point, and make them in one moment psychologically break. So that they in one moment military implode from bottom up (weak, exhausted, demoralized ground troops start, in a falling domino way, to give up and lay down weapons). This is one way. The other way is to see psychological breakdown happening on the level of officers cadre, with all of them losing completely both trust and fear from MAH (Min Aung Hlaing) and SAC (State Administration Council) and some of them then decide to try a counter-coup. It can be also combination of both.

It is impossible to know how and when the SAC will collapse. However, it is certain that SAC will collapse. The three above-described dynamics are bringing us in that direction, Blazevic adds.



Photo: AFP

CONSCRIPTION STARTS IN 172 OUT OF 330 MYANMAR TOWNSHIPS

The Myanmar junta is now implementing the military conscription law in 172 townships, where selection of candidates for the army draft is now underway, according to Data for Myanmar.

The Military Conscription Law, despite being bought in by an earlier military dictatorship, was only enacted on 10 February 2024. Initially, the junta started selecting candidates for conscription in the regions of Yangon Ayeyarwady and Bago and the Union Territory of Naypyitaw because of their high populations.

The junta is planning to soon commence conscription in the remaining 158 of Myanmar's 330 townships, though it has not yet announced when.

Many young adults have already fled their homes to avoid being selected for conscription, with many trying to get to Thailand or other neighbouring countries. If people flee after having been selected for military service their family members are often threatened by the junta and forced to pay money.

Defence forces and the National Unity Government (NUG) have encouraged people not to participate in the conscription process. In some areas there is unrest over the way junta administrators are summoning youths and selecting them for conscription. Across the country administrators and other officials implementing the Conscription Law have been killed.

The Military Conscription Law states that men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27 are eligible for conscription and if conscripted they must serve a minimum of two years in the army. Additionally, anyone deemed to have 'specialist' skills can be conscripted up to the age of 45 for men and 35 for women and will have to serve a minimum of three years.

MYANMAR JUNTA SAYS PROCESS UNDERWAY FOR MILITARY TRAINING FOR NEW CONSCRIPTS

The Military Council's Minister of Defence General Tin Aung San said on 2 April that they have fixed the date for opening the first batch of boot camp training in April 2024 and work is underway to issue the Rules for the People's Military Service Law.

He said these things at the 3/2024 coordination meeting of the Central Body for Summoning People's Military Service held in Naypyidaw on 2 April. He also said that the final version of the Rules was submitted to the Ministry of Legal Affairs to check in accordance with the legal affairs and to seek their legal advice.

"After receiving the recommendations from the ministry, the draft rules will be amended and submitted to the Union government meeting via the Security, Peace and Stability and Rule of Law Committee so as to release the Rules if it is approved," he added.

CORE DEVELOPMENTS

He said that exemptions from conscription as per the law, deferment of the recruit, exemptions from conscription as prescribed by the Central Body and concessions granted had been distributed to all States and Regions.

He added that many people voluntarily registered for military service, but the ward-township level officials should supervise and ensure they are actually offering voluntary service. And moreover, the work for summoning the new recruits, collecting data from them, doing medical checkups for fitness and summoning all eligible people for military service should be strictly supervised, guided and examined at the grassroots level of Ward and Village-Tracts, General Tin Aung San said at the coordination meeting.

The Military Council's spokesman Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun said on 27 March that all the recruits in the first batch would be voluntarily enlisted but in fact the military is forcibly recruiting the youths under the age group mentioned in this Law.

The Township-level Summoning People's Military Service are visiting door to door in every ward to check the household registration and collected data

of the youths who are eligible under this Conscription Law and then they are summoned to their offices for enlistment.

The Military Council has said that they would recruit 5,000 personnel per month starting from April this year under the People's Military Service Law (Conscription Law) which came into force on 10 February 2024 but they had started the recruitment earlier than they said.

The Military Council said that they summoned youths under the People's Military Service Law in Yangon, Mandalay and Magway Regions and Naypyitaw Council Union Territory starting from 29 March for basic military training.

The Military Council enforced this law hurriedly after they lost many army outposts and stations across the country and they are facing many frontlines and war theatres across the country simultaneously. The junta warned that the draft dodgers would face up to 5 years' imprisonment.

The National Unity Government (NUG) issued an announcement which says that this Conscription Law forcibly enacted by the Military Council is illegal and the people do not need to abide by this law.



Young people queue for a Thai visa at the Thai Embassy in Yangon. Photo: AFP



Photo: AFP

EXAMINING THE TENSIONS OF THE CHINA-MYANMAR RELATIONSHIP

Crisis Group Asia recently released a new report looking at relations between China and Myanmar titled *Scam Centres and Ceasefires: China-Myanmar Ties Since the Coup*.

The report, dated 27 March, points out that notwithstanding a recent flurry of diplomacy, China remains unhappy with Myanmar's military regime and resistant to normalising relations. This was well demonstrated when in late 2023, China gave tacit support to a major rebel offensive in north-eastern Myanmar that dealt the junta a resounding defeat in a strategic enclave on the Chinese border.

Crisis Group believes that Myanmar-China relations are important because China has more leverage in Myanmar than any other foreign power. While it cannot dictate outcomes, it can influence events. Beijing is cautious about outside involvement in its neighbourhood, but its ambivalence about the regime leaves room for greater international consensus on how to deal with Myanmar's post-coup crisis.

The report says that for China, the February 2021 coup was an unwelcome complication in its relations with neighbouring Myanmar. Xi Jinping had built warm relations with the Aung San Suu Kyi administration and was preparing major infrastructure projects across the country that would connect south-western China to the Bay of Bengal – part of Beijing's long-held strategic and economic objectives.

The coup brought insecurity and uncertainty to Myanmar, making big investments unviable. It also

brought to power a leader, Min Aung Hlaing, who harbours markedly anti-China sentiments, even by the standards of the military he leads.

As a result, Beijing has declined to normalise relations with the regime, and it continues to signal its unhappiness bilaterally (declining to invite Min Aung Hlaing to China despite much lobbying) and multilaterally (allowing the National Unity Government (NUG)-supporting Myanmar permanent representative to the United Nations (UN) to remain in his seat in New York).

China's tacit support for the armed offensive against the military and its allies in the Kokang region is an even more striking signal of its irritation, in particular at the regime's failure to take action against scam centres targeting Chinese nationals.

But as the report points out, Beijing's displeasure has not, however, translated into disengagement. As part of a longstanding border management approach, it seeks to maintain relations with all the main parties to preserve its leverage and stop geopolitical rivals from capitalising on turmoil. Nor, should push come to shove, would it likely stand idly by and let the regime collapse, lest it be replaced by the Western-leaning NUG or some other configuration of a broadly anti-China resistance movement.

Crisis Group believes that there is room for different actors to work together on improving outcomes in Myanmar.

CORE DEVELOPMENTS

While China has traditionally taken a border management approach that focuses on minimising active conflict, it should resist overly transactional or short-term approaches in favour of promoting long-term stability, including by supporting legal sources of income in enclaves under the sway of armed groups along its border, while pushing to end illicit activity across the board, not merely the forms that have the biggest impact on China and its citizens.

The report also says that the NUG's long-term strategic interests would be best served if it continues

signalling that it is neither excessively Western-leaning nor a threat to Chinese interests in the region, even if this does not immediately lead to warmer relations with Beijing.

Crisis Group believes that building an international consensus for action on Myanmar, including at the Security Council, remains difficult but not impossible. While maintaining dialogue and preserving the possibility for future action is key, members should seize opportunities to raise the profile of Myanmar's oft-forgotten plight for a global audience.

WHY ARE EAOS FIGHTING EACH OTHER IN NORTHERN SHAN STATE?

Ai Sai (Mao Land) for Mizzima

The Northern Shan region has been teeming with uncertainties and anarchy for decades, since Burma's independence, if not before.

Throughout history, whenever central power collapses, fighting breaks out. For instance, the Burmese kingdom's power deteriorated at the sunset of the Konbaung dynasty just before the British colonial era, and some of the northern Shan regions were liberated from the Burmese Kingdom. But they couldn't substitute another power.

Hsen Wi was the earliest Shan state which was liberated from the Burmese Kingdom's umbrella. Hsen Wi was also the biggest state in Northern Shan and it covered territories to the south, which become known as Mong Yai, Kesi Mansan, Mong Hsu, Mong Nawng, Mong Kawng, and Lai Kha. To Hsen Wi East, Kokang and the two Wa states that came under its jurisdiction later. To the west were Hsi Paw, Mong Mit, and Tawng Peng (Ta'ang Palaung). Collectively, these areas made up Northern Shan.

DID HISTORY REPEAT ITSELF?

After the 2021 post-coup, erosion of central power in Myanmar and the deterioration of the Myanmar Army, old Hsen Wi state, the current major operation area of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, became the first liberated area for rebel alliances after they drove out the Myanmar army's major outposts, camps, battalions, and commands.

But, locals in Northern Shan State still face uncertainties and unsound conditions, despite having gained some liberty.

They worry about the combination of the SAC's threats and competition between different ethnic armed groups in the area. Inter-ethnic tension is at boiling point. The area is a multi-ethnic area, and comprised of more than five different ethnic groups. The area also serves as one of the important economic gateways between China and central Myanmar.

At least four major ethnic armed groups are active throughout the areas seized by the Three Brotherhood Alliance.

Photo: AFP

CORE DEVELOPMENTS

Before Operation 1027 – beginning in October 2023 – some of these groups did not have cordial relations with each other.

For instance, the Kachin believe that some parts of the Northern State are part of the larger Kachin State and want an autonomous Kachin 'sub-state' in northern Shan State.

The Palaung or Ta'ang ethnic communities also seek control to create their own state.

The local Shan communities are unhappy with the Kachin and Ta'ang's claims. When Operation 1027 succeeded and as new administrations were installed across the area by the Kokang-led rebels, relations have worsened.

OPERATION 1027 CHANGES ARMED GROUP RELATIONS

All of the active rebel groups in Northern Shan and Kachin states are the same umbrella group of the so-called Wa rebel United Wa State Army-led FPNCC (Federal Political Negotiation and Consultation Committee) alliance.

Operation 1027 changed the power dynamic among the FPNCC members.

Previously, the UWSA, KIA, and SSPP/SSA were the FPNCC powerhouses, but following the Operation 1027 offensive the ethnic armed organisations that

make up the Three Brotherhood Alliance have seen their political power increase which has exposed increasing factionalism between the groups fighting the junta.

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

There was fighting between the MNDAA and the Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA) in Hsen Wi Township on 26 and 27 March.

Unfortunately, the UWSA, as the group coordinating the FPNCC, cannot sort out these problems because they are beholden to groups that produce and smuggle drugs to fund themselves, such as the TNLA.

This means that there might in the future be more fighting between different ethnic armed organisations in northern Shan State.

SHORT-SIGHTED VISION

So long as narrow ethnonationalism, area expansion, and short-sightedness are the norms, the inter-ethnic or inter-ethnic armed groups conflicts will be hard to resolve. With these uncertainties, it will be hard to completely cleanse Shan State of Myanmar junta positions.

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Photo: AFP

UN CALLS ON WORLD NOT TO FORGET SUFFERING IN MYANMAR

Millions of people in Myanmar “cannot afford for us to forget” their suffering, a UN official said Thursday last week, describing mounting hunger, mass displacement and safety concerns as the conflict between the junta and ethnic minority groups drags on.

“As the conflict continues to escalate, as humanitarian needs intensify, and with the monsoon season just around the corner, time is of essence for the people of Myanmar,” UN official Lisa Doughten told the Security Council, on behalf of humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths.

“They cannot afford for us to forget. They cannot afford to wait. They need the support of the international community now to help them survive in this time of fear and turmoil.”

According to the United Nations, 2.8 million people are displaced in Myanmar, 90 percent of them since the junta took power in 2021. That number has only risen as fighting has intensified in the Southeast Asian nation since last autumn.

In October, an alliance of ethnic minority fighters launched a surprise offensive in northern Shan state, capturing territory and taking control of lucrative trade routes to China.

Across the country, residents “are living in daily fear for their lives,” Doughten said - especially since the junta said in February it would enforce a military service law, allowing it to call up all men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27 for two years.

“Across Myanmar, hunger is mounting. In 2024, food insecurity is now affecting some 12.9 million people - nearly 25 percent of the population,” the UN official added.

Khaled Khiari, the UN assistant secretary general for the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, said an end to the “military’s campaign of violence and political repression” would be “a vital step.”

He expressed concern about what he called “unprecedented” unrest in western Rakhine state, where civilians, notably Rohingya, are caught in fighting between the military and fighters affiliated with the Arakan Army. About one million Rohingya, a mainly Muslim minority that has faced persecution in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar, have fled to neighboring Bangladesh.

The current situation in Rakhine means there is no “immediate prospect for the safe, dignified, voluntary and sustainable repatriation of the Rohingya to their places of origin or choice,” Khiari said.

To try to find a solution to Myanmar’s political crisis, Khiari said that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres plans to appoint a new special envoy to the country “in the coming days.” The post has been vacant since June 2023.

AFP



Photo: AFP

MYANMAR UNIVERSITY ENROLLMENT SURGES AS STUDENTS SEEK TO AVOID CONSCRIPTION LAW

Due to the conscription law passed by the Myanmar Military Council, students who have been away from university for a long time are returning to school in large numbers. They chose to enroll in school to avoid conscription.

According to Ma Ohnmar (name changed), a school affairs assistant, many young people who joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) by boycotting the junta's schools have now returned to school as a result of the conscription law, and school registration fees have also climbed three times.

"The conscription law has caused more students to return to school this year," said Ma Ohnmar. "School enrollment fees are about 70,000 kyat. In the past, school enrollment fees were about just 20,000 kyat."

According to the conscription law enacted on 10 February by the Military Council, those who can be temporarily deferred from military service are those who have received a certificate of unfit health, civil servants and students, those who are nursing elderly parents, those who are receiving drug addiction treatment, and those who are in prison. Therefore,

eligible young people have tried to evade the military service law in various ways, such as leaving for foreign countries to study and work.

A philosophy student of Dagon University told Mizzima that he was unable to go abroad for various reasons, so he had to return to university in Myanmar without any choice. "For me, going abroad is not easy. It's not easy to even go to work, let alone go to school. What's worse is that now I am the one supporting my family, so I can't go to other countries like others. I had to go back to school because I became a little nervous about the military conscription law."

"I didn't have a chance to attend the first year of my university because of the COVID-19 global pandemic. When the schools did reopen, I did not attend at all. Now I have to go back to school because of the current situation. In order to be suspended from serving in the army, I need a reason to do so," said the student.

"Even though we decided to go back to school, whoever catches their (authorities') eyes might have to be forcibly conscripted."

The age for military service is set as 18-35 years for men, 18-27 years for women, 18-45 years for expert men, and 18-35 years for expert women. Every eligible citizen must serve for 24 months in the army, and those who are called up as scholars or experts must serve for 36 months.

For some students, school affairs assistants said that in addition to the school applications, they provide a testimonial certificate of attendance. It takes around 2 weeks to make the certificate and there is a price rate for the certificate.

"We also provide school letters. In fact, it's fine if you show the school enrollment. But, some eligible people are worried and try to get a recommendation letter. It costs about 20,000 kyat more for the letter of recommendation. Each price is different. Some of them set a higher price than this," said Ma Ohnmar.

It is learnt that there are more young men who ask for the letters of recommendation than there are attending schools. It has also been announced that there are currently no plans to recruit women for military service in the implementation of the conscription law. The NGO Data for Myanmar announced that the Military Council's conscription law is being quickly implemented before the end of April, and has already spread to 172 out of Myanmar's 330 townships.

Universities have set a deadline for accepting applications for first-year students until the end of March. However, students said that the deadline may be extended due to the first year's large enrollment. For senior students, enrollment will be accepted until the end of April.

The tuition fees of state-owned public universities used to be around 20,000 kyat per annum, which are low prices. Currently, under the Military Council, the tuition fees of the state-owned universities have increased threefold.

In a variety of ways, a large number of young people are leaving Myanmar, while a significant number of those who remain are returning to their universities in order to evade the conscription law.

BEIJING'S EXCESSIVE MARITIME CLAIMS THREATEN FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION

SUN LEE

In its latest escalation of territorial assertiveness in the South China Sea, Beijing has unilaterally drawn a new expansive baseline in the northern Gulf of Tonkin, encroaching deep into international waters. This brazen move, which analysts deem excessive and a violation of international law, has rightly drawn protests from Vietnam and raised concerns about the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) disregard for maritime rules and norms.

The Gulf of Tonkin, known as Vinh Bac Bo in Vietnamese, is a strategically vital waterway shared by Vietnam and China, having immense economic, defense, and security implications for both nations. In 2000, after years of negotiations, Hanoi and Beijing signed a Maritime Boundary Delimitation Agreement, clearly demarcating each other's territorial seas, exclusive economic zones, and continental shelves in the Gulf. This landmark agreement was hailed as a model for resolving maritime disputes through diplomacy and adherence to international law.

Yet, the CCP's recent unilateral action threatens to undermine this hard-won agreement and further escalate tensions in the region. By drawing a new baseline that encroaches up to 50 nautical miles into international waters, Beijing has effectively laid claim to vast swaths of maritime territory that rightfully belong to the global commons. This brazen overreach not only violates the spirit and letter of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) but also sets a dangerous precedent for disregarding established maritime boundaries and norms.

The implications of China's excessive claims are far-reaching and deeply concerning. By asserting its jurisdiction over expanded international waters within the new baseline, Beijing could impede the freedom of navigation and innocent passage, principles enshrined in UNCLOS which are critical to global maritime trade and security. Foreign vessels, including commercial ships and naval craft, could now face restrictions or outright denial of access to these waters, potentially disrupting vital shipping lanes and heightening the risk of confrontation.

Moreover, the new baseline potentially gives China a pretext to push Vietnam into renegotiating the '2000 Boundary Agreement,' further eroding the hard-won gains of diplomacy and escalating regional tensions. Such a move would not only undermine the credibility of existing maritime agreements but also embolden Beijing's revisionist ambitions, setting a dangerous precedent for other disputed territories in the South China Sea and beyond.



Supporters of China rally to welcome the arrival of a Chinese naval ship in the Philippines. Photo: AFP

The CCP's justification for this excessive maritime claim – asserting national sovereignty and jurisdiction – rings hollow and betrays a disturbing disregard for international law and the rights of other nations. By unilaterally redrawing boundaries and encroaching on shared waters, Beijing is essentially attempting to rewrite the rules to suit its own narrow interests, undermining the very foundation of the rules-based international order.

Crucially, China's actions in the Gulf of Tonkin are part of a broader pattern of aggressive behavior in the South China Sea, where Beijing has systematically militarized artificial islands, intimidated regional neighbors, and made sweeping territorial claims that flagrantly disregard international law. From the Paracel Islands to the Spratly archipelago, the CCP has repeatedly demonstrated its unwillingness to respect the sovereign rights and interests of other nations, fueling regional instability and eroding trust in its commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes.

The international community cannot afford to turn a blind eye to China's provocative actions in the Gulf of Tonkin. Acquiescing to Beijing's excessive maritime claims would set a dangerous precedent, emboldening the CCP to escalate its revisionist ambitions and further undermine the rules-based order that has underpinned regional peace and prosperity for decades.

A strong and unified response is imperative. Vietnam and other nations affected by China's overreach must resolutely protest and bring international attention to this issue, raising it through bilateral channels and multilateral forums. The United States, as a staunch defender of freedom of navigation and a crucial player in the Indo-Pacific region, should consider conducting freedom of navigation operations to physically challenge China's excessive claims and affirm its commitment of upholding international maritime law.

Furthermore, the international community must explore avenues for strengthening the enforcement mechanisms of UNCLOS and other international legal frameworks governing maritime affairs. Failure to hold Beijing accountable for its transgressions will only embolden its disregard for established norms and further erode the credibility of the rules-based order.

The CCP's actions in the Gulf of Tonkin are a stark reminder of the regime's growing assertiveness and its willingness to undermine international law and regional stability in pursuit of its narrow, revisionist ambitions. By drawing an excessive baseline and encroaching on international waters, Beijing is not only challenging the sovereignty and rights of regional nations but also posing a direct threat to the freedom of navigation – a principle that underpins global maritime commerce and security.

The international community must stand united in defense of the rules-based order and the principles of freedom of navigation and respect for international law. Acquiescing to China's excessive maritime claims would set a dangerous precedent and embolden the CCP's revisionist agenda, further destabilizing the Indo-Pacific region and undermining the foundations of the international system. It is time for a firm and principled response, one that upholds the shared values of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Sun Lee is the pseudonym of a writer who cover Asian affairs. The views expressed do not necessarily represent the views of Mizzima Media Group.

WEST FOCUSED ON UKRAINE AND ISRAEL CONFLICTS AS NATO TURNS 75



NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg speaking at NATO headquarters. Photo: AFP

Two world hotspots have the West embroiled, digging deep into their pockets for funding.

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg urged the United States to stick together with Europe as the Western military alliance turned 75 on Thursday last week menaced by an aggressive Russia and the spectre of Donald Trump's return to power.

On a geopolitical level, the West is heavily focused on the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel, with Western governments coming under public attack for the billions of dollars and weaponry being sent to fuel the conflicts.

The Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 re-invigorated NATO as it was confronted by one of the most serious challenges since it emerged from the ashes of World War II to counter the Soviet Union.

The alliance has bolstered its forces across eastern Europe and grown to 32 members after Finland and Sweden joined its ranks.

But while the war has refocused NATO's attention on its old nemesis Moscow to the east - there is also another threat unnerving allies from leading power the United States in the west.

That's the possible return to the White House of Trump, who undermined NATO's collective defence guarantee by saying he'd encourage Russia to attack any members not spending enough on defence.

"I do not believe in America alone, just as I don't believe in Europe alone," Stoltenberg said at a ceremony at NATO's Brussels headquarters.

"I believe in America and Europe together in NATO, because, fundamentally, we are stronger and safer together."

In a bid to stave off Trump's criticisms, NATO has showcased increased spending by its European allies - with 20 members this year set to hit a target of two percent of GDP for defence.

"North America also needs Europe," Stoltenberg said, after a Belgian military band played the NATO anthem.

"Through NATO, the United States has more friends and more allies than any other major power."

Ukraine wants air defence

While Trump looms over the future of the alliance, NATO countries face the more pressing challenge of supporting Ukraine so it does not lose its fight to push back Russia.

Alliance members have thrown their weight behind Kyiv - which is bidding to join NATO - by sending Ukraine weapons worth tens of billions of dollars. Much of this funding has gone to military industrial companies.

But those supplies have now dwindled as crucial US support remains blocked by political wrangling. On the frontline, Ukraine's outgunned forces have been pushed onto the back foot.

In the face of surging Russian missile attacks on its infrastructure, Kyiv is pleading with its Western backers to send all the Patriot defence systems they can spare.

"At the same time we are celebrating (the NATO anniversary) ... Ukraine is having a difficult time," said Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna. "We must give rapid support to Ukraine.

The military support, ammunition but also air defence." Stoltenberg, meanwhile, has proposed a 100-billion-euro (\$108-billion) five-year fund in a bid to ensure long-term support for Kyiv. He is also pushing to get NATO as an organisation more directly involved in coordinating deliveries, something the alliance has so far refused to do out of concern it could drag it closer to war with Russia.

Part of the urgency for the plan, officials say, is to try to protect support for Ukraine from Trump's possible return. But there remain many questions over how any financing would work and allies will look to thrash out details by a summit in Washington in July.



Ukrainian soldier looks at an armoured car. Photo: AFP

Widening Middle Eastern war

Meanwhile, the Israeli conflict appears to be worsening as casualties in Gaza increase, and Israel attacks targets in Lebanon and strikes Iranian consulate buildings in Damascus, Jordan.

Israel's retaliatory campaign in Gaza has killed at least 32,975 people, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza.

US Congress and Western governments are finding it harder morally to support Benjamin Netanyahu's government, rattled by large street protests in capitals

around the world calling for a ceasefire. For the Joe Biden administration in Washington, the heavy financial support for the Israeli offensive – dubbed a genocide by the United Nations and many other critics – could have negative effects on the Democratic Party's chances in this year's November elections.



People protest against Israel's war in Gaza. Photo: AFP

MAPPING THE MYANMAR CONFLICT

Nathan Ruser works at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and brings his background in geo-mapping to attempt to make sense of the unconventional warfare raging across Myanmar since the 2021 coup.

“Internal conflict is ecology, in the way that these actors interact and compete, and Myanmar is a proving ground for that strategy,” he tells the Insight Myanmar podcast.

Due to the complex interplay of geographic and ethnic diversity, combined with the absence of clear battle lines, he found that trying to understand the Myanmar crisis through a framework that did not take into account the country’s peculiarities was all but impossible. Indeed, Ruser can’t find any contemporary conflict that is in any way similar to what’s been happening in Myanmar; he points to maybe the longstanding conflict in Afghanistan, or the Vietnam War, as more apt comparisons.

“Understanding the tone of the conflict is one of the most important parts of mapping it,” he explains. Ruser describes how the initial stages of the coup saw the military holed up in fortified bases while sending out marauding bands of soldiers, as had traditionally been the military’s strategy; faced with superior force, the resistance usually melted away to avoid engagement. Today, however, the situation has changed, and is far more complicated. Resistance forces often patrol right up to the military bases, while military convoys assault villages many miles away, and because of this, it’s nearly impossible to define regional control in binary terms. Drawing on Stathis Kalyvas’s *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Ruser created a nuanced mapping technique that relies on a sliding numerical scale. This approach allows him to map out the degree of relative control across a region - which has become so complex that at times he has to proceed village by village! This is also quite different than the typical media approach, which tends to paint with a very broad and simplistic - and often inaccurate - brush.

Ruser also stresses that to really get a more comprehensive understanding of the situation as it unfolds, ground reporting is needed alongside satellite data. Where the latter gives a valuable overview -



for example, helping to distinguish which outposts are manned by which group - the former fleshes out important human details and nuance that satellite data cannot, such as the specific leadership structure in an area, or the general morale of troops in the field. Interestingly, he finds that junta bases are particularly easy to distinguish in a satellite view, because they all have helicopter landing pads nearby. This highlights the regime’s reliance on air support, and thereby shows how their forces are viewed as little more than an occupying army; in other words, they are so hated by the local population that their only lifeline to supplies and reinforcements is via the air. Ruser also maps out military-installed roadblocks because it helps him determine where nearby soldiers are probably located, which then informs his analyses when he incorporates data regarding recent skirmishes.

Ruser’s recent study of satellite imagery indicates that the junta’s military bases are becoming even more fortified and increasingly confined to “shrinking zones of control;” in line with this, he notes that military patrols go out less frequently and cover less ground all of which paint a picture of a military becoming less mobile, and more defensive. That said, he feels they maintain a clear advantage in urban centers, so he doesn’t expect Burmese cities to see conflict anytime soon. He references a similarity in how Assad developed his “Syria Strategy,” in which the regime’s forces pulled back from the countryside where the resistance was stronger, and consolidated its control in and around the major cities.

CHECK OUT PODCAST

Listen to the details of his work on the Insight Myanmar podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2024/3/1/episode-227-above-the-fray>



OUTGOING INDIAN AMBASSADOR MEETS MYANMAR JUNTA CHIEF

Vinay Kumar, the outgoing Indian ambassador to Myanmar, met with Myanmar junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyidaw on 29 March, according to state media. Their discussion encompassed various aspects including bilateral relations, trade, economics, investment, cotton production, pharmaceutical manufacturing, military cooperation, health support for Myanmar's armed forces and civilians, efforts towards border stability, and preparations for the general election in Myanmar, according to state media.

Indian Ambassador Kumar was set to conclude his tour of duty in Myanmar and return to India following this meeting.

Civil war in Myanmar has pushed refugees into India's northeast. In response, India plans to allocate about US\$3.7 billion to secure its permeable 1610-kilometer border with Myanmar with a fence over the span of about a decade

JUNTA CHIEF ENGAGES IN TALKS WITH CHINESE ENVOY

Junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, on 1 April engaged in discussions with Deng Xijun, the Special Envoy for Asian Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, at the office of the junta's Military Council.

According to the junta-controlled newspaper, their conversation centred on China's assistance in Myanmar's peace process, collaboration in narcotic drug eradication, bilateral efforts to combat online gambling and scams, border trade facilitation, and political developments in Myanmar.

In November last year, the junta chief accused an unnamed foreign country, widely believed to be China, of supplying weapons to the Three Brotherhood Alliance. He said that ethnic armed groups in northern Shan state used "drones with advanced technology" to attack army positions and were aided by "foreign drone experts."

China brokered a ceasefire in January 2024 between Myanmar's junta army and the Three Brotherhood Alliance in northern Shan State.

Recently, there's been crackdowns on online money scams in Myanmar perpetrated by Chinese criminals. On 1 April, the Chinese embassy in Yangon, Myanmar, announced that a collaborative police operation between Myanmar and China led to the arrest of over 800 people suspected of engaging in cross-border scamming activities.

VICE-SENIOR GENERAL SOE WIN ADDRESSES MEETING WITH TRAINEES AND CADETS

Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the junta's Defence Services Vice-Senior General Soe Win met trainees from the infantry platoon training course and cadets from Bahtoo Station at the Combat Forces Training School on 2 April.

During the meeting, he urged all trainees to organize the people not to follow the propaganda of armed terrorist groups.

By "armed terrorist groups", he meant ethnic armed groups and the National Unity Government or NUG's People's Defense Force (PDF), which are fighting against the junta. In contrast, the junta frequently uses airstrikes, even targeting civilians.



NUG ACTING PRESIDENT EMPHASIZES COOPERATION WITH KIA

At a meeting of the National Unity Government (NUG) on 2 April, Duwa Lashi La, the acting president of the NUG said that it is constantly striving to fully cooperate with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), according to NUG's official Facebook Page.

The KIA has carried out offensives against the junta army bases in Kachin State. It seized Lwegel town, across the China-Myanmar border from Zhangfeng, in Longchuan County, Yunnan Province, China, on 31 March.

The acting president also urged NUG officials not to forget that citizens have entrusted their lives, homes, and future fortunes to the NUG.

The acting president also noted that the wave of the Spring Revolution has reached its highest point only because of the support of the students, the public, and the various ethnic groups involved.

Vancouver screening of short films raises funds for Myanmar's Spring Revolution

In Vancouver in western Canada, the Artist's Shelter organized a screening of four short films titled "Daring Flowers" and raised over 4,500 Canadian dollars in funds for the Spring Revolution, according to a post on Public Voice Television's Facebook Page, which was



established in April 2021 to amplify the authentic voice of the people of Myanmar.

More than 100 fans attended the film screening, "Daring Flower".

The film screening in Vancouver featured the shorts "Together", "The Guilt", "We Only Have Ourselves", and "The Unknown Infinity".

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Analysis & Insight



DIGITAL MAGAZINE

Our relaunch of Mizzima Weekly – with Issue 1 released on 11 April – will provide readers with a more focused read on what matters in Myanmar and the wider region, with an emphasis on analysis, insight and providing key talking points.