

New age rebels winning the fight in Myanmar

Arakan Army's highly mobile and lethal tactics have made a mockery of government's peace process

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Myanmar's insurgent Arakan Army has deployed hit-and-run tactics the military has found difficult to counter and combat.
Photo: Twitter

As Myanmar's government seeks for peace, its autonomous military, the Tatmadaw, faces a new type of insurgency it seems increasingly ill-prepared to counter and combat.

Myanmar's "new" insurgents are highly mobile and, unlike the country's older generation rebel groups, maintain few fixed positions, using instead hit-and-run attacks that have rendered the Tatmadaw's traditional frontal assaults increasingly ineffective.

The situation is in many ways similar to the one the United States faced in the Vietnam War: an invisible enemy which strikes from the shadows, making counterattacks more likely to hit civilians than enemy combatants.

That's all conspiring to undermine the Tatmadaw's leverage and clout against ethnic armed groups that rely on local population support to sustain their insurgent fights. Previously, Myanmar's myriad rebel groups aimed to control large swathes of territory protected by fixed and often well-armed installations.

The Karen National Union (KNU), long firmly entrenched on the Thai border, maintained several bases along the Moei river and a well-fortified headquarters with permanent buildings housing its civilian administration and military command units. Those positions eventually became easy targets for the Tatmadaw, causing one after another to fall under traditional assaults in the late 1980s and early 1990s.



Kachin Independence Army (KIA) fighters manning rifles on a supply route from Laiza, a KIA-controlled stronghold in Myanmar's northern Kachin state on the border with China. Photo: AFP/Patrick Bodenham

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), situated in the country's north, once controlled most of the northern Kachin state apart from major towns, with the rebels running their own administrative buildings, schools, clinics and military bases.

When the KIA signed a ceasefire agreement with the Tatmadaw in February 1994, the camps it still maintained after losing several positions were even more fortified with an entirely new headquarters, which later became a town, established at Laiza.

The once powerful Communist Party of Burma previously controlled a 20,000-square-kilometer territory in Shan state, most of which is now in the hands of the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the country's largest and best-armed ethnic army.

Myanmar's new ethnic armies, namely the Arakan Army (AA) in western Rakhine state and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), an ethnic Palaung group in northern Shan state, were initially trained by the KIA but have since opted for a different kind of resistance.

The AA and TNLA are highly mobile forces which, at least for the time being, do not openly strive to control territory but rather carry out demoralizing guerrilla attacks and then withdraw after accomplishing their missions.

Neither group has any permanent military bases, operating instead through temporary hideouts, a mobility which allows them to strike targets where the Tatmadaw are often caught off guard.

The AA, now the most active and hardest-hitting rebel army in the country, has carried out attacks not only from its stronghold areas in northern Rakhine state but also as far south as the town of An on the main highway that connects Rakhine state with the rest of Myanmar.

In August last year, the TNLA, AA and Kokang rebel allies staged a surprise attack on the elite Defense Services Technological Academy in the garrison town of Pyin Oo Lwin, situated only 67 kilometers east of Mandalay.

The TNLA, founded in 2009, has an estimated 5,000 fighters under arms while the AA, established in the same year, has recently grown to a strength of at least 3,000 fighters and perhaps even more.

Unlike the leaders of the “old” rebel armies who have fought state forces for decades, the TNLA’s and AA’s commanders are young, dynamic and do not carry the same baggage as battle-hardened warlords, many of whom now have substantial business interests.



TNLA soldiers march to mark the 51st anniversary of Ta’ang National Resistance Day in Homain, Nansan township, in northern Myanmar’s Shan state. Photo: AFP

The TNLA and AA first saw serious armed action in 2015, when they fought against the Tatmadaw alongside the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in Kokang, a district in northeastern Shan state populated by ethnic Chinese.

Analysts described that warfare as some of the heaviest ever seen in the history Myanmar’s ethnic conflicts, with the Tatmadaw deploying airpower and heavy artillery on an unprecedented scale.

The AA later moved its area of armed resistance to Rakhine state, where it has gained considerable support from the state’s Buddhist ethnic Rakhine majority population.

AA has made use of digital media to spread its ethno-nationalist message outside the state, while its leader, Tun Myat Naing, appears in several internet videos in which he speaks excellent English and portrays as a disciplined professional soldier.

The AA’s emergence has leveraged rising Rakhine nationalism, a powerful force in a state now widely associated with the Muslim Rohingya refugee crisis. The Tatmadaw’s response to the new war in Rakhine state has been to shut down internet traffic in five townships, including in southern Chin state, where the AA is also active. It has also used air power and heavy artillery against the AA, but with little effect without definite and precise targets to strike against the shadowy group.



***Tun Myat Naing, commander-in-chief of the Arakan Army (AA) at the Wa State in Panghsang, April 16, 2019.
Photo: AFP/Ye Aung Thu***

The “old” Tatmadaw was a poorly equipped but ruthlessly effective light infantry fighting force that was incessantly on the move. That changed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when it entered into ceasefire agreements with about two dozen ethnic rebel armies.

At around the same time, the Tatmadaw’s strength was boosted from fewer than 200,000 soldiers to what is estimated at 500,000 under arms today.

More recently, the Tatmadaw has procured new fighter aircraft and artillery from China, modern airplanes and helicopter gunships from Russia and artillery including truck-mounted multiple rocket launchers from North Korea.

Soldiers in the new, better-equipped Tatmadaw had little or no fighting experience until ceasefires collapsed and new wars broke out in 2011, when the military broke its ceasefire agreement with the KIA and launched a major new offensive in the north.

After suffering heavy casualties in Kachin, Shan and Rakhine states, the Tatmadaw opted to pull back its inexperienced infantry forces and rely more on air power and artillery barrages.

That campaign was lethally effective against the KIA because it had fixed positions to strike. But the Tatmadaw’s recent use of airpower, artillery and multiple rocket launchers in Rakhine state appears to have caused more victims among civilians than AA fighters.

In mid-February, for example, a Rakhine state school was hit with artillery shells, wounding at least 19 schoolchildren. An estimated 100,000 civilians have been made homeless by the Tatmadaw’s bombardments and being caught in the crossfire while the AA continues its attacks.



Rakine state residents hold bullet shells in a village in Rathedaung township where fighting between the Myanmar military and Arakan Army (AA) took place from January 26 to 28, 2019. Photo: AFP/Stringer

On February 18, a military helicopter carrying Social Welfare Minister Win Myat Aye and Rakhine State chief minister Nyi Pu, also came under fire. They emerged unscathed but the incident underscored the AA's ability to strike even well-protected officials.

In northern Shan state, the Tatmadaw appears to be using the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), an ethnic Shan army which signed the government's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015, as a proxy to fight the TNLA.

Within days of signing the agreement, the RCSS was able to send thousands of troops from its base area along the Thai border in the south to northern Shan state, making a mockery of its status as an NCA signatory.

The NCA has made all 20 or so previous ceasefire agreements brokered in the late 1980s and early 1990s redundant, adding to the confusion on Myanmar's already convoluted and complicated ethnic battle fields.

The irony of Myanmar's flagging peace process is that the nation is now being wracked by some of the heaviest fighting seen in decades, fueled in part by the AA's and TNLA's more effective hit-and-run fighting style.

The Myanmar government has indicated that yet another round of peace talks will be held in April, though only with NCA signatories, which by some estimates represent less than 20% of the country's total number of ethnic fighters.

With general elections set for November this year, the government may yet agree to expand talks with non-signatory groups to show that it has at least tried to end the country's many decades-old civil wars. But as long as more mobile and nimble insurgent groups like the AA and TNLA sense they are winning their respective fights against the Tatmadaw, there is little chance Myanmar's ethnic wars will end anytime soon.

[Reporting from Yangon]



Myanmar soldiers patrol Thapyuchai village, outside of Thandwe in Rakhine state in a file photo. Photo: Twitter

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