

'Two Asian Powerhouses are Competing in Myanmar's Rakhine'

Military and security expert Dr M Sakhawat Hossain tells The Daily Star



Golam Mortoza

Myanmar has recently deployed troops on the Bangladesh border. Bangladesh has expressed its concern by writing a letter to the UN Security Council. The Myanmar government-controlled media are seen propagating that Bangladesh has deployed troops on the Myanmar border.



M Sakhawat Hossain (SIPG, NSU). File photo

Tension on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border is mainly centring the Rohingya crisis -- a creation of Myanmar. The current tense situation leads to some burning questions.

Does Myanmar want to create a war-like situation with Bangladesh? How is Bangladesh's preparation, ability and strength? How significant is the Bangladesh-Myanmar relations in the context of international and regional politics?

The Daily Star turned to military and security expert Dr M Sakhawat Hossain (SIPG, NSU) to have an in-depth analysis of Bangladesh-Myanmar relations.

Following are excerpts of the interview:

The Daily Star (DS): Myanmar is deploying troops on the Bangladesh border. Bangladesh has already addressed it to the Security Council. What do your long years of observation and research say about the disturbing development?

Dr

M Sakhawat Hossain (MSH): First of all, I would like to say that I am speaking based on my long research and observation. I have lived and worked in that region. We have limitation to know Myanmar completely. You can say, this is my own experience-based analysis.

The election is supposed to be held in Myanmar next November where mainly two parties are competing. One is the NLD and the other is its army although the army will not be in the election directly. Army will be there to control the political situation which has been the case over the years and they are also in the parliament.

The conflict in the Rakhine region has several levels. The first level is the Arakan Army vs government forces. The second is Rakhine Buddhists vs Bamar Buddhists, the third is Rakhine Buddhists vs government forces and last but not the least is Rohingyas vs Myanmar army and Rohingyas vs Rakhine Buddhists.

And then two powerhouses in Asia are in a kind of competition in Rakhine. India has influence in northern Rakhine while China's influence is in southern Rakhine. The Arakan Army has freshly joined the competition. Besides, the Rohingya issue is already there. Those who are regularly following the matter can see that the strength of the Arakan Army has suddenly increased.

DS: Where does the Arakan Army particularly exist? Inside Myanmar or outside?

MSH: They are located in northern Rakhine where Indian ports are to be built. Two more groups have joined them. One of them belongs to the Karen community and the other probably to the Shan Province. There is no information that the Arakan Army is positioned outside the Myanmar border. Their locations are in those areas where the Myanmar army cannot reach. There are many places in Myanmar that are unwritten autonomous regions, including Shan Province and Karen Province. The Karen Independent Army is fully equipped with firearms. They have created a fairly independent state.

DS: What is the source of Karen's power? It is said that China's arms support is the source?

MSH: Almost all the weapons they use are made in China. That's why experts think they get help from China.



DS: Does it mean China is the source of power for both Myanmar and anti-Myanmar rebel Karen?

MSH: It's like that. Experts think, China's arms support is Karen's main source of power.

Earlier, China had relations with the Communist Party of Myanmar. At one point, China changed its policy that the party would no longer cooperate with its Myanmar counterpart. There will be government to government cooperation. However, many experts believe that China is still continuing party to party cooperation.

Four months back, media in Myanmar and Thailand have reported that a large number of Chinese-made weapons meant for the Arakan Army entered Myanmar from the northeast Bay of Bengal.

In recent times a new organisation called Arakan Rohingya Army has been formed there and claimed to be very strong. None has so far noticed any mentionable activities from them and Arakan Army initially said that they have no relation with Rohingyas. However, the recent statement of the Arakan Army said that they are for the people of Arakan. The implication of this statement is that they may have adopted a policy of involving the Rohingyas.

A few days ago, two Myanmar soldiers made confessional statement of committing crime (Rohingya genocide) and are believed to be under detention of the Arakan Army. The Myanmar army, however, says they are fugitives.

Where did they escape from? If they are in the hands of the Arakan Army and if they say this from there, it means that the Arakan Army is highlighting the atrocities that Myanmar is committing in Arakan or Rakhine for the international arena. Not just the Rohingya, they say, it has happened to the Karens and to the Shan community. All of this is now being highlighted. Those who once said that they have no relationship with the Rohingyas are now working for the Rohingyas.

DS: Why is Myanmar raising tension on the Bangladesh border now?

MSH: For this we have to look at the international situation. Tension is running high over India's border with China. This tension is more from the Indian side. Not much is known from the Chinese side. From Myanmar's point of view, it cannot be kept out of this tension and the polarisation of the United States, Australia and Japan behind India against China. In this polarisation, it seems Bangladesh is neither here nor there. But, one thing is very noticeable that suddenly the US Secretary of Defense Dr Mark T Esper talked with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina over phone.

This is a big issue in the geopolitical context. Bangladesh is being dragged into the Indo-Pacific region. It is being sponsored by the US and the most active here is India. Japan and Australia are also with it. The US Secretary of Defense has talked with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh for quite a long time. A number of unconfirmed sources, especially in various international media, reported that it is proposed in the talks that they (USA) apparently want to sell some sophisticated war equipment to Bangladesh which include Apache helicopters that have been discussed at different times. They (USA) also want to assist in necessary training. India and Japan have invited Bangladesh to join the Indo-Pacific. In this situation, we have to see what kind of pressure can come on Bangladesh. Myanmar is creating a kind of pressure on the border from the thought that some kind of pressure may come on Myanmar. Western countries are forging alliance on the Rohingya issue.

DS: Myanmar also knows the context like Bangladesh that you have raised. Knowing this, Myanmar is apprehending many things. Is that the reason Myanmar is deploying troops or creating tension at the border?

MSH: Myanmar is putting a kind of pressure on Bangladesh. The cantonment we have in Ramu is very close to the Myanmar border. BGB is working all over the border of the country, there is army in Chattogram Hill Tracts, there is cantonment which is very close to the Rakhine state. Our army is already there, whether for internal reasons or because of location. For these reasons, Myanmar may have deployed troops on the border to create pressure.

Another reason may be that the soldiers who were on duty earlier are being replaced. When this change occurs, they take some action for strategic reasons. I think Myanmar is doing this because of such reasons.

DS: Many issues come up in this regard. One is St Martin's Island. Being far away from mainland and a small island, it is said that Myanmar is in a more advantageous position than Bangladesh. Is St Martin's Island always a source of concern for us strategically?

MSH: Our Navy is there since 1992. I don't think there is any reason that Myanmar will come and occupy this island. Doing so would be a complete declaration of war. If anything like that happens, Bangladesh will also take counter measures. At that time Bangladesh may take the help of western nations. Especially, in the Bay of Bengal where they are more active.

DS: China is also active there. Myanmar is even involved in the Russian game.

MSH: China will not allow Myanmar to do that. Because, if that happens, the whole thing will go against China. China has not yet finished their work in the South Bay of Bengal which is called CMEC (China-Myanmar Economic Corridor). Work is underway on the \$7 billion project.

DS: If Myanmar makes any such a decision, could there be problems in those projects?

MSH: There will be problems. And China will not want to get involved in any major problems in the Bay of Bengal or the Indian Ocean at the moment. Because, China has not reached that position yet. China does not have the naval power to challenge India and the United States in the sea. The naval power they have is in the South China Sea and their main focus is there. With that, there is CMEC for future security and it will do something in alliance with the regional countries. However, China will not be able to come to the naval challenge at this moment.

DS: In that case, what is Bangladesh's situation in terms of naval, air and land presence on Myanmar border and the influx of Rohingya? How is the balance of military power? Can it be perceived or analysed?

MSH: I will not give a qualified statement about how strong Bangladesh is. And, it is never understood who is the strongest from numerical point of view. I can give an example. Egypt is the most militarily powerful country in North Africa. So, mathematically the Egyptian military is supposed to overthrow Israel in four hours. But, they can't. You can analyse who has how many troops with that. It is estimated that China has 2 million troops and India has 1.9 million. If China is at war with India today, will anyone be able to bring in all the troops? Will India not keep troops at Pakistan point?

Myanmar is ahead of Bangladesh in terms of number of ground force. With the addition of two submarines, Bangladesh is ahead on the naval side. I have doubts about the air force, but Myanmar may be ahead. Their number is much higher. Another thing to keep in mind here is that Myanmar soldiers are experienced in jungle war. Its military has been fighting that battle for nearly 70 years. They are very good in terms of jungle and mountain war strategies.

Another big thing is the geographical location of Bangladesh. Suppose our war with Myanmar started. If our air force has to go inside Myanmar, it has to go a long way. But, our refinery, industry and the biggest port is in Chittagong. It is very close to Myanmar. So, geographical advantages and disadvantages are very important factors.

I think the number and the strength our army has is quite capable of facing an attack. Now the war is not three, but four dimensional. Due to that, India has now gone after Rafal, leaving everything out. Lately they have been looking to buy F-35s from the US.

If we think from the side of Bangladesh and Myanmar, we have some advantages as well as some disadvantages. Focusing on that, we need to address the geopolitical and strategic shortfalls as soon as possible.

And if that is the case, who will help us in the international arena and who will not will depend on our diplomatic and foreign policy.

DS: One last question. Is the mobilisation of Myanmar troops on the border just about putting pressure on Bangladesh? Or Myanmar can really take the provocation a little further, can dare to cross the border?

MSH: Myanmar will not dare to do that at the moment. The biggest reason is economic. Not only China, they are now trying to attract Western countries to invest. The city of Rangoon in Myanmar is being rebuilt after the capital was shifted. Chinese companies took part in the bid. However, a Swedish company probably got the job. Among the big investors in Myanmar, Japan is far ahead. South Korea is also going to invest in Myanmar. Myanmar is not in a position to do anything that could adversely affect its investment.

At the UN, our Prime Minister said that a safe zone must be created for the Rohingyas. If that is done, Myanmar will face a huge problem in the Rakhine region. I don't think Myanmar will lock in war with Bangladesh; China will not let that happen.

Source: <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/two-asian-powerhouses-are-competing-myanmars-rakhine-1970853>

Troops Mobilisation on Border : Myanmar putting kind of pressure on us

Brig Gen (retd) Sakhawat talks to Star



Bangladesh has expressed its concern to the UN Security Council over the recent deployment of Myanmar troops on the Bangladesh border. Tensions on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border are mainly centring the Rohingya crisis, a creation of Myanmar. Does Myanmar want to create war-like situation? How is Bangladesh's preparations, ability and strength? How significant is the Bangladesh-Myanmar relations in international and regional politics? The Daily Star's Golam Mortoza turned to military and security expert Brigadier General (retd) M Sakhawat Hossain to have an in-depth analysis of Bangladesh-Myanmar relations.

Following is an excerpt of the interview:

TDS: Why is Myanmar raising tension along the border now?

MSH: First of all, I would like to say that I am speaking based on my long research and observations. You can say, this is my own experience-based analysis. For this we have to look at the international situation. Tensions are running high over India's border conflict with China. From Myanmar's point of view, it cannot be kept out of this tension.

The polarisation with the United States, Australia, and Japan behind India against China is also there. In this, it seems Bangladesh is neither here nor there. But one thing very noticeable is that US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper suddenly called Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina. This is a big issue in the geopolitical context. Bangladesh is being dragged into the US-Australia-Japan-India pole. A number of unconfirmed sources, especially in various international media, reported that they [US] apparently want to sell some sophisticated war equipment to Bangladesh which include Apache helicopters that have been discussed at different times. They [US] also want to assist in necessary training. India and Japan have invited Bangladesh to join their side. Myanmar is creating a kind of pressure on the border from the thought that some kind of pressure may come on to them. Western countries are forging alliance on the Rohingya issue. There might pressure Myanmar through safe zone or a no-fly zone or any other way.

TDS: Like Bangladesh, Myanmar also knows the context you have mentioned. Knowing this, Myanmar is apprehending many things. Is that the reason Myanmar is deploying troops or creating tension at the border?

MSH: Myanmar is putting a kind of pressure on Bangladesh. The cantonment we have in Ramu is very close to the Myanmar border. Very close. The BGB is working all over the border of the country, there is the army in Chattogram Hill Tracts, and there is the cantonment which is very close to the Rakhine state. Our army is already there, whether for internal reasons or because of location. For these reasons, Myanmar may have deployed the troops to create pressure.

Another reason may be that the soldiers who were on duty earlier were being replaced. When this change occurs, they take some action for strategic reasons. I think Myanmar is doing this because of such reasons.

TDS: It is said that Myanmar is in a more advantageous position than Bangladesh regarding St Martin's Island. Is the small island always a source of concern for us strategically?

MSH: Our navy is there since 1992. I don't think there is any reason that Myanmar will come and occupy this island. Doing so would be a complete declaration of war.

TDS: China is also active there. Myanmar is even involved in the Russian game.

MSH: China will not allow Myanmar to do that. Because, if that happens, the whole thing will go against China. China has not yet finished their work in the South Bay of Bengal which is called CMEC (China-Myanmar Economic Corridor). Work is underway of the \$7 billion project.

TDS: What is Bangladesh's situation in terms of naval, air, and land presence on Myanmar border? How is the balance of military power? Can it be perceived or analysed?

MSH: I will not give a qualified statement about how strong Bangladesh is. And, it is never understood who is the strongest from numbers.

Myanmar is ahead of Bangladesh in terms of the number of ground force. With the addition of two submarines, Bangladesh is ahead on the naval side. I have doubts about the air force, but Myanmar may be ahead. Their number is much bigger. Another thing to keep in mind here is that Myanmar soldiers are experienced in jungle war. Its military has been fighting for nearly 70 years.

Another big thing is the geographical location of Bangladesh. Suppose a war with Myanmar started. If our air force has to go inside Myanmar, it has to go a long way. But our refinery, industry and the biggest port are in Chittagong. It is very close to Myanmar. So, geographical advantages and disadvantages are very important factors.

However, now the war is not three but four-dimensional. Due to that, India has now gone after Rafale [French jetfighter], leaving everything out. Lately, they have been looking to buy F-35s from the US.

If we think from the side of Bangladesh and Myanmar, we have some advantages as well as some disadvantages. We need to address the geopolitical and strategic shortfalls as soon as possible.

TDS: Is the mobilisation of Myanmar troops on the border just about putting pressure on Bangladesh? Or Myanmar can really take it a little bit further?

MSH: Myanmar will not dare do that at the moment. The biggest reason is economic. Not only China, they are now trying to attract Western countries for investments. The city of Yangon in Myanmar is being rebuilt after the capital had been moved. Chinese companies took part in the bid. However, a Swedish company probably got the job. Among the big investors in Myanmar, Japan is far ahead. South Korea is also going to invest in Myanmar. Myanmar is not in a position to do anything that could adversely affect the foreign investments.

At the UN, our prime minister said that a safe zone must be created for the Rohingyas. If that is done, Myanmar will face a huge problem in the Rakhine region. I don't think Myanmar will get into a war with Bangladesh. And China will not let that happen. **Log on to www.thedailystar.net to read the full interview with the headline: 'Due to polarisation, Bangladesh seems neither here nor there'**