



Trading Amidst Conflict

The State of Border Relations Between Arakan and Neighboring Countries



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The Center is an independent, non-partisan and research institution established in December 2021 by a group of young professionals including journalists, political analysts, researchers as well as social workers. The Center aims to promote the understanding of the situation of human rights, politics, economics, and social dynamics in Arakan, as well as issues related to Arakan affairs in Myanmar and beyond, through the publication of rigorous research papers.

The Center also intends to address the policy gaps in Arakan and Myanmar in general through analysis and recommendations in favor of democratic policy change and common solutions. The Center publishes a series of monthly reports, along with the policy briefing issues related to Arakan affairs, on its website and through various publications.

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Table of Contents

<i>Executive Summary</i>	4
<i>Part I: Introduction</i>	5
1.1 Background of the Report.....	5
1.2. Literature Review.....	5
1.3 Report Structure and Methodology.....	7
1.4 Historical Background.....	7
<i>Part-II</i>	11
2. Border Trade with Bangladesh (Early 2021 to November 2023)	11
<i>Part-III</i>	15
3. Trade During the Armed Clashes (November 2023 to December 2024)	15
3.1 Trade with Bangladesh.....	15
3.2 Emerging Trade Route with Mizoram	16
<i>Part-IV</i>	20
4. Trade Relations under the ULA/ AA (December 2024 to August 2025)	20
4.1 Arakan and Dakha's Trade Relations	20
4.2 Arakan Trade with Mizoram: An Alternative Route	23
<i>Part-VI. Conclusion</i>	25
Future Prospects and Challenges for Border Trade in Arakan	25
<i>Endnotes</i>	26

Executive Summary

- From November 2023 to December 2024, the resumption of armed clashes in Arakan, driven by the Arakan Army (AA) as part of the broader '1027 Operation,' severely disrupted border trade with Bangladesh. The conflict led to the closure of key trade routes, such as the Maungdaw-Angumaw road, halting official trade crossings and causing goods like rice and betel nuts to rot in warehouses, resulting in significant economic losses. Informal trade persisted under volatile security conditions, with local traders reporting challenges due to blockades by the Myanmar junta and ongoing fighting, which pushed both traders and authorities to seek alternative routes through India's Mizoram via Paletwa.
- Throughout this period, the United League of Arakan (ULA)/Arakan Army (AA) gradually consolidated control over Arakan's border areas, emerging as the de facto authority regulating cross-border commerce. By implementing taxation on imported goods, conducting inspections, and occasionally detaining cargo vessels, the ULA/AA secured trade revenues, transforming from a disruptor to a regulator of border trade. This shift was particularly evident after the AA's territorial gains in Maungdaw and Buthidaung in December 2024, which granted them near-total control over the 270 km Bangladesh-Myanmar border, fundamentally altering the trade landscape.
- Following the AA's territorial gains in December 2024, Bangladesh adopted a pragmatic approach to trade with ULA/AA-controlled areas, despite not formally recognizing ULA/AA-issued trade documents. Initially rejecting shipments with ULA tax receipts, Bangladesh authorities began selectively permitting imports, such as bean sacks, by January 2025, acknowledging the AA's control over border infrastructure. This shift was underscored by public statements from Bangladeshi officials, who recognized the AA's role in collecting tariffs, reflecting a strategic need to maintain trade flows for food security and economic stability amid a volatile security environment.
- As trade with Bangladesh faltered, the Paletwa-Mizoram corridor emerged as a critical alternative route for Arakan, facilitating the import of essential goods like food, fuel, medicine, and household items. Controlled by the ULA/AA after their January 2024 capture of Paletwa, this route faced significant challenges, including damaged infrastructure, monsoon-related disruptions, and blockades by local Mizoram groups like the Central Young Lai Association. Despite these obstacles, the corridor provided a vital lifeline for civilians in northern and central Rakhine, sustaining the flow of goods amid the conflict-driven collapse of traditional trade routes. From November 2023 to August 2025, Arakan's border trade evolved into a dual system characterized by disrupted Bangladesh routes and a fragile yet essential Mizoram corridor.

Part I: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Report

Arakan (Rakhine State) in Myanmar has historically been trading routes, occupying immediate linkages to neighboring countries like Bangladesh from the northwest through Maungdaw border and lying near India through Sittwe Port and Chin State's Pletwa.¹ Both this geographic location and strategic strong point- the area has been targeted and being interested by the great and regional powers for investments including the trading. It is critically and historically the potential area of regional economic development with strategic location as cross-border connectivity and local livelihoods.² However, the situations of those trading routes have been changed throughout the timeline and different authorities shaping by ongoing political situations, bilateral relations, armed conflicts, and broader regional dynamics, with formal trade routes corridors like Teknaf-Maungdaw and Paletwa-Mizoram³⁴ have frequently been disrupted or suspended amid conflict and control shifts between the Myanmar Military junta and the Arakan Army.

The 2021 military coup has caused serious serial conflicts in the Arakan State and the Arakan Army has controlled most of the areas of the State⁵, including the areas of those trading routes. These power shifts have significantly disrupted and reshaped cross-border trade with neighboring countries, particularly Bangladesh⁶. As the SAC lost territorial control in border areas, the ULA filled the vacuum by implementing its own regulatory and taxation structures, including for border trade⁷. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate the evolving nature of border trade in Arakan between early 2021 and mid-2025. It explores how military confrontations, governance vacuums, and the rise of parallel administrative systems, especially by the ULA, have transformed economic transactions across borders.

The primary objectives of this special report are to examine the shifting nature of border trade between Arakan (Rakhine State) and its neighboring countries, mainly Bangladesh and India. It will be within the context of changing political landscapes and controlled actors over key territories from early 2021 to mid-2025. Through this, this report aims to trace the trajectory of both formal and informal trade mechanisms during this period and assess how different conflict phases affected access to trade routes, regulatory enforcement, taxation, and the economic survival of local communities. Furthermore, the report explores the different nature of changing border trade components in which the main current actors have competed and negotiated control over trade infrastructure and how these actions reflect broader strategies for asserting authority and legitimacy. Lastly, it seeks to apply key theoretical perspectives in order to analyze the intersection between trade and conflict in Arakan, offering insights into the role of economic networks in contested borderlands and the implications for regional development and governance.

1.2. Literature Review

Around the world, the states can be confronted with the situations of armed non-state actors (ANSAs) often filling the vacuum with the parallel administration which include the regulatory and taxing systems for border trade if the central or the state-led governments cannot control or are unable to govern effectively the frontier areas. Particularly, this kind of phenomenon has been applied in many conflicts affected areas, providing a comparative lens to understand the evolving dynamics in Arakan State. While many literatures have highlighted these situations of border trading at the conflict zones controlled by ANSAs, there are many theoretical analyses and literatures by Le Billon⁸ and Ballentine & Sherman⁹ who have proved how ANSAs have tried to maintain the border trade. First and foremost, the literature on the political economy of conflict and hybrid governance highlights how ANSAs use trade regulation not only to finance their movements but also to enhance their legitimacy and embed themselves in local socio-political structures. Prominently, these groups called ANSA serve as the de facto authorities in those territorial areas with their governance where they try to blur the boundaries between the state governance and theirs.

Therefore, the theoretical analysis over the global affairs mirrors the Arakan studies currently on its border trade affairs. Since the 2021 military coup and especially after renewed clashes in late 2023, the ULA has gradually expanded its influence over northern and central Rakhine, including key border corridors such as Maungdaw and Paletwa. Reports indicate that the ULA has introduced its own taxation systems, licensing procedures, and informal customs checkpoints to oversee trade with both Bangladesh and India¹⁰¹¹. This shift not only disrupts existing formal trade routes controlled by the Myanmar military but also alters the political economy of border commerce. Applying conflict-related political economy theory, this evolution illustrates how control over trade becomes a strategic and symbolic act, where legitimacy, survival, and revenue generation converge.

Learning from international examples through this framework, the Taliban in Afghanistan kept the customs checkpoints and controlled along the major trade routes like Spin Boldak where they collect the revenues and operate the travel permit systems even though they are regarded as an insurgent group.¹² Moreover, Colombia's Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) also created the instance as imposing the "revolutionary taxes" on coca production and local commerce, functioning as an alternative governing authority in many rural areas.¹³ Another similar instance is al-Shabaab in Somalia which established the sophisticated taxation regime on goods moving through ports and highways¹⁴.

More prominently in Myanmar, the most complete controlled border trade imposed by the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in its territories bordering China where it currently manages border permits and business regulations independently from Naypyidaw¹⁵. From these examples, it can be seen as the comparative insights for the better understanding of how the United League of Arakan (ULA) and its armed wing, Arakan Army (AA) has implied its control through its victory in Arakan, enacting its regulations over the border trading system at Arakan Border land in Myanmar. Interestingly, through the theoretical standpoint, many analysts indicate that ANSAs' regulated border trade can be viewed not just solely from criminals or opportunists. Regarding this, as mentioned by realists, controlling trade routes and exploiting resources-rich areas can enhance the deeper political entrenchment¹⁶. Beyond this, by examining how legitimacy is carried out through governance acts, such as taxation, regulation, and dispute resolution, constructivist frameworks make a further contribution. These acts give these actors recognition from the local populace and, indirectly, from neighbouring states through tacit economic engagement.¹⁷

At the moment, liberal theorists mention economic interdependence as the key points for positive outcomes like peace. They mainly argue on the fact that informal trade relations between ANSA at the border areas can foster limited collaborations while temporarily maintaining the stability of otherwise disputed boundaries.¹⁸ The conditions are the same as the trade relations occurring between Bangladesh merchants and ULA/AA's regulated check points. More likely to this idea, dependency theory also points out the economic dependent relationship between states or non-state actors with other countries. More specifically, it helps here to explain the vulnerabilities of local communities and traders caught between state and non-state actors¹⁹. Since the State Administration Council (SAC) has withdrawn from several border posts, local actors are more increasingly dependent on the ULA/AA's structures of trading where it can be analyzed between the armed actors and local actors and then between NSAs and the neighbouring states like Bangladesh and India. In this regard, the dependency of border trading between AA with Bangladesh and India can impact over the political affairs of decisions if the neighbors are pressuring over those affairs based on economic dependency which can also affect the asymmetric economic relations.

Apart from that realism, liberalism or constructivism and dependency theories, aligning with the human security framework can further reinforce the essential perspectives over ANSAs' border trades with states. It describes that in conflict areas, cross-border trade plays not just as a source of income for armed actors but as a lifeline for people who rely on imported goods, food, and medicine for survival. It is more about humanitarian interests than the profits or revenues.²⁰ In Rakhine State, this perspective underscores that ULA-regulated cross-border trade is not just an economic or strategic tool for armed actors but a critical mechanism for sustaining civilian livelihoods and mitigating the humanitarian consequences of prolonged conflict. In brief, the growing role of the ULA in regulating cross-border trade with Bangladesh and India is not an isolated development but part of a broader pattern of hybrid governance observed in many conflict-affected regions. It reflects a complex interplay between economic pragmatism, political strategy, and local legitimacy; one that challenges

conventional state-centric assumptions and demands a more nuanced understanding of border governance in times of war.

1.3 Report Structure and Methodology

Beyond the introduction part, the report included other four chapters. In chapter (II), it discusses the Border Trade with Bangladesh from early 2021 to November 2023 covering trade relations under the SAC and informal trade through the ULA-controlled areas. In chapter (III), the report covers the trade during the armed clashes from November 2023 to December 2024. It researches how the return of armed clashes affected trade, policy changes adopted by the SAC, the ULA's effort to control the trade routes and a glance at the trade relations with Mizoram of India through Paletwa. In Chapter (IV), trade relations under the ULA/AA from December 2024 to July 2025 is mainly focused and it covers how the ULA authorities dealt with Bangladesh, key changes and characteristics of the trade relations, trade with Mizoram, as an emerging route for civilian survival. Finally, in chapter (V), the conclusion part is discussed.

Regarding the methodology, the research has applied the qualitative method only stemming its data and information from both primary and secondary sources. For primary information, two traders are interviewed as the KII (key informant interviews) for Myanmar-Bangladesh trade while another two traders and one journalist are interviewed for Arakan-Mizoram trade situations. On the secondary sources, we collect data from online media platforms, government websites and organizational sites.

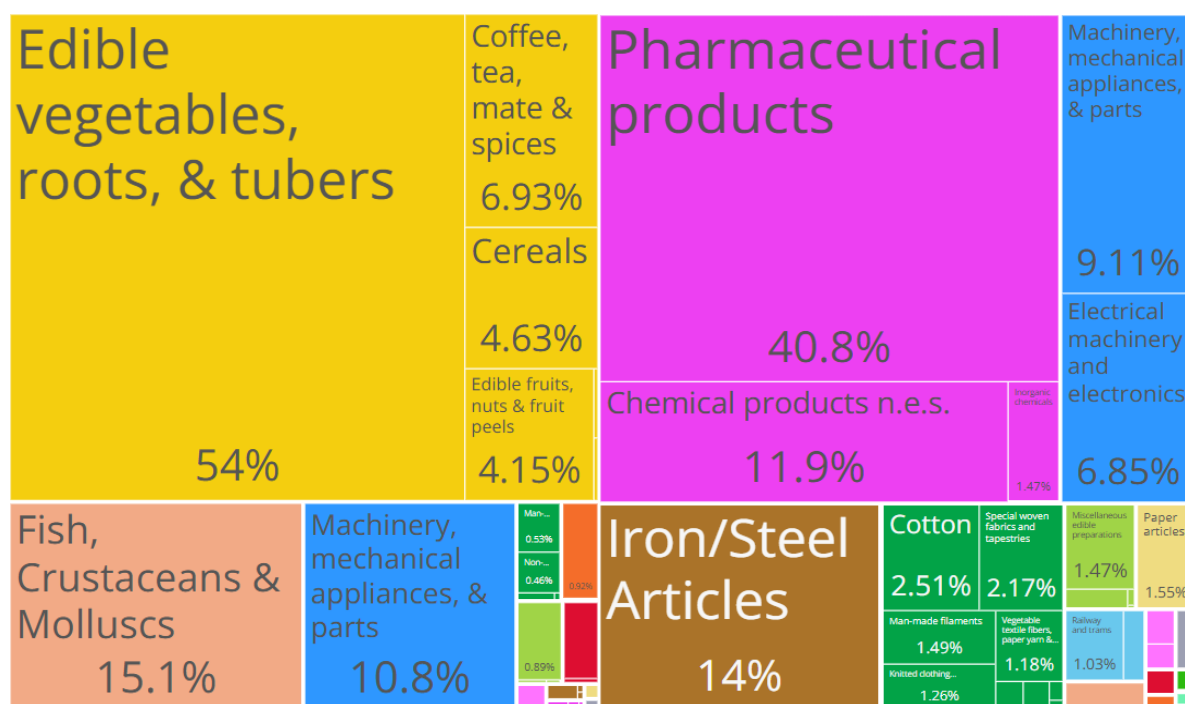
1.4 Historical Background

Despite situated in the geopolitical strategic point, Arakan was largely neglected by the successive post-independence Myanmar governments in formulating trade relations with neighboring countries. Historically, Arakan was a key trading and commercial note in the trade and cultural networks between South and Southeast Asia during the time of Mrauk-U until the late 18th century. Then, even during the British colonial rule (1826-1948), Sittwe was one of the top rice exporting ports in British Burma. Then, the first trade agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh started on August 3, 1973, and it set the stage for mutual trade based on peaceful coexistence, non-alignment, and respect for sovereignty. It marked the beginning of structured economic ties. Then, only after the collapse of socialist regimes in 1988, the military governments during the late 1980s had started to reduce the state's control of the trade by introducing respective bilateral trade agreements with neighbors. On June 1, 1989, Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) on Border Trade and Economic Cooperation was signed and this strengthened private-sector involvement and provided a framework for diversified economic collaboration, including trade fairs and exhibitions. Private sectors like the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) and the Union of Myanmar Chamber of Commerce and Industry (UMCCI) were included in the trade relations.

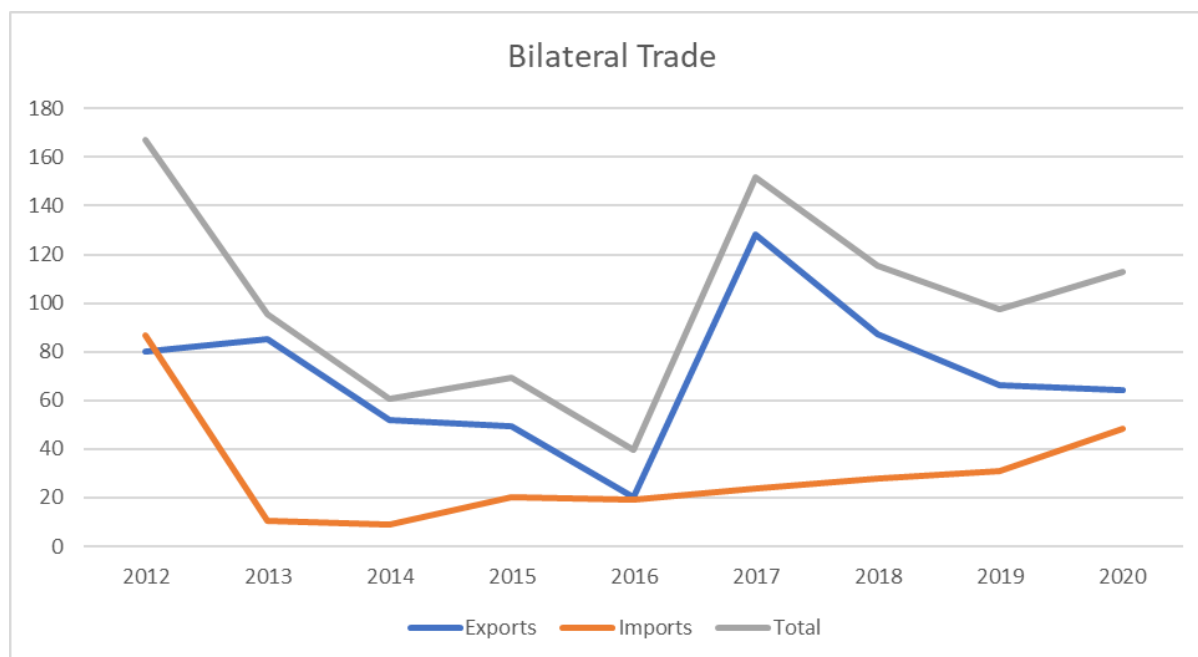
In addition to that, Rakhine state being connected with Cox Bazar district of Bangladesh, Myanmar government introduced a trade agreement with Dhaka government on May 18, 1994 (enforced in September 1995) giving the Ministry of Commerce's Department of Border Trade to have an authority for importer and exporter license and registration^{21 22} The key points of the deal included 1) legalization of the border trade, 2) permitting local products to trade, 3) defining border trading points (Maungdaw in Myanmar and Teknat in Bangladesh), etc. Then, only in March 2003, agreements on the Coastal Shipping, Trade Account, and Joint Business Council were established, and this aimed to address logistical challenges like the lack of direct shipping routes, which often routed trade through third countries like Singapore, and fostered stronger private-sector trade links.

Four years later in July 2007, the two counties signed to establish a direct road link between Bangladesh and Myanmar, with Bangladesh financing approximately 23 km of road construction from Taungbro to Bawlibazar in Myanmar, including bridges and culverts along with an alternative route (Teknaf-Maungdaw-Sittwe) to improve physical connectivity and boost trade by reducing reliance on costly and time-consuming shipping routes. Then, in 2011, during the visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to Myanmar, a joint commission for bilateral cooperation was established to provide a platform

for ongoing negotiations to resolve trade barriers and promote mutual economic benefits. During the late years of the military-backed USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party) and the NLD (National League for Democracy) administration, there were renewed attempts to establish formal trading hubs in Rakhine as part of a wider development agenda. In 2017, the Rakhine State government announced plans to upgrade the Kanyin Chaung border trade post near Maungdaw into an economic zone, backed by 15 billion kyats of investment.²³ ²⁴The plan envisioned expanding facilities from 50 acres to 200 acres and attracting garment factories from Yangon, with the stated goal of transforming Rakhine into a regional trading gateway.²⁵ Similarly, the Sittwe Port developed under India's Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) was also positioned to boost formal trade flows, linking Rakhine with India's Kolkata and northeastern states. ²⁶ As of 2020, the key currency used in trading is USD and key trading commodities and their percentages between the two countries are as shown in the below table; ²⁷



While political and structural challenges such as the outbreak of the 2012 communal violence and Rohingya crisis constrained progress, data showed ups and downs in the trade between the two countries.



From 2012 to 2020, the total value of border trade between the two countries decreased from above 160 USD to just above 100 USD meaning political factors including the trade relations. Moreover, it is also notable to see that Myanmar has a trade surplus. However, out of these total values, trading through Rakhine state (Sittwe and Maungdaw ports) only accounted for 40% of Myanmar's exports to Bangladesh and 29% of imports from Bangladesh meaning there are also other trading routes beyond Rakhine state as follows; Among these four routes in 2020, Maungdaw and Sittwe only occupied 40 percent (20 in each) while Yangon and Thilawa shared 40 and 20 percent respectively.²⁸

No	Name	Type	Key Commodities
1	Maungdaw - Teknaf	Water Route	rice, pulses, and pharmaceuticals
2	Sittwe Port - Teknaf/Chittagong Port	Maritime Route	agricultural products (e.g., rice, fish)
3	Yangon Port - Chittagong Port	Maritime Route	containerized and bulk goods like marine products and industrial items
4	Thilawa Port - Chittagong Port	Maritime Route	diversified exports like machinery and agricultural products.

However, informal trade flows often overshadowed official figures.²⁹ An estimate placed the value of informal trade in 2020 across the Rakhine-Bangladesh border at as much as \$300 million annually.³⁰ Several factors contributed to this persistent informality: cumbersome licensing procedures, currency restrictions, corruption in the customs system, and insecurity along the frontier.³¹ The escalation of armed conflict in northern Arakan between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar junta after 2017 further disrupted trade, making traders reliant on informal arrangements that could adapt quickly to shifting security conditions (ICG, 2020).³²



Ultimately, under both USDP and NLD governments, the gap between policy ambition and ground realities remained stark. Formal projects such as the Kanyin Chaung Economic Zone (KCEZ) and the Kaladan Project highlighted a vision of Rakhine as a hub for state-directed economic integration. However, weak infrastructure, local insecurity, and political mistrust left these ambitions underdeveloped. Alternatively, there are also proposals for border hats along the Bangladesh-Myanmar frontier could help regularize informal trade and deepen bilateral ties. Yet, political and security issues complicate this vision. Tensions over the Rohingya crisis, the presence of armed activities, challenging terrain, and fears of drug trafficking present serious obstacles. Moreover, the strained diplomatic relationship and lack of trust between the two governments have stalled dialogue on such initiatives.

On the ground, Rakhine's border trade continued to rely overwhelmingly on informal channels, embedded in local networks and resilient to state attempts at centralization. Later, this dual structure of formal policy frameworks and entrenched informal practices created the conditions for the ULA/AA to step into border trade management after 2020 due to the failure of state-led initiatives such as the KCEZ and the limited success of formal bilateral agreements. Adding to the existing challenges in the border trade with Bangladesh was the national political turmoil in Myanmar inflicted by the military coup in February 2021.

Part-II

Border Trade with Bangladesh (Early 2021 to November 2023)

This chapter will address key questions and changes that took place in Myanmar-Bangladesh trade relations especially via Rakhine state from early 2021 to November 2023, the month in which the armed clashes between Myanmar junta and AA resumed. During this two years period, the border trade through Rakhine state experienced significant challenges, primarily due to the armed clashes, natural disasters, unsolved refugee repatriation issue, government policy changes, and other challenges. According to some sources,³³ the import, export and trade volume between the two countries are as follows;

Year	Myanmar Exports	Myanmar Imports	Total Trade Value
2021	125 M	38.7 M	163.7 M
2022	179 M	36.9 M	215.9 M
2023	67.2 M	25 M	92.2 M

From 2021 to 2023, trade between the two countries fell by 57 percent meaning trade relations in one decade only decreased, not increased. When the Myanmar military staged a military coup in early 2021, the Dhaka government issued a brief, four-sentence statement from the foreign ministry emphasizing the promotion of "democratic ethos," "peace and stability" in Myanmar, and the "voluntary, safe and sustained repatriation of the Rohingya sheltered in Bangladesh. ³⁴Dhaka's stance as a neighboring country to Myanmar solely focusing on refugee repatriation and trade as its foreign policy interest was also uncovered when its diplomatic representative attended the Armed Forces Day in Naypyidaw held on March 27, 2021. ³⁵

On the other hand, the ruling of Sheik Hasina and her Awami League (AL) in Bangladesh was also highly criticized as being led into more authoritarian rule. Therefore, based on these two factors, the early 2021 military coup in Myanmar had no significant impact on the overall trade relations between the two countries especially in 2021. The total trade volume of USD 163 millions also meant that the trade was now returning into something more than 2017, the year that the Rohingya crisis broke out. Myanmar's junta sources even mentioned Bangladesh's approval of importing 100,000 metric tons of rice from Myanmar in April 2021, despite initial hesitation following the February 1 military coup. ³⁶It highlights how this trade decision was part of maintaining economic ties to support diplomatic engagement, particularly for Rohingya repatriation talks.

However, trade relations through Rakhine state were not without challenges and obstacles. Short armed clashes broke out between the Myanmar junta and AA from August to November 2022, and the result was the closure of land and water routes harming the trade relations via Rakhine state. Media reported on December 1 that land and water routes remain closed despite AA ceasefire with junta in November 2022 and these include Sitwwe-Agumaw-Maungdaw road, and Sittwe-Rethedaung-Buthidaug waterways, both are important parts of border trade with Bangladesh.³⁷ It was mentioned that the Maungdaw-Ahngumaw road was only reopened on 4 December.

Before the armed clashes in July, 2022, some reports said that key export items via Sittwe and Maungdaw ports included tamarind, turmeric, ginger, dried fruits, betel nut, hilsa, and local products and Dhaka also showed interest in expanding imports from Myanmar, including live fish and teak.³⁸ In January 2023, new opportunities in the trade arose when salt produced in Arakan State was arranged to be exported to Bangladesh for the first time in more than a decade, according to those engaging in salt production. In records, in 2012, Bangladesh bought 30,000 tonnes of salt from Arakan, but that was the last purchase made until this most recent deal because the salt was deemed of insufficient quality.³⁹ Besides, coconuts grown in southern Arakan townships of Manaung, Thandwe and Gwa fetched good prices due to high demand from Bangladesh.

However, traders also experienced challenges when the junta government in Rakhine state introduced a QR code scheme to facilitate border trade via Arakan in February 2023. According to the

junta, a QR code system was introduced to facilitate legal trade, systematically monitor trucks carrying goods under export licences, and facilitate inspection of goods. Under the new policy, traders are required to apply for a transport permit online, and the Commerce Ministry issued QR codes for cargo trucks.⁴⁰ But, this policy change also faced criticism from the trading community. Merchant U Nyi Nyi from Sittwe said; “Traders are having difficulties as they are not familiar with the online system, and there are also delays in the QR code system. The QR code system will be used not just for border trade, but for transportation of all exports and imports.”

Besides, a merchant from Maungdaw said he suffered losses because of delays in the QR code system caused by slow internet connections. In addition to that, traders also faced increasing burden in March when the commodity flows in Maungdaw District were hampered by strict junta checkpoints, possibly to restrict things reaching into the hands of AA.⁴¹ As a result, the flow of goods was delayed and local residents experienced a rise in the price of goods such as a sack of Paw Hsan Mwe, the most popular variety of rice, from around K70,000 to K100,000 and a lower grade rice variety from K40,000 to K60,000, in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships.⁴²

On April 4, 2023, the junta newspaper announced the shipment of 200,000 tons of rice from Myanmar to Bangladesh but only 2,500 tons (1.25 percent) from Rakhine state⁴³. Three days later, a new turning point happened in the financial transaction when key Bangladeshi banks such as Sonali Bank and Agrani Bank imposed limitations on the issuance of US dollars to traders from Myanmar. The secretary of the Rakhine State Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FCCI), a regional body in Rakhine State, focused on promoting local business and investment, U Aung Aung said; **“As a consequence, Bangladesh traders are finding it challenging to purchase the necessary US dollars from the government for their procurement of goods and buying commodities from Myanmar owing to shortage of US dollars.”**⁴⁴

Some accounts said that this happened due to U.S. sanctions on Myanmar's state-owned banks, which froze accounts and disrupted financial flows, prompting caution to avoid regulatory violations. The decision was also influenced by Bangladesh's severe foreign exchange crisis, with dwindling reserves and deficits forcing banks to conserve dollars amid a widening balance of payments gap.⁴⁵ Moreover, when the deadly Cyclone Mocha struck against the coast of Arakan on May 14, 2023, trade with Bangladesh could not be resumed until late May. Reports said that some warehouses were damaged by the cyclone, while other businesses experienced difficulties running their offices. Roofs of seven warehouses were blown off in a Sittwe border trade camp, and around 20 percent of stock was damaged in the storm.⁴⁶ “Border trade halted one week before the storm. It will take time to resume border trade considering the extent of damage caused by the storm,” said trader U Nyi Nyi from Sittwe.⁴⁷

Even after the cyclone, the nationwide trade policy shift by the Myanmar junta also negatively affected the trade in the border. On July 7, 2023, exporters said that the military junta's easing of a restriction that had required exporters to deposit their potential export earnings in local banks prior to their goods shipping was not likely to markedly improve the trade environment.⁴⁸ The Advanced Telegraphic Transfer (TT) system that introduced the restriction has been practiced for exports of beans and pulses, sesame and peanuts via the border trade since July 2022.⁴⁹ Specifically speaking, the main problem facing them was not about paying into the banks in advance of their export earnings, but rather the requirement that 65 percent of export revenues be converted to the Myanmar currency at an official exchange rate of 2,100 kyats per dollar whereas the exchange rate in the market stood at around 3,000 kyats per dollar.

Consequences were increasing. Even the state-owned newspaper of the New Light of Myanmar on July 8 admitted that the Maungdaw border did not meet a target and performed only 38 per cent of them. Policy instability from the Bangladeshi side also impacted negatively on border trade.⁵⁰ Since early June, Bangladesh suspended imports of all products from Myanmar except ginger and garlic. Thus, the price of betel nuts has subsequently dropped from 200,000 kyats per 25 viss to 80,000 kyats due to sluggish demand as reported on July 12.⁵¹ U Tin Aung Oo, Chairman of the Rakhine State Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, explained the reasons.

“As a policy matter, some export processes require licenses, and such changes are currently taking place. The main difficulty is that, at present, one country is unable to issue payment drafts to the other side. The issuance of payment drafts is being restricted and controlled by the other side, which has also led to a decline in trade volume.”⁵²

Not quite surprisingly, a media report in early August said that Myanmar's border trade with Bangladesh declined by 60 percent compared with the same period last year after Bangladesh imposed a limit on imports of freshwater fish from Myanmar four months ago⁵³. On August 21, the government newspaper said that there were no imports from Bangladesh via Sittwe and Maungdaw ports.⁵⁴ On September 1, 2023, Myanmar junta increased restrictions on border trade by announcing that Only Agricultural produce and fisheries will be allowed for export via Sittwe post. The authorities claimed that this action is necessary to ensure systematic border trade with Bangladesh and promote trade.⁵⁵

Five days later, media reported that among the two main border trade posts between Rakhine and Bangladesh, five types of export goods will no longer be permitted from Maungdaw. Among the restricted export goods are agricultural products such as rice/rice by-products, various types of beans, sesame/groundnuts/groundnut stems, and red gram, while freshwater and saltwater fish varieties are also subject to restrictions. The authorities stated that these restricted goods will only be allowed to be exported to Bangladesh through a single border trade post, the Sittwe border trade station (Shwe Myint Gyan) port.⁵⁶ Although the clear motive behind this move was unverifiable, it highlighted the increasing control on trade, possibly to hinder ULA/AA from taxing the border trade in Maungdaw.

On another front, Myanmar junta also increased seizing of smuggled cattle destined for Bangladeshi market. More than 250 head of cattle intended to be smuggled across the border from Arakan State to Bangladesh were seized from June 8 to September 11, according to Rakhine Daily, a mouthpiece of Rakhine state's junta government.⁵⁷ One day later, Myanmar junta also released news that from 10 January 2023 till the second week of September, 18 methamphetamine dealers along with 1263637 banned pills (including 300ICEs and prohibited powder) were caught and seized across Rakhine State.⁵⁸

On October 1, junta officials said that they were working hard to improve the freshwater fish export volume to Bangladesh via the border camp in Maungdaw. Arrangements were made to expand freshwater fish farming and apply modern techniques, the news said.⁵⁹ Ten days later, media reported about the decreased Bangladeshi imports of freshwater fish mostly coming from large husbandries in the regions of Irrawaddy, Yangon and Bago in central Myanmar.⁶⁰ Thus, the junta policy change was blamed for the drop. The change in policy meant that as of September, rice, broken rice, beans and pulses, sesame, peanuts, onions and aquatic products cannot be exported to Bangladesh through Maungdaw. Previously, three to five cargo boats left the Maungdaw border trade camp for Bangladesh daily, but now only one cargo vessel departs for Bangladesh every three days, according to local traders.

In apparent response to Bangladesh's actions of freezing two junta bank accounts, the junta moved to significantly curtail trade activity through the Maungdaw border trade facility. The junta's Department of Trade issued an order dated September 1 and in effect as of September 4, stating that traders wishing to export agricultural and aquatic goods to Bangladesh must use the Sittwe border trade camp. U Myint Thura, director-general of the Department of Trade and spokesperson for the Ministry of Commerce, said;

"The restrictions were intended to deter possible smuggling after Bangladesh's state-owned bank froze two Myanmar banks' accounts and trade payments."

However, the junta's trade policy changes affected local traders in Maungdaw, businessmen in mainland Myanmar, and boat operators and cargo workers at the Maungdaw, a primary route for a variety of freshwater and saltwater fish coming from mainland Myanmar in refrigerated trucks.

In summary, armed clashes in Rakhine (Arakan) resumed on November 13, 2023, with the Arakan Army (AA) attacking junta camps along the Maungdaw-Bangladesh border, leading to a complete halt in formal trade routes by November 23, causing piled-up goods to rot, economic stagnation, and lost revenues for the junta. The suspension exacerbated price surges for imports like ginger in Bangladesh, spiraled local economies in Arakan where farmers couldn't sell produce, and fueled cross-border issues such as increased drug trafficking, organized crime, and illegal weapons flowing into Rohingya camps.

Despite the disruptions, informal trade persisted, with betel nuts fetching high prices for export to Bangladesh, while overall bilateral trade via Yangon continued in limited forms, such as a 2024 MoU for rice imports excluding Arakan. An alternative trade route emerged via Paletwa to India's Mizoram following AA's control of the area in January 2024, aligning with the Kaladan project, but it faced repeated blockades by local groups like the Central Young Lai Association over fuel and food supplies

aiding conflict, resulting in destroyed goods, stranded traders, and court-imposed bans on fuel exports until September 2024, though foodstuffs resumed transport with restrictions.

From early 2021 to November 2023, Myanmar-Bangladesh trade relations via Rakhine State faced significant challenges due to armed clashes, natural disasters, policy changes, and the unresolved Rohingya repatriation issue, leading to a 57 percent decline in trade volume. Despite the Myanmar military coup in February 2021, trade initially remained resilient, with Bangladesh approving rice imports and maintaining economic ties to support diplomatic engagement, particularly for Rohingya repatriation talks.

However, trade disruptions intensified with short-lived armed clashes in 2022 closing key trade routes, a problematic QR code system for trade permits in 2023, and Cyclone Mocha damaging infrastructure, all of which hampered border trade operations. Additionally, policy shifts, such as Bangladesh's import restrictions and Myanmar's junta limiting exports to specific ports, further strained trade, alongside financial transaction issues due to U.S. sanctions and Bangladesh's foreign exchange crisis.

Part-III

3. Trade During the Armed Clashes (November 2023 to December 2024)

The armed clashes in Arakan resumed on November 13, 2023, when the AA attacked two Myanmar junta camps on Angumaw-Maungdaw road, a part of the border trade route in conjunction with the famous '1027 Operation' in northern Shan state. The next day, media reported that all trade and transportation routes connecting Arakan with proper Myanmar areas were blocked by the junta authorities. The return of the armed clashes in Maungdaw along the border with Bangladesh continued until December 2024 when the last Myanmar junta military post, Na-Kha-Kha (5) was captured by the AA. Trade relations with Bangladesh was significantly disrupted due to the armed clashes, and an alternative route with India's Mizoram through Paletwa region had also emerged. This chapter will assess the changing trade landscape between Arakan and Bangladesh and how a new route with Mizoram was developed.

3.1 Trade with Bangladesh

On November 23, 2023, media reported that Bangladesh-Myanmar border trades completely halted due to the Rakhine war. A trader from Maungdaw said;⁶¹ "The trade zone in Maungdaw has stopped sending goods to Bangladesh. From the other side too, there is goods coming in. When the roads are closed, everything needs to be stopped. I can no longer travel anywhere. Both sides are suffering because of this sudden development. Meanwhile, goods piled in warehouses and started rotting."⁶² On December 12, Nikkei Asia reported that Myanmar's economy is stagnating as fighting escalates at the border.⁶³ Weeks later, sources mentioned that the Myanmar junta facing cash-strapped states also lost millions of dollars in unrealised border trade revenues, among them, Maungdaw post was one.⁶⁴

In February 2024, Bangladeshi media also started to report how the cessation of border trade impacted on their side. The report said; ⁶⁵ "Trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar through the Teknaf land port has been halted due to conflict between the Myanmar Junta forces and the Arakan Army in Rakhine state. This has particularly affected the import of ginger, a primary import from Myanmar, causing a rise in local market prices to Tk250."⁶⁶ During April, ramifications of the trade suspension became more visible. Media from Arakan reported that the economy was spiralling in war-ravaged Arakan State as its producers could not sell their products such as rice and other agricultural crops, meat and fish to local and foreign markets.⁶⁷ As the fighting continues to take a toll on the economy, people are suffering from greater financial hardships. Farmers were having a hard time as they could not sell their produce and rice.⁶⁸

Beyond the economic and trade relations, media from Bangladeshi side also mentioned how the changing border landscape affected societies inside Bangladesh. On May 3, an opinion piece on Dhaka Tribune linked that in the unstable Myanmar, there is a rise in organized crimes and the production of illicit drugs.⁶⁹ Being the next-door neighbour, Bangladesh has been heavily affected by synthetic drugs like yaba, Ice and heroin coming from Myanmar through criminal gangs as well as Rohingya nationals for the last 25 years.⁷⁰ Another piece in the same month also highlighted illegal heavy weapons entering Bangladesh from Myanmar falling into the hands of separatist groups based in the Rohingya camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf in Cox Bazar district.

On May 24, a report said that cross-border trade plunged 48% in Bangladesh-Myanmar trade, and from April 1 to May 17, no trade occurred at either border post due to the escalating war between the Arakan Army and the junta's military.⁷¹ However, sources also reported that informal trade was also going. On July 24, media reported that farmers in Rakhine said that betel nuts, a local crop, are fetching good prices this year. Report continued that one maund (25 viss) of betel nuts was sold for up to 190,000 kyats this year whereas a maund of that was priced at only 70,000 kyats, primarily exported to Buthidaung, Maungdaw, Sittwe, Kyauktaw, Paletwa in Chin State, and Bangladesh.⁷²

Another emerging pattern was also taking place in other sides of Myanmar. On August 22, Institute for Strategy and Policy (Myanmar) reported that there are 17 border trade stations between Myanmar and its five neighboring countries. Within the last seven months, Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) took control of five border trade stations bordering China, Thailand, and India.⁷³ Another development though not directly connected to border trade, the ULA on September 12 released a statement of banning import of foreign and outside produced alcoholic beverages into Arakan. However, on the other hand, as a sign of continued trade between Myanmar and Bangladesh through Yangon port, media reported on December 10, 2024, that Bangladesh will import 3.92 lakh tons of rice from Myanmar. This report continued to mention that according to officials from the Ministry of Food, Bangladesh has entered into a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Myanmar and Vietnam for importing rice, with the agreements expected to last until 2027, but rice export from Arakan will be excluded for this time. ⁷⁴

3.2 Emerging Trade Route with Mizoram

Just around two months after armed clashes resumed, the AA took control of the Paletwa's township in southern Chin state on January 15, 2024⁷⁵. This paved a key alternative trade route via Paletwa to Mizoram in line with the planned Kaladan's project while the Myanmar junta imposed complete trade blockage and formal trade with Bangladesh declined due to the armed clashes. Before this time, trade between Paletwa and Mizoram was very minimal due to difficult terrain and unfamiliar connection. Moreover, during the armed clashes with the AA in 2022, records showed that the Myanmar junta blocked the trade between Kyauktaw and Paletwa on the reason of cutting food to the AA. Only on December 3, 2022, Myanmar junta partially reopened the waterway linking Arakan State's Kyauktaw and Chin State's Paletwa with some restrictions still in place.⁷⁶

Residents from Paletwa also said; "Only junta-controlled Z-craft would operate between Kyauktaw and Paletwa, twice per week, for now. They have asked for allowing other vessels to similarly operate once again, in consideration of potential health emergencies." ⁷⁷ In fact, the Kaladan project aims to connect mainland India with its northeast states through Rakhine, Paletwa and Mizoram. In connection to this, news on January 20, 2023 said that Sittwe Port, built by the Indian Government will be designated as an international port and opened soon, but the exact date of the opening ceremony has not yet been determined.⁷⁸ Only four months later, a report said that the Sittwe port was set to open on May 9.⁷⁹

When the year turned into 2024, reports in February highlighted that the Arakan Army had taken full control of India's Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. One political analyst stated⁸⁰; "Whether it is the Indian government or the Bangladeshi government, they will inevitably have to engage with the ULA/AA. Geopolitically, it is no longer possible to avoid engagement. The coup-led military is failing on all fronts. Both countries will need to establish diplomatic relations with the ULA/AA." However, the development of the formal trade route as envisioned by the government of India was slow and limited. Locals in Arakan found out the Kaladan route as an essential one out of necessity and emergency.



In April 2024, ground reports also mentioned the degree of growing border trade between Arakan and Mizoram via Paletwa. Sources said that India has suspended exports from Lawngtlai District in Mizoram State to Chin State's Paletwa Township for an indefinite period. The ban was made as of the second week of April in response to the food requirements of refugees who have fled fighting

in Myanmar, according to Paletwa residents.⁸¹ More than 40 boats full of goods are imported into Paletwa through the Paletwa-Mizoram road and Kaladan River daily from Lawngtlai District. Residents from Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, and Pauktaw townships have been forced to rely on commodities imported from India. The ULA also negotiated with Indian authorities to resume trade through Paletwa.

Even though the trade was resumed due to the successful negotiation, the second time broke out in June, again.⁸² This time, the reason was not purely commercial. A local civil society group known as the Central Young Lai Association (CYLA) from Lawngthlai district of Mizoram blocked the trade. The key reason they claimed was because of the AA using essential foodstuffs and fuel to make war in Myanmar's Chin state. Behind this motive, there was a clear reason that the CYLA stemming from the same Lai-Chin tribe of Chin National Front (CNF) having hostile relations with the AA wanted to pressure the latter to block this trade route. The CYLA also destroyed 50 barrels of fuel owned by Arakan merchants in Thitpokeche Village, Lawngtlai District, on June 25.⁸³

However, this move was opposed by another Chin tribe, Mara Youth Association (MTP) from the Siaha district, home of Mara tribe, as the Mara groups in Chin state possessed better relations with the ULA leadership. But, the damage was already done. On June 29, Indian police and members of the CYLA visited hotels and guesthouses where Rakhine traders were staying in Lawngtlai and instructed them to leave by June 30 at the latest.⁸⁴ A trader reported that although they had already purchased goods, they requested permission from the police to take the items back to Rakhine. However, the Indian police stated that the matter was under the jurisdiction of the CYLA.

The report added that the traders mainly purchased essential goods such as cooking oil (bean oil, mustard oil), onions, garlic, dried chilies, peanut snacks, household items, fuel, and medicines. Reports on July 9 were also quite disturbing. It is said that members of the CYLA destroyed fuel and some commodities of Arakan State merchants who had been stranded at Lawngtlai. They also disposed of more than 50 barrels of fuel purchased by Arakan merchants from Indian suppliers.⁸⁵ The financial loss totaled about 100 million kyats, and hundreds of traders from Arakan found themselves stranded on the road with goods in tow after the CYLA blockaded the route. The restriction became even bigger when the Lawngtlai District court on July 17 banned fuel exports until September 16, 2024. The Lawngtlai District Court in India's Mizoram state issued a ban on the export of fuel from the district to neighbouring countries, including Arakan. The court order also warned of legal action against filling stations that fail to follow the government's order to ration fuel. Merchants were, however, trying to import food and pharmaceuticals to Arakan from Lawngtlai.⁸⁶

One day later, the report said that The Mizoram-Paletwa route has been reopened for the transportation of foodstuffs, but restrictions on fuel and medicines remained in place.⁸⁷ One trader said; "Yesterday, they reopened the route. We are at the gate heading toward Tipa (a location on the route). Many cargo vehicles have already departed for Rakhine via other routes as well. The route has been reopened, but there are still restrictions on certain goods. Fuel, engine oil, and the like are restricted. Medicines are also not allowed to be transported yet."⁸⁸

Following the ULA/AA's capture of Maungdaw and Buthidaung in December 2024, Bangladesh pragmatically shifted from rejecting ULA-issued trade documents to selectively accommodating them, acknowledging the group's de facto control over the 270 km border and engaging in tariff negotiations to sustain essential commerce, despite formal ties with the Myanmar junta. The AA asserted governance through taxation, detentions of cargo vessels, and regulation of exports like timber, while disruptions from rival groups, monsoons, and security incidents fueled illicit flows, price surges, and humanitarian crises, compelling Dhaka to prioritize stability and food security over diplomatic orthodoxy. In parallel, the Mizoram-Palawa route emerged as a vital alternative lifeline amid Bangladesh disruptions, tied to India's Kaladan project but complicated by AA control, infrastructural damage, and local blockades, leading to inflated transport costs and shortages that tripled civilian prices for essentials like rice and fuel. Overall, from December 2024 to August 2025, the ULA/AA transformed cross-border trade into a tool for economic leverage and legitimacy, forcing Bangladesh and India to navigate geopolitical tensions, intermediary exploitation, and humanitarian imperatives in a volatile frontier economy.

Armed clashes in Rakhine (Arakan) resumed on November 13, 2023, with the Arakan Army (AA) attacking junta camps along the Maungdaw-Bangladesh border, leading to a complete halt in formal trade routes by November 23, causing piled-up goods to rot, economic stagnation, and lost revenues for the junta. The suspension exacerbated price surges for imports like ginger in Bangladesh,

spiraled local economies in Arakan where farmers couldn't sell produce, and fueled cross-border issues such as increased drug trafficking, organized crime, and illegal weapons flowing into Rohingya camps. Despite the disruptions, informal trade persisted, with betel nuts fetching high prices for export to Bangladesh, while overall bilateral trade via Yangon continued in limited forms, such as a 2024 MoU for rice imports excluding Arakan. An alternative trade route emerged via Paletwa to India's Mizoram following AA's control of the area in January 2024, aligning with the Kaladan project, but it faced repeated blockades by local groups like the Central Young Lai Association over fuel and food supplies aiding conflict, resulting in destroyed goods, stranded traders, and court-imposed bans on fuel exports until September 2024, though foodstuffs resumed transport with restrictions.

Part-IV

4. Trade Relations under the ULA/AA (December 2024 to August 2025)

This section examines how the ULA/AA engaged with Bangladesh and India in the aftermath of its December 2024 territorial gains, focusing on the strategies it employed to assert control over cross-border trade and the key transformations that reshaped the nature of Bangladesh-Arakan and India-Arakan economic relations.

(4.1) Arakan and Dakha's Trade Relations

(4.1.1) Bangladesh's Engagement with ULA/AA-Controlled Trade

Following the capture of Maungdaw and Buthidaung in December 2024, the ULA/AA achieved near-total control over the 270 km-long Bangladesh-Myanmar border. This territorial gain marked a turning point in the trade relations between the two sides, as Bangladesh found itself directly dealing with a non-state actor rather than the Myanmar junta. With the ULA assuming the role of de facto authority, the structures of cross-border commerce began to change in ways that reflected both the pragmatic needs of Bangladesh and the consolidation of the AA's political-economic governance. The consequences of this transition became apparent almost immediately.

On December 19, 2024, Bangladesh rejected a rice shipment from Maungdaw that carried ULA-issued tax receipts, refusing to formally recognize the ULA's documents.⁸⁹ Yet, less than a month later, on January 12, 2025, the same authorities permitted the import of bean sacks from Maungdaw, indicating a shift from outright rejection to selective accommodation of the ULA's role.⁹⁰ This contrast captured the evolving legal ambiguity in border trade: while Dhaka maintained formal relations with the junta, in practice it could not deny that trade infrastructure and customs were now under AA control.

By early January 2025, it was clear that the AA was no longer a marginal disruptor of trade but rather its regulator. On January 3, Bangladesh's Home Adviser Lt Gen (retd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury publicly confirmed that the ULA/AA was collecting tariffs along the border trade routes. He explained that **"First there is the Myanmar government which collects taxes for goods coming in from Sittwe. But, since the border is controlled by the Arakan Army, they too collect taxes. This is a difficult situation"**.⁹¹

His statement represented the first official acknowledgment from a high-ranking Bangladeshi authority that Dhaka had to engage the ULA as a stakeholder. This development highlights the transformation of infrastructure and control, with the AA asserting governance through taxation, a practice resembling other cases where non-state actors became gatekeepers of cross-border trade. The AA's determination to secure revenue from commerce was further demonstrated by its detention of three cargo vessels on January 16, 2025, carrying some 50,000 sacks of goods en route to Teknaf. The vessels remained under AA control for days as the group demanded a share of trade profits, leaving traders in fear.

"The cargo vessels have not yet been released by the Arakan Army. This incident has left traders in a state of fear. Trade was already disrupted due to the conflict in Myanmar, but this situation requires government intervention; otherwise, traders may abandon Teknaf," explained Jasim Uddin, the general manager of United Land Port Limited.⁹²

The general secretary of the Teknaf Clearing and Forwarding (C&F) Agents Association warned that goods worth Tk30–40 crore were stuck, with significant revenue losses for the Bangladeshi government.⁹³ Here the **economic incentives** of the AA's strategy became evident: by detaining ships, it secured bargaining leverage, but at the cost of trader confidence, echoing the controller's effect described in conflict economy studies. The Myanmar junta responded by closing maritime trade

between Yangon and Teknaf on January 24, 2025, halting a long-standing commercial artery. Traders reported;

“Ships carrying goods have to turn back. Now everything has come to a halt. Even a frozen fish cargo ship has been forced to turn around”.⁹⁴

This illustrated how **security dynamics** directly undermined commerce, with competing authorities using blockades and detentions to shape trade flows. For ordinary Arakan residents, the disruption had devastating consequences- food, medicine, and fuel had to be imported through unstable routes via India and Bangladesh, pushing prices up while job scarcity deepened economic hardship.⁹⁵ Here, humanitarian needs intersected with trade, making commerce not only an economic issue but a question of survival for local populations. Regarding this humanitarian and civilian perspective of the border trade, a local trader told to the CAS team as the following:

“The Bangladesh government and authorities are unaware of the export to Arakan. However, local officials are aware of the informal trade and consider the issues faced by the people in northern Arakan if exports were to be prohibited. If Bangladesh entirely shuts down the informal trade, the people in northern Arakan will suffer significant issues in their daily lives because they depend only on Bangladeshi goods.”

Recognizing both the risks and the opportunities, Bangladeshi officials began recalibrating their approach. On February 8, 2025, Interim Government Advisor on Maritime Transport Brigadier General (Retd.) Dr. M. Sakhawat Hossain visited the Ghumdhum border and argued that despite instability, trade and connectivity with Arakan held strategic importance for Bangladesh. He suggested; **“It is possible to establish a land port here. Although the current situation is unstable, whether it happens today or tomorrow, our relationship will improve.”**⁹⁶

This statement reflected Dhaka’s pragmatic recognition that sustaining trade, even with a non-state actor, was in its national interest. Such pragmatism resembled the geopolitical influences observed in other conflict zones, where states prioritized stability and economic continuity over formal diplomatic orthodoxy. By March 2025, the contours of the new trade order were clear. The ULA/AA consolidated its authority over the Maungdaw border and the Kanyin Chaung Economic Zone, from which timber, including teak, was exported daily to Bangladesh. Local residents confirmed that the Arakan People’s Revolutionary Government (APRG) oversaw these transactions, sometimes engaging in extensive logging to meet trade demands⁹⁷. This reliance on natural resource exports reflected how goods and commodities served as both an economic incentive and a governance tool.

Meanwhile, Bangladeshi analysts highlighted the long-term risks of instability along the border. In April 2025, some scholars argued that arms smuggling, human trafficking, and limited cooperation from Myanmar had long undermined border security, and that the rise of the AA posed fresh uncertainties for Bangladesh’s national security.⁹⁸ In the same month, the AA accused the junta and allied groups like ARSA of smuggling narcotics into Bangladesh, warning that such flows could jeopardize regional stability⁹⁹. These episodes underscored how **security dynamics** and **intermediaries**, both licit and illicit, shaped border trade, much as in other conflict zones such as Somalia, where local actors facilitated both commerce and smuggling.

(4.1.2) Dhaka’s Pragmatic Shift

The turning point in Bangladesh’s official discourse came on April 28, 2025, when Foreign Ministry Advisor Touhid Hossain acknowledged; **“The entire stretch of our border with Myanmar is now under the control of non-state actors. The central government has no authority there”.**¹⁰⁰ He defended Bangladesh’s engagement with the AA as a necessity in Dhaka’s own interest, emphasizing that it could not deny the realities on the ground. This admission confirmed the geopolitical pragmatism driving Dhaka’s policy: while sovereignty concerns prevented formal recognition of the ULA/AA, the imperatives of food security, border stability, and trade revenue required cooperation. Between May and August 2025, trade under ULA/AA control in Rakhine State exhibited a highly dynamic interplay of economic, security, and governance factors, shaped by both internal control measures and external pressures. In early May, Bangladeshi authorities intercepted a cargo vessel carrying 600 bags of urea fertilizer and detained ten smugglers attempting to bring the goods into Rakhine via river routes. ¹⁰¹ This incident highlighted how infrastructure and physical control over crossing points determined trade access, akin to Gaza’s restricted crossings. The blockade of legal imports from Bangladesh caused cement prices to surge in Maungdaw and other AA-controlled areas,

demonstrating how goods and commodities directly influenced economic incentives, while scarcity created pressure for both legal and illicit flows.¹⁰²

During mid-May, ULA/AA authorities intensified inspections of imported food, medicines, and counterfeit goods from Bangladesh and India, balancing food security with civilian needs¹⁰³. Concurrently, crossfire incidents on the Naf River during attempts to smuggle narcotics illustrated the security dynamics of riverine trade.¹⁰⁴ Border trade remained suspended until late May, reflecting the AA's capacity to control access and enforce temporary bans, while also negotiating with Bangladesh to resume commerce¹⁰⁵. By early June, disruptions in fuel and petroleum imports due to damaged roads from monsoon rains drove prices upward, showing how infrastructure constraints and environmental factors amplified economic pressures¹⁰⁶. The AA also temporarily suspended the export of buffaloes and cattle to Bangladesh for two months, citing insufficient regulatory frameworks and price uncertainty, emphasizing the tension between legal frameworks and NSA de facto control.¹⁰⁷

In July, narcotics seizures, including yaba tablets from female traders and local youth, highlighted the role of intermediaries in enabling trade while also facilitating illicit flows.¹⁰⁸ The AA's selective enforcement was evident when Bangladeshi fishing vessels illegally entering Rakhine waters were detained and then released, showing a strategic balance between maintaining control, reducing conflict escalation, and sustaining economic activity.¹⁰⁹ On another front, Dhaka's policy over the border trade is also highly informal. A local Rohingya trader from Maungdaw explained to the CAS team: **"Since there is no legal trade, BGB charges 20,000 to 30,000 per bag of items if they are found (this is not an official tax collection). Most of the time, they do not allow the import of anything other than food. Sometimes they arrest people attempting to import goods from Bangladesh."** It is uncertain if the BGB will charge money for products or detain you and thus, people try to avoid BGB, he added.

The AA's control over Arakan-Bangladesh trade operated within a volatile security environment, where rival armed groups such as Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA) / Rohingya Islamic Mahaz exploited border insecurity and further complicated trade, linking **geopolitical influences** to local economic flows.¹¹⁰ This dynamic helps explain the AA's selective enforcement strategies, inspecting shipments, detaining vessels, and regulating exports as efforts to maintain revenue, ensure civilian welfare, and secure border stability. By managing trade amid both competition from rival actors and ongoing conflict, the AA demonstrated its dual role as both a de facto authority and a stabilizing agent in the region's commerce.

For Bangladesh, the shift revealed a realist calculation: prioritizing stability, food security, and trade revenues over the nominal sovereignty of Naypyidaw. For the ULA/AA, trade became both a tool of survival and a mechanism of governance, entrenching its de facto legitimacy on the international stage. It demonstrates that non-state actors, when effectively consolidating territorial control, can not only disrupt but actively regulate cross-border commerce, compelling state actors to adapt in response to shifting realities on the ground. A local trader from Maungdaw explained the opportunities and challenges in the trade relations. He said; **"Despite the quantity of items, prices are higher. Disruptions caused by border conflicts, war, extortion, road destruction, heavy monsoon rains, and border trade formalities are key challenges."** But, he also mentioned the opportunities that traders can travel to the border to purchase items and facilitate market operations, while individuals can use Bangladeshi SIM cards for communication, which simplifies interactions between the ULA and the traders.

This disruption, escalating amid ongoing conflict in Rakhine State, contributed to broader economic standstill at the port, with almost all import and export activities halted by mid-July, marking a four-month suspension that severely impacted local traders, and commodity flows like ginger and rice. Since then, only a small and informal trade took place on the border with communities in northern Arakan facing food and humanitarian crises suffering from the blockages.

By August, 2025 the arrest of illegal Bangladeshi fishermen from the Naf River underscored persistent security risks and the fragility of cross-border relations under AA oversight¹¹¹. The issue of illegal fishing from Bangladesh in Arakan water is a [constant problem](#). Throughout this period, trade remained highly contingent on AA control over ports and river routes, commodity demand, enforcement practices, and negotiations with Bangladeshi authorities. Economic incentives, including high demand for timber, livestock, and essential imports, drove merchants to navigate risks, illustrating

the interplay of opportunity costs and conflict-related incentives. However, Dhaka authorities [have blocked](#) the flow of trade and essential humanitarian items since early 2025.

(4.2) Arakan Trade with Mizoram: An Alternative Route

Amidst warfare, displacement, and disruptions in the Bangladesh trade route, the Mizoram corridor through Paletwa has emerged as an alternative survival lifeline for civilians in the conflict-affected region of Rakhine. Yet, this route is shaped not only by economic needs but also by infrastructure limitations, shifting security dynamics, and political contestation between state and non-state actors (NSAs).

(4.2.1) Corridors of Survival and Chokepoints of Conflict

The Arakan-Mizoram trade route reflects a complex intersection of infrastructure gaps, humanitarian necessity, and competing sovereignties. Initially tied to the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP), agreed upon between India and Myanmar in 2008, the project's incomplete implementation left Paletwa as a contested gateway. By 2024, the AA had consolidated control over Paletwa, making it a de facto regulator of cross-border flows despite India's formal engagement with Naypyidaw. In February 2025, Indian and Myanmar junta officials met in New Delhi to discuss restarting border trade, focusing on commodities such as medicine, beans, and petroleum products, alongside new payment mechanisms in rupee and kyat¹¹². Yet, this state to state negotiation did not reflect on the border trade relations that took place in Paletwa under the AA control¹¹³ creating a legal contradiction as de facto authority. One local trader from Kyauktaw explained the taxation situations to the CAS team as follows; **"Taxes for cross border trading by AA are different on items and value. There is tax free for food related items, ULA/AA was collected 3% tax for other import items. There was no tax collected by the Indian side because taxes were already paid since we purchased items from a shop. Tax was already added to its price."**

By early May 2025, infrastructural challenges were already evident. Reports from traders in Kyauktaw indicated that roads connecting Mizoram to Rakhine were severely damaged, delaying delivery trucks transporting rice, cooking oil, and fuel. Merchants from Kyauktaw explained that large delivery trucks were stuck, forcing traders to rent smaller vehicles at extremely high costs, leading to sharp inflation in food and fuel.¹¹⁴ One local merchant explained; **"Commodity prices are going up. They've nearly doubled compared to before..... To get goods into Rakhine now, we have to rent smaller, dedicated vehicles, but the rental fees are extremely high, which makes things even harder. That's why prices are rising here in Rakhine."**¹¹⁵

Soon after, the situation escalated when Indian authorities shut down the Lawngtlai-Paletwa road indefinitely on May 16, citing border security. The closure prevented the flow of food, medicine, and fuel, immediately affecting civilian welfare in Rakhine. Analysts warned that the closure would exacerbate commodity shortages and increase prices further.^{116 117} **"The closure of this route means Rakhine civilians will face higher prices and more shortages. Trade flows are not continuous, so the impact on people is severe. Rising commodity prices during the conflict will bring significant hardship"** ¹¹⁸ It reflects the tension between state sovereignty and de facto local authority, where humanitarian flows became hostage to political and security calculations.

However, after only four days, India reopened the route, enabling the resumption of food, medicine, and fuel imports. Traders emphasized that this reopening was not only about commerce but a matter of community survival, as shortages had already pushed prices to unsustainable levels. ¹¹⁹¹²⁰ A local trader from Kyauktaw explained the situations to the CAS team as follows: **"Mostly, import items from Mizoram to Arakan are food related stuff, medicine, petrol, machine and fertilizer. There are no significant export items from Arakan to Mizoram. I only heard about dry fish being imported to Mizoram."** The trade relations and dependence here prove how overreliance on a single trade corridor can pose significant risks to regional and state-level survival, highlighting its potential implications for broader political and security linkages.

(4.2.2) Exploitation, Alternatives, and Humanitarian Stakes

Yet the fragility of such access was soon underlined by accidents and weather disruptions. On May 31, ten cargo boats capsized in the Kaladan River amid heavy monsoon rains, killing one person and destroying shipments.¹²¹ This highlighted how overreliance on unsafe waterways caused vulnerability to maritime disruptions and needed other alternatives infrastructural support yet under the conflict ridden-zone. By June, economic incentives and intermediary exploitation became clearer. While the AA set regulated rental fees for boats, operators demanded nearly double-up to 20 million kyats per trip while laborers in Mizoram side raised wage demands by almost 100 percent. This “rapacity effect” of scarcity drove up civilian costs threefold by the time goods reached Rakhine. Traders reported that costs for transporting rice, fuel, and daily consumer goods tripled by the time they reached Rakhine markets.¹²² As one trader explained, **“During the monsoon, transportation costs for Rakhine traders are very high... By the time goods arrive in Rakhine, prices have nearly tripled”**.¹²³

In early July, reports showed over a hundred trucks stuck in Mizoram, with traders paying over ten million kyats per truck, further inflating commodity prices.¹²⁴ The cumulative effect was a crisis of affordability, where survival needs clashed with profit-driven trade practices. Despite these barriers, local actors sought solutions. On July 17, the Mara Defence Force (MDF/MTC) began constructing a new road link between Mizoram’s Mara region and Paletwa, seeking to bypass insecure waterways and reduce transport costs by half. Traders welcomed the effort, noting that safer and cheaper overland transport could lower inflated wartime prices and mitigate dependence on risky boat routes.¹²⁵ The initiative showed how intermediaries, while often accused of inflating costs, could also act as facilitators of humanitarian access, much like local networks in wartime economy.

Throughout these months, the humanitarian dimension remained central. Each closure, accident, or price surge directly translated into civilian hardship, reinforcing the human security perspective. For Rakhine’s population, the Mizoram route is less a commercial enterprise than a survival corridor. Its repeated disruptions reveal the fragility of civilian welfare in a system where trade is vulnerable to geopolitical rivalry, infrastructural collapse, and opportunistic intermediaries. At the same time, the geopolitical stakes are rising India balances formal engagement with Naypyidaw against the AA’s de facto governance, while also monitoring China’s growing influence in Rakhine infrastructure. A local trader explained the situation to the CAS team; **“Currently, there are no trading restrictions due to the pressure of the Myanmar military. It seems ULA has an agreement and understanding with the Mizoram government. In some check points, both of the AA soldiers Mizoram soldiers are checking together. Most significant challenge is transportation, mostly in the rainy season. And, there is no fixed price for labour fees. It is also a challenge for traders.”**

Following the ULA/AA’s capture of Maungdaw and Buthidaung in December 2024, Bangladesh pragmatically shifted from rejecting ULA-issued trade documents to selectively accommodating them, acknowledging the group’s de facto control over the 270 km border and engaging in tariff negotiations to sustain essential commerce, despite formal ties with the Myanmar junta. The AA asserted governance through taxation, detentions of cargo vessels, and regulation of exports like timber, while disruptions from rival groups, monsoons, and security incidents fueled illicit flows, price surges, and humanitarian crises, compelling Dhaka to prioritize stability and food security over diplomatic orthodoxy.

In parallel, the Mizoram-Palawa route emerged as a vital alternative lifeline amid Bangladesh disruptions, tied to India’s Kaladan project but complicated by AA control, infrastructural damage, and local blockades, leading to inflated transport costs and shortages that tripled civilian prices for essentials like rice and fuel. Overall, from December 2024 to August 2025, the ULA/AA transformed cross-border trade into a tool for economic leverage and legitimacy, forcing Bangladesh and India to navigate geopolitical tensions, intermediary exploitation, and humanitarian imperatives in a volatile frontier economy.

Part-VI. Conclusion

Future Prospects and Challenges for Border Trade in Arakan

The trajectory of border trade between Arakan, Bangladesh, and India since the 2021 coup highlights the extent to which conflict, governance, and geopolitics shape economic life. While the SAC attempted to maintain control of official trade channels, its authority eroded steadily as the ULA/AA consolidated its influence across borderlands. This shift created a contested space in which both state and non-state actors collected revenues, imposed taxation, and shaped the flow of goods. For Bangladesh, engagement remained cautious and primarily framed by security concerns, especially regarding refugee flows and the risk of arms trafficking. India, by contrast, pursued its long-term strategic interest in the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project through Mizoram, signaling its determination to anchor connectivity projects despite the volatile conflict environment.

At the community level, borderland traders, fishermen, and transport workers navigated these overlapping authorities and taxation systems, sustaining livelihoods in conditions of uncertainty while facing recurrent disruptions from clashes, blockades, or natural disasters. Border trade thus served both as an economic lifeline for ordinary people in Arakan due to the blockages and as a political meaning contested by rival authorities.

The findings of this study also reveal clear theoretical patterns. Realism helps explain how trade became a tool of power and strategic leverage. For instance, both Delhi and Dhaka authorities attempted to use trade routes with the ULA/AA-controlled areas as a political tool or leverage. In the case of Dhaka-Arakan trade, trade relations with ULA/AA serves more as means to achieve their goals of refugee repatriation than an economic incentive overall. When it was not realized in time, Dhaka suspended the trade relations with ULA-controlled areas since mid-2025. But, for New Delhi and authorities in Mizoram, Arakan under the ULA is essential for the implementation of the Kaladan project and as the ULA publicly and constructively supports it, trade with Arakan is smoothly as usual apart from the logistical challenges and frequent interruptions by the CSO like CYLA. It means that both Bangladesh and India engaged pragmatically, driven by strategic interests rather than ideological concerns.

Liberal perspectives show the persistence of interdependence at the grassroots level, as communities continued cross-border exchanges despite war, although the liberal promise of peace through trade remained unrealized in the absence of trust and strong institutions. Constructivist analysis demonstrates that trade is not only material but also symbolic, the ULA/AA framed its role in trade regulation as a marker of sovereignty and fairness, contrasting itself against the SAC's corruption. Political economic perspectives situate border trade within a war economy, whereas the trade volume and nature of trade currently taking place on both Bangladesh and Indian borders are mainly minimal or critical for the civilian survival rather than the profits of the political actors. Finally, a human security lens underscores that disruptions in trade directly impact livelihoods, food security, medicines and dignity. Women and marginalized groups remain the most vulnerable, facing exclusion from decision-making and heightened risks along informal routes.

In short, in comparison between the two trade routes, while Arakan trade with Mizoram of India is increasingly becoming more normal and stable, its trade with Bangladesh faced blockages, disruptions and political manipulations especially by the Dhaka authorities. On the other hand, both trade routes are highly informal in terms of infrastructures, rules and regulations, financial transition, law enforcement and taxation.

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