



SITUATION UPDATE:

Recent MAF Gains in Perspective

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| October 2025 |

Current Situation

In the past six months, the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) has made apparent military progress in numerous locations throughout the country, retaking locations it had lost over the past several years.

- In July and August, it regained ground in Southern Shan State's [Pekon](#) Township and Karenni State's [Loikaw](#) and [Demoso](#) townships.
- It regained nominal control of [Lashio](#) in April,¹ and fought its way through [Nawngkhio](#) and into [Kyaukme](#) town, in Northern Shan State, in September and overran [Thabeikkyin](#) town in neighbouring northern Mandalay Region in July.
- In September, it claimed to have finally secured the [Asia Highway](#), connecting the town of Myawaddy on the Thai border (in Karen State) to Yangon.
- In September, it retook some positions in [Bhamo](#) town and in [Hpakant](#) Township, Kachin State, though both of these places remain very much contested.

These recent MAF military successes have caused some analysts and observers to point to the events of the past six months as a resurgence of the MAF's military strength, a major turning point in post-2021 fighting, an indication of the comparative weakness of resistance forces, and a sign that the MAF will continue to retake large swathes of the territory that it has lost since 2021. However, it is important to note these recent MAF gains have been geographically limited. Fighting persists in many parts of the country, the MAF has suffered additional losses elsewhere during the same period (e.g. Sagaing Region's [Banmauk](#) town), and elsewhere it has made no progress in recapturing positions it earlier lost (e.g. western Myanmar). Accordingly, despite accompanying political efforts, the MAF's territorial gains in 2025 must be put into perspective before any conclusions can be drawn about the future.

Background

The MAF has suffered unprecedented military losses since 2021, as nationwide resistance to a military coup — and non-violent protest attempts met with deadly military force — galvanised armed anti-MAF activity.

Many long-standing ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) have fielded new recruits from central Myanmar,

provided training and equipment to newer people's defense forces (PDFs), or both. They have also seen greater opportunity and pressure to oppose the MAF by force. These factors have driven major territorial expansion, particularly in Rakhine, Shan, Kachin, and Karen states. Elsewhere, such as in Karenni and Chin states, a long-standing but relatively small EAO has taken the helm in a coalition of smaller local groups, effectively forming a unified armed opposition to the MAF. As a result, over the past four years the MAF has lost control of large swathes of Rakhine, Shan, and Kachin states, as well as nearly all of Myanmar's border crossings. In many of these areas with a strong EAO presence — even where there is an MAF presence nearby — these EAOs are the ones facilitating or blocking humanitarian access.

In other parts — generally central and northwest — of Myanmar, newer armed actors (formed after the coup) have persistently beaten back the MAF from rural areas. In some cases they have seized towns, including as recently as September 2025 in Banmauk. These actors have benefited from training, weapons, and other support from larger EAOs, and have often fought alongside them in opposing the MAF. As a result, across much of Myanmar it can be said that the MAF lacks control of rural areas and is mainly confined to urban areas and larger roadways. In many of these areas, humanitarian response activities take place under the auspices of local resistance actors — or at least do not take place under the auspices of the MAF, as a result of both reduced MAF control and minimal MAF willingness to allow them.

Since late July, the MAF political apparatus (now called the State Security and Peace Committee, or SSPC) has moved swiftly to try to facilitate [elections](#) starting in December. While these elections will not be free or fair, the apparent assumption on the part of the SSPC is that these will allow a transition to a nominally democratic government that has greater international, if not domestic, support. These impending elections appear to be catalysing MAF offensives, insofar as greater territorial control would allow the elections to take place in more places, and military victories also serve a symbolic purpose as a sign of the military's continued strength. At the same time, numerous actors have voiced staunch opposition to the elections, and this may be spurring greater armed activity against the MAF as well.

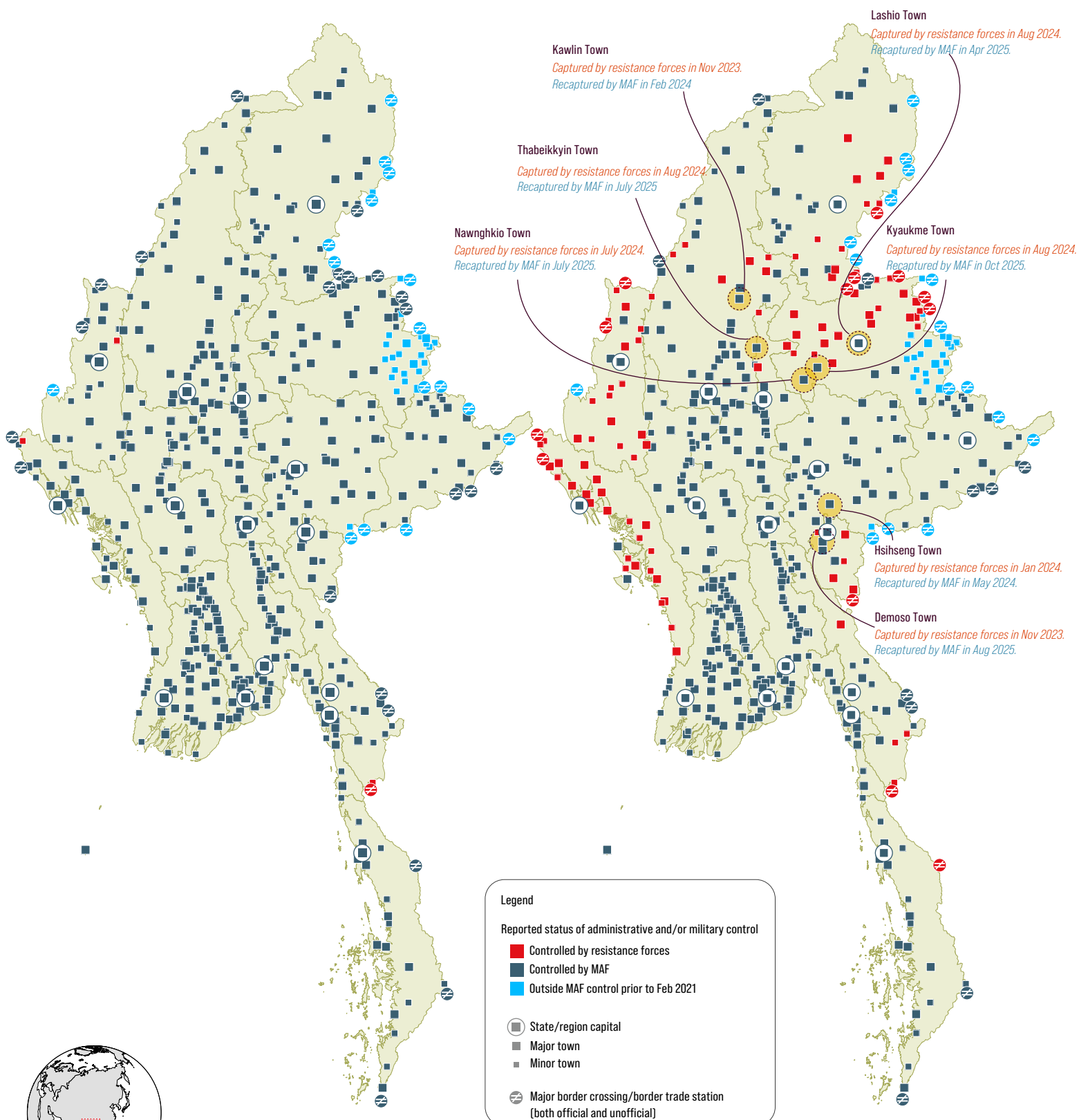
¹ The MAF regained access to Lashio, the largest town in Northern Shan State, in April. However, this was not the result of military might, but rather of Chinese [pressure](#) on the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army.

Reported Status of Administrative and Military Control

Towns, Minor Towns and Border Crossings

Status of Control Two Years Ago
(As of 1 October 2023)

Current Status of Control
(As of 1 October 2025)



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Impact

The impact of the MAF's recent gains is relatively small and should not be overstated. While the MAF has seen more battlefield success in the past six months than it has since the coup in 2021, this has been slow progress, and it still controls less of the country than it has since the 1950s. The MAF's recent successes should be noted, and there are locations where the MAF is likely to see future success; at the same time, the scale of what the MAF has lost is immense, and it is not in a position to retake the vast majority of these areas for the foreseeable future.

The specific recent MAF gains have been small in scope, and they have been slow. In Northern Shan State, the majority of which the MAF has lost control of since late 2023, it has retaken two towns, Nawnghkio and Kyaukme. In Kachin State, where the MAF has lost control of multiple townships and all border crossings, it has retaken a few positions in Hpakant Township — after sending over 1,000 reinforcements there — and a small number in Bhamo town after sending a flotilla of at least 15 naval ships. In Karen State, where it has lost most rural areas and nearly all border crossings,² it regained access to the main road only after fighting to do so for over a year. In all of these cases, these locations are surrounded by territory controlled by or hosting armed actors that continue to oppose the MAF.

It is true that the MAF's gains in Southern Shan State and Karenni State have been larger and may well continue. Likewise, the MAF may continue to make gains in northern Mandalay Region, moving beyond Thabeikkyin town to other parts of Thabeikkyin, Mogoke, and Singu townships. However, a large percentage of territory across western, northwest, northeast, and southeast Myanmar — and many border crossings — remain outside the MAF's control. Nearly all of Rakhine and Chin states, and much of Sagaing Region and northern Magway Region, for example, are now functioning beyond the MAF's control. Finally, Myanmar's economic situation and the MAF's access to revenue remain extremely poor, and this will remain the case regardless of recent territorial gains; the MAF still cannot effectively generate revenue through natural resource extraction or border trade.

It is possible that the recent string of MAF gains has boosted morale within the MAF and demoralised specific armed actors. However, there is little to suggest that it has dampened the resolve of these armed actors, many of whose *raison d'être* is the defeat of the MAF — locally, if not entirely. For the same reason, these localised changes in control are unlikely to have changed the calculus for other armed actors that have seized control of specific areas; it is unlikely that these actors are any more inclined to reverse their hard-fought gains up to this point by ceding that territory.

Finally, the impact on the specific places where control changed is relatively small. In all cases, these locations had already been devastated by at least one round of fighting that seriously damaged local economies and agricultural activity and displaced locals — many of whom remain displaced. In some cases, such as Nawnghkio and Kyaukme, the recent MAF takeover was preceded by dozens — maybe hundreds — of airstrikes, leaving little of the towns or their populations in place. Humanitarian response programming in these places has focused on supporting people who have been displaced or otherwise affected, and this will likely continue to be the case. Local responders operating in these places were typically operating outside the purview of the MAF, and they will likely continue to do so, albeit with the higher risk that comes with a greater MAF presence.

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² The two border crossings where the MAF retains a presence in Karen State are at Myawaddy, which is functionally under the control of the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF)/Karen National Army (KNA), and Payathonesu, which is jointly administered by several armed actors.

Forecast

Far from the momentum shifting toward an MAF military victory, it appears that the overall situation in Myanmar is unlikely to change in the near term. The situation has now in many ways entered into a stalemate status quo, for at least the medium term, certainly until after the coming elections.

An overall stalemate does not mean that nothing will change in specific locations. For example, it is likely that the MAF can retake other parts of northern Mandalay Region and make incremental gains in Northern Shan State, and that it can make still larger gains in Southern Shan State and Karenni State. In Rakhine State, while it would not be easy for the MAF to retake territory, it is likely that fighting will continue along the borders of Sittwe and Kyaukpyu townships. Meanwhile, EAOs and smaller resistance actors may continue to make gains in specific places, including in Kachin State, northern Sagaing Region, and along the borders of Rakhine State in Magway, Bago, and Ayeyarwady.

However, it does mean that no actor moves closer to fully realizing its objectives, with many parts of the country remaining contested. In some parts of the country, the MAF will remain without any access whatsoever, though it can still undermine its opponents with airstrikes. In many parts of the country, it will retain a presence around urban areas and be able to move — albeit while being attacked — along roads and waterways but have minimal control of the rural areas surrounding these. For many people, the primary or only administration with which they interact will be linked to EAOs or more localised resistance actors.

There may be more significant changes farther off. Shifts within the leadership of the MAF or its political apparatus, following the election or at some later time, could make a difference in its willingness — and capacity — to seek peace with individual armed actors. Shifts within the leadership and relative bargaining positions of EAOs, PDFs, or the National Unity Government (NUG) could likewise bring these actors to the negotiating table. However, it is unlikely that the MAF's recent gains — or even a potential increase in its military capacity in the longer term — will be the main catalyst for this. Regardless of whether or not this happens, in many parts of Myanmar it will be actors other than the MAF that must be involved in response activities.

Response Implications

The recent changes in control of specific locations within Myanmar do not, themselves, call for changes in response activities. Many international response agencies and donors are already programming at least in part through non-MAF actors, including in areas recently affected, and this continues to be the most effective strategy for supporting people in many parts of the country. In some parts of Myanmar, reaching vulnerable populations requires working through the MAF; elsewhere, it is essential to not work through the MAF. A few locations changing hands does not change this.

However, as important as access is purpose. If fighting is indeed entering into a prolonged stalemate, donors and implementers will need to rethink what kinds of programme modalities, and what entry points, are best suited to a long term crisis. Currently, a sizable majority of the international response is focused on basic emergency humanitarian assistance; very often, this assistance is cash based assistance directly to beneficiaries. As fighting becomes a potentially long term and endemic crisis, donors and implementers will need to consider how programs can become more cascading, sustainable, and systemic; merely addressing immediate humanitarian needs will not be sufficient, and there will not be enough funds to comprehensively cover these needs. As such, 'humanitarian plus', 'development-light/development-in-crisis', and governance programming will need to be increasingly considered as critical components of aid files, in order to reduce full aid dependency in a context that has become a large-scale endemic crisis for the foreseeable future.

