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Arakan Army Dominance in Rakhine State: An Insight on Border Security and Associated Strategic Risks for Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The speed at which the non-state actors consolidated and expanded control over the two states (Rakhine State and Chin State) is a significant change in the regional security scenario with direct implications on border management and strategic equilibrium of Bangladesh. The paper is inspired by the emergence of Arakan Army that has been in a state of excessive territorial control and dominance in Rakhine State on the south-eastern side of Bangladesh at the time when a population of 1.2 million Rohingya are yet to be repatriated. The research followed a qualitative situational study and analysis based on recent reports of conflict, regional security evaluation, and border risks dynamics to analyse how the changing situations influence cross border stability and security issues. The analysis suggests that the declining control of Myanmar Government in Rakhine State has multiple linked risks for Bangladesh. Such risks include the rampant growth of drug and human trafficking networks, the likelihood of skirmishes at the borders due to lack of functioning command and control structure, and the increasing risk of new influx of remaining 0.6 million Rohingya in Rakhine State. The study also points out suspension of repatriation prospects of the 1.2 million Rohingyas living within Bangladesh, mounting maritime insecurity, and non-traditional security concerns in the Bay of Bengal as strategic risks. The paper concludes by suggesting that dominance of the Arakan Army represents a long-term security problem in border governance, as opposed to a temporary or short-term security issue. Therefore, these security dynamics along Bangladesh-Myanmar border requires adoption of integrated and coordinated border management, maritime vigilance and surveillance, real time intelligence collection and humanitarian preparedness to mitigate the long-term strategic vulnerabilities.

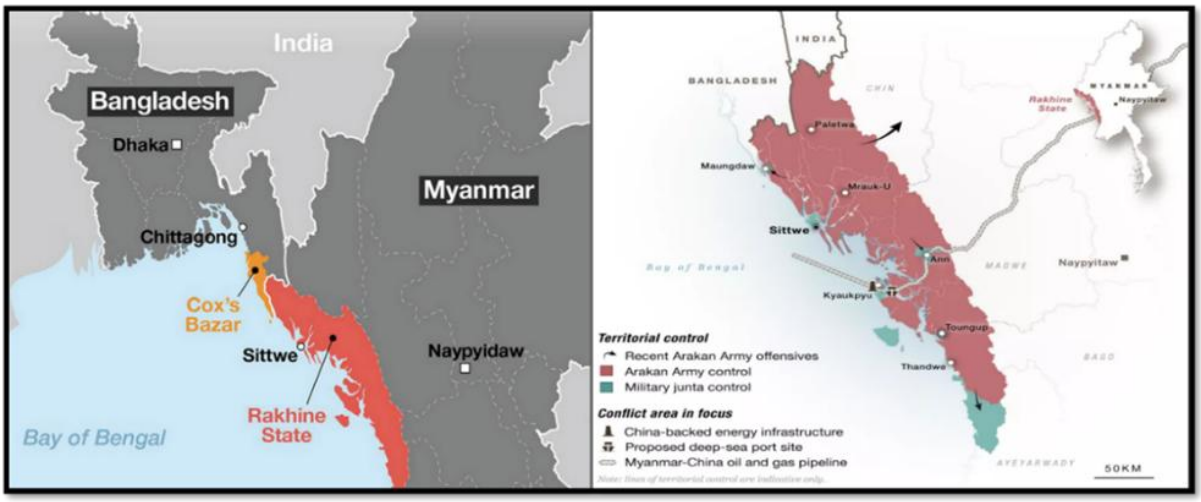
Keywords: Arakan Army, Bangladesh, border security, Rakhine state, Rohingya crisis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The mounting territorial expansion and encroachment of the Rakhine State by the Rakhine People's Army (RPA) has played an important role in changing the security contagium in the south-eastern border of Bangladesh. Ever since in 2021, Myanmar lost a state of Rakhine, in a short period of time. As a result, the non-state armed governance has become a new reality in different parts of most of Myanmar (McConnachie et al., 2022; Kyed, 2022; Thawnghmung and Htoo, 2022). This change is particularly important for Bangladesh as the Rakhine State is directly bordered by Bangladesh and is at the center of the current Rohingya crisis that directly impacts border security

and strategic stability of Bangladesh (McConnachie, 2022; Wahab, 2022). Thus, the recent happenings in Rakhine State should be very closely watched and monitored to remain stable and provide security in the southeastern part of Bangladesh. If such monitoring is not continued, cross-border security threats might rise and compromise long-term regional stability.

Figure 1: Rakhine State in the Regional Map and Dominance of Aarakan Army from December 2024



Source: Maps Collected from Open Source

The explosive growth of the Arakan Army has led to other effects, including increased instability, reduced institutional control and transformed the effective rules of border control and cross-border migration. Existing literature on border governance in Myanmar depict that weakened state control frequently enhances illegal economy, unlawful taxation and coercive regulation of mobility that may spread beyond the domestic boundaries encompassed in the country (McDuie-Ra, 2022; Yoni, 2022). These conditions in the Bangladesh-Myanmar perspectives augment the vulnerabilities of drug trafficking, human trafficking, and irregular population movement. These trends make the process of managing the humanitarian situation and the process of protecting refugees much more difficult (Rana and Riaz, 2022; Siddiqi, 2022). At the same time, the ecological pressure, in-security of livelihoods, and pressure conflict related to Rohingya community in Rakhine State has increased the risk of new displacement towards Bangladesh (Islam, 2022; Mitu, 2022). Bangladesh should therefore be strategically prepared for a potential massive influx of the rest of the estimated 0.6 million Rohingya (from Rakhine State) to ensure national and regional stability. A better coordination of humanitarian activities, increased preparedness on the border, and good international coordination will be the key to wisely dealing with any sudden pressure brought about by displacement.

Against the above backdrop, this paper examines how not only is the dominance and territorial control by the Arakan Army in Rakhine State an immediate security concern for Bangladesh, but also the driver of structural changes in border governance in the long run. The objective of the study is to analyse the current situation in the state of Rakhine and assess the emerging risks of border security and strategic risks to Bangladesh. It will especially focus on cross border incidents, Royingya displacement dynamics, maritime security in the territorial water, and non-traditional security threats. By making links between patterns of territorial control and cross border risk trends, the paper aims to present a practical and balanced analysis of the way in which a strong non-state actor (the Arakan Army) is affecting the level of security in the region and creating long term strategic challenges for Bangladesh.

This research is important not just from an academic perspective but also from a policy-oriented approach of security analysis from the Bangladesh perspective. Academically, it deals with the subject of the study of borders governing and non-state actors by analysing the territorial control

and dominance of the Arakan Army as a long-term structural change and not a temporal outcome of war. This study is also an extension to existing theories of border security, transborder crime theories, and spillover effects theories. Empirically this paper enhances displacement or influx dynamics of Rohingyas, illicit cross border activities, development in maritime domain and non-traditional security threats into a common analytical framework focused on Bangladesh receive scarcely discussion in existing literature. From policy formulation perspective, the findings also provide some timely insights on emerging risks in the region along southeastern part of Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal focusing on coordinated border management, intelligence cooperation and humanitarian preparedness. By bringing recent developments in Rakhine State directly in connection with long term strategic stability of Bangladesh, this study brings relevant evidence for security stakeholders, humanitarian actors, and regional policy makers to address complex cross-border challenges.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Territorial Control by Non-State Actors.

Recent studies highlight that non-state actors are moving slowly out of insurgent activities into seeking permanent territorial control, which is greatly modifying the governance and security patterns of the warring regions. Studies on the borderland problems of Myanmar the tend to form parallel systems of authority, administer cross border movement and control economic activity in regions that have weaker state power (Kyed, 2024; McConnachie et a1.,2022). An obvious example of such a tendency is the role of Arakan Army in Rakhine State that flouts traditional state-controlled security systems (Thawnghmung and Htoo, 2022; Weygand, 2025). These literatures prove that the territorial control by the non-state actors is likely to lead to the establishment of the long-term governance systems rather than causing short-term instability. It also suggests that it is an important factor in determining the forms of local authorities, security management, as well as cross-border security dynamics.

2.2 Spillover Effect

Research on border governance emphasises the fact that a lack of authority over the border area or weak and fragmented authority causes cross border spillage such as illegal trading, cross border population displacement, and indirect effects on security (Alam & Uddin, 2025; McDuie-Ra, 2022; Yoni, 2023). Since influx of 1.2 million Rohingyas in August 2017, Bangladesh-Myanmar border became a contentious territory that was shaped by violence, militarisation, and informal control (Wahab, 2022). These conditions lead to increase in uncertainty and initiate enforcement predicaments and increase the risk of border offences when both state and non-state actors are present in close proximity (McConnachie, 2022).

2.3 Fresh Wave of Rohingya and the Problems of Repatriation

The issue of Rohingya crisis and its consequences in Bangladesh is discussed relatively bigger portion of literature. These literatures also talk about on patterns of displacement, host- refugee relations, and barriers to repatriation process (Alam & Uddin, 2025). Studies show that insecurity and governance challenges in Rakhine State remain an important obstacle for sustainable repatriation (Islam, 2022; Siddiqi, 2024). Additionally, environmental pressures, risk to livelihood, and violence also contribute to increasing the risks of displacement to the remaining 0.6 million Rohingya populations (Mitu, 2024). These studies imply that changes in territorial control and authority have direct effects on the pressures for migration and humanitarian assistance.

2.4 Drug and Human Trafficking

Studies on border governance show that the absence of proper border governance helps in the facilitation of drug trafficking, human trafficking, and organised crime in refugee host areas (Rana and Riaz, 2022, Ahmed and Nusrat, 2022). Illegal economic activities have been on the rise in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh specifically Coxs Bazar and other borders (Rahaman et al., 2022). Experts gradually interpret such risks as security threats in non-traditional forms blurring the boundaries between internal security, humanitarian protection as well as transnational crime (Wahab and Ashutosh, 2022). The literature review responds that drug and human trafficking are likely to be increased in unstable border environments. It emphasizes how urgently new forms of border governance, wise regional action and effective network of monitoring are necessary.

2.5 Security Dynamics in Bay of Bengal

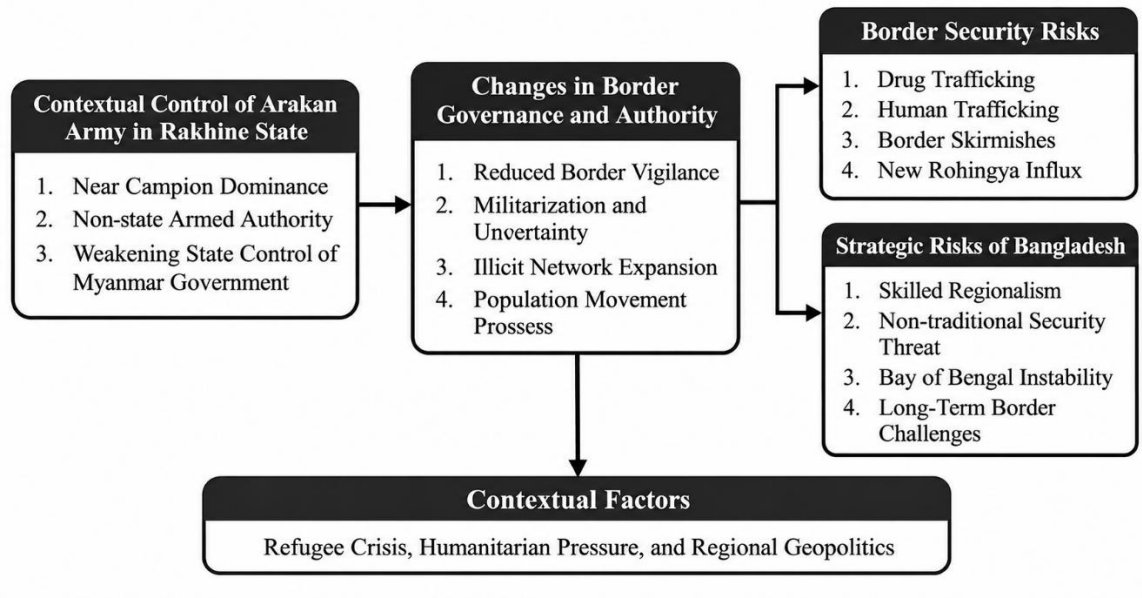
Many studies incorporate the border security analysis to the maritime areas which are sometimes related to the strategic waterways. The studies on humanitarian governance and regional geopolitics imply that there is the potential for the instability of the coastal conflict areas to have implications on the maritime security, surveillance network, and regional power dynamics (Wahab and Ashutosh, 2022, Weigand, 2025). In the case of Bangladesh, events in the Rakhine State in the recent past have significant implications for long term strategic stability in the Bay of Bengal. The implications are also in favor of bringing land and maritime security together in the perspective of border security.

2.6 Research Gap

Numerous articles study the Myanmar-related issues such as border governance, non-state actors and Rohingya crisis. However, there are still important gaps in the research. Most research examines the growth of the Arakan Army in the context of Myanmar's civil war or a role as a non-state actor in conflict regions. However, they do not fully explore the almost complete territorial control of the Arakan Army in Rakhine state as well as its long-term influence on the authority of the Bangladesh border. Much of the literature on the Rohingya focuses on humanitarian and social and livelihood outcomes without adequately addressing the implications of the changing security and political situation in Rakhine State on future displacement and the feasibility of repatriating the 1.2 million Rohingyas as well as increasing cross-border security challenges for Bangladesh. Similarly, study and research on drug and human trafficking, border crimes and non-traditional security threats are often not carried out in an interconnected manner but as separate problems stemming from the reduced border governance under the control of the Arakan Army. Moreover, maritime and strategic aspects of Rakhine's instability on Bangladesh are two gray areas. Specifically, the development in the Bay of Bengal is still insufficiently studied in empirical and analytical terms. This paper contributes to fill these gaps by bringing together territorial control and dominance, border security and crimes, displacement dynamics, risk of further influx of migrants and strategic vulnerabilities of Bangladesh into a single analytical framework.

3. Conceptual Framework

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework



Source: Researchers' Own Construct

The conceptual framework illustrates how the Arakan Army's territorial dominance in Rakhine State reshapes border governance and authority, potentially generating security risks, including trafficking, border skirmishes, and new Rohingya influxes. These developments may create broader strategic risks for Bangladesh, while the Rohingya crisis, humanitarian pressures, and regional geopolitics provide the overarching contextual factors influencing these dynamics.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Study Design and Analysis Approach

This study uses qualitative, quantitative and spatial analytic research design to investigate the consequences of territorial dominance by Arakan Army in Rakhine State on border security of Bangladesh. The study is based on a descriptive and analytical process which is well planned and systematic process. It combined spatial data with qualitative analysis in finding out gaps in governance, risk zones, spillover effects which is like recent studies about geospatial governance. The analysis focuses on the post 2021 situation and developments after 2024 when the Arakan Army achieved 90% territorial control of Rakhine State.

4.2 Data Types and Sources

Both spatial and non-spatial secondary data were utilised which ensured the analytical depth and Research reliability. Spatial information aids in the territorial control map, border proximity and maritime zone mapping. And non-spatial data are used to provide contextual understanding of security dynamics, displacement risks and strategic challenges. Besides, data related to recent crimes that occurred in the bordering areas were collected from the appropriate authorities. Additional information was also sought from official reports, security briefings and confirmed media to ensure information accuracy and reliability.

Table 1: Data Types and Sources Used to Conduct the Study

Data Type	Source	Purpose
Administrative boundary map (Bangladesh-Myanmar)	Open street map and GADM	To assess the border demarcation and proximity factors
Satellite imagery (2021-2025)	Google Earth Application and Landsat	To analyses the territorial dominance and other activities of Arakan Army
Conflict location data	Open source	To identify control areas and hotspots
Rohingya settlement data	UNHCR, RRRC, NGO, INGO and Government report	To analyses the current state of Rohingyas
Maritime boundary data	International hydrographic data	To conceptualize the maritime risk
Policies and security reports	Government and academic report	To assess the risk

4.3 Geospatial Data Processing and Mapping

All the spatial data was processed in QGIS and ArcGIS software and processing is also the standard geospatial workflows. Boundaries layers, satellite imagery and conflict zone datasets were georeferenced to a commonly used coordinate system. Overlay analysis was also applied to find out bordering risk zones, controlled areas of Arakan Army dominance near Bangladesh- Myanmar bordar, and Coastal areas of Bay of Bengal. Reduction mapping and spatial filtering process were utilised to airmark the high-risk corridors. This process also reproduces spatial analytical procedures commonly employed in research on geospatial governance.

4.4 Qualitative Risk Assessment and Analysis Framework

Non-spatial data was evaluated using content analysis and thematic coding. Security risks were categorised in two types, border security risks and strategic risks based on study on policy documents, academic studies, and conflict assessments. The qualitative findings were then linked to spatial outputs using an integrated framework of analysis. This link also helps it to have territorial control patterns systematically linked to cross border risks. This mixed analytical approach is consistent with applied geospatial methods of governance used in other studies.

4.5 Analytical Model.

To organise the analysis, a linear analytical model was utilised to conceptually establish the link between territorial dominance and security risks:

Where Y is border and strategic risk outcomes and X_1 is the degree of control of non-state actors over territories, X_2 is vulnerability of border governance, a a constant, B_1 and B_2 are coefficients and a is an error term. The equation is derived in a way that is used for analytical interpretation instead of statistical estimation. It is also followed by the established conceptual modeling practices in security and governance research.

4.6 Software and Tools Used.

Table 2: Materials and Tools Used for Analysis

Material Type	Tool Used	Purpose of Use
Hardware	Computer workstation	Data sorting and analysis
GIS Software	QGIS, ArcGIS	Risky zone identification and mapping
Image Processing	Google Earth Application	Visual understanding of control areas
Data Management	Microsoft Excel	Sorting and classification of data
Document Analysis	Manual coding	Analysis of qualitative date

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5. Result and Discussion

5.1 Territorial Control and Border Control

The geospatial analysis and discovery indicate that since December 2024, Arakan Army is exercising an effective control and dominance over nearly 90% of land territory indicating a clear and quick transformation in territorial control in Rakhine State. This paradigm change has taken a major role at the time of shaping the border governance and security across the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. In this regard, the institutional government administrative authority in these regions have collapsed and fragmented governance structure and informal regulatory networks have been created by the Arakan Army. Moreover, the concentration and predominance of Arakan Amry near bordering areas have increased the level of uncertainty in governance and deposed institutional supervision. These developments are making an impact on border stability, and the rising concern is great for Bangladesh.

Figure 3: who controls territory in Rakhine State: Pre 2021 to Post 2024

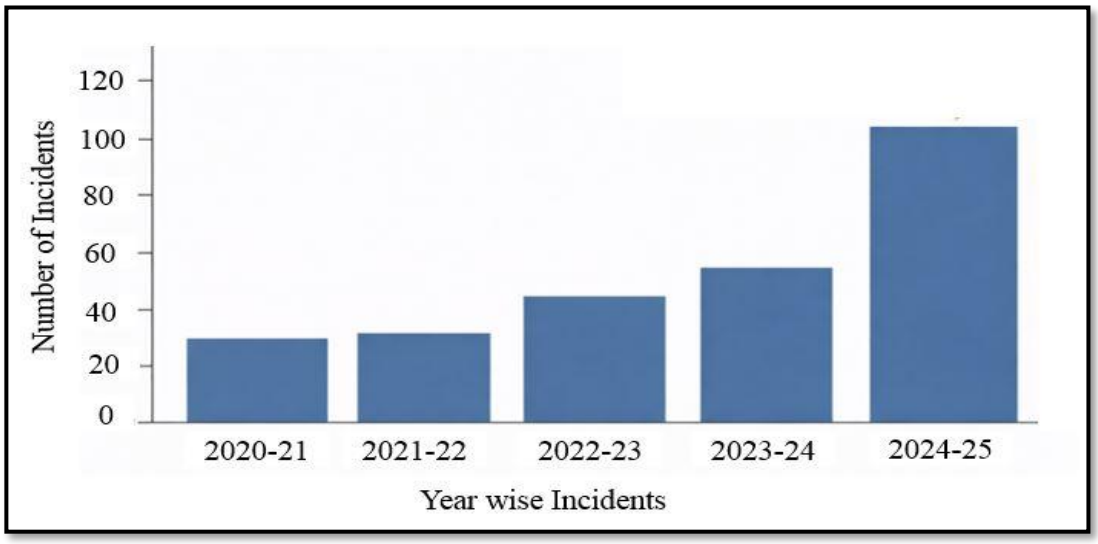


Source: Researchers' Own Construct

5.2 Trends of Border Security Incidents

Analysis and findings of border related cases show that there is a certain increase of transborder crimes due to the consolidation and formation of Arakan Army's control in Rakhine State. Drugs trafficking, human trafficking, border skirmishes and unauthorized push in or uncontrolled cross boarding movement incidents were reported to be on a sustained wise after 2024. This pattern discloses that weak and vulnerable border control in the Myanmar side has made way to and increased the rate of crime in the southeastern part of Bangladesh. Recent reports also indicated that such cases are increasingly becoming common and being geographically expanded along vulnerable border points. If current trend continues, border security and low enforcing agencies may come under increasing pressure in the near future to deal with the complex security challenges.

Figure 4: Annual Border Security Incidents (2020-2024)

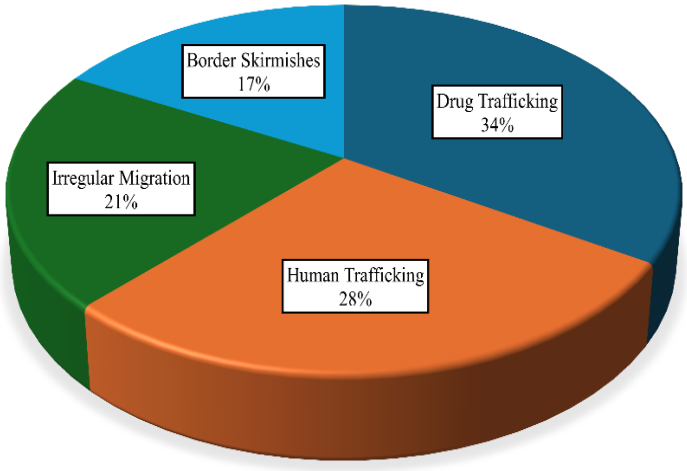


Source: Researchers' Own Construct based of Collected Data

5.3 Emerging Border Risks

Recent incident distribution is further shaped to crystallise the nature of the emerging threats, relatives. Drug trafficking and human trafficking are the biggest recorded incidences, followed by irregular migration or push-in and localised skirmishes between non-state actors along the bordering areas. This distribution shows that non-traditional security threats have become more common than direct confrontations of conventional military along the border. Figure 5 indicates that drug trafficking (34%) state that 1/3 of the incidents in the observed, linked to drug smuggling. Human trafficking (28%) means more than one-quarter of causes related to human trafficking of innocent people. Besides, irregular migration (21%) depicts displacement due to push or cross border movement without authorisation. Besides, border skirmishes (17%) are direct confrontations between a non-state actors or Myanmar military forces.

Figure 5: Composition of Border Security Risks



Source: Researchers' Own Construct based on Collected Data

5.4 Comparative Risk Assessment (Pre 2024 & Post 2024)

To underpin the comparative risks and changes, the border security incidents were analysed under two periods namely before and after 2024. The comparison reveals an enormous escalation of drug and human trafficking related incidents and displacement of population pressure in the following time. Furthermore, border skirmishes between state actors with no state actors and Myanmar Security Forces have also increased at a lower rate. This implies increasing military presence and tension, rather than continual fighting. At the same time, the hope of safe and stable repatriation of nearly 1.2 million Rohingya refugees are gradually going down. The present situation and new threats by nano-state actors also imply a structural declination of repatriation based on the unstable governance and security in the Rakhine State.

Table 3: Comparative Border Security Risks (Pre 2024 and Post 2024)

Material Type	Pre 2024	Post 2024	Observed Trend
Drug Trafficking	Moderate	High	Sharp increase
Human Trafficking	Moderate	High	Sustain increase
Irregular Migration	Low Moderate	High	Rapid escalation
Border Skirmishes	Low	Moderate	Gradual increase
Repatriation Feasibility	Limited	Severely Constrained	Structural decline

5.5 Long Term Strategic Vulnerabilities

The findings recognise a handful of deeper and sophisticated strategic vulnerabilities to Bangladesh which is beyond immediate border security concern. In this connection, the uncertain future of repatriation prospect of 1.2 million Rohingyas has manifested itself in the form of the most vital strategic burden. The overwhelming control and dominance of non-state actor in other side of the border has complicated the bilateral engagement to find a lasting solution with regard to repatriation of Rohingyas. Besides, alarming rise of Non-traditional Security Threat may be considered as another emerging strategic vulnerabilities. Moreover, the increase in the level of tensions in the territorial waters of Bay of Bengal can cause long-term strategic weakness to national security by preventing merchant shipping, fishing activities and add risks of human trafficking along the maritime routes. Therefore, the security implications of the dominance of the Arakan Army in Rakhine State go beyond the physical security of the border with land and are instead broader and more connected to the issue of national and maritime security.

6. Significance of Findings

The major conclusions of this study are that the dominance of the Arakan Army in Rakhine State is a manifestation of a long-term structural change in border administration, rather than a recent transformation of the conflict into an intensification of violence. By combining subjective and objective analysis and risk appraisal the study underlines the ways in which territorial control by non-state actor can reconfigure security, humanitarian and strategic environments at the same time. This combined approach is very relevant considering the recent developments and to identify an important analytical gap for niche into the changing security challenges in the bordering areas of Bangladesh. The findings are significant because they reveal evidence for long term policy planning, as opposed to short term crisis response. These also help the policymakers to visualise the emerging security risks and pave the way to prepare more effectively by formulating prudent strategic options to Bangladesh

7. Conclusions

The study shows that the strong control of Arakan Army in Rakhine State has significantly influenced on the border management in south-eastern part of Bangladesh. This includes abundance of drug and human trafficking network, illegal crossing of borders, frequent skirmishes at borders, delayed repatriation process of Rohingyas and tension in territorial water of Bay of Bengal. This research also identifies emergence of nontraditional security threats along the bordering areas as long term strategic threat for Bangladesh. By integrating qualitative and quantitative risk assessment, the study has also provided a clear and comprehensive idea on how dominance of non-state actors changing the security dynamics along the border and poses significant security threats at strategic level for Bangladesh.

The research also provides a structural analytical framework for the security planners, policymakers and humanitarian actors by relating the recent situation of Rakhine State with the cross-border security dynamics. Despite having in it the limitation of use of secondary sources of data, as well as open-source data, the study offers a time worthy and dynamic route to strengthening the integrated border management, intelligence coordination, humanitarian preparedness and maritime vigilance. The study has also found the current domination of Arakan Army at Rakhine State as a long-term security problem in which the multi-level governmental responses are necessary. Therefore, prudent and plausible approaches are urgently needed to deal with these long-term strategic risks to improve the resilience along Bangladesh-Myanmar frontier.

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