

## **Geopolitical Dimension of Rohingya Crisis**

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While much of the attention on the Rohingyas focuses on the atrocities committed by the Myanmar military, influx of the displaced to Bangladesh and their sufferings, the geopolitical dimension of the Rohingya crisis is often overlooked. The assets and economic potential in Rakhine State, the place for habitual residence of the Rohingyas, are valuable to Myanmar's military establishment, which exercises significant influence over the country's economy. Certain geopolitical realities like lucrative natural resources of Rakhine State, its geostrategic significance and investment opportunities have essentially made the Rohingyas a victim of continued exclusion and extermination. Moreover, the regional geopolitics have brought the Rohingya displacement crisis to a standstill. Regional actors like China, India and Japan have continued their economic assistance to Myanmar and not openly condemned the government for forcibly displacing almost an entire ethnic minority.

### **Geopolitical Significance of Rakhine State**

Rakhine State is located in the western part of Myanmar. It shares a narrow border with Bangladesh in the northwest and there is the Bay of Bengal in its western and southern border. This province of Myanmar has a strategically significant location as it acts as the land bridge between South and Southeast Asia. It also has around an above 360 miles long coastline, giving access to the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the province is very close to Malacca Strait, one of the most strategic maritime shipping routes.

Geographically the Rakhine State is separated from the rest of Myanmar by the Yoma Mountain Range. Despite that, the province contributes significantly to the country's overall economy. It has large reserves of natural resources including oil and natural gas. Around 25 oil and gas fields have been discovered within the Rakhine State. Among them, the Shwe gas project generates the most revenue to the Myanmar government.<sup>1</sup>

### **China: A Mediator?**

China is Myanmar's biggest trading partner and the largest foreign investor. The political, economic and defence cooperation between the two countries has been deepening in recent years. China is interested in conflict-prone Rakhine state for a series of infrastructural projects that are part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). From 2015, a Chinese consortium is developing a \$2.7 billion special economic zone and a \$7.3 billion deep-sea port on the island of Kyaukphyu, off the coast of Rakhine state. China has also invested \$1.5 billion to install an oil pipeline and parallel natural gas pipeline that will carry oil and natural gas from Rakhine State to China's Yunnan province.<sup>2</sup> These ambitious projects will allow China to potentially avoid the Malacca dilemma and will give strategic foothold in the Bay of Bengal.

Since the recent Rohingya exodus to Bangladesh, China has been supporting Myanmar in the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council and General Assembly, and vetoed

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<sup>1</sup> Motaher, Mostakim Bin. 2019. "The Rohingya Conflict: An Analysis through the Lens of the Geopolitical Economy of Resources". Master Thesis, Linnaeus University.

<sup>2</sup> Poling, Gregory. 2018. "Kyaukpyu: Connecting China to the Indian Ocean". *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*. <https://amti.csis.org/kyaukpyu-china-indian-ocean/>.

humanitarian interventions proposed at the General Assembly. China's pro-Myanmar stand at the global level has essentially saved Aung San Suu Kyi's administration from political and diplomatic isolation.

However, China has also considerable economic stake in Bangladesh. Therefore, Beijing wants Naypyitaw and Dhaka to resolve the Rohingya issue through bilateral arrangements, avoiding UN or other multilateral forums. In November 2017, China tried to act as a mediator by offering a three-step plan to the displacement crisis. The Chinese proposal had a violence reduction phase, followed by the repatriation of Rohingyas, and then long-term economic development in the region. The Chinese mediation approach considered poverty and underdevelopment as the root causes of the Rohingya displacement crisis, overlooking the deep-rooted ethnic tensions and denial of fundamental civic rights of Rohingyas. Now the China-brokered repatriation initiative has reached a standstill which has revealed that the Chinese approach to the Rakhine conflict is "fundamentally flawed" and "one-sided".<sup>3</sup>

### **India: It's about Realpolitik**

India has critical security, economic and geopolitical interests in Myanmar. India shares a long border with Myanmar along the former's landlocked and violence-prone northeastern states. Insurgent groups have long exploited the fragile security arrangements in the border regions between India and Myanmar to obtain safe-haven, weapons, and engage in cross-border criminal activities. India needs a robust

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<sup>3</sup> Bhatia, Rajiv. 2018. "Presentation on 'Rohingyas: Geopolitics, Morality and International Law'". *Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations*. <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/presentation-on-rohingyas-geopolitics-morality-and-international-law/>.

cooperation with Myanmar to neutralize the insurgent groups and criminal gangs operating along the Indo-Myanmar frontier. Thus, cooperation with Myanmar is very crucial for India to safeguard its internal stability and territorial integrity.

India also has a vested interest in Myanmar to balance increasing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean region and to reduce its dependency on the Shiliguri corridor to connect the northeastern region with the rest of India. Similar to China, India has been investing in connectivity projects in Rakhine that would enable India to supply energy resources to its northeastern states through Myanmar. India has committed to invest \$484-million in the Kaladan Multimodal project which includes shipping, inland water and road transport. As a part of the project, India has already built a sea-port in Rakhine's Sittwe which will be connected with the eastern Indian sea-port of Kolkata by sea. Later, the newly built Sittwe port is proposed to be connected to Indian northeastern state of Mizoram by road.<sup>4</sup>

India has responded to the Rohingya crisis in a passive way. New Delhi claimed to remain neutral on the situation and abstained from voting for the resolutions condemning Myanmar's atrocities against the Rohingyas at the UN. India has failed to come up with any actionable framework to resolve a highly complex humanitarian crisis in its immediate neighborhood primarily due to its geopolitical interest over the Rakhine State and strategic compulsions vis-à-vis China in the region.

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<sup>4</sup> Motaher, Mostakim Bin. 2019. "The Rohingya Conflict: An Analysis through the Lens of the Geopolitical Economy of Resources". Master Thesis, Linnaeus University.

## **Japan: Economic Interest Overshadows Humanitarianism**

Japan tries to position itself as the “leader of the liberal order in Asia.” However, when it come to the Rohingya displacement crisis, Japan appears to remain silent in condemning the Myanmar government. Japan has a longstanding economic engagement in Myanmar. Tokyo continued to bankroll the Myanmar government throughout the Western sanctions of 2003. Following the political reforms in Myanmar, Japan resumed its overseas development assistance (ODA). As Japan’s domestic market shrinks due to a rapid population decline, its business needs to expand in foreign markets. Thus, Myanmar has appeared as an ideal destination for Japanese investment due to its location within Southeast Asia, where neither the United States nor Europe dominates.<sup>5</sup>

Following the recent Rohingya crisis, Japan has abstained from all Rohingya-related resolutions at the UN. Moreover, the Japanese government has also refused to use the term “Rohingya,” essentially echoing the Myanmar government’s narrative of labeling the Rohingyas as “Bengalis”.<sup>6</sup>

## **The United States: A Reluctant Actor**

As part of its Pivot to Asia, the Obama administration closely engaged itself in the political transformation in Myanmar in the early 2010s. This resulted in the 2015 parliamentary elections and a new government in March 2016, led by Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy came to power. To further facilitate

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<sup>5</sup> Muranushi, Michimi. 2019. “Japan’s Defense of Myanmar and the Rohingya Genocide”. *Middle East Institute*. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/japans-defense-myanmar-and-rohingya-genocide>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

democratization, the United States (US) lifted economic sanctions on Myanmar in October 2016 which brought a massive inflow of economic assistance in the form of aid, investment, trade. However, the Trump administration is reluctant in actively promoting democratization or defending human rights abroad. The US disengagement from Myanmar has further provided a favorable situation for the Myanmar government and its military apparatus to persecute and forcibly displaced the Rohingyas.<sup>7</sup> Following the Rohingya influx to Bangladesh, the US has issued some rhetorical statements condemning the Myanmar government and placed sanctions on some Myanmar army officials and businesses linked to the army. However, the practical effectiveness of these actions is doubtful to resolve the Rohingya displacement crisis.

### **The Way Forward**

Four years on, the Rohingya displacement crisis is now threatening to transform into a regional one, that could have socio-political and security implications far beyond the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. The lack of sincere efforts by the international community has made Bangladesh to bear the burden of a crisis that is of Myanmar's own making. The regional and global powers should recognize the humanitarian dimension of the displacement crisis and work to resolve it in a sustainable way.

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<sup>7</sup> Fumagalli, Matteo. 2017. "How Geopolitics Helped Create the Latest Rohingya Crisis". *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-geopolitics-helped-create-the-latest-rohingya-crisis-84309>.