

Rohingya Crisis from a Geopolitical Lens: Power Struggle over Regional Hegemony shadowing the Humanitarian needs

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Abstract: *Rakhine state in Myanmar is strategically located at the center of a power struggle between emerging Asian nations. Consequently, the strategic position has become the crucial factor that fans the fire behind the current Rohingya issue. As a minority group in Myanmar, the Rohingya have struggled for citizenship for decades. To escape the state-orchestrated persecution, a large number of Rohingya took shelter in neighboring Bangladesh. Under the cloak of geopolitical issues, the Rohingya Crisis has lingered for five years with no clear path to resolution. While India attempts to pursue its “Act East Policy,” China seeks to incorporate Myanmar into its “One Belt, One Road” initiative. A further aggravating factor is a threat posed by US military forces in Southeast Asia to China’s interests. However, as a neighboring nation of Myanmar, Bangladesh became entangled in the conflict between the Regional Competitors. The study argues that the geopolitical interest of bordering countries and the economic interest of the military regime have exacerbated the situation and are one of the primary reasons why the crisis has not been resolved. The purpose of this study is to analyze how and why the geopolitical consequences of the Rohingya crisis outrun the humanitarian demands of this crisis. Through content analysis of previous scholarly publications, the conclusions of the research have centered on how the fight for regional hegemony makes the Rohingya crisis more vulnerable.*

Keywords: *Geopolitics, Regional Hegemony, Rohingya crisis, Look East Policy, One Belt One Road, Humanitarian needs.*

Introduction

For fear of their lives, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority in Myanmar’s Rakhine State, have fled the country, contributing to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis (Albert & Maizland, 2020). Rakhine State, which has been home to a disproportionate number of Rohingya people since the beginning of recorded history (Zarni & Cowley, 2014), is recognized for its wealth of natural resources but suffers from a perilous political situation (Khan, 2018). Myanmar’s Rakhine State is located on the coast of the Indian Ocean. The geographical position of this state has become crucial in the current Rohingya

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issue. This strategic position makes it the center of the geopolitical competition of the great powers (Hossain, 2022). Kissinger contends that geopolitics is synonymous with global equilibrium and the maintenance of national interests within the context of the international distribution of power (Gray & Sloan, 2014).

Rakhine, being a predominantly Buddhist province in Myanmar, the Muslim Rohingya have always remained a minority group in this area. This religious minority population of Myanmar is considered the most oppressed minority worldwide (Robinson & Rahman, 2012). Rakhine state had a population of 3.2 million before the current Rohingya exodus, which began in August of 2017. Less than two million of them were members of the Rakhine ethnic group, whereas 1.1 million were Rohingyas. The remaining population consisted of Burman or members of other minority groups, including the Mro, Chin, Dagnet, Kaman, and Hindu (UoM, 2015). Muslims of the Rohingya ethnic group have lived in largely Buddhist Myanmar for decades despite being refused from citizenship since 1982 (Haque, 2017).

The conflict involving the Rohingya in Myanmar is commonly understood to be a religious dispute; however, this is only partially accurate. Analyst Siegfried O. Wolf opined that the crisis was primarily caused by political and economic factors (Shams, 2015). Rakhine people, who are predominantly Buddhist in religion, make up the large bulk of the population in this region. The Rakhine people as a whole have the impression that the central government, which is dominated by ethnic Burmese, is prejudiced against their culture, taking advantage of them economically, and marginalizing them politically (Wolf, 2015). The Rohingya population is seen by the Rakhine people as an additional competition for resources and as a threat to their own identity. This notion is the principal cause of conflict in the state, and it has led to recurrent armed battles between the rival sides (Shams, 2015). Maung Zarni, an academic and activist, has claimed that the Burmese military is using China and India's geopolitical rivalry to justify its genocide against the Rohingya (Ozturk et al., 2020). He explained that the Burmese military had made it a priority to ensure that both India and China can benefit from the multibillion-dollar developments being carried out along the Arakan Region's coastline.

Regional and International emerging powers are getting involved with different geopolitical motives. The United States' focus adds a new dimension. Their involvement in the matter has prompted a deeper Chinese engagement (Ismail, 2018). China and India, two major nations in Asia, are struggling for Regional Hegemony. The reluctance of major nations to address the Rohingya crisis and their attempts to placate Myanmar are the primary roadblocks on the path to a resolution of the situation (Rahman & Akon, 2019). Both China and India have made large financial commitments in ongoing infrastructure development projects in Myanmar, especially those that are located in Rakhine State (Kimura & Kudo, 2011; Brewster, 2017 & Taidong, 2019). On the other hand, various nations that

border Myanmar have decided to maintain their silence on the matter of the Rohingya problem because they do not have any particular interests in Rakhine.

The arrival in Bangladesh of a considerable number of Rohingya refugees has ratcheted up the level of tension and added a new facet to the situation that has been unfolding over the past few years. However, rather than actively contributing to finding a solution to the Rohingya refugee crisis, other countries in the region, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Laos, and international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), Organization of Islamic States (OIC), European Union (EU), and Human Rights Watch (HRW), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), frequently monitor the situation and voice their opinions on the Rohingya crisis. However, the paper will address how the geopolitical feature of the Rohingya crisis creates regional tension undermining the humanitarian response. In addition to this, it will place an emphasis on the measures they take in regard to the benefits they derive from the geopolitical context.

Brief context of the Rohingya Crisis

For decades, the Rohingya have faced systematic forms of discrimination, persecution, and statelessness (Haar et al., 2019). Additionally, they have been subjected to waves of violence between 1978 and 2017 that have led to their forcible displacement into Bangladesh (Baird, 2020). To understand the conflict, we have to look back on the circumstances of the colonial period. During the Second World War, the Buddhist community of Rakhine Province (previously known as Arakan State) favored the Japanese side, whereas the Muslim Rohingya fought for the British like the people of Bengal frontiers did (Chattoraj, 2017). This historical animosity persists year after year to the present day. In light of this, the government of Myanmar is striving to establish the Rohingya people as foreigners and immigrants from Bangladesh (Sahoo, 2017).

Beginning a cycle of forced displacement: 1975

In 1975, the military regime led an operation named ‘Tatmadaw’ to find illegal infiltrators in Myanmar. Roughly 3,500 Rohingya people were coerced into leaving Rakhine and moving to Bangladesh. Once more, in 1978, the government began a large-scale investigation codenamed “Nagamine” (“Dragon King”) in an effort to identify the outsiders. The result of this procedure had tremendous repercussions. As a consequence, the region is currently dealing with one of the most complicated humanitarian crises in its history. In 1978, a substantial number of people were forcibly displaced throughout the country, and more than 200,000 Rohingya escaped to Bangladesh, where they are still living as refugees. The year 1978 marked the beginning of the Rohingya crisis (Mattern, 1978). In following years, the United Nations played the role of mediator in negotiations between Bangladesh and Myanmar, which ultimately led to the formation of a bilateral agreement. The government of Myanmar had made the decision to allow 187,250 Rohingya refugees to return to their homes (Warr & Wong, 1997).

Pushing back the Rohingyas as a result of their freedom movement: 1992

The second significant influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh took place between April 1991 and May 1992, when the Myanmar government first started taking actions against the Rohingya freedom movement. More than 250,000 Rohingya people have been moved by the government of Myanmar towards the border with Bangladesh during that time period (Rahman, 2010; Robinson & Rahman, 2012; Bepler, 2018). On the other hand, with the assistance of the UNHCR, a reparation program was initiated, and more than 200,000 Rohingya were deported back to Myanmar (Farzana, 2017). The entire procedure of the settlement took roughly three to four years to complete (Abrar, 1995).

Inter-Communal Conflict: 2012

On the 10th of June, 2012, more than 500 Rohingya community members made their way across the Naf River into Southeast Bangladesh in order to seek refuge from large-scale military strife. This conflict had initially been identified as an ethnic conflict between the minority Rohingyas and the Buddhist majority. In the beginning, it was thought that this conflict was an ethnic struggle between the Buddhist majority in Myanmar and the Rohingya minority (Huda, 2013). As a result of the alleged rape and murder of a Rakhine woman in late May 2012 by three Rohingya men, ethnic tensions between the Rohingya and the Rakhine erupted into communal violence (The Guardian, 2012). As a result of at least 50 deaths, 30,000 people being driven from their homes, and the ongoing indifference shown by the government in Myanmar, the Rohingya people were compelled to seek refuge in Bangladesh.

Rohingya Clearance Operations in Response of Militant Attacks: 2016

The attacks carried out by Rohingya militants on Myanmar's border police in Rakhine state on October 9 result in retaliation against the Rohingya population, which in turn results in a new surge of refugees crossing the border (BBC, 2016). According to state media, the government has denied reports of human rights abuses in Rakhine and had claimed that the military is carrying out "Clearance Operations" targeting suspected "violent attackers" who killed nine border guards on October 9th (Wright, 2016). In October of 2016, the Tatmadaw began a severe crackdown on the Rohingya, which included the abduction of men and boys for the purpose of forced labor, the raping and sexual exploitation of girls and young women, and the disappearance of children (United States Department of State, 2016).

The recent Extreme Influx: 2017

A terrorist organization in Rakhine known as the "Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army" (ARSA) was responsible for the deaths of a large number of law enforcement officials after the 25th of August, 2017. They attacked about 30 checkpoints, and as a result, the government of Myanmar raised the presence of West Asian Muslim

extremist organizations in the Rakhine area (Goodman & Mahmood, 2019). Extreme repercussions followed, and as a result, the government of Myanmar initiated a military crackdown against Rohingya villages. To escape certain death, nearly 500,000 Rohingya people have fled to Bangladesh (Chattoraj, 2018). Bepler (2018) contended that the number passed the threshold of one million during the middle of 2017.

Theoretical Relevance

In the context of international politics, the term “Regional Hegemony” refers to the political, economic, or military domination, control, or influence of one independently powerful state, also sometimes referred to as the “Regional Hegemon,” over other countries in direct proximity. John Mearsheimer, a famous international relations expert, devotes different facets of the pursuit of regional hegemony in his book, “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.” According to his theory, which is referred to as Offensive Realism, the anarchic nature of the international system, the drive to survive, and the ambiguity about the intentions of other states all ultimately lead to states pursuing Regional Hegemony.

Gramsci defines hegemony as “predominance by consent,” which is the condition that occurs when a fundamental class exercises a political, intellectual, and moral role of leadership within a hegemonic system that is cemented by a unified worldview or “organic ideology” (Valeriano, 1982). According to hegemonic stability theory, it is more likely for the international system to be stable when there is a single state that is the leading world power, also known as a hegemon (Joshua, 2005). Gramsci believed that a group could neither maintain its dominant position in modern society by only looking out for its own limited economic interests, nor could it maintain its position alone by the use of force and coercion. Instead, it needs to demonstrate intellectual and moral leadership, while also forging alliances and reaching agreements with a wide range of other groups. For not having a single Hegemon and for the presence of emerging powers like China and India, the stability and humanitarian issues like the Rohingya crisis have a questionable doubt for finding a solution. In order to prevent the rise of hegemonic power, a balance of power gradually emerges in interpersonal, intergroup, and international relations as a result of the need for individuals to demonstrate their esteem (Morgenthau, 1948). China and India both are in a Tug of War centering Myanmar for proving their power in the Region.

According to Offensive Realism, a theory of international relations, governments are naturally inclined to competition and conflict due to their self-interest, desire to maximize power, and fear of other states. Aside from that, it argues that states have a responsibility to act in this way since it is essential to their continued participation in the international system (Johnson et al., 2016). Offensive Realism contends that the desire for security and, more importantly, the need to survive motivates nations to aggressively enhance their power. States do not cooperate with one

another, with the exception of short-term alliances; rather, they are continuously working to weaken their rivals' authority while bolstering their own. The goal of Offensive Realism is to attain safety through dominance and hegemony; hence it actively pursues power and influence (Valeriano, 2009). For the purpose of the power dominance competition, China and India observe Myanmar as a weapon for increasing their dominance and power in the Region and for attaining Regional Hegemony and to maximize their power in the Region, respectively, India is following their 'Act East Policy' and China has been forwarding following their 'One Belt One Road' initiative. Other than focusing on the Humanitarian need of providing assistance for the solution of the Rohingya issue, the infrastructural projects of India and China have received more importance to these competing countries in order to combat towards increasing their power in the region by utilizing the geopolitical location of Myanmar.

Methodology

Several studies addressed such issues as the Rohingya people's persecution and ethnic cleansing in the past, the crisis's effects on Bangladesh, the threat of terrorism in neighboring areas and the effect of health and the environment for the Rohingya crisis. However, this study aims to establish the correlation between the strategic significance of Rakhine and the ongoing Rohingya issue from a different point of view. The Research objective is to find out how the strategic value of Myanmar's Rakhine State sustains the Rohingya refugee crisis. This paper will also focus on how the strategic importance of Myanmar's Rakhine state to its neighbors contributes to the development of regional competition. It will be analyzed in terms of how their hegemonic struggle diverts attention away from the Rohingya crisis. The writers will begin their defense of their position by outlining how the countries of the region managed to put the Rohingya crisis on the back burner in order to focus on their strategic interests.

To identify the answer to these questions, researchers went through scholarly writings collected from different websites, mainly Google scholar, Hein Online, World cat etc. Besides, they reviewed secondary literature (e.g., books, book chapters, journal articles, newspapers, etc.) published on Myanmar's Rohingya issue and geopolitical features. The construction of this article makes utilization of the qualitative method as well as secondary data, which includes sources like newspapers and other Journal articles. The researchers conducted the method of Qualitative Content analysis. Due to the nature of this research, a conceptual discussion on geopolitics was required. This study's primary purpose is to investigate the factors that led to the geopolitical aspects of the Rohingya issue taking precedence over the humanitarian aspects of the situation.

Using a content-analysis-based approach, this paper combed through a mountain of literature spanning decades to better comprehend the evolving nature of the

situation. In order to have a better understanding of the impetus that led to the beginning of the crisis, the pertinent literature from the 1970s was reviewed and evaluated. There is a significant lack of academic material produced by authors from Myanmar, which could have been informative in comprehending the predicament from the viewpoint of the local population. As the paper suggests that the crisis has a geopolitical attachment, a literature review focusing on the International Relations aspect of the crisis was conducted. After 2016, the year of the most recent inflow of Rohingya refugees, a significant amount of material was reviewed since academics from around the world had come to the conclusion that the refugee situation required a sustainable solution.

Geopolitical features of Rohingya Crisis

Scholvin (2016), referring to Nicholas Spykman (1942), quoted that “*Ministers come and go, even dictators die, but the mountain ranges stand unperturbed*” (p. 05). Here, Scholvin indicates the importance of the geographical features of world politics. Sempa (2002) argues that practitioners of international politics frequently use the term ‘geopolitics’ to study specific policy issues and problems. It is the interactions among states in a specific geographical setting.

Myanmar is a country in Southeast Asia that is bordered by Bangladesh, Thailand, China, India, Laos, the Andaman Sea, and the Bay of Bengal (Ahamed et al., 2020). The country serves as a land and marine bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Because of its strategic positioning, this area attracts political and economic attention from many of Asia’s most powerful nations. It is clear from the following map that the Rakhine state of Myanmar is a crucial node.



Figure 1: Geographical location of Rakhine State, Myanmar (Nayak, 2017)

The Rakhine province is located in a strategic part of Myanmar and is important from a Chinese and Indian geopolitical perspective (Khan, 2018). Before it gained its independence in 1949, China utilized Burma Road as a means of transporting its military supplies. After it attained its independence, Myanmar had a substantial influence on China's foreign policy, which included access to the Indian Ocean, energy security, border stability, and economic cooperation between the two countries (Yoshikawa, 2022). On the other hand, the governments of India made efforts to increase their influence in Myanmar in order to safeguard their respective national interests (Gupta, 2008).

China is striving to achieve regional dominance in order to protect its interests throughout the South Asian region. Because of this power competition with India in the region, China's goal is to infiltrate the Indian sphere of influence via Myanmar through economic engagement and the new connectivity endeavor called BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) (Mohan & Abraham, 2020). India constructed a seaport that established another road connection between Rakhine state and the northeastern portion of India because it does not want China to have a monopoly on the benefits that flow from Myanmar (Chakma, 2019). Because of its advantageous location between South Asia and Southeast Asia, Myanmar serves as an excellent bridge between the two halves of the continent. As a consequence of this, both countries consider Rakhine to be the "geopolitical headquarters" in order to realize a wide range of political goals and put economic policies into effect in the near future (Khan, 2018).

Regional Hegemony

In the current geopolitical landscape, according to Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, "Whoever dominates the Indian Ocean, dominates Asia". The title of hegemony will be bestowed upon a nation when it dominates its region on its own and is the sole major power. When there is more than one great power in a territory, there cannot be hegemony in that region. A state is considered to be a potential hegemon, if it possesses the capability of dominating a region by supplanting its neighboring great powers (Teixeira, 2021). It's no secret that China and India compete for dominance in Asia and beyond. Both recognize South and Southeast Asia as important political centers (Taufiq, 2021). The defense of national interests, especially geopolitical and geo-economic security, is a shared priority for China and India in Myanmar.

As the Myanmar army's (the Tatmadaw) crackdown drove more than 600,000 Rohingya refugees into neighboring Bangladesh, the administration of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi was widely criticized by countries in both the West and the Islamic world. In contrast, China and India provided unwavering support for her regime, which was backed by the military (Taufiq, 2021). Myanmar has long received aid from China and India. Since September of 1988, when the military of Myanmar took control of the government, both of the Asian powers

have been working toward increasing their influence in the newly reorganized Myanmar in order to safeguard their respective national interests. This includes making substantial investments in Myanmar, particularly in the state of Rakhine (Taufiq, 2019).

Scholars are in agreement that even after the brutal ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas by the Tatmadaw, the primary reason for China and India's unwavering support for Myanmar is the vast infrastructure projects that both countries are constructing in the Rakhine region (Taufiq, 2021). In terms of trade or political competition in the region, China's path to regional hegemony places a maximum effort on preventing Myanmar or other South-East Asian countries from moving closer to the dominance of the United States or the West. This is because China wants to establish itself as the dominant power in the region (Womack, 2003).

China has the capacity to utilize its veto power because it is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. This means that China can decide whether or not the subject will be brought before the International Criminal Court. Throughout the entirety of the crisis, it has been hesitant to publicly criticize the government that was in power in Myanmar (Alam, 2021). China will never be able to establish itself as the Regional Hegemon in Asia as long as there is another major regional power.

Involved countries and their stances on Rohingya Crisis

The Rohingya crisis has deep-rooted geopolitical features that influence the crisis multi-dimensional. Complicated power politics of two big Asian powers- China and India play a vital role in the regional context. While India is following its 'Act East Policy,' China moves forward with its 'Belt and Road Initiative.' The first two parts will cover the reactions of Myanmar's bordering two Asian 'Big Powers,' India and China, separately since they are the main stakeholders in this region. The chapter will then bring the inquisitiveness of other regional countries, e.g., Bangladesh, Laos, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia, under an umbrella term and illustrate in detail. However, the authors will start the arguments with the position of India regarding this crisis.

India's stance regarding Rohingya Crisis

As a neighboring country, it was expected that India would come forward to diffuse this state-orchestrated human catastrophe. Unfortunately, the Home Affairs Ministry of the country already declared Rohingya settled in India as 'illegal' immigrants and ordered their deportation from their land. The ministry also instructed concerned states to identify illegal Rohingya and repatriate them to Myanmar. They also declared the displaced Rohingya a threat to their national security (Sahoo, 2017). The national and international community criticized India's stance regarding the recent Rohingya crisis.

India needs the cooperation of Myanmar to combat rebellions in its north-eastern borders (Idris, 2017). These Border States use Myanmar as a base of their insurgency.

Also, India has both economic and strategic interests in Myanmar. Yhome (2018) discusses India's Rohingya policy developed by considering various factors such as diplomacy, domestic politics, security issues and geopolitical factors. He identifies three phases of India's response to the Rohingya crisis.

a. Violent conflict in Rakhine state, 2012:

In this phase, India took the pro-Myanmar position and considered the crisis as an 'internal affair' of Myanmar. India had its economic interest, energy interest (cross border pipelines), connectivity interest (With the assistance of Myanmar, connect its landlocked north-eastern states to the Bay of Bengal). Again, India had the pressure of regional power politics, especially to win over China. Moreover, a security concern influenced India's Myanmar policy in this early phase. It wanted to prevent cross-border ethnic insurgency in its north-eastern borders. Therefore, security cooperation was also a factor for India to decide its Rohingya policy.

b. Indian government announcement to deport Rohingya in 2017:

According to the Indian government, approximately 10,500 Rohingya were living in India in 2015, whereas the number increased to 40,000 in 2017. Two new factors are crucial here; growing security concerns and the need for a delicate balance between Bangladesh and Myanmar. While discussing India's approach regarding Rohingya, Yhome (2018) raises three essential points behind in this phase;

- Return of the displaced Rohingya to Rakhine from Bangladesh and 'elsewhere.' Possibly by using the word 'elsewhere,' they tried to emphasize on the Rohingya population living in India.
- Finding a long term solution for the Rohingya crisis through socio-economic developments in Rakhine.
- Drawing the attention of the international community to handle the crisis with restraint.

c. Memorandum of understanding between Myanmar and India: Active role with an unimpeded approach:

Ignoring the leading human rights issues, they kept the focus on the infrastructural development of Rakhine and signed a memorandum of understanding with Myanmar in 2017. Storey (2017) discusses that India took the initiative to modernize Myanmar's navy through joint patrols. In this regard, India made a deal of \$38 million in lightweight torpedo arms. However, India has its regional ambition, such as the '*Act East Policy*' through which it aims to balance Chinese influence in Southeast Asia and make connectivity in this area as well. India mainly aims to counter China's Indian Ocean plans. India is keen to develop its intimacy with Myanmar for the above-discussed concerns. To summarize, we can draw a diagram like the following to portray the geopolitical interest of India is in **Figure 2**.



Figure 2: Geopolitical interest of India in Rakhine State, Myanmar

Chinese Geopolitical interest in Rakhine state

The Chinese government has a previous inclination to Myanmar and there is no exception in the current situation (Cookson, 2017). From the beginning of the crisis, China has been a vocal supporter of Myanmar for regional interest. Chinese dominance in Myanmar has a yearlong background. From the military junta regime, 1962, China maintained a close relationship with Myanmar. After that, while most of the world’s countries put an embargo on Myanmar, China was the only strategic partner beside them. Moreover, China profoundly influenced the foreign policy of independent Myanmar (Chattoraj, 2018).

The more substantial part of the Chinese economy, especially gas and oil supply, export markets in Europe and the northern hemisphere depends on ocean shipments. The ‘*Strait of Malacca*’ and the ‘*Strait of Lombok*’ are two main passages for the ocean shipments of Chinese products. The countries around these two waterways strongly bond with the USA, which creates a fundamental challenge for the Chinese economy. Moreover, China’s most prominent rival nowadays, the USA, controls these waterways by the 7th fleet of the US navy. Therefore it has become a geographical trap for the Chinese government, which it is trying to escape (Cookson, 2017).

Additionally, it will create an alternative route to avoid the hotly contested South China Sea. Another fact that attracts Myanmar to invest in this project is that the

KyaukPyu port will also be the starting point of an oil-gas pipeline from Myanmar to China (Idris, 2017). Moreover, the strategic location of *KyaukPyu* allows the Chinese navy to access the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal (Storey, 2017). Similarly, Chatteraj (2018) argues that the Chinese navy targets coastal nations such as Myanmar and Bangladesh to get access to their ports.

However, Storey (2017) views that China is playing the role of a broker in the peace process. They will try to keep the Rohingya Crisis alive to discourage foreign investors in Myanmar. Thus, it will reduce the western influence in Myanmar, and China will dominate this region fully. China implied its veto power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) against passing a resolution condemning the attacks on Rohingya (Ahmed, 2018).

We discussed earlier, the shipments of Chinese products primarily relies on the sea dominated by the US allied countries. Cookson (2017) refers to this trapped situation as *'like having a knife at your throat all the time.'* Referring to his arguments, we can recapitulate the Chinese agenda in three significant steps;

- a) To confront the US 7th fleet, China is aiming at building a strong 'Blue Water Navy.'
- b) Expanding its sovereignty and control in the South China Sea.
- c) In search of an alternative route, targets a large-scale project named *'one belt and one road'* initiative.

The factors behind the strong Chinese involvement in Rakhine are shown in **Figure 3**.

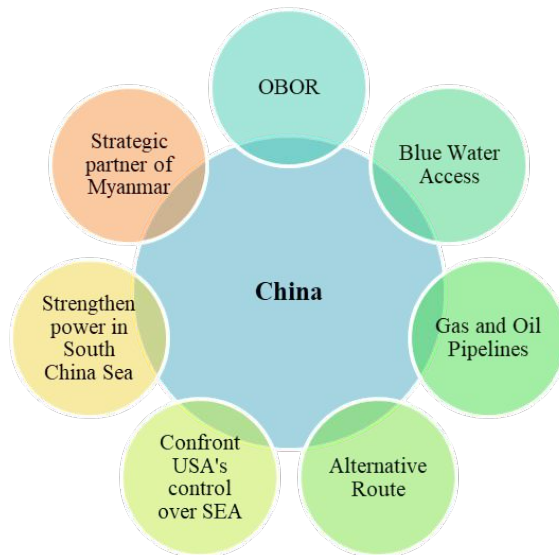


Figure 3: Geopolitical interest of China in Rakhine, Myanmar.

The final step, China’s One Belt and One Road initiative, aims to improve economic interconnectedness (Sakib, 2019). This project highly depends on the bilateral relationship between Myanmar and China (Cookson, 2017). That is why China always keeps concerns regarding the issues of Myanmar.

USA and its strategic position on Rohingya Crisis

Historically, the relationship between Myanmar and the USA was inauspicious and gloomy. The USA and its allies put sanctions on Myanmar in 1997 (Bepler, 2018 & Yhome, 2018). Later, the isolation period relaxed in 2012, but the country is still under severe scrutiny of the west (Bepler, 2018). Mahadevan (2013) claims that the USA changed its rivalry view to Myanmar after the official visit of Hillary Clinton in 2011. Policymakers consider this move as one of the greatest optimistic approaches of the USA towards Myanmar after 1955. One year later, the President of the USA (then Barack Obama) also paid a visit to Myanmar and announced to work together for a better tomorrow.

However, Sharma (2017) contends that the United States of America would like to maintain the ongoing communal hostilities in Rakhine in order to sabotage the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative being undertaken by China. The OBOR project will be delayed further the longer Rakhine State continues to be unstable as a result of the Rohingya conflict. The Myanmar army was accused of being responsible for serious abuses of human rights in Rakhine by the House of Representatives of the United States of America. They accused the Myanmar government of engaging in “ethnic cleansing” by persecuting the Rohingya minority group (Ahmed, 2018). To conclude, the concerns of the USA are as follows shown in **Figure 4**.



Figure 4: Geopolitical interest of the USA in Rakhine, Myanmar.

Responses from other regional and international stakeholders

For instance, it seems like the Southeast Asian countries, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, found no personal benefit in the Rakhine state. Therefore they did not feel like interfering in this matter. However, these Asian countries took a self-centered approach and considered the matter as Myanmar's internal issue. For that reason, they hold a solid and resistant position against Rohingya refugees. They have either held the boats of asylum-seeking Rohingya in their coastal areas for long or turned them away at gunpoint immediately (Sahoo, 2017). Indonesia and Malaysia attempted to raise the matter in a muted voice, despite the fact that some of them condemned Myanmar's horrific treatment of the Rohingya.

After the 2017 crisis to the present, Malaysia gave shelter to almost one hundred thousand Rohingya but denied the status of refugee (Al Jazeera, 2020). Again, Indonesia provided aid for the refugees sheltered in Bangladesh (The Straits Times, 2017). Several international and regional bodies like the United Nations (UN), Human Rights Watch (HRW), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) continuously request Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia to provide shelter to the Rohingya who escaped from Myanmar by boat and reached to their seashores (Khairi, 2016). Although many Western countries (e.g., the UK, France, etc.) condemned Myanmar's brutal actions towards the Rohingya community, none of them took any practical initiative to solve this problem. Abdin (2017) claimed Russia is sheltering Myanmar regarding the Rohingya crisis and stands against international sanctions. With the support of Russia, Aung San Suu Kyi also warned the critics about using Russian veto powers if needed (Fumagalli, 2017).

Hegemony vs. Humanity: What is the Priority?

From the above discussions, it is clear that Myanmar's neighboring countries and world big powers have vested geopolitical interests of their own in the Rakhine State. In this part, researchers will elucidate how these countries respond to the recent Rohingya crisis. The discussions will be starting with India's role, then China, and 'other countries' as the writers segmented before.

Despite being one of the closest allies for so long, India did not concentrate on Bangladesh's wellbeing. Moreover, it was reluctant to solve the Rohingya refugee crisis and tried to develop inwardness with Myanmar. While dealing with the crisis, Indian foreign policymakers go for a soft approach instead of a visible stand. Their major purpose is to assure their profit while minimizing disorder in this area. The Indian government has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention. Despite this, India has a great reputation for hosting refugees during various time periods. Previously, refugees from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Tibet, and Afghanistan were sheltered there. Regarding the Rohingya issue once more, India absorbed thousands of refugees following the 2012 deadly violence. The foreign minister at the time, Salman Khurshid, visited Myanmar and offered a \$1 million economic aid plan (Sahoo, 2017).

India and China have long records of rivalry and the Rohingya issue added one more layer to that. It is evident that both countries were involved in the Rohingya crisis for their particular interests. Besides, it is not possible to deny that these two Asian superpowers are here to check and balance each other in regional politics. Significantly, China and India are trying to establish a stronghold in Myanmar, at least for two common reasons- geopolitics and economy.

The Chinese involvement in Myanmar drives India to choose its position in the Rohingya crisis. In the 1980s, India vehemently opposed the military's suppression of the Burmese democratic movement. This stance pushed the then Myanmar government a staunch ally of China. India does not want to repeat this to maintain its geopolitics (Sahoo, 2017). Also, India wants to have access to East Asia. It aims to create a regional hegemony in Asia and, more specifically, in Southeast Asia. To fulfill this desire, India considers Myanmar as the gateway. Therefore India is strongly backing the Myanmar government.

China is aware of the USA's agenda of preventing its expansion toward Southeast Asia. The policymakers of China are concerned about the USA's involvement in protecting human rights and, therefore, try to establish hegemony on Myanmar. Significantly, China is concentrating on economic development of its own. Control over the land of Myanmar will allow China to establish gas and pipelines. Besides, China finds Rakhine a strategically important location that opens the door to the Indian Ocean (Idris, 2017 & Sharma, 2017). If India is trying to balance Chinese influence in Myanmar by investing in different projects, China is also trying to restrict the USA in South East Asia. The growing influence of China in Myanmar poses the greatest threat to the hegemonic position of the United States in Asia. The Chinese vision of integrating Asia, Europe, and Africa through initiatives known as One Belt One Road poses a challenge to the United States' position as the world's preeminent superpower. This initiative will reduce the distance and increase the opportunity of spreading Chinese products in large cities (Sakib, 2019). China has developed initiatives such as OBOR, AIIB, and the Silk Road fund in order to compete with the Bretton Woods institutions that are dominated by the United States (Sharma, 2017).

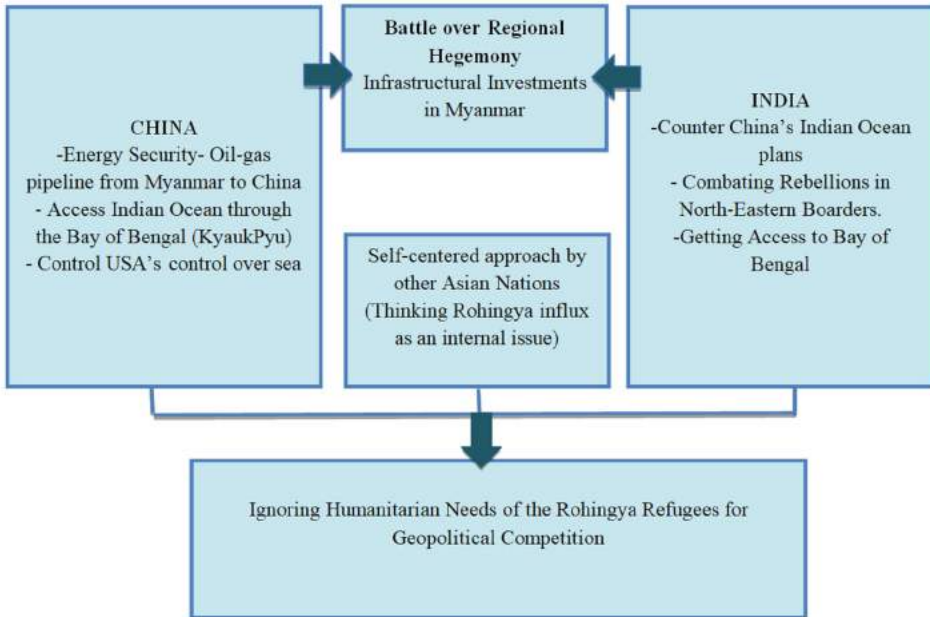


Figure 5: Geopolitical interests of three global actors-USA, China and India.

Among the significant power politics, Bangladesh has become the scapegoat of this crisis (Adawy, 2013). Again, Khan (2017) views Bangladesh as a geopolitical chessboard. From the beginning of the crisis, the Bangladesh government has been consistent at one point; the Rohingya community belongs to Myanmar. It is their responsibility to return their citizens in a peaceful way (Robinson & Rahman, 2012). Again, Bangladesh did not sign in the refugee convention of 1951 and the country is not obliged to shelter Rohingya refugees. Still, Bangladesh is assuring the shelter and safety of the Rohingya people. Why Bangladesh is hosting these large numbers of refugees might arise while other neighboring countries (e.g., India, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, etc.) sealed their borders (Sahoo, 2017). The answer relies on humanitarian ground and the issue of morality. During its liberation war in 1971, Bangladeshi people were refugees in India (Abrar, 1995). This previous experience generates sympathy among the people of Bangladesh and the authorities consider Rohingya cases from an empathetic perspective.

Conclusion

Rohingya crisis is a vital threat to regional stability. Bangladesh is standing in between a hard and rock situation regarding this crisis. The recent massive influx of Rohingya in Bangladesh creates serious tensions and struggles. The territories along the borders of Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India are the epicenter of terrorist and insurgent activity. Besides, they use the place as a training field (Rahman, 2010). Again, we know Rohingya are idly spending their days in camps. This useless time attracts them to engage in transnational crime and smuggling (Chattoraj, 2018). In

addition, newer opportunities for illegal drugs, arms and human trafficking for sex trades may be enhanced. The drug ‘Yaba’ comes from Myanmar and Rohingya is used as a carrier (Banerjee, 2019). Meanwhile, the percentages of addicted youth are frequently rising in Bangladesh (Sakib, 2019).

Myanmar, especially the Rakhine State, is a door to South East Asia for both India and China. Again, it gives them alternative blue water access through the Bay of Bengal. Moreover, natural resources make Myanmar an essential field of competition between big powers. Again, the USA could have played a significant role in solving this crisis. Unfortunately, they also consider their rivalry with China and control over South East Asia as their prime concern. While China focuses on Myanmar to save its OBOR project, the USA targets to disrupt it. Therefore, the USA will not pressurize Myanmar in this issue to prevent Chinese hegemony in Myanmar. Hence, the USA focuses on the North Korean crisis instead of solving the Rohingya issue. Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia agreed to assist refugees temporarily, but none took any practical initiative to resolve the crisis permanently. Even they are not enthusiastic about dealing with the matter, considering it as the responsibility of Myanmar.

Some writers blame the religion (e.g., Islam) of Rohingya for the causation of this crisis. Sharma (2017) explains the influence of ‘Islamophobia’ in the Rohingya crisis from the dimension of Huntington’s theory of ‘Clash of Civilization.’ In his opinion, Huntington says, in the post-cold war era, wars would take place, not between countries but civilizations. Islamophobia has always remained a common factor that fanned the fire of the Rohingya refugee crisis. India is unwilling to shelter them for the sake of their national security and possible militant insurgencies.

On the other hand, the Arakanese Buddhist community was also afraid of losing their religious and political power in Rakhine due to the growing number of this Muslim minority group. However, the main issue is not a religion and it never was. We should instead focus on the geopolitical features of Myanmar because, ultimately, they are going to decide the fate of the Rohingya. Hence, there is no reason to consider ‘Islamophobia’ as an essential catalyst behind the Rohingya crisis.

World superpowers could soon stop this crisis by taking immediate measures. Nevertheless, they find their benefits in keeping the crisis alive. Despite having the chance to pressure Myanmar to solve the Rohingya crisis, both India and China are busy with their geographical tug of war. Although China promised to help Bangladesh regarding the Rohingya crisis, it seems more inclined to the wellbeing of Myanmar. On the other side, India and Bangladesh share a long and fruitful history of friendship. Despite that, it looks like India will not hesitate to disown the interest of Bangladesh in the Rohingya issue (Khan, 2017 & Ahmed, 2018). Both China and India find the Rohingya crisis as an opportunity to hold their hegemonic power in Asia. Linter (2017) argues that the Rohingya Crisis may establish China’s strong position in the

Asian region. The Chinese government also maintains a diplomatic relation with Bangladesh and promises to help them regarding this crisis. Still, China is primarily concerned about the wellbeing of Myanmar instead of Bangladesh (Cookson, 2017). Even then, China is the leading business partner of Bangladesh (Sakib, 2019).

To sum up, we could say that, except for the stakeholders taking an empathetic stronghold, it is impossible to solve the Rohingya crisis. It would remain a burning issue unless the geopolitical competition over Rakhine was resolved. Being made the scapegoat in this crisis would have negative repercussions for Bangladesh in the long run. It's possible that the Rohingya community's problems will never be resolved as long as we continue to view them through the narrow lens of Islamophobia rather than the broader lens of geopolitics. In the not too distant future, the Rohingya population may end up becoming known as "Asia's new Palestinians."

*** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.**

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