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CHINESE AND INDIAN RESPONSES TO ROHINGYA CRISIS: THE CONVERGENCE OF COMPETING POWERS

Abstract

The paper argues that despite being regional competitors, China and India's competition over Myanmar created a point of convergence in their response to the Rohingya crisis. Although the persecution of the Rohingyas was labelled as the textbook case of "ethnic cleansing" by the international community, this could not deviate New Delhi and Beijing from striving for their objectives in Naypyidaw. Therefore, this paper argues, given the differences between India and China's internal (political system, political culture, values, norms) and external (worldview, zero-sum strategic objectives, often divergent) contexts, the Chinese and Indian responses to the Rohingya crisis present a paradox. Despite their regional competition for influence, China and India have had a policy convergence in Myanmar. This convergence is directly connected to their strategic, political and economic aspirations in the Indo-Pacific regions. The paper further argues that Myanmar receives more strategic value than Bangladesh from China and India.

Keywords: Rohingya Crisis, Malacca Dilemma, SAGAR, Act East, Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMMTT), Kyaukpyu Port

1. Introduction

Given the historical antagonism, the re-rise of China and India means stiffer strategic competition for influence between the two rivals in the Indo-Pacific region, where their interests and influences primarily diverge and contradict. New Delhi's security and strategic perception of Beijing has long been one of deep distrust, especially since the 'Chinese incursion' into Arunachal province in 1962. The 'China Threat' perceptions in the United States (US) and Japan were mirrored in New Delhi since the 1990s. This shared perception triggered an underwhelming response from the trans-Atlantic alliance to India's nuclear test in 1998. The fear of strategic encirclement remains high among strategic thinkers in New Delhi. India perceived its spatial threat from China through four avenues: its land border with China, its land connections with India's neighbours, Chinese maritime and naval presence in the Indo-Pacific region and its maritime connections with India's neighbours, and

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China's power projection through its 'strategic proxies'. Against this backdrop, both rising powers compete for their sphere of influence within the Indian Ocean region and beyond. For example, India has been the most stringent critic of Chinese-sponsored BRI in the South Asian region as Indian policymakers believe that the innate objectives of such initiative are not innocent as infrastructure development or connectivity as the People's Republic of China (PRC) claims.

Instead, for New Delhi, it is about maximising Beijing's strategic clout in the Indo-Pacific at the expense of the other competitors. Therefore, under the Obama and then Trump administrations, when the US started to rebalance its military and other assets from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific region and formulated the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)", Indian policymakers found a shared grand strategy that they believe can contain China's "regional and global ambitions". On the other hand, in the mountains, both countries faced off through recent border skirmishes over Doklam and Galwan River Valley; in the oceans, Sino-Indian competition was visible over ports, naval bases, infrastructure and alliance building. Maritime disputes over the South China Sea, the tensions in the Taiwan Strait, and the Korean peninsula translated into unease among Chinese strategic thinkers and policymakers.

Given the nature of Bangladesh's diplomatic relationship with China and India, most of the academics and policymakers of Bangladesh were bemused to receive a lukewarm response from these two friendly nations in the following months of the 2017 Rohingya crisis.¹ Some of the literature tried to compare the responses of India and China regarding the Rohingya crisis rather than build an explanatory case behind these two nations' diplomatic responses. Therefore, this paper investigates answers to two crucial questions: i) despite being regional competitors, why do China and India have a policy convergence regarding the Rohingya question and Myanmar? ii) does Myanmar hold more significant strategic value than Bangladesh for China and India? This paper aims to answer the first question by investigating the causal factors behind the Indian and Chinese response to the Rohingya crisis in the third section. The fourth section discusses the possibility of a difference in the assigned strategic value for Bangladesh and Myanmar regarding Sino-Indian strategic competition centring the Indian Ocean region. The paper has looked into existing published works such as peer-reviewed articles, books, monographs, speeches and government documents for primary and secondary

¹ Yanghee Lee, "Opinion | The United Nations Is Failing the People of Myanmar," *The Washington Post*, November 09, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/11/02/un-failing-myanmar-burma-people-revolution/>.

sources. The paper has followed the qualitative method for analysis. This research aims to help Bangladesh's policymakers and academia understand the reasoning behind China and India's competition or convergence on the Rohingya crisis and navigate through future negotiations regarding Rohingya and Myanmar.

2. China-India Dichotomy in Myanmar: Competition vis-à-vis Convergence

Easing up the US sanctions over Myanmar in the post-2015 election period, like many other democracies, opened the door for India in Myanmar. Until then, Myanmar was under China's overwhelming influence. Following the end of the Cold War, both states were going through "post-socialist" overhauling. Hence, in the period from 1988–2015, it was evident that Myanmar followed the Chinese development path with a state interventionist approach vis-à-vis limited economic opening up; an authoritative political system and a strong regulatory system.² In 1988, following the "8888 revolution", when the first set of Western sanctions was setting in on Myanmar on the ground of "human rights violations", China came in to fill the void of international cooperation for a set of reasons. Until the 1980s Myanmar was an "isolated hermit kingdom" and consequently lacked simple consumer goods such as sewing machines, textiles, light electronics, medicines, bicycles and refined petrol.³ The intensive trade relationship commenced with two major trade agreements. The first border trade agreement was signed between Yunnan Machinery Import-Export Corporation and Myanmar Export and Import Services in 1988. Subsequently, at the government level, a border trade agreement was signed in 1994. The nature of this bilateral trade relationship was intensive and remained so largely till 2011. However, often this relationship was defined as imbalanced where Myanmar had a high trade deficit and Myanmar's military elites developed an overdependence on Beijing.⁴ However, there is a disagreement among scholars regarding the "simple and binary" interpretation of this complex relationship. Rather, this was more than a "patron-client" relationship where the military leadership successfully played the China card to bolster its relationship with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Thailand in particular, Japan

² Andrzej Bolesta, "Myanmar-China Peculiar Relationship: Trade, Investment and the Model of Development," *Journal of International Studies* 11, no. 2 (2018): 23–36, <https://doi.org/10.14254/2071-8330.2018/11-2/2>.

³ Isabel Hilton, *China in Myanmar: Implications for the Future* (Oslo: The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, NOREF, 2013).

⁴ Toshihiro Kudo, "Myanmar's Economic Relations with China: Who Benefits and Who Pays?" in *Dictatorship, Disorder and Decline in Myanmar*, ed. Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (Australian National University: ANU Press, 2008), 87–110.

and India.⁵ Consequently, such a play facilitated Myanmar's accession to the ASEAN was possible in 1997.

On the other hand, Myanmar's natural reserve for energy and other resources was significant for Beijing's energy-hungry growth path. Moreover, Myanmar was the transit route for China for bringing in energy from the Middle East and Africa. In the long term, when it comes to exporting goods to the Middle East, Africa and Europe; Myanmar provides an alternative and shorter gateway by avoiding the troubled water of the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea. However, the political transition in Myanmar since 2011 was a surprise to Beijing. Despite the signing of the "comprehensive strategic cooperation partnership" in 2011; decelerated Chinese investment and economic engagement were evidenced by cancelled and stalled investment projects. The construction of the Myitsone dam was a prime example where a flagship hydro energy project was cancelled.

For India, the opportunity to meaningfully engage Myanmar came when the geostrategic reality in India's neighbourhood converged with Modi's 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policies, as Myanmar constitutes India's gateway to Southeast Asia and holds the key to ASEAN-wide infrastructure projects that will increase trade within the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area. In that bid, India is partnering with several infrastructure schemes. For example, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMMTT), a multimodal corridor connecting the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with the Sittwe deepwater port in Myanmar's Rakhine State. In terms of security sector cooperation, following Modi's 2018 visit to Myanmar, India doubled up its effort as New Delhi started conducting joint anti-insurgency operations in the Rakhine state of Myanmar, near its Northeastern provinces. In July 2019, Myanmar and India signed a defence cooperation treaty. Arranging joint army training for Tatmadaw (codenamed as IMBAX-2017 and IMBEX 2018–19), New Delhi tried to train the Tatmadaw to participate in the United Nations peacekeeping missions. On the other hand, growing naval cooperation between the two countries is evident as both navies conducted joint maritime exercises in 2018 and 2019. Along the same line, Myanmar hedged its defence purchase between India and China as in 2017, it started to procure India's first indigenous anti-submarine torpedo, known as TAL Shyena and received a Russian-made diesel-electric Kilo Class submarine called INS Sindhuvir.

⁵ Pak K. Lee, Gerald Chan, Lai-Ha Chan, "China's 'realpolitik' engagement with Myanmar," *China Security* 5, no. 1 (2009):106.

On the other hand, to counterbalance the Chinese-built Kyaukpyu port by negating any Chinese footprint in the Bay of Bengal, India developed the Sittwe port in the Rakhine state under India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) policy.⁶ Sittwe port works as the base for the KMMTT initiative to connect Northeastern India with Southwestern Myanmar. Amidst the violation of international laws and persecution of the Rohingyas by the Tatmadaw, the growing defence sector cooperation between India and Myanmar, New Delhi's non-interference approach in the Rohingya issue has been a major source of frustration for Bangladeshi policymakers. Albeit being the biggest democracy in the world, India has been conducting a balancing act by sending humanitarian support for Rohingyas on the one hand and deporting Rohingyas from its own land, citing security concerns on the other. India's domestic considerations, such as a Hindu nationalist party like BJP being in power, Islamophobic populist sentiment, counterterrorism efforts in Southern states and West Bengal, anti-insurgency operations in Kashmir and the fear of collusion between the Rohingya refugees and violent extremist groups have also been highlighted by some of the literature to explain Indian response to Rohingya crisis.⁷ On the other hand, few scholars tried to assess China's reaction in separation from India's as they argue Rohingya issue features at the bottom of Beijing's strategic consideration when it comes to great power rivalry in the Indian Ocean region.⁸ In summary, some of the academic literature tried to analyse the responses from China and India either through a liberal or realist lens.⁹ However, domestic and external considerations of these two nations

⁶ Sainandan S. Iyer, Ranadhir Mukhopadhyay and Sridhar D. Iyer, "The Sino-Indian Geopolitics and Maritime Security of the Indian Ocean Region," *Strategic Analysis* 45, no. 1 (February 2021): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2020.1870269>.

⁷ Charlotte Gao, "On Rohingya Issue, Both China and India Back Myanmar Government," *The Diplomat*, September 13, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/on-rohingya-issue-both-china-and-india-back-myanmar-government/>; Subir Bhaumik, "Geopolitics," *South China Morning Post*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics>.; C. Christine Fair, "Rohingya: Victims of a Great Game East," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (March 2018): 63–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660x.2018.1519356>.; Bertil Lintner, "Myanmar a Perfect Fit on China's Belt and Road," *Asia Times*, February 18, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/01/myanmar-a-perfect-fit-on-chinas-belt-and-road/>.

⁸ Xiangming Chen, "Globalisation Redux: Can China's Inside-out Strategy Catalyse Economic Development and Integration Across Its Asian Borderlands and Beyond?" *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 11, no. 1 (2018): 35–58, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsy003>.

⁹ Sainandan S. Iyer, Ranadhir Mukhopadhyay and Sridhar D. Iyer, "The Sino-Indian Geopolitics and Maritime Security of the Indian Ocean Region," *Strategic Analysis* 45, no. 1 (2021): 1–17; Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, "China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) and Southeast Asia: A Chinese 'Pond' Not 'Lake' in the Works," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 111 (2017): 329–343, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1410959>.; Carla P. Freeman, "China's 'Regionalism Foreign Policy' and China-India Relations in South Asia," *Contemporary Politics* 24, no. 1 (2017): 81–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1408168>.; Marko Juutinen, "Kautilyan Foreign Policy Analysis: Sino-Indian Dynamics in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 14, no. 2 (April 2018): 206–226, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2018.1472859>.

were not juxtaposed vis-à-vis Bangladesh and Myanmar's strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific region.

Subsequently, Beijing's overwhelming dependence on Malacca Strait for peacetime trade, energy flow, and military troop movements makes China vulnerable during a possible armed conflict or a full-scale war. Therefore, finding multiple openings in the Indian Ocean for its military assets to move from mainland China to the Ocean has encouraged Beijing to look into the Bay of Bengal littorals. On the other hand, New Delhi's participation in US-sponsored strategic alliances like AUKUS or QUAD puts Beijing in a tight spot where both countries perceive their national interests as mutually exclusive. However, one has to remember the other side of the coin. Despite this apparent zero-sum game in their relationship, both countries behaved themselves over the years. They even showed some cooperation in different regional and global forums (i.e. BRICS, WTO and COP negotiations). By recovering from the initial blow of the pandemic, in 2021, Sino-Indian bilateral trade now stands at US\$ 125 billion in contrast to US\$ 92.8 billion in 2019 and US\$ 87.6 billion in 2020.¹⁰

Their relationship's complex and dichotomous nature was evident during Myanmar's crackdown and the Rohingya influx to Bangladesh. The much-appreciated so-called democratic transition of Myanmar that led to the removal of Western sanctions on the country soon proved to be false dawn following escalated ethnic and religious strife in its borderlands. There was high hope amongst the Western democracies regarding Aung San Suu Kyi's hybrid democratic regime to give back citizenship to the Rohingyas and stop the state-sponsored violence. However, she followed the suit of her predecessor or at least failed to act upon, when almost seventy military battalions consisting of 30,000–35,000 soldiers were deployed to implement what is to be called a "textbook case of ethnic cleansing" with "genocidal intent" to carry out ethnic cleansing on Rohingya people. This 2017 ethnic cleansing resulted in the expulsion of nearly 742,000 Rohingya civilians to Bangladesh, making it one of the largest instances of forced migration globally. Even following the 2017 atrocities by the military, the international community was reluctant to apply any meaningful pressure or sanction on Suu Kyi's government over the fear that this would make her "democratic government" fragile and she would lose her position and control over the military, a position arguably she never had.

¹⁰ Karunjit Singh, "Explained: India's Bilateral Trade with China in 2021," *The Indian Express*, January 26, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-china-trade-explained-7740518/>.

Bangladesh-China relationship is often lauded as a “trusted friendship” or “all-weather friendship”. On the other hand, the historical relationship with India is based on shared history of struggle and bloodshed during Bangladesh’s liberation war in 1971. But it was not until 1975, Bangladesh-China bilateral relations commenced with trade and economic cooperation between the two nations. Since the 1980s, China has become the largest military hardware provider for Bangladesh. Along with defence, by 2005, China became Bangladesh’s largest trade partner in terms of imports. The Dhaka-Beijing defence cooperation was strengthened by the completion of the “Defense Cooperation Agreement” in 2002. This agreement was the first of its kind for Bangladesh with any country and it entails cooperation in the area of military training and defence production.

Interestingly, in the following year of the 2017 Rohingya influx, Bangladesh ranked second after Pakistan in terms of the world’s largest importer of Chinese military hardware. Subsequently, under the incumbent government of Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh-India bilateral relations touched their peak as both the countries resolved maritime disputes, signed the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) to exchange enclaves, addressed India’s security problem in the Northeast Indian states, built up cooperation in energy, trade, connectivity, counterterrorism and defence sector. Despite this amity that Bangladesh perceived that it enjoyed with China and India, the post-2017 Sino-Indian relationship with Bangladesh needs to be understood and explained vis-à-vis Myanmar. Nonetheless, Without introducing any framework for analysis, most often than not, the resource and geostrategic value of the Rakhine state to India and China have been flagged for underwhelming response by the two nations. Consequently, Myanmar’s “democratic transition” was preferred at the expense of a persecuted ethnoreligious minority group. The fragility of her position and the so-called democratic process was visible when the military ousted Suu Kye’s newly elected government on the ground of an allegedly “fraudulent” election by the coup of February 2021.

3. Drivers of Convergence

Growing strategic Sino-Indian competition, to a large extent, can be attributed to their resurgence within the global power structure, rapid economic growth and ensuing dependence on seaborne trade as well as energy import. A significant of which transit through several chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific region. Consequently, intensified geostrategic attention has been growing on the littoral regions of South, Southeast and East Asia, which are adjacent to the sea lane that links the energy hubs of the Persian Gulf with the energy-hungry economies of the Indo-Pacific. Any interruption of this supply lane would likely be damaging to

regional economies and the global economy as a whole. Beijing's dependence on maritime commerce, energy import, and the strategic susceptibility that this entails has been labelled as Beijing's "Malacca dilemma". The Malacca Strait is a key choke point in the Indian Ocean, which sees a staggering proportion of Beijing's energy and trade commute through its lane. Therefore, a significant amount of China's BRI engagements can be bracketed as an attempt by Beijing to reduce its strategic susceptibilities by branching out its energy and trade connections. Subsequently, this also helps to enhance Beijing's political and strategic clouts through expanded infrastructure and trade networks. Beijing's growing assertiveness in the East and the South China Sea and skirmishes in the borders with India are contributing to intensifying competition between India and China. Kaplan identified Myanmar as the heartland of this competition as he drew the boundary. He says, "China's drive southward and India's drive both westward and eastward means both powers collide in Burma. As China and India vie for power and influence, Burma has become a quiet, strategic battleground".¹¹ Consequently, China is looking towards Pakistan and Myanmar for access to a second coastline to find an alternative to bypass the Malacca Strait. China considers energy security as a strategic compulsion to maintain its presence in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, China is also looking at the vast markets of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, along with India and trying to gain entry to the Indian Ocean through multiple entree routes to counter its Malacca quandary. Beijing's constant presence in the Indian Ocean Region and its new port-building strategy comprise a strategy to erode India's strategic space. In the aftermath of the Western sanctions in the late 1980s, as the biggest democracy, New Delhi took a normative stance to shun the military regime of Myanmar. However, by the mid-1990s, Indian policymakers and strategic thinkers started to revisit their policies toward Myanmar's military regime. Following the 2017 Rohingya influx to Bangladesh, a clear Sino-Indian policy convergence toward Myanmar was visible. Both the major powers were trying to appease Myanmar to keep it in their fold. The drivers behind this convergence have been discussed in the following sub-sections.

3.1 *Strategic Insecurities and Infrastructure Projects*

The most significant strategic vulnerability for Beijing in the Indian Ocean region has been securing the Malacca strait, a major waterway for trade connecting Asia with the Middle East, Europe and Africa. The gravity of China's dependence on this chokepoint can be understood as the Chinese naval strategists often name this problem as the "Malacca Dilemma". Almost 80 per cent of Chinese crude oil imports

¹¹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2011).

and some Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports happen through the Strait, making it a geostrategic choke point as far as Beijing is concerned.¹² Given Beijing's dependence on the Malacca Strait, China has a vested interest in securing the Strait from any kind of transnational security threats. However, China remains uncomfortable with any possibility of a greater role for Western powers in providing security to the Strait. Consequently, Chinese strategists have claimed that the US and Japan have been using non-traditional security threats such as terrorism as an excuse to strengthen their naval presence around the Strait. Furthermore, Beijing has been concerned over India's growing maritime capability surrounding the Strait. New Delhi has been modernising its military installations around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located near the northern mouth of the Malacca Strait. To resolve this problem, a flagship BRI project, China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), was introduced. Subsequently, CMEC will link Yunnan province in China to the commercial centres of Yangon New City, Mandalay and Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone in Myanmar. Consequently, this turns Naypidaw into a major cog in China's plan to link the Indian Ocean and an alternative solution for Beijing's "Malacca Dilemma".

Subsequently, from India's point of vulnerability, it shares a 1,643 km-long border with Myanmar, often marked by insurgency. Along this border, active insurgent groups of these Northeastern states, mostly India's hinterland, often used Myanmar to escape the Indian military. In recent years, Myanmar has been instrumental in neutralising these insurgent groups and their bases within Myanmar territory. Such an act has significantly reduced India's strategic vulnerability in its Northeastern states. Consequently, insurgent groups such as Arakan Army (AA) used the state of Mizoram as their sanctuary to mount attacks against the Tatmadaw. As reciprocation, before the military takeover of 2021, Indian security forces thwarted the activities by the AA in the Indian territory.

3.2 ***Energy***

Among one of the key strategic interests for Beijing in Myanmar is energy security as David Lampton summed it up by saying that "(Beijing) makes friends with every regime that has energy in the ground".¹³ Since the late 1980s, when both Myanmar and PRC faced Western sanctions, Beijing has continued to be one of the junta's few international supporters, defending the military elite in the United

¹² Chu Daye, "China Raises Alert for Malacca Strait as Regional Tensions Threaten Global Shipping Lines," *Global Times*, July 04, 2019, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1156830.shtml>.

¹³ David M. Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money, and Minds* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

Nations Security Council (UNSC) and providing support to survive Western sanctions.¹⁴ In return for its protection at the UN, Beijing has looked to tap into Myanmar's energy reserves, estimated to be about 11.8 trillion cubic feet of gas reserve and US\$ 3.2 billion barrels of crude oil.¹⁵ Myanmar's hydroelectric power potential, approximately 100,000 MW, is another energy source for Beijing to explore. Via the Myanmar-China gas and oil pipeline, China receives about 10 million tonnes of crude oil each year and 1.68 million tonnes (equivalent to 2.5 billion cubic metres).¹⁶ This makes China the largest recipient of oil and gas from Myanmar.

Since the 1990s, due to Myanmar's regime interest and security, Chinese companies were allowed to tap into the natural resources such as rivers, minerals and timbers in the Shan State. This exploitation of resources often led to violent conflicts between the Tatmadaw and the insurgent groups. Insurgent groups such as Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and its ethnic partners in the northern Shan State and the eastern Kachin State engaged the Myanmar junta in the decade-long armed struggle. On the other hand, in Rakhine State, Indian and Chinese stakes can be defined and understood as part of the broader spectrum of Sino-Indian relations. These stakes revolve mainly around the region's need for infrastructure and gas pipeline building. Such energy projects create employment opportunities, generate revenues from transit fees, oil and gas and provide much-needed finance for the military regime to sustain. In September 2013, among a number of infrastructure projects, a transnational pipeline went operational, which was constructed by the China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) linking Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine, to Kunming, China. Another such project to transfer Myanmar's gas and oil from the Shwe gas field to Guangzhou, China, can be mentioned. A parallel pipeline was built to transfer imported Middle Eastern oil via the Kyaukpyu port to China, bypassing the Malacca Strait. Hence, Myanmar is very significant in ensuring China's energy security.

However, by acknowledging the adverse impact the pipeline building projects might have on the local communities, the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State urged the Myanmar military regime to do a comprehensive impact assessment survey. Due to these projects, significant local tension related to land seizures could

¹⁴ Lee, Chan, Chan, "China's 'realpolitik' engagement with Myanmar."

¹⁵ David Allen and Rainer Einzenberger, "Myanmar's Natural Resources: Blessing or Curse?" Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, December 11, 2013, <https://www.boell.de/en/2013/12/11/myanmars-natural-resources-blessing-or-curse>.

¹⁶ "China-Myanmar Oil Pipeline Carries 5 Mln Tonnes Crude in H1," *Xinhua*, accessed March 09, 2023, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/21/c_138245542.htm.

be observed. Adding to that, inadequate compensation packages, severe environmental degradation, and an influx of foreign workers undermining local employment opportunities generated significant frustration among the local communities. On the other hand, New Delhi financed and constructed the Sittwe deep-sea port as part of its KMMTT project to connect its Mizoram state to the Bay of Bengal. Therefore, it can be argued that the coastal region of Rakhine has immense strategic significance for both India and China. Hence, Myanmar had vested interests in clearing the Rakhaine state land to provide it with further investment from India and China within the broader context of geopolitical manoeuvring.

3.3 *Defence*

In the face of Western sanctions, since the 1990s, China has been the overwhelming defence partner for Myanmar. Following the coup of 2021 and the military regime's crackdown on its citizen, Beijing tried to maintain its distance from the military regime regarding weapons trade. However, with global attention focused on the Russia-Ukraine war, China has furtively stepped up its engagement with Myanmar's junta. Following the coup, top military leadership got engaged with Russia to diversify some of its weapons sources. This has motivated China to engage Pakistan as its proxy to export weapons to Myanmar. Myanmar's military regime plans to procure Chinese-upgraded JF-17 Block III and air-to-surface missiles through Pakistan.¹⁷ These fourth-generation near-stealth fighter jets were developed by a joint research and development programme between Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and China's Chengdu Aircraft Corporation.¹⁸ Publicly, China does not want to supply any critical military weapons to Myanmar since it does not want to be associated with the military junta's military operations against its citizens. Such an association might severely undermine Beijing's global image as the junta might use the acquired weapons against the pro-democracy resistance groups who are supporting the resistance. Such association with the junta might undermine Beijing's interest within Myanmar.

On the other hand, despite being the largest democracy, New Delhi has always maintained a close relationship with the Tatmadaw. Throughout its history, Tatmadaw or Myanmar military has constantly undermined Myanmar's quest for democracy and ruled the country for most of the past 70 years. Such a policy position

¹⁷ Hanan Zaffar, "Pakistan to Provide Weapons to Myanmar as China Backs Ties," *The Defense Post*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/02/24/pakistan-weapons-myanmar-china/>.

¹⁸ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Myanmar and Pakistan in Arms Deal, Guided by China," *The Economic Times*, February 11, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/myanmar-and-pakistan-in-arms-deal-guided-by-china/articleshow/89491351.cms>.

was mainly derived from the understanding that the Tatmadaw is a partner in its Northeastern states' counterinsurgency efforts. Some of the insurgent groups in the Northeastern region gain access to arms, find sanctuary and mount cross-border attacks from Myanmar's northwestern states. Increasingly, in the recent past, Indian policymakers had depended on Myanmar's military to resolve this problem.¹⁹ Such cooperation is based on the rationale that only Myanmar's military regime can deal with such cross-border insurgent groups—provided India reciprocates by supplying the proper combination of defence apparatus. Under such cooperation, India trained Myanmar army officers and sold sophisticated weapons to the army. For example, in July 2019, India supplied Shyena with advanced torpedoes to the Myanmar navy. Defence hardware such as mortars, radars, rocket launchers, night-vision devices, and road construction gear such as bulldozers, dump trucks, soil compactors bridges, and communication devices were supplied by India to Myanmar.²⁰ Apart from arms transfers, the two sides led joint Bilateral Military Exercises.

On the contrary, such an assumption has proved wrong since the coup of 2021, as the Myanmar army itself is facing severe resistance and often failing to manage its own insurgency. Decades-long military rule has hardened the insurgent groups of Myanmar to gain capabilities and influence. Since the coup, as the military junta in Myanmar has lost significant ground to the People's Defense Force (PDF) and insurgent groups, its ability to fight Indian insurgents operating from Myanmar's territory has significantly waned. As a result of such conflicts, India's ongoing geostrategic projects through Myanmar's territory, such as the KMMTT project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project have been undermined. These two projects are the hearts of India's Act East Policy, which aims to advance India's interest in Southeast Asia. Therefore, the leverage of India's counterinsurgency cooperation with Myanmar's military regime remains largely limited.

The Myanmar army lost its control over its territory and is busy waging a nationwide civil war by persecuting its entire populace. Under such circumstances, the Myanmar army offers little other than undermining India's investment within Myanmar and risking India's image to the general people of Myanmar and at the global level. Hence, India's partnership with the Myanmar army not only weakens Myanmar's quest for democracy but it fails to serve India's economic and security

¹⁹ Pushpita Das, "Security Challenges and the Management of the India–Myanmar Border," *Strategic Analysis* 42, no. 6 (February 2018): 578-594, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2018.1557932>.

²⁰ Thu Htet, "Opinion: Indo-Myanmar Ties Should Go beyond Geopolitical Interests," *The Irrawaddy*, February 27, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/indo-myanmar-ties-go-beyond-geopolitical-interests.html>.

interests in Myanmar. Conversely, should New Delhi engage publicly with the pro-democratic forces, this might give India a chance to have a stronger role in the future journey of Myanmar, in particular, vis-à-vis China. Consequently, if New Delhi continues to support the military regime by sending military aid and supplies to the Myanmar military to counterweight China's influence, it might undermine its goodwill image to the general Myanmar population. More significantly, such a ploy will likely play into China's hands in terms of providing further legitimacy to the military junta.²¹

4. Difference in Strategic Value between Bangladesh and Myanmar

The diplomatic relationship that Bangladesh enjoys with India can be understood by its historical and cultural affinity since the war of liberation. On the other hand, relation with Beijing has evolved over the years on issues ranging from defence to profound economic cooperation. However, the Rohingya influx of 2017 has provided a reality check to Bangladeshi policymakers regarding the growing geopolitical reality in the Indo-Pacific region. In which the strategic value assigned to Myanmar and Bangladesh varied and tilted heavily towards Myanmar. To understand the reasons behind such Indian and Chinese dependence on Myanmar in comparison to Bangladesh, it is imperative to look into the evolution of Bangladesh's foreign policy and how that corresponds vis-à-vis Myanmar.

As a newly independent nation in the bipolar setting, multilateralism can be seen as the most significant mean to legitimacy and inclusiveness in the international system. Therefore, right after independence, the Bangladesh government's first priority was to access multilateral forums such as the UN, Commonwealth, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and so forth. Article 25 of the Constitution provided the guiding principle for Bangladesh's foreign policy. Since then, Bangladesh has always tried to find a middle path and maintained a code of neutrality. As Dhaka believes in territorial integrity, its foreign policy is non-aggressive, non-aligned, non-interventionist and non-expansionist as well. Accordingly, as a responsible international actor, Bangladesh followed a multilateral diplomatic approach which is essentially value-based, where Bangladesh sought to contribute to norm-setting exercises. In the realm of foreign policy, Bangladesh has two broad aspirations—first, the pursuit for its security and preservation of sovereignty, and second, the search for resources for its progress and economic

²¹ Saket Ambarkhane and Sanjay Valentine Gathia, "Over a Year Later, Myanmar's Military Coup Threatens India's National Security," United States Institute of Peace, May 14, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/over-year-later-myanmar-military-coup-threatens-india-national-security>.

development. The first aspiration comes from obtaining enough strategic autonomy for sufficient manoeuvrability in policy-making. The second one marks the quest for resources, entailed by aid, trade, export diversification, foreign direct investment and remittances to bolster its human and infrastructural development. Such aspirations require a high level of international engagement.

In this regard, the United Nations is a significant element in Bangladesh's external relations, as it has been the global symbol and embodiment of multilateralism. Bangladesh perceives multilateral forums such as the UN as the source of security and sovereignty. Consequently, policymakers believe, like in many other developing countries, Bangladesh's external interests are better served by usually acting as a member of a wider international grouping, such as the Commonwealth, WTO, Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), OIC and so forth. Thereby it helps Bangladesh with better manoeuvring space and bargaining capacity when it comes to negotiating with major international actors.

However, when it comes to growing competition among the major powers in the Indian Ocean region, as opposed to maintaining neutrality or equidistance, authoritarian regimes such as the Myanmar military regime seek regime security. Hence, sacrificing strategic autonomy to secure regime interest renders more strategic value to Myanmar than Bangladesh. Insecurities among the major powers create uncertainties in the region. For example, Indian policymakers feel increasingly encircled by China's "strategic pearls" while China feels insecure by its limited capacity to secure its vast sea lanes of trade and communication. Two of China's top three energy suppliers are from the Middle East, Iraq and The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). On the other hand, Myanmar has the most diverse energy reserve among ASEAN countries. With total reserve comprised 104 oil and natural gas blocks, out of which 51 are on the land, with the rest in maritime space.²²

To that end, Myanmar renders strategic and real benefits for Beijing's energy security dilemmas. Myanmar offers a chance to branch out imports, lessen overdependence on imported LNG, reduce shipping time, and cut dependency on energy imports from the Middle East region. The deepwater port which is being constructed in Myanmar offers Beijing the potential to bypass the Malacca Strait. The energy infrastructure connecting China to Myanmar is new. However, expansion

²² Zeya Nyein, "Myanmar Earns about US\$3.5 B from Natural Gas Export," Eleven Media Group Co., Ltd, September 16, 2019, <https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/myanmar-earns-about-us35-b-from-natural-gas-export>.

strategies are ambitious and given the domestic political instability in Myanmar, the cooperation between the two countries should be observed closely.

Apart from securing energy, China has other significant stakes in Rakhine. Primarily the protection of its connectivity and the economic corridor between the Bay of Bengal and southern China. This corridor is a critical element of the BRI, which includes a planned road and a pipeline as well as rail connections between the port and southern China and the newly-built Kyaukpyu port on the Bay of Bengal. The whole package gives China direct entry to the Indian Ocean for the first time in history. This access might have considerable significance for the regional balance of power vis-à-vis India.

With renewed conflicts in Rakhine state, Beijing is looking to protect its investments in the Kyaukpyu corridor. It has been providing considerable funding for the Arakan Army, including finance and arms. As a result, this has allowed Beijing to gain influence vis-à-vis the Myanmar army and hedge its bets. Providing support to the Arakan Army serves other purposes, particularly in relation to India's competing infrastructure projects like Kaladan in Rakhine that would link the Indian Ocean with India's Northeast states. The Kaladan project entails the construction of a road to India's Mizoram state, new port facilities at Sittwe and a river transit system. Upon completion, this would provide a direct connection between the Bay of Bengal and the Indian northeast. New Delhi envisions the Kaladan corridor as a driver of economic growth in otherwise India's hinterland of the northeast. This corridor is expected to reduce India's reliance on Bangladesh for transit routes. However, the Arakan Army has recently seized important territory along the Kaladan corridor. This gives it substantial bargaining capacity with New Delhi. Nonetheless, it is yet to be clarified whether New Delhi is interested in a deal with the AA. Or perhaps, it will just double down on its long-running support for the Myanmar army.

Apart from eliminating India's concern with the Northeast insurgency, Myanmar is a country of crucial strategic importance for New Delhi in connecting Southeast Asia. Being a convergent country for two of New Delhi's flagship strategies ('Act East' and 'Neighbourhood First'), it is marked as a doorway of New Delhi to the Southeast Asian region and the KMMTT project features as the first important footstep in that direction. Having signed the project as MoU between India and Myanmar in 2008, the venture is in its final phase after steep delays and cost fluctuations. It holds the potential to connect India to Southeast Asia and overcome India's chicken neck syndrome. India's afresh implemented dual-track policy approach seeks to participate with the military junta of Myanmar. Where the overt objective is to bolster security in its northeastern states and the implied one is to

counterbalance Beijing's increasing influence across the South Asian region.²³ However, with regard to Dhaka, New Delhi's Myanmar policy once again has manifested that India remains largely oblivious to Bangladesh's major concern. Which is the repatriation of more than one million Rohingyas population, who were appallingly expelled by the very military leadership with whom New Delhi engages. The geopolitical calculation which has driven New Delhi to take the policy of appeasement vis-à-vis Myanmar's military regime has largely failed to accommodate the Rohingya issue or Bangladesh's concerns. A closer look suggests India's new "two-track" policy might not be helpful in achieving its bigger geostrategic goals, which are the containment of China and attaining regional supremacy.

Therefore, for neighbours like New Delhi, a policy revisit seems indispensable. India's friendship with Myanmar military top brass is improbable to bear any favourable result for New Delhi's counterinsurgency campaign since the Myanmar army is busy fighting numerous insurgent groups. Hence, it is in no position to remove the Northeast Indian insurgents based in its Sagaing region. Therefore, the military regime may not only use them against the PDF but also assist them in gaining more capabilities with the support of the Chinese. The assumption that New Delhi should not antagonise the military leadership since it will send them into Chinese embrace is seriously flawed as they are already in China's grip. Moreover, New Delhi will soon have to invent a method to deal with manifold stakeholders. Especially rebel groups like United League of Arakan-Arakan Army (ULA-AA) and Kachin Independence Army-Kachin Independence Organisation (KIA-KIO) control large territories near the Indian border. It will be improbable for India to just count on the military regime to complete the KMMTT project and operationalise it. The AA tried disrupting the project after the Indian army dismantled the rebel bases in isolated southern parts of Mizoram by starting "Operation Sunshine". However, the AA is now keen to deal with New Delhi on its own now, as is the NUG. India can neglect the evolving reality in Myanmar only at its own peril. Its wait-and-watch so far has proved to be counterproductive. If the Modi government is serious about Act East through Northeast, it has to play a meaningful role in Myanmar.

On the other hand, Beijing's precedence has been categorising the Rohingya crisis as an internal issue and advocating for a non-interventionist approach from the global community. Beijing maintains that only the parties directly affected, namely

²³ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "New Delhi's Twin-Track Approach of Dealing with Myanmar," *The Economic Times*, February 02, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/new-delhis-twin-track-approach-of-dealing-with-myanmar/articleshow/80649497.cms>.

Bangladesh and Myanmar, should have a voice in its resolution. So far, as an alternative, the plan proposed by China entails: repatriating refugees, ending the violence, and beginning economic development in Rakhine state. In that order, it does not address the inherent vulnerabilities and insecurities of the Rohingyas within the Rakhine State. Therefore, it does not allow any scope for a voluntary sustainable repatriation. Besides, there are some anxieties regarding the viability of Beijing's plan. China plays down the magnitudes of the crisis by attaching the violence to the economic underdevelopment of the region rather than the ethnic cleansing and atrocities by the Myanmar security forces. Beijing understates the direct danger facing the Rohingya. Beijing does not contemplate the possibility that the Rohingyas would be unsafe in Rakhine State once repatriated to Myanmar.

5. Conclusion

The Chinese and Indian response to the Rohingya crisis has been puzzling for policymakers and scholars alike. When great powers contest for regional influence, most often than not, they have distinctive world views, conflicting norms and ethos, which might work as the wrapping for the *realpolitik* agenda that they carry. Due to military rule and human rights violations during popular uprising, Myanmar suffered Western sanctions since the late 1980s. China came to the rescue to fill the need for consumer products that Myanmar needed. In reciprocity, Beijing hoped to gain access to the natural resources of Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal to resolve its Malacca Dilemma. Despite being the largest democracy, India joined the competition to woo Myanmar military regime in the 1990s. This attempt has been cemented through formal policy formulation by New Delhi, such as the SAGAR and the "look east". Myanmar used this ploy of playing China against Japan, India and ASEAN. So it was not surprising that the military junta played Western powers during its so-called political transition in Myanmar in 2011. Under the pretence of democracy, Myanmar was able to receive Western investments, which created anxiety among the Chinese policymakers. Therefore in 2017, when more than a million Rohingyas were expelled from their homeland due to the atrocities, both India and China did not respond the way the international community expected.

Given the normative nature of the plight attached to the crisis, India and China were expected to play a different role other than appeasing the military regime. Bangladesh expected strong support from China and India due to its relationship with the two neighbours. However, the perceived or otherwise geopolitical realities of these two countries meant a convergence of their stance on Myanmar derived from their competition to appease Myanmar. The new geopolitical realities and geostrategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region increased the value of the military

regime in Myanmar to the competing powers such as China and India. As a responsible member of the international community and due to its constitutional obligation, Bangladesh played a role that promised to resolve the Rohingya crisis through diplomatic negotiation and discussion. However, the *realpolitik* of geostrategic competition, internal and external strategic realities in India and China and geostrategic competition in the Indo-Pacific dictated that Myanmar would receive higher strategic value than Bangladesh.