

# **China's Geopolitical Interest in Myanmar: A Case Study of Rohingya Issue**

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## **Certificate**

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “China’s Geopolitical Interest in Myanmar: A Case Study of Rohingya Issue” submitted by Rabeya Bosri Chandni has been submitted to obtain the degree of Master of Philosophy in Political Science. It can be certified that the candidate has fulfilled all the requirements as per the directions of the University of Dhaka. I endorse that the thesis may be considered to award the degree.

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**Dedication**

To my beloved family.

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**List of Abbreviations**

AAGC	The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor
AICHR	ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ARSA	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army/Harakah al-Yaqin
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BCIM	The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Initiative
BIA	Burma Independence Army
BIMSTEC	The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BOB	Bay of Bengal
BRI	The Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	The Chinese Communist Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMEC	The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor
CPEC	The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
EAOs	Ethnic Armed Organizations
EU	The European Union
FPNCC	Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy
GA	Geopolitical Agent
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
GoM	Government of Myanmar
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus

ICC	International Criminal Court
ICCPR	International Covenant on civil and Political Rights
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IEA	International Energy Agency
IOM	The International Organization for Migration
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
KIA	The Kachin Independence Party
MNDAA	The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NLD	National League for Democracy
NRC	National Registration Card
NUG	National Unity Government
OBOR	The One Belt One Road
OCHA	The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
PDF	People's Defense Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
R2P	The Responsibility to Protect
SAARC	The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SCS	South China Sea
SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNGA	The UN General Assembly

## Abstract

This study looks into China's geopolitical interests relating to the Rohingya refugee crisis that in turn affects Bangladesh. China is one of the most important development partners for both Myanmar and Bangladesh, but in the case of the Rohingya crisis, it has extended diplomatic support and cooperation to Myanmar's government—a government accused of committing genocide. Leaving Bangladesh alone with over a million Rohingya refugees, it suggests Bangladesh not to internationalize the issue and solve it bilaterally with Myanmar, which did not cooperate with the international community nor with Bangladesh to rehabilitate Rohingyas safely. This context generates a question about why China has prioritized their Sino-Myanmar relationship compared to their Sino-Bangladesh friendship. The contemporary works assist to perceive China's interests in Myanmar but cannot explain the reasons behind China's special care to Myanmar on a criminal ground. Hence, this qualitative research, depending upon secondary sources and some interviews, will provide a structural analysis of the research question 'why China has taken side with Myanmar on the Rohingya issue' through the lens of neo-classical geopolitical perspective. The research has found some opportunities and challenges toward China's primary and secondary interests which originated from the Rohingya crisis. Particularly, the fear of third party's involvement in Myanmar and risks to the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative with other economic interests along with the opportunity to get back the 'Pawkpaw' relation with Myanmar and portray itself as the regional leader, provoked China to be a strong supporter of Myanmar's ethnic cleansing operation. Thus, this study attempts to provide a clear scenario of China's neo-classical geopolitical calculation of the Rohingya crisis in the international environment including all major powers response to the crisis while the contemporary studies provide a fractional discussion based on Sino-US competition or Sino-India competition.

## **China's Geopolitical Interest in Myanmar: A Case Study of Rohingya Issue**

### **Chapter One: Introduction**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

The escalation of the Rohingya crisis has affected global affairs and relations heavily. Hence, the geopolitical steps of the corresponding agents deserve a distinct discussion over this issue. The USA, China, India, Russia, Japan, the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and all other major countries and international institutions bear moral responsibility to handle Myanmar's stubbornness for continuing their genocide on Rohingyas at any costs. All players have their own ground to justify their role in the crisis, but I have selected China's response to be explained for a variety reasons. China is now rising as a regional actor, as well as a global power (Xiaokun, 2013 cited in Scott, 2019). It has been working hard to design its global order by which it will control the global affairs as per its interests and thus reduce the US hegemony (Doshi, 2021). Moreover, it has a stronger bonding with Myanmar than others and shares an extensive border along with eternal ethnic, cultural, and economic ties. That is why China had many opportunities to get the situation under control and do what is best for humanity. However, it chose not to.

Of all the foreign parties, Korybko (2017) feels that China stands to lose the most from what is occurring in Myanmar. From the view of neo-classical geopolitics, this study has endeavored to find out those geopolitical opportunities and challenges for China in Myanmar originated from the Rohingya crisis to understand why China has sided with Myanmar on the Rohingya issue. Based on secondary data sources and some personal interviews (through direct communication, email, and online questionnaires), this qualitative research has attempted to

make a structural analysis of international politics within which China got perception of its geopolitical interests and capabilities. Getting the whole scenario of international politics also helps us to identify the obstacles on the way of having a united stand for Rohingyas. Thus, this study has contributed to the analytical development of neo-classical geopolitics that is now at the progressive stages in the hands of Nuno Morgado and other promising scholars.

The thesis consists of eight chapters. The first chapter is introductory—it will tell the story of this research journey through gradually explaining the background of the study, research question, its objectives and scopes, and methodology, as well as the limitations of the work. The second chapter will help the reader get acquainted with the available contemporary works and showed the research gap that inspired to lead this work. The conceptual framework of the study, the third chapter, will brief the main theoretical terms and approaches of this discipline. The historical background of the Rohingya crisis will be introduced in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter will capture the reactions of Bangladesh, China, the USA, India, Japan, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other countries, as well as international organizations to the Rohingya crisis. In the sixth chapter, the study will narrate the Chinese interests that have been expanded in Myanmar over the years. The seventh chapter will convey the analytical discussion over the China's position with Myanmar from its primary and secondary geopolitical interests in Myanmar. The eight chapter will draw the conclusion of the study by providing a short discussion over the findings.

## 1.2 Background: The Escalation of Rohingya Crisis: 2016-2017

The regular attack and counter-attack came to global media attention in 2016. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army/Harakah al-Yaqin (ARSA), a newly armed group of emigrant Rakhines in Saudi Arabia, killed nine members of border police on 9<sup>th</sup> October of the year. The military of Myanmar, known as ‘Tatmadaw’, brutally executed the “Clearance operations” over Rohingyas as the answer to that assault. The killings of more than 1000 civilian people, rape, and burnings of hundred villages during October 2016–June 2017 led hundreds of thousands of Rohingya rush to the border with Bangladesh (Barany, 2019). In response of this, the ARSA killed 99 Hindu civilians and launched a counter-attack on almost 30 military outposts on 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2017, which rendered an excuse to the Tatmadaw for erupting violence in northern Rakhine once again. In contrast to Tatmadaw’s claim to have killed 400 insurgents (*CBC News 2017*), the Ontario International Development Agency (OIDA) claimed that this military crackdown has taken more than 24,000 lives, 18,000 women have been raped, and fire has been set on 1,15,000 residences (*The Daily Star, 2019*). Within two weeks of military crackdown, 370,000 Rohingyas along with Hindu and Buddhist Rakhines fled away to Bangladesh (*The Washington Post, 2017*). By the time the total number of refugees in Bangladesh exceeded one million and generated both socio-economic and political crisis.

The Myanmar government had not only supported the atrocities of its military but also refused to take the responsibility of the refugees in the excuse of defining them as ‘Bengalis’ and ‘terrorists’. The lack of security from the government has pushed the number of Rohingyas to 3.5 million all over the world as they resorted to exile. A further 120,000 Rohingyas are

leading a humiliating life in the camps within the Rakhine state. In the camps, their lives are full of restrictions, deprivations and humiliations.

**Table 1**

*Rohingya Refugees in Different Countries Since 1978*

<u>Destination Countries</u>	<u>Estimated Number</u>
Bangladesh	More than 1,100,000
Saudi Arabia	42,000
United Arab Emirates	10,000
Malaysia	Over 100,000
Thailand	60,000
India	40,000
Pakistan	350,000
Nepal	600-3000

*Note.* Made by Author Based on AP News (2022), Barany (2019), Ellis-Petersen, H. & Hassan, A. (2021), Hassan, (2021), Mahat (2020), Putra et. al. (2019)

Rohingya predicament has been a global humane crisis not because of only the ethnic cleansing operation by the Myanmar government but also for the contradictory role of global powers to stop the crime. Moreover, some powerful states have directly supported such brutality of the Government of Myanmar (Gom). After a long military rule (1962-2010), the ascendance of democratic government in power made the Rohingyas and other stakeholders hopeful for the progress of the situation. However, instead of changing the discriminatory policies toward the Arakan Muslims, the democratic government had continued those and supported the joint mass killing operation of Tatmadaw and Rakhine Buddhists. The strategical importance of Rakhine state

and its mainland toward its neighbouring states have rendered it a battleground of international politics.

### **1.3 China's Importance in the Rohingya Crisis**

Apparently, China has no connection with the Rohingyas. Notwithstanding, it is an important factor in the discussion on the issue. The veto power of China in the security council along with its long border with Myanmar has turned it to a burden-stone in the crisis. Because of its open support to the Myanmar government's actions against the Rohingyas, and the application of that veto power to protect Myanmar from any punitive action of the UN, the international community has failed to adopt necessary steps against the crime. Though some states condemned the GoM and imposed some economic, diplomatic or political sanctions over the state, the expected impact has not been reflected due to China's support toward Myanmar. Moreover, the humanitarian aspect of the crisis has been undermined by the regional rivalry among India, China, the USA. The leaders have been engaged in taking advantage of the crisis rather than solving the problem.

Above all, China is the only one country whom Myanmar has chosen as a mediator between Bangladesh and Myanmar. None but China has succeeded in bringing Naypidaw to the discussion table with Dhaka. The success is limited only to this point. Naypidaw had not implemented any of the deals. On the other hand, Bangladesh sat with Myanmar under the pressure of China to solve the problem bilaterally and now has been disappointed at the failure of Rohingyas rehabilitation in Rakhine. At this critical situation, China needs a more assertive role for attaining the participants trust if it really wishes to create the image of global benevolent leader.



## 1.4 Research Problem

The birth history of Bangladesh creates a kind of innate sympathy towards the oppressed and destitute people. Hence, despite of not being a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention but respecting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Bangladesh bears the responsibility to provide asylum to the hardly escaped Rohingyas (Abrar, 2013). The government of Bangladesh had opened its border on the proposal of the United Nations (UN) (Rana, 2021) in 1978 and allowed 1,67,000 Rohingyas by June

(Ahmed, 2019) as well as 2,50,000 Rohingyas in 1991-92. With the cooperation of the UN and UN Refugee Agency, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) became successful in repatriation of a major number of Rohingyas to Myanmar but a large number of unregistered were out of any kind of

monetary or humanitarian assistance and the repatriation discussion. The new flight of Rohingyas in 2012 overwhelmed the suffering of 28,000 registered and those unregistered Rohingyas in Bangladesh. The 2016-17 military crackdown in the Rakhine state caused to about 1.4 million refugees (in total) looking for asylum in the camps of Bangladesh (The UN, 2022), outnumbering the local people 2:1 (Alam, 2018). In this context, the Rohingyas cause a great traditional and non-traditional security threat for Bangladesh and all over the world that should be solved as soon as possible.

The most troublesome issue is that the government of Myanmar is imposing 'Bengalis' identity on them and not accepting them as Myanmar citizens. Such claims create confusion about the responsible authority for Rohingyas among the international communities and place Bangladesh in an embarrassing situation. Moreover, this crisis has been affecting the

diplomatic relations of Bangladesh. China's direct support to the Myanmar government has removed India from the side of Bangladesh. China's stress on bilateral solution (Bangladesh-Myanmar) with the help of Chinese mediation has put Bangladesh away from international cooperation regarding the issue. Moreover, Beijing's failure to pressurize the Myanmar government to repatriate the million Rohingyas from the camps in Bangladesh has been creating many socio-political problems. Although this context could not break down Bangladesh-China relation, it strains the bonding.

### **1.5 Research Question**

This study will try to explore the geopolitical interest of China over the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar from the viewpoint of neo-classical geopolitics. Though the Rohingyas entered in independent Bangladesh in three phases previously: 1978, 1991-1992, 2012, the latest and fourth entire 2016-2017 surpassed the previous numbers of Rohingyas, this study will focus on that period. The study will search for the answer of the following question:

#### **RQ: Why has China taken side with Myanmar on the Rohingya issue?**

In order to facilitate the inquiry more precisely, I have resorted to two sub-questions that will provide us with answers of the main question more scientifically and systematically. The sub-questions are following:

Q1: What are the principal geopolitical interests of China in Myanmar?

Q2: What geopolitical interests of China have emerged and what were immediately threatened due to this crisis?

## 1.6 Objectives of the Study

The influx of Rohingyas in Bangladesh is theoretically a decades-old problem. But the 2016-2017 entering of million people all on a sudden was a great shock for Dhaka. Moreover, China and India's direct support to Myanmar has both surprised and disappointed Bangladesh. It has been suffering from a lot of problems like demographic change, environmental threats, human trafficking, drug trafficking, unemployment, deterioration of law-and-order situation, etc. due to providing asylum to the helpless people. In this context this study aims to explore the following issues.

- To capture the responses of China and other international actors to the brutal military crackdown over the Rohingyas.
- To explore different kinds of geopolitical interests of China in Myanmar.
- To identify the immediate risks and opportunities that China felt to its geopolitical interest after the escalation of the crisis.

Thus, this study will help understand China's response to the Rohingya crisis from the neo-classical viewpoint of geopolitics. Moreover, it can provide helpful analysis to realize the current trend of regional politics, as well as rivalries. The future of China's mediation between Bangladesh and Myanmar regarding the crisis can be understood from this discussion.

## **1.7 Scope of the Study**

China's response toward the Rohingya crisis is full of tensions in the regional and international politics. That is why the scope of this study is highly broad. I have provided here a brief list of the utility of this research in context of international politics.

- The study will help us to get a tangible view of the challenges and advantages of China generated from the Rohingya refugee crisis between Myanmar and Bangladesh.
- This study will help us to explore the new trends in regional politics of South Asia and Southeast Asia that are leading the support of big powers, specifically China toward Myanmar.
- An important advantage of the study is that it will help us to identify those factors which are impediments for the interest of Bangladesh but opportunity for Myanmar in getting the patronage of the big neighbors.
- This study will also help seek new strategy and the ways for Bangladesh to uphold its rights and needs over the Rohingya issue.

## **1.8 Research Methodology**

This study is a qualitative work in nature and its data source is secondary. Data has been collected from various national and international books, journals, newspapers, and television programs, as well as internet websites. The author has also interviewed some experts to understand the actual problem and politics behind this crisis. The participants were selected randomly but by their ground of expertness in the issue. The scholars of international relations, foreign policy of China, India, Myanmar and the USA, legal system, defense and the strategic

studies were prioritized in this study. In consideration of the issue's sensitivity, I have used mixed and open questionnaires to make the interviewees comfortable.

In case of explanation, I have adopted the neo-classical geopolitical approach. This approach is not only popular among the statesmen in the contemporary period but also very exclusive to the scholars to understand the global phenomena. Moreover, the Rohingya crisis has got much attention from the geopoliticians and experts of international relations who have viewed the crisis from a single point of geo-economics, geo-strategy, or balance of power.

### **1.9 Limitations of the Study:**

States always hide their geopolitical code in the artistic representation of their actions. Geopoliticians, political scientists, and policy makers work to decode these geopolitical ambitions. In doing so, the author has also faced some that are listed below:

- The concerned parties of the study were China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. However, the author became able to get response of the specialists from India, Bangladesh and the USA. Any response from the responsible representatives of China and Myanmar and Bangladesh was not found.
- The research field was Rakhine state of Myanmar but I could not visit the place and collect any primary data from locals and local administration.
- Lack of sufficient works on neo-classical geopolitics and limited access to the work on geopolitical aspects of Rohingya issue until 2020 have highly hampered the research to get necessary data in time.

### **1.10 Ethical Considerations**

The author does agree that the atrocity on Rohingyas nearby her border and the silence of the big powers have inspired to look into the issue scientifically. However, she does not have any personal conflicts with any parties of the study. To maintain the privacy of the respondents, this study has been done very cautiously. The author has tried her best to protect the originality of the information and data sources while avoiding the risk of plagiarism.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Ahmed (2010), Islam (2019), Parnini (2013), Uddin (2015), Ullah (1995), Ware and Laoutides (2018), Yunus (1994), and others have devoted much of their careers to describe the origin of Rohingyas in Arakan state. According to their index, the Arabian Muslims reached the coast of ancient Arakan between 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries and founded the Muslim community in the region. Thus, the Myanmar government's claim for addressing Rohingyas as Bengali residents of Chittagong becomes invalid. Moreover, Ware and Laoutides (2018), and Islam (2019) find the flavour of politics in defining the persecuted people in a way, so that the government can be benefited politically and economically while avoiding liability. Ullah and Chatteraj's (2018) tri-nation field survey respectively in Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia explores that the Rohingyas have been discriminated in a number of ways as a part of a long-term-plan of the Myanmar government. However, very few of these studies could go beyond the contest on Rohingyas ethnic identity that provided us with a grand floor to shed light on the geopolitical interests hidden in the crisis. Similarly, Bert (2004), Chenyang (2010), Cook (2012) Geng (2006), and Tea's (2010a, 2010b) works contribute to identify the long-time strategies of Beijing, New Delhi and Washington in Naypyidaw, but failed to connect the major powers' interest in the Rohingya crisis. This study looks for China's interests in this quandary from the perspective of neo-classical geopolitics.

Hussain (2018) has very intelligently and quickly grabbed the time-demanding issues in his book, "Rohingyas of Burma: The history of Genocide", but failed to keep up the spirit of the age. As ex-officio of Bangladesh Armed Forces, the author had more potentiality to perceive the primary concerning issues for China as a neighbouring state of Myanmar in this

crisis. From the geo-economic and geo-strategical perspective, Hussain could see the billion-dollar investment in the Rakhine state and an alternate way to Malacca dilemma for instigating China to favour Myanmar. Applying the case study approach, Ismail (2018) explores that soft power rivalry of great powers, China and the USA, motivates China to take side with Myanmar on Rohingya issue. According to his view, China has pursued to protect its economic and political interests in Myanmar by expanding its soft power there. Beijing's interests can be identified as a) establishment of gas and oil pipelines in Rakhine state b) development of Kyaukpyu sea-port in the same area, c) check the expansion of democratic values by the US influence, and d) covering the same problem of China with the Uighur Muslim in Xinjiang. However, sustaining the importance of such factors, there are also some particular issues for which China would stop the interference of international community in the land of Myanmar.

Sultana (2019) has attempted to discuss the nature of China's response and the reasons behind such response on the Rohingya issue from the geo-strategic side. Through analytical and narrative approach, she has connected the alignment of China with Myanmar as the former's interest in the access to the Indian Ocean, developing its western region, protecting economic schemes, and securing energy supply through the latter. There is no doubt about the importance of these issues in the Sino-Myanmar relationship but her claim to sustain border security and stability of China through cooperation with Myanmar is not acceptable in the case of Rohingya minority due to their border distance. However, the neo-classical geopolitical perspective will provide us a broader outlook to examine the other powers' influence over the Rohingya issue that is not possible in a single actor's geostrategy.



Among the scarce literature on the Rohingya issue, an exclusive discourse from the prevalent ethnic minority problem in Myanmar, Karim's (2020) "Genocide and Geopolitics of The Rohingya Crisis" is an excellent one. The book, a product of qualitative research, has explored from beginning to the possible destination of the crisis in sixteen chapters. The huge opportunity to invest in Myanmar's natural resources, energies, and infrastructure building, as well as holding its strategic position to monitor and control the rival's activities in the Asia-Pacific region has made the Rakhine state vulnerable to the politics of big powers. While China is one step ahead among the competitors for its historical close tie with the country, its siding with that government at this juncture period can be remarked as a great fortune for China to bring Naypyidaw in its axis again. In contrast, East Act Policy, an amalgamation of economic and security interests, is running for advancing the India-ASEAN and India-Asia-Pacific relationship where Myanmar is the entrance. Though the USA has officially criticized the atrocities of Myanmar government, any requests from Suu Kyi to participate in combating terrorism could have provided a chance to establish its influence there. This has not happened yet but the crisis has been an obstacle to rapid implementation of the China's BRI project that in turn benefits the US. Japan also kept silence in response to the severe violation of human rights in Rakhine just not to lose the floor of looting benefit from Myanmar to its rivals India and China.

Moreover, the power transition to the democratic government in Myanmar in 2011 has brought some changes in its foreign relations which have played determinant role in deciding the actors' agencies in the country. In this regard, Lanteigne (2019) and Byrd (2020) have attempted to hold those domestic changes in Myanmar in relation to understand China's strategic position but ignored the Rohingya issue as an important driving force. This study will

try to articulate these important domestic factors with the geo-political contest in Naypyidaw to properly address the principal actor, Beijing's achievements and challenges due to the Rohingya crisis. Mannan (2020) and Zahed (2022) have analyzed respectively the Sino-US competition and Sino-India rivalry as the dominant facts of China's stand from the geopolitical perspective. Through the multiple theoretical lens of realism, liberalism, constructivism, and Confucianism, Changrui and Fu (2023) have examined China's foreign policy on the Rohingya issue. Changrui and Fu remark that China's promise for peaceful development, cooperation and economic connection as well as its respect for national sovereignty have encouraged it to be engaged with Myanmar in the peaceful resolution of the crisis.

However, the 2016 Myanmar military's aid on the Rohingya people and rounding this issue the position of China and India in favour of the Myanmar government has surprised Bangladesh. It can be assumed that the side selection over the Rohingya crisis has a deep connection with the geopolitical strategies of China, the USA, India, Russia, and Japan. Though the above literature is rich in rationality and data on their own grounds, none of those has explored the challenges of the extensive relationship between the Rohingya crisis and the rival powers geopolitical interests from the neo-classical geopolitics. All previous studies have just focused on the issues that China has gained due to the crisis but did not notice which threats were at its doorstep. China's response to this crisis is not only to grasp the opportunity but also to minimize those challenges. This paper will shed lights on both the opportunities and challenges for China originated from the Rohingya crisis that drives it to avoid the humane and rational need of Bangladesh.

### **Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework of the Study**

One of the most perceptible but not easily definable terms is geopolitics. The two terms ‘Geography’ and ‘Politics’, possessing very old and distinctive disciplines, jointly form another field of knowledge, known as ‘Geopolitics’. That is why, this discourse illustrates both the statecraft and geographical issues but in a single framework. It explains the political discourses through the lens of geography. Like all other political actions, geopolitics also aims for power by preserving national interests in the international politics. This chapter will define the term geopolitics and geopolitical interest along with its different theories.

#### **3.1 Defining Geopolitics**

‘Geopolitics’ is still developing as a discipline along with the changing aptitude of politics. Because of its dynamic and multi-dimensional nature, its definition proves a difficult task. However, it cannot be denied that there are some concrete facts that this discourse bears itself. Rudolf Kjellen coined the term ‘geopolitics’ in 1999 by adding the prefix ‘geo’ with the Greek word ‘Politics’. He described the discipline as “the theory of the state as a geographical organism or phenomenon in space” (Weigert, 1942, pp.106-109). Therefore, it can be said that the aim of this discipline is to define the political actions and processes considering the geographic attributes.

In the classic period, the states considered land as the instrument of power and so they occupied other states. In order to justify these expansionary activities, the geopoliticians and

statesmen resorted to the concept of 'Social Darwinism'. By this, they recognized the state as a living space that grew naturally. That is why; Karl Haushofer, a very influential geopolitician of that time defined it in the following way,

Geopolitics is the science of the conditioning of political processes by the earth. It is based on the broad foundation of geography... The essence of regions as comprehended from the geographical point of view provides the framework for geopolitics within which the course of political processes must proceed if they are to succeed in the long term. (Haushofer et al., 1928, p. 27, in O'Loughlin, 1994, pp. 112–113)

The relation of such claims and *real-politik* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century reminds the words of Tuathail (p, 4) which states, "Geopolitics is a form of power/knowledge concerned with promoting state expansionism and securing empires". Most interestingly, this nature of geopolitics has not changed a little through the span of time introduced many new facts with it. The cold war geopolitics had poured some 'colour of ideology' and 'art of representation' within the traditional intention of invading other countries. Basically, this time was in favour of two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, who had competed around the world for establishing their own ideologies at the expense of other's sovereignty.

The contemporary geopoliticians do not like to see the discipline so plainly. Gilmartin and Kofman (2004, p.113) defined 'geopolitics' by appending the term with statesmanship that it is the way of cultivating and representing territorial strategies. More definitely, the critical geopoliticians view the previous geopolitical claims as a way of seeing the world in the eyes of European white elite-males. Therefore, geopolitics is a kind of 'situated knowledge' (Flint, 2016) that just reveals the social and geographical aspirations of the theoreticians. Agnew

(2003, p. 5) describes geopolitics as a way “to understand how it came about that one state’s prospects in relation to others’ were seen in relation to global conditions that were viewed as setting limits and defining possibilities for a state’s success in the global arena”.

However, most of the contemporary scholars have defined the term considering the classic to modern attributes of the discipline. Conveying the vigorous aspects of classic geopolitics, Flint (2016) defines it as the contest for control over geographical areas having international and global component as well as the utilization of those areas for political gain. For Owens (1999), geopolitics offers a range of strategic choices which lead a state towards strategic efficiency. Similarly, Halim (2005) believes that the main objective of the geopolitics is to explain how the national resources and capability can strengthen a state in the international politics. In order to this, it focuses both on domestic and foreign environments. It encourages utilizing the domestic resources, as well as motivates achieving the control of foreign resources to enhance its power.

**Functional Definition of Geopolitics:** Observing its evolutionary nature and recalling the claims of neo-classical geopolitics, we can define “geopolitics” as an innovative approach to understand how geography affects international relations by reworking it in light of shifting social, political, economic, and cultural variables. This understanding will assist us to perceive China’s response to the Rohingya crisis in the international environment that has been vibrated due to the escalation of crisis.

### 3.2 Defining Geopolitical Interest

A frequently uttered but abstractly used term in geopolitics is the geopolitical interest. Scholars believe that the geopolitics serves the national interest of a country. From this perspective, geopolitical interests are those national interests that contain the geographical considerations in strategies and policies of attaining their goals. In order to avoid complexity, this simple view will be accepted as the core term of our research. The next step is to figure out the national interest of a sovereign state.

There are two schools available from classic to contemporary period based on their emphasis on the tangible and intangible elements of national interests (Miskel, 2002). The first school conveys the realist outlook of prominent statesmen and scholars, such as Thucydides, Chanakya, Ibn-e-Khaldun, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Otto von Bismarck, Lord Palemerston, Richard Nixon, and Hans J. Morgenthau and so on. In the words of Morgenthau (1948), the preservation of one's physical, political, and cultural identity from the intrusion of other nation-states is that entity's national interest. W. W. Rostow illustrates the term as a conception applied by the states in order to facilitate own advantages from the international atmosphere (Padelford & Lincoln, 1962). The second school bears a broad outlook which embraces the intangible elements with the traditional tangible ingredients of national interest. The intangible elements refer to the highly graced values like justice, human rights, economic egalitarianism, gender equality, global peace, freedom from diseases, etc. The mostly important fact is that the national interest varies time to time according to conditions of national power, the scale of politics and contexts. But the ultimate aims of nations remain stable and these generate the subsequent desire of the states depending upon variables. All the states wish to attain more

power than their competitive nations through advancing their political, economic, military, technological, and strategic capabilities. The power, in Hay's words (2002), relates to context-structuring, or the ability of actors to reshape the social, political, and economical landscape for individuals.

Hence, the national interests can be of two types: primary and secondary interests. Primary interests aim to increase the political, economic, ideological and military strength. All the states generally consider these as their primary interests and they will prefer the battleground to compromise these interests. The interaction (both the coalition and conflict) among the states builds up surrounding the primary interests. The secondary interests originate from the advancement of or to advance the primary interests. These interests are not less important from the primaries. The state may adopt some secondary interests as their permanent goals and may change some according to the structural contexts. For example, the United States has reduced its military presence in Europe as the possibility of threatening its dominance in the region has been mitigated due to the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of terrorism in Asia.

**Operational Definition of Geopolitical Interest:** Once the British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston announced, "We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual and those interests it is our duty of follow" (Padelford & Lincoln, 1962, p. 234). This clear and firm declaration about the nature of international relations has just removed the curtain of all artistic expression of the agendas by the agents in geopolitics. While the geopolitics is itself a playground of politics and the preservation of national interest is the sole responsibility of the agents, geopolitics is exactly a geographic

instrument to accomplish this goal by politicians. So, we can say that the geopolitical interests refer to those national interests originating from the geographic attributes of states.

Here such interests can be seen from two sides: a) the agent state and b) the client state. The 'agent state' utilizes the geographic advantage of the client state to accomplish its certain goal in exchange for some benefits toward the client. For our research, we are considering China as the 'agent' and Myanmar as the 'client' state.

### **3.3 Different Geopolitical Theories**

Among various approaches of geopolitics, the classical, neo-classical and critical perspectives are very commonly represented in the academic discussion. Though the author has adopted the neo-classical approach to analyze the geopolitical interests of China in Myanmar regarding the Rohingya crisis, both the neo-classical and critical approaches are explained in this study to visualize why the neo-classical approach is preferred to other approaches.

#### **a) Classical Geopolitics**

The classical theory views the territory as a bone of contention between the states (Kuus, 2010). The stronger one identifies the weaker as the uncivilized one which needs to be civilized by that strong country or accuses the later as an evil state or peace-breaker that should be corrected under the former's control (see Agnew, 2003, p. 7). Thus the (western) dominant one or group of dominating nations represent the world map as the summation of some interconnected regions which are hierarchically organized where they belong to and convey the authority to rule over others (Flint, 2012). Through these claims, Western nations have been



justifying their twentieth century's colonies and imperialistic advances to the present day under the premises of in the name of "war on terror" or protecting "freedom", "liberation", etc.

Classical geopolitics can be divided among three schools: i) German school, ii) American school and, iii) British school. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a number of German scholars provided a series of theories over the way of increasing the state power. List's *lebensraum* (living space) idea about the state found the solution of all national problems into the expansion of state's boundary (Halim, 2005). Ratzel and Kjellen justified this concept claiming that a state is a living organ, which had to expand at the cost of other smaller and weaker states/cultures (Flint, 2012). It is said that these vigorous geopolitical theories influenced Germany's foreign policy, particularly, its decision to be engaged in the World War I and II (see Halim, 2005; Flint, 2012). British scholar Mackinder's heartland theory, American scholar Mahan's Sea power, and Spykman's Rimland theory dominated their respective countries' foreign policy for a long time. These theories divided the global map between different regions like heartland/pivot, crescent/outer crescent and inner crescent and predicted from where to rule the world as an invincible power.

Under this theory, the agent state identifies "a nebulous target" (Flint, 2012, p. 3) which should be corrected by the "global military response" (Flint, 2012, p. 3). In our case, we do not hear that China is claiming any racial or moral hierarchy over Myanmar or on others, or calling for any military invasions there, which are vital elements of classical geopolitics. Rather it is protecting Myanmar from the 'global criticism' and the UN's punitive actions. That is why, this geopolitical perspective does not fit with our aim that wants to understand the mystery behind China's protective attitude toward Myanmar on the Rohingya issue.

## **b) Critical Geopolitics**

The critical geopolitics claim the re-read of all classic literature, maps, public statements, mediums of art and entertainment that label one part of the human civilization as “uncivilized and barbaric” and the other part as “civilized and superior” (Flint, 2012, p. 3). According to the preachers of this approach, (classical) geopolitics is a “situated knowledge”, which instead of the real picture of the globe just exposes the social and geographical background, as well as the aspirations for future of the Western white elites (Flint, 2012). Originated from post-modernism, this approach very cautiously explores the role of language and history in creation of power and authority (Kuus, 2010; Flint, 2016). Though this geopolitical frame shows geopoliticians' prejudices and political goals using discourse analysis methodologies, it has never indicated a well-defined or internally cohesive study program (Kuus, 2010).

The diversity and micro-level analysis of ‘critical geopolitics’ has made it difficult to claim its main arguments (Kuus, 2010) or erect any framework under which an empirical inquiry in the global scale can be conducted. Furthermore, by focusing on geographical representations rather than the relationships between geography and politics (Crombois, 2015), critical geopolitics contradicts the goal of this paper. The interest of this study is not to analyze how China is representing its political agenda (in Myanmar) to the global audience; rather it wants to explore what geopolitical interests have originated from or are challenging for China on the Rohingya issue. That is why the critical geopolitics has not been applied in this research work.

### **c) Neo-classical Geopolitics**

The neo-classical geopolitics is the soft version of classical stand. It has left the state as a living organism but retains the emphasize on “power expansion” (Guzzini, 2012; in Crombois, 2015, p. 483) and geography for shaping the foreign policy. Megoran (2010, p. 187) has illustrated the term as the “ways of thinking about the effects of geography on international relations that explicitly locate themselves within the Mackinder-Haushofer-Spykman tradition, but which creatively rework it with reference to changed social, economic, political and cultural factors”. Like the classical geopolitics, the neo-classical geopolitics is also politically conservative and realist which generalizes and simplifies the space, culture and civilizations as well as suggests for policy in the names of national interests and national security (Megoran, 2010; Mamadough, 1998; Crombois, 2015), but does not provide any racial boundaries (Megoran, 2010).

Although China has no territorial target or claiming any racial hierarchy as in classical geopolitics, its intension to protect its “power expansion” policy in Myanmar fits it with the neo-classical geopolitical case. By “re-assessing the importance of some forms of environmental determinism” (Haverluk, et al., 2014; cited in Crombois, 2015, p.483), the neo-classical geopolitical perspective will help us get a clear view on how the geographical attributes of Myanmar influenced China’s decision of Rohingya issue.

There are some geo-economic and geo-strategic studies on this issue are available but China’s support to Myanmar just from a single view, such as geo-economics or geo-strategics, rather than neo-classical geopolitics will broaden our outlook to understand the actual catalysts for Beijing’s response.

### 3.4 Analytical Framework of the Study

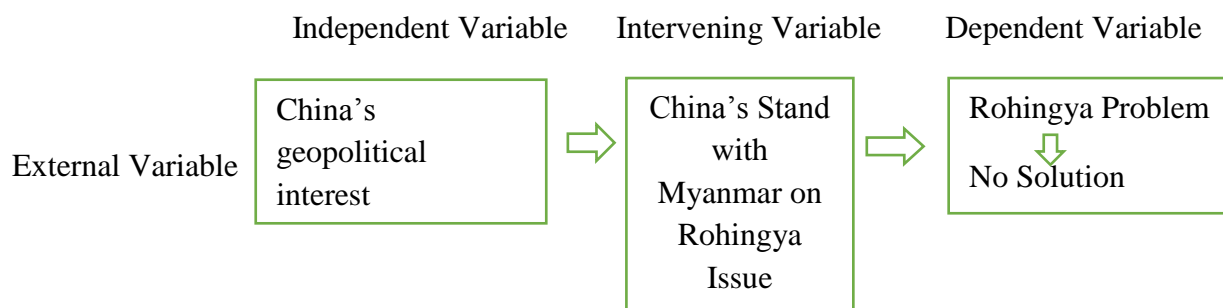
In this study, China is our main agent and Myanmar is the client state. Within this structure, the agents realize their opportunities and constraints and perform according to this context. To be sure, a structure connotes the “context and refers to the setting within which social, political and economic events occur and acquire meaning” (Hay, 2002). The geopolitical structures consist of geographical patterns and political features. Here, geographical pattern indicates the shape, size, and physical attributes of the places and their interaction with other geographical units. In the political realm, there are some established rules (legal) and norms (conventional) which influence the choices and actions of the agents. The political institutions with their executive rules and daily practices create and maintain the political features. The international relations between China and Myanmar before and after the Rohingya crisis have been serving here as the geopolitical structure for China where it would realize the opportunities and challenges toward its interests in Myanmar. And thus, its decision (foreign policy) on the Rohingya issue has been made.

The neo-classical geopolitics through the agent and structural analysis will reveal China’s (agent country) perceptions about the challenges and opportunities originated from the Rohingya crisis toward China’s national interests. From the viewpoints of external variables, China’s protection of Myanmar from the international pressures and international organization’s punitive actions may have affected Myanmar’s decision not to stop this ethnic cleansing operation, or solve the problem peacefully and rehabilitate the Rohingyas in their lands. Therefore, a solution of the Rohingya issue is a dependable variable, and China’s stand with Myanmar is the independent variable. As this study is looking for reasons why China is

backing Myanmar on Rohingya issues from the geopolitical perspectives, its geopolitical interests become the independent variable and China's decision to back up Myanmar is the dependent variable. So, the whole scenery shows that China's geopolitical interests are the independent variable, China's stand with Myanmar is intervening variable, and a solution of Rohingya issue is the dependent variable. The explanatory variables can be shown in the following way.

### **Model 1**

#### *China's Stand with Myanmar on the Rohingya Issue*



*Note.* Made by Author

Through this model, we will be able to explore China's geopolitical interests that have been threatened or emerged in the international politics due to the escalation of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. The structural analysis will help get a clear view on how those threats and opportunities were created for China by visualizing the international relations and politics at that time.

## **Chapter Four: Historical Background of the Rohingya Crisis**

The “Rohingya” is itself a contradictory term to portray the affected people of the Rakhine state and another catalyst to the crisis in Myanmar. The GoM has repeatedly rejected the title and urged the international community and media for addressing Rohingyas as ‘the Muslim community in northern Rakhine State’. But the inclusion of words like ‘Muslim Community’ or ‘Arakanis Muslim’ is a matter of defaming both from Rohingyas and other Muslims as the government has constantly been addressing them as terrorists and connecting the conflicts to Muslim terrorism. This opens the floor to divert the concentration from the original facts of the crisis. The frequent use of ‘Bengalis’ by the GoM is also rejected by both the Rohingyas and the government of Bangladesh. However, there is also no available term to depict them easily to the readers. For these reasons, the author uses the term Rohingya to describe the people of Rakhine state who are suffering from the discriminatory and exclusionary policies of the government due to their ethnic and religious identity, as well as linguistic difference. This section will provide us with a historical explanation of the crisis.

### **4.1 The Rohingyas in Arakan**

The Rohingyas are the Muslim residents of Rakhine state of Myanmar. But until 1784, Rakhine was a sovereign kingdom for 2000 years, known as ‘Arakan’. Rakhine owned a rich civilization of distinct language, culture and tradition. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, some shipwrecked Arab traders reached to the coast of Rambi island of Arakan and wanted asylum from the king, Mahatoing Tsandaya. By his majesty, these Arab traders began to live here permanently and thus the first descendant of Muslim community was established in Arakan. The Moorish, Arab, Persian traders, as well as the Mughal, Turk, Pathan, and Bengali soldiers came in succession

and became assimilated with the Arakanese. However, it was in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when a large number of Muslim Bengalis from Gaure (the capital of then Bengal) invaded into the country on behalf of the Arakan king to liberate it from the Burmese ruler. After achieving victory, about 50,000 Bengali soldiers were employed for the service of this kingdom (Habib Ullah, 2017). The strong presence of Bengali laureates like Nasorullah, Alaol, Daulat Kazi, Magon Thagore, Shaborid Khan, and Mohammad Khan were also found in the royal court during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The murder of Mughal prince Shah Shuza along with his family by the Arakan king caused to entrance of many Indians to have revenge. However, the influence of Islam culminated so high that the rulers of the kingdom adopted Islamic titles and carved ‘kalimah’ on the coins. But no sign of adversity among the people of different religions was found in the state though the Buddhists always called the Muslims and Hindus *Kulas* or foreigners (Ahmed, 2019). In contrast, the Buddhists were recognized as Maghs. Most interestingly, these Maghs were also outsiders as they originated from the old Magadha kingdom in India and resorted to the Vesali (ancient Arakan) kings Chandras (Yunus, 1994). The persecution by the chauvinist Hindus and rival Mahayana Buddhist sects compelled these Theraveda Buddhists to flee eastward in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. By the time the intermarriages between the Buddhists and their co-religionists the Mongolians and the Tibeto-Burmans swept away their Indian identity and now they introduce themselves as Rakhines that is a Burmese alternate to ‘Arakan’.

The first influx of Arakanese started for Cox’s Bazar of Bengal in 1784 when the Burmese king Badow Paya attacked the kingdom taking advantage of its internal chaos. King Badow Paya easily conquered Arakan and annexed it to his empire along with imposing the Burmese nationality upon the Arakanese. As the people of Arakan could not accept the defeat, they embraced the guerrilla war where almost 200,000 Arakanese died. However, their failure

attempt to overthrow King Badow Paya in 1796 led to the expulsion of two-thirds of Muslims into Bengal (Uddin, 2015) and a hostile relationship with the Burmese.

#### **4.2 The Rohingyas During the British Reign**

As a consequence of defeat in a series of Anglo-Burmese war in 1825, 1852, and 1885, Burma became a colony of Britain. In the wars, the Arakanese took side with the British hoping for getting back their independence. But their endeavour went to vain. In the meantime, many Arakanese who fled to Bengal during the Burmese rule came back to their motherland. The encouragement from the British rulers to be engaged in the newly upsurged Burmese economy brought a number of Indians who were mainly Muslim. The sudden increase of Muslims in the region and the ‘divide and rule’ policy of British administration instigated the bitterness between the Rakhines and Arakanese in this time. During the Second World War, “Rakhine communalist in connivance with Burma Independence Army (BIA) killed 100,000 Rohingyas and drove out 50,000 across the border to East Bengal” (Ahmed, 2019, p.15) in the absence of British troops. Of course, this was unrecoverable for Arakanese (Rohingyas). That is why; they sided with British ruler and fought against the Japanese and their supported ally Burma Independence Army (BIA). Like Arakanese, Karen, Kachin, Chin and some other ethnic minorities took up arms for the British reign.

#### **4.3 Rohingyas in Independent Burma/Myanmar**

The independence of Burma introduced a new tragedy to the fate of Rohingyas. Prior to liberation, all the ethnic groups except Rohingyas were invited by the national leader Aung San to Pang Long convention in 1947. The ethnic leaders fought tooth and nail against the ‘Union



of Burma' but became appeased after getting the conditional right to separate after ten years if they wished. The ignorance from the British rulers and Burmese leaders placed the Arakan Muslims before the Pakistan leader Qaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah for having autonomous status within Pakistan or supporting Rohingyas to attain autonomous status from the government of Burma. But the promise from a special envoy of Aung San to guarantee the rights of Rohingyas kept Jinnah aloof from the Burmese politics (Yunus, 1995). The assassination of Aung San and his cabinet in 1947, and the constitution of 1948 without recognition of identity or assurance of rights and security for Rohingyas tended them in a violent way. However, another promise from the U Nu government for political rights and equal status with other nationalities led them to leave arms (Maung, 1989). In fact, this government openly declared the residents of Buthidaung, Maungdaw and Rathedaung as the Rohingyas, issued National Registration cards (NRCs) for them, and provided with important positions in civil service.

The inauguration of military government in 1962 swept away this volatile protection. Announcing Rohingyas as the 'foreign alien', the Ne Win government revoked the NRCs from them and banned their all-socio-cultural organizations. The 1974 constitution had also been passed without any recognition to the Rohingyas rights. The military operated the Nagamin, or the Dragon king operation, against the Rohingyas that killed nearly 10,000 (Parnini, 2013) and caused almost 300,000 of them to resort into Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2019). Most of them could return home by the mediation of UNHCR between Bangladesh and Myanmar but the exclusionary strategies did not stop. The 1982 Burma citizenship act categorized citizens into a) full citizenship, b) associated citizenship and c) naturalized citizenship; but failed to put Rohingyas into one of these. Exactly, they believe that Rohingyas ancestors had migrated into

Arakan from Chittagong after the first Anglo-Burmese war. Therefore, they have designed Section 3 of the act in a way, so that the Rohingyas failed to prove themselves as citizen and came out of the government's responsibility. This article is given below:

Nationals such as the Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine or Shan, and ethnic groups as have settled in any of the territories included within the State as their permanent home from a period prior to 1185 B.E., 1823 A.D. are Burma citizens. (Brett and Hlaing, 2020)

Behind these constitutional attempts, the military government adopted a variety of discriminatory policies. It stopped using the word 'Rohingyas' from books, newspapers and journals since the 1980s (Ullah and Chatteraj, 2018). The government's decision to establish cantonments in the northern part of Rakhine made a lot of Muslims homeless. Confiscating the properties of Muslims without any compensation, the government has built roads and buildings for cantonments with the wage-free (or low paid) labour of those destitute and at last sold the remainder lands to the retired army personnel and Rakhine convicts. Exactly such cruelty was framed to bring ethnographic change in Rakhine and make the Rohingyas leave the state hopelessly for good.

## **Chapter 5: The Escalation of Rohingya Crisis Since 2016-2017: Reactions of Different Actors**

Myanmar's violent campaign against the Rohingyas has made a place in the history of brutality. The fear of experiencing another "Rwanda Genocide" has at last stood at the "ethnic cleansing". People all over the world had become awfully surprised and moaned at this brutality. All segments of press and media tried hard to cover all the news the whole time. The UN, the EU and the OIC have condemned this and called on Myanmar to stop such heinous activities. However, there are also some states which have supported the government of Myanmar or kept silence against this crime. Along the response of the government of Bangladesh at this quandary, I have tried to narrate the reaction of other significant states and international organizations here.

### **5.1 Reaction of Bangladesh**

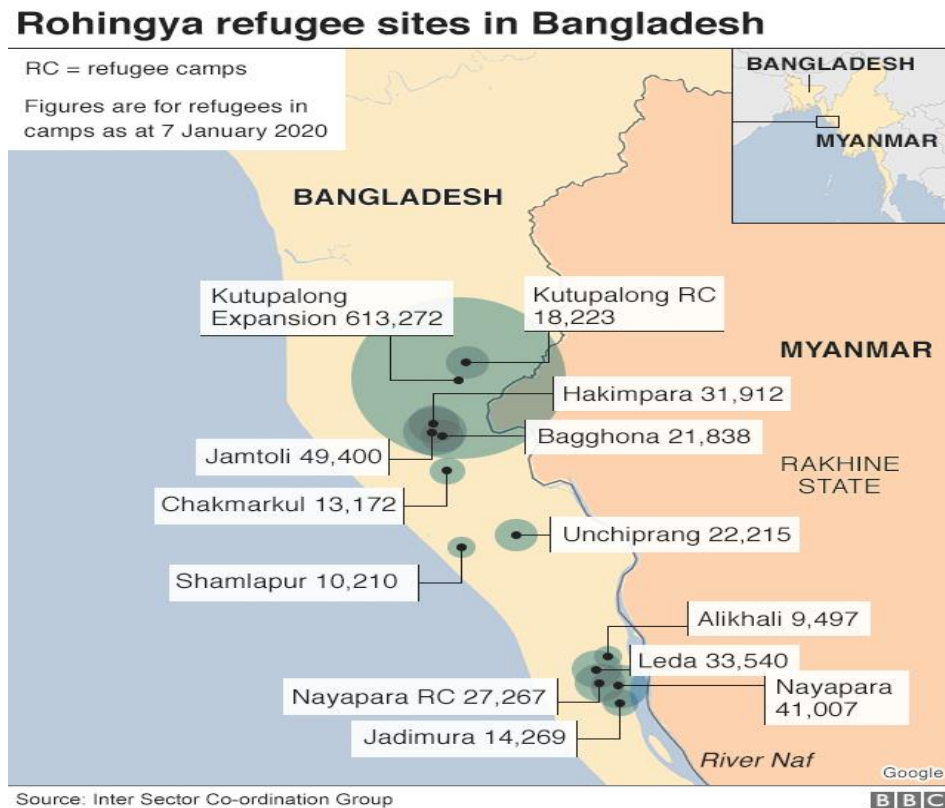
Bangladesh shares the closest border with the Rakhine state of Myanmar. Particularly, the Cox's Bazar district of Chittagong has been separated from the Maungdaw district of Rakhine state via a land and water boundary (Naf River) of 193 km. Therefore, it has no choice except partaking the sorrows of those helpless people by sheltering them on its own soil and fighting for their rights and dignity in the international arena. Hence, Dhaka's response to this crisis is twofold: a) providing shelter and humane assistance to the Rohingyas with the aid of different donors, and b) persuading Myanmar for peaceful repatriation of those people in their motherland.

a) **Providing Shelter and Humane Assistance**

Most of the Rohingyas reside in the 34 congested refugee settlements in Teknaf and Ukhia upazilas of Cox's Bazar. Kutupalong is the biggest and most densely populated refugee camp. According to Khatun (2017), Bandarban, another district nearby Cox's Bazar holds almost 200,000 Rohingyas. Recently 19,000 refugees have been relocated to the Bhasan Char, a 13,000-acre island of Noakhali district where the GoB has planned to gradually accommodate 100,000 Rohingyas (Nguyen & Lewis, 2022). Investing above \$310 million of its own funding, the GoB has arranged all necessary equipment for better living on the island. After a series of talks, the UNHCR and the UN refugee agency agreed with the GoB to enroll the refugees of this island into their humanitarian aid on 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2021 (Habib, 2021). Along with several national and international organizations, the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, Bangladesh has been providing humanitarian support to the people in the camps. As the people fled from their hometown with nothing except their lives, they are badly in need of food, clothes, shelter, medicine, sanitation and most importantly arrangement of livelihood until they go back. A large number of displaced children are of school age. Moreover, most of the refugees are witnesses of tremendous persecutions that has led to mental illnesses. They are also vulnerable to engaging in extremist organizations and criminal activities. In fact, the list of humanitarian aid for these displaced and traumatized people is dimensional and the Bangladesh government has been working hard to stabilize their condition.

## Map 2

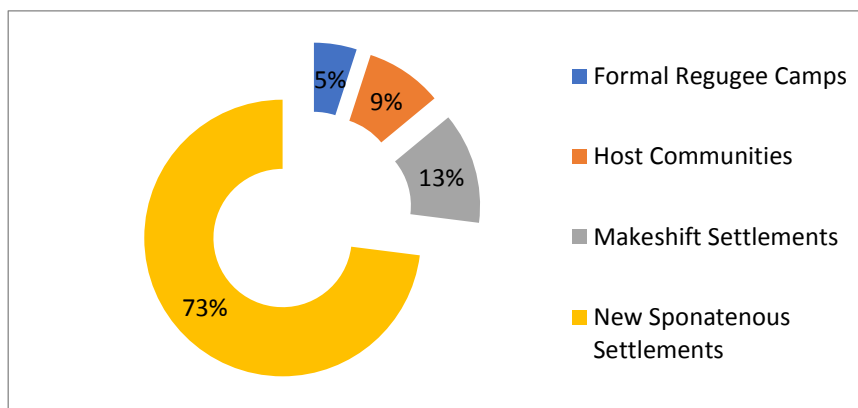
### *Rohingya Refugee Sites in Bangladesh*



The refugees have basically settled in four types of arrangements. These are a) formal refugee camps; b) host communities; c) makeshift settlements and; d) new spontaneous settlements. The following diagram shows that the facility of formal arrangement has been provided to the lowest percentage of the refugees that is around five percent. About nine percent of them have resorted to host communities while a larger portion to these displaced people is living in makeshifts. The largest population of refugees—almost 73—is in the fourth category of settlements.

**Figure 1**

*Nature of Rohingyas' settlements in Cox's Bazar*



*Note.* Made by Author Based on Alam, 2018

**b) Persuading Myanmar for Peaceful Repatriation of Rohingyas in Their Motherland**

The Bangladesh government has always taken the side of Rohingyas' safe repatriation in their motherland. But that will be possible only when Myanmar government stops its discriminatory attitude towards those people. At least, these Rohingyas must receive the status of legal citizens of Rakhine state so that nobody (not the state nor the believers of other religions) can violate their human and citizen rights. But the Bangladesh government, avoiding this key factor of the continuous crisis, had always been engaged just to persuade Myanmar government for peaceful repatriation of those people in their country. Bangladesh mainly wanted to solve this problem by bilateral discussion. However, the frequent violence against the Rohingyas and no improvement in the Rohingya-Government relationship, along with the Myanmar governments attempt to impose the Bangladeshi citizenship over the Rohingyas assert the inability of this diplomatic approach. In fact, the crisis has turned to a

multidimensional issue with the passage of time that it is now not limited to the Myanmar's domestic matter. Hence, the GoB is attempting to draw the global attention in a multilateral way along with continuing its bilateral discourse with the government of Myanmar.

#### ❖ **Bilateral Initiatives**

Since the first entrance of afraid and distressed Rohingyas in the independent Bangladesh, the government responded with bilateral diplomacy with that of Myanmar to send back its citizens. The GoB strongly believed that the "Rohingya phenomenon" was totally an internal affair of Myanmar and so it had no right to intervene in the matter (Wijngaarden, 2018; Barany, 2019). Hence, its reaction to this crisis was always limited to the primary humanitarian help to Rohingyas and then to denote Myanmar government for taking away their people from Bangladesh. As a result, hundreds of thousands of registered Rohingyas could go back to their motherland in previous times, for example, in 1978 and 1991. But all the unregistered people were out of this policy. Though this bilateral approach was not fully successful to stop Rohingya's repeated infiltration in or to complete their repatriation from Bangladesh, the Myanmar government's sluggish response was a silver lining for resolving the problem.

However, the post-2016 period of the crisis has become so ticklish to be resolved immediately. Bangladesh government, at the first stage of this event, has approached the Myanmar government following its previous policy and call for stopping violence against Rohingyas. Visiting Myanmar on 24<sup>th</sup> - 27<sup>th</sup> October, 2017, then Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal signed two agreements over the repatriation of the Rohingyas with his counterpart in Myanmar government (Babu, 2020). Also, the two states founded a joint working group, so that the repatriation could be voluntary and safe. Unfortunately, four meetings and the two-

point repatriation processes respectively in 2018 and 2019 could not send a single Rohingya to Myanmar from the camps. Myanmar accused Bangladesh for failure of repatriation and this lame excuse aroused criticism at the 2019 sessions of the United Nation General Assembly and NAM summit (Banerjee, 2020). In fact, the Rohingyas are so afraid of their previous repression in Rakhine that nobody wished to go back there voluntarily without the clear declaration of citizenship from the government (Mostofa, 2022).

### ❖ **Trilateral Efforts**

The GoB cannot claim that it has ever formulated a coherent policy for stopping Rohingyas' repeated infiltration in Bangladesh and Myanmar's attempt to impose "Bangalee" nationality over Rohingyas or its intentional violation to drive away the Rohingyas from Rakhine state (see Wijngaarden, 2018; Ware & Laoutides, 2018; Swazo et al., 2021). Rather, denying its own role to uphold the issue, the GoB has only passed the pillow by claiming "The international community should try and find out why these refugees want to come" (Jeory, 2012). However, the new influx of a large number of Rohingyas that have escaped from Rakhine state to the Bangladesh boundary and the indescribable sufferings of those people make both the Bangladesh government and international authorities understand that the issue has already crossed the Myanmar border. Although the world leaders are condemning Naypyidaw for its "ethnic cleansing" operation against the Rakhine Muslims, this is not enough to halt the deep-rooted oppression over the Rohingyas. On the contrary, there are very few players who can play with that pillow (Rohingya crisis) and, unluckily, all those players have already chosen their side to Myanmar. Consequently, the GoB found itself alone before starting the



race with the GoM. However, Bangladesh government is heavily trying to find a common ally to mediate the crisis from the bottom.

China and India are neighboring states, common development partners and key regional powers for both Bangladesh and Myanmar. Moreover, China and Myanmar claim themselves “paukpaw” or closest friends. That is why commentators all over the world have condemned Beijing for protecting Naypyidaw from international action against its brutal genocide. At last bowing to the global pressure, Beijing has often been communicating with the GoM to repatriate the Rohingyas as soon as possible but no progress has been noticed. Following Beijing, India did not want to make Myanmar dissatisfied with it. After the failure of China’s mediation to resolve the issue bilaterally, the foreign minister AK Abdul Momen has approached his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, at a meeting in Tashkent, to use their good terms with the military junta of Myanmar (Mizzima, 2021). However, Dhaka has still not received any positive response. In the meantime, initially indifferent Japan has now expressed its willingness to mediate the issue in January 2020.

#### ❖ **Multilateral Efforts**

As Dhaka’s “‘look East’ and ‘constructive engagement’ policies focusing on trade matters” (Banerjee, 2020) have been futile in bringing Bangladesh and Myanmar closer to resolve their problem with trust and cooperation, the GoB has no more confidence over this approach. The failure of some subsequent agreements with Myanmar on the emphasis of India and China also proves the logic for Dhaka’s approach to raise the issue on the global stage. It has been appealing for the effective actions from the international authorities to repatriate the Rohingyas at the earliest. However, Bangladesh should have identified and utilized those

multilateral platforms at first where it has membership along with Myanmar. For example, there are the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), BIMSTEC, SAARC and the United Nations where both nations have memberships.

The Bangladesh government has failed to uphold the issue in a potential floor for discussion, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The GoB could have made an effort to place Myanmar before the forum for discussion as both are members of this sub-regional organization. Even if BIMSTEC cannot discuss any issue without the consensus between the member states, it at least could approach Myanmar over the issue as it has infringed the mandate of the organization for “peaceful co-existence” among the member nations (Banerjee, 2020). It has been also failed in raising its voice against the human rights violation in Myanmar in the ASEAN Regional Forum.

However, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh had offered a five-point proposal to that of Myanmar for coming over the juncture in the 72<sup>nd</sup> UN General Assembly on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2017. These were a) the unconditional end of violence against the Rohingyas; b) the formation of a fact-finding mission to investigate into Myanmar; c) protection of all civilian people without the discrimination of race and religion and if necessary to establish a safe zone in Myanmar; d) the safe and secured return of all Rohingyas from Bangladesh; and e) implementation of Kofi Annan advisory commission (The Daily Star, 2017). This proposal unquestionably picked admiration from the global bodies but resulted in no benefit. Hence, addressing the issue as a regional crisis, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has placed the clauses again in a four-point figure before the 74<sup>th</sup> UNGA session in 2019. After 2 years, the 76<sup>th</sup>

session of this global body has also closed with “a deep discussion” over the issue, without any effective advancement of the condition.

## **5.2 Reaction of International Communities**

Except China, Russia, India and few other states like Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (neighbours of Myanmar) all the major states and the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres have expressed their grave concern for that ill-fare headed people. According to Barani (2019), Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmud Ali, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, French President Emmanuel Macron, eight Nobel Peace Prize Laureates, Allard K. Lowenstein have termed this atrocity an “ethnic cleansing” or, worse yet, “genocide”. Different UN officials including Zeid Ra’ad al-Husseini and UN special envoy human rights in Myanmar Yanghee Koh have commented on this as “bearing the hallmarks of genocide” and requested all the big powers to share responsibility of finding a solution to this problem.

### **5.2.1 Reaction of Different States**

Prohibiting the issue of arms and commodities to Myanmar, the European Union and the USA stood by the Rohingyas (Babu, 2020). Australians protested this violation of human rights by holding a large procession. Aside from big powers, many Muslim states took individual initiatives to express their concern regarding the issue. Breaking the ice of silence, former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak criticized the Myanmar government for its crime against humanity and asked for an inquiry into the facts to ASEAN on an international Conference in 2017 (Putra et al., 2019). At his request, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summoned an emergency ministerial meeting in Kuala Lumpur to analyze the situation

of Rohingyas in January of the same year. The country also recalled its ambassador from the Naypyido for this reason. Maldives closed trade with Myanmar (Bearak, 2017). The republic of Chechnya also stood in favour of Rohingyas. People of Indonesia gathered in procession to object the genocide and their government had sent the foreign minister for discussion with the GoM and the GoB.

An important step was adopted by Gambia, a party of Genocide Convention. In cooperation with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Gambia has asked for accountability by the then State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). On its initial ruling in January, 2020, the court acknowledged Myanmar's genocidal atrocities and ordered the state to protect Rohingyas from persecutions and mass killings. Since the ICJ's jurisdiction is limited to the contentious states, it is incapable of punishing those who ordered and conducted this brutality, as well as those who are protecting those criminals by denying the truth. However, the International Criminal Court (ICC) holds the authority to bring under trial individuals who are accused of war crimes or crimes against humanity. Though Myanmar is not a member of ICC, it has sanctioned a full investigation into the case of Rohingya in Myanmar in November, 2020 as the victims' destination is Bangladesh, another member of ICC (BBC News, 2020). Some states and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also appeared before the Argentine domestic court against the offense committed by the military of Myanmar (Banerjee, 2020).

On the other hand, India and Japan had stretched out their hands to the government of Myanmar by promising it to provide respectively \$25 million and \$4 million for rebuilding the living conditions in Rakhine state (Haidar, 2019; The Daily Star, 2017). The Chinese

ambassador, Hong Liang had provided 200 million kyats to the GoM as humanitarian aid for the affected state of Myanmar and pledged to enhance Beijing's assistance in need (Zaw, 2017). International donors funded the Joint Response Plan for supporting humanitarian operations in Bangladesh refugee camps as well as the development of local communities. The Emirates Red Crescent collected \$17.7 million for Rohingyas through a week-long fund-raising campaign in the UAE in 2019. The global bodies had amassed \$674.5 million of the total goal of \$943 million in 2021 (The Daily Star, 2022).

### **5.2.2 Reaction of China**

Coming out of its traditional policy not to interfere into others internal affair, China has been sheltering its “chafer state” Myanmar since 2007 in the United Nation. Even if China's veto against a resolution for “Freedom and Democracy in Myanmar” in the UN Security Council picked up huge criticism in 2007, its very important role in broadening Myanmar's National Convention has rendered itself as a responsible stakeholder of international politics (Kemenade, 2008, p. 170). Sequentially, global commentators had expected that China would show its sense of responsibility once again by persuading Myanmar for repatriating Rohingyas safely.

In the beginning, Beijing did not only support the Myanmar military crackdowns over the Rohingyas but also applauded this brutality publicly. Addressing Rohingyas as extremist and terrorists, Hong Liang, the Chinese envoy to Myanmar, strongly welcomed the counterattacks of the security forces against them and took this campaign as “just an internal affair” in September, 2017 (Ramachandran, 2017). Moreover, Mr. Hong ensured the government of Myanmar to safeguard its interest in the international stage and to

provide the necessary assistance for sustaining the internal development and stability (Zaw, 2017). That is why Beijing, together with Russia, have obstructed measures at the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly to condemn Myanmar's brutal treatment of the Rohingyas (Habib, 2021). Moreover, it suggested the government of Bangladesh to resolve the problem bilaterally and not to spread it more in other ways (Banerjee, 2020). On its suggestion, the GoB also signed a secret repatriation agreement with the GoM ousting the UNHCR from talk (on Myanmar's insistence) on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2017 but that had just justified the reluctance of Myanmar government to accept the Rohingyas as its citizens (Baranny, 2019; Mostofa, 2022).

Bowing to increasing global criticism, the government of China offered itself as the mediator between Myanmar and Bangladesh in 2017. Visiting both nations in November, 2017, then Foreign Minister Wang Yi presented a proposal of the following three-points: a) Restoration of order by announcing a ceasefire so that the Rohingyas could find peace, b) Bangladesh-Myanmar discussion over the repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh and c) Assistance from the international community to rebuild the Rakhine state (Venkatachalam, 2017; Wilson, 2017). About the outcome of this arbitration, Reuters reported as follows.

Over the past two years, Chinese officials have brokered three meetings between leaders of the two countries, made multiple visits to the sprawling refugee camps housing the Rohingya in Bangladesh, hired cattle trucks to bring returnees home and even offered cash inducements, all to little avail. (McPherson et al.,2020)

In the meantime, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid a visit to China in July 2019 where Chinese President Xi had also assured her to continue his endeavour to fix the

issue. Beijing had also provided the Rohingyas camped in Bangladesh with 2,500 ton of grains. China brokered a tripartite virtual meeting between Bangladesh and Myanmar held on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2021. Though the meeting was seen as a positive advancement for further cooperation in solving the prolonged crisis, the military coup in Myanmar on 1<sup>st</sup> February of that year led all attempts to fail again (Mostofa, 2022). However, a new ray of hope has appeared as the virtual meeting of a newly formed technical level Ad-Hoc Task Force for Verification of the Displaced Persons from Rakhine took place on the 27<sup>th</sup> January, 2022. Both sides deemed themselves prepared for working together.

### **5.2.3 Reaction of India**

India's reaction regarding the Rohingya crisis shocked Bangladesh. India-Bangladesh relationship is considered stronger than India-Myanmar relationship<sup>1</sup>. But the matter of sorrow is that when the whole world (except China, Russia and some fellows) was busy blaming the state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi for permitting Tatmadaw to continue its brutality against the Muslim Rakhines, Prime Minister Modi rushed to Naypyidaw on 5 September, 2017 in order to know how he could help her to address the existing situation (Das, 2017). He had absolutely forgotten about his old neighbour-friend Sheikh Hasina's urgency. Even the pressure from international communities and different Rohingya Organizations in exile could not persuade India to stand with humanity. In comparison with Beijing's open support for Naypyidaw's "anti-terrorism attack" and its use of political, economic, and diplomatic favours

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<sup>1</sup> India's north-eastern part shares approximately 4,095km borderline with Bangladesh while covers almost 1,640km boundary with Myanmar. On the one side, India-Myanmar the relationship that has been renewed in the 90s of the last century has stumbled several times. On the other side, Bangladesh-India friendship is more than formality. Aside from regular contacts and communication, occasional trips among the government officials of higher level even the seasonal fruits and food exchange are token of their strong bonding. In fact, the historical and cultural tie with the West Bengal of India as well as the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's bold contribution to the independence of Bangladesh has turned it to an indispensable friend of this country.

on all levels, New Delhi has been fermented not to lose any chance of showing its capability to shield Myanmar. Even to prove its siding with the Myanmar government, it declared 40,000 Rohingyas (who took shelter in India after the military crackdown) illegal migrant and decided to hand over them to that government. Although it had stopped the implementation of this decision for a while due to international pressure, sources say that it has forced out a second group of five Rohingyas on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2019 (Das, 2017; Hussain, 2019). It is a complete violation of customary international law. According to the principle of non-refoulement, no state will send back the refugees to a land where they are victim of prosecution (Habib, 2021).

With the cooperation of New Delhi, a development project has been going well in Rakhine state so that the GoM could bring back those ill-fated people very soon. Indian Ambassador handed over 250 prefabricated houses to Myanmar in July, 2019 as part of their agreement in 2017 (Basu, 2019). In contrast, Bangladesh has received five tranches of relief in lieu of diplomatic support in times of need from its old friend, India. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited New Delhi in 2019 but it was up to the end of 2020 to get a little move from her Indian counterpart. During a two-day visit to Myanmar on 4 October, 2020, Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla and Army Chief Gen. M. M. Naravane of India pointed out to Suu Kyi and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing that Bangladesh was also another friend-state like Myanmar (Basu, 2020). Also, that they wanted to resolve the problem as early as possible.

#### **5.2.4 Reaction of the United States**

In the development of the idea of human rights and its protection all over the world, the USA has been playing an important role (U.S. Embassy in The Czech Republic, 2023). As the USA has declared the military crackdown on the Rohingyas as “great tragedy” and “crimes



against humanity” (Barany, 2019, p.16; The Alliance for Citizen Engagement, 2021), it is generally expected from a state that it would play the leading role in ending crimes (see Blank & Culbertson, 2018). But its actual role was limited to the sanctions on military-to-military engagement with Myanmar and its top military generals along with its two units and police commanders who were directly involved with this ethnic cleansing (The Alliance for Citizen Engagement, 2021). It has imposed economic sanctions and adopted different steps only when the military seized Myanmar’s democratic government in 2021 (see Uddin, 2023).

The USA has been responding this to historical tragedy by providing humanitarian relief without advocating for political solutions. Political scientists Blank and Culbertson (2018) contend that the promise of return will not result in a long-lasting solution for the problem unless it addresses the denial of basic citizenship rights or the violence that first forced the Rohingya to escape. Through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the USA has provided almost \$2.4 billion for the Rohingyas and host communities in Bangladesh since 2017 (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2023). Besides, it has been working with third countries and different networks to extend the number of resettled Rohingya refugees in the USA and other countries but outside of Bangladesh (The Dhaka Tribune, 2023).

### **5.2.5 Reaction of the United Nations**

The United Nations has called the brutal violent operations against Rohingyas “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” and repeatedly urged the Myanmar government to adopt necessary steps to protect the Rohingyas from this violation in the Rakhine state. To facilitate the resettlement of these shelter-less people, two parties of the United Nations respectively—

the UNHCR and the U.N. Development Program signed a memorandum with the Myanmar government in mid-2018 but kept the text of the agreement secret to all (Baranny, 2019; Mahtani, 2018). But this secrecy failed to either attain Myanmar's trust or to start the repatriation process. The UNHCR led the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar reported on August 27, 2018, that the military campaign "undoubtedly amount to the gravest crimes under international law". Even this Fact-Finding Mission raised the demand that "Myanmar's top military generals, including Commander-in-Chief Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing, must be investigated and prosecuted for genocide in the north of Rakhine State, as well as for crimes against humanity and war crimes in Rakhine" (Ahmed, 2018). Though some of the major powers like the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and ASEAN strongly supported a UNSC referral of Myanmar to the ICC, the veto power of China and Russia made this attempt futile. However, denouncing such atrocities against the Rohingya and other minorities in Myanmar, the United Nations sanctioned a resolution on 27<sup>th</sup> December, 2019 (Rana, 2021). The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR) passed a resolution in June, 2021, titled 'Human Rights Situation of Rohingya Muslims and other Minorities in Myanmar', moving a step forward (Khan, 2021).

Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations, U Hau Do Suan, called the resolution "another classic example of double standards" and "selective and discriminatory application of human rights norms designed to exert unwanted political pressure on Myanmar." He said the resolution did not attempt to find a solution to the complex situation and refused to recognize government efforts to address the challenges (The Associated Press, 2019).

The United Nations has been conducting humanitarian support through Joint Response Plan (JRP) in the camps in Bangladesh. The Rohingyas in Bangladesh are in serious need of such funding until they can return to their motherland with proper dignity and well-described rights. At first, the United Nations along with its agencies the IOM, UNHCR and OCHA organized a joint conference with Kuwait and the European Union where it estimated about \$434 million needed to support Rohingyas in the camps (Joint Statement on the Rohingya Refugee Crisis, 2017). However, the growing number of refugees (especially by birth) has been augmenting the amount of expenditure and the humanitarian agencies have found that more than \$881 million are necessary for 2022 Joint Response Plan on 29<sup>th</sup> March, 2022. For the first time, the plan has included the 540,000 local people, together with more than 918,000 refugees in Bhasan Char and Cox's Bazar in its list. The UN has been encouraging the international community to donate more generously for the Joint Response Plan as it is declining.

### **5.2.6 The ASEAN Initiatives**

ASEAN—Association of Southeast Asian Nations—has embraced the responsibility of ensuring human rights in the region. To attain this purpose, it has formed ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in 2009 and adopted the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration in November 2012. Being criticized by the international community, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management sent an assessment team to Myanmar. However, the allegation of being accompanied by the Myanmar delegation and not incorporating the Rohingyas viewpoint in the report has made the visit of this team futile. That is why we see though the team has conducted a fundamental needs assessment in the Rakhine state in December 2018 and May

2019, and convinced the Rohingyas in Bangladesh camp for come back in July 2019, the situation has not changed much. It could arrange neither a discussion over citizenship rights or a promise for a safe return of Rohingyas from the Myanmar government. Even among ASEAN member states, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines have taken the side on Myanmar (Banerjee, 2020). Exactly, it was an eye-wash effort of ASEAN to avoid further criticism over its effectiveness in the region.

So far, the reaction from the international community was limited to condemnation and some humanitarian aids. No global powers have genuinely come forward to offer the Rohingyas proper assistance. Although China has taken the mediatory role, the content of its peace-proposal does not include the root of the problem. Moreover, it has failed to ensure the accountability of the GoM in keeping its words to repatriate within due time. That is why we see, in spite of signing the memorandum, the GoM has not taken any Rohingyas in Rakhine, but the internal attention has already been moved to various new issues like Russia-Ukraine War, the scarcity of gas, oil, electricity and so on.

## **Chapter 6: Geopolitical Interest of China in Myanmar**

Beijing has already declared the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the ‘Chinese Century’ (Rousset, 2018). China has developed beneficial power ties in both nearby regions and remote areas that are abundant in the resources required to drive its rise (Kaplan, 2010). In Kaplan’s words, “China has built advantageous power relationships both in contiguous territories and in far-flung locales rich in the resources it requires to fuel its growth” (2010, pp. 22-41). Identifying China as an ‘uber-realist power’, Kaplan says that the state basically conducts foreign relations to secure its energy, metals, and strategic minerals, which can be said to appease its economic hunger. As a proximate neighbour and rich in natural energy and resources, Myanmar is a prime destination for Beijing. In this chapter, a historical brief about Chinese geopolitical aspirations have been described along with its interests in Myanmar step by step. Thus, it will answer to the first sub-question of our paper: What are the principal geopolitical interests of China in Myanmar?

### **6.1 Historical Base of Chinese Geopolitics**

The fall of China in the nineteenth century is more surprising than the uprising of the country in the twenty-first century. “After centuries of viewing their country as the cultural, political and economic centre of the world” (Roy, 1997, p. 123), the Chinese had to accept the superiority of the western powers in the "Century of Shame". The defeat in the first Sino-British Opium War of 1839–1842 set the stone of century of shame for China (Nike, Lan, 2003) when it, as a consequence of loss in a series of wars, lost Korea, Taiwan, the Ryukyu Islands, the Pescadores, and Port Arthur to Japan; Burma, Bhutan, Nepal, and Hong Kong to Britain; Annam to France; Macao to Portugal and so on (Lo, 1989). This sagacity instilled in the Chinese a deep sense of outrage, shame, and susceptibility to foreigners, as well as a desire

never to suffer injustice once more (Roy, 1997). Moreover, the historical connection between the development of communist party of China (the CPC, the only ruling party since 1949) and the beginning of the Peoples Republic of China, as well as the coming out of the country from a stagnant, poor economics with a vast population under the leadership of the CPC have knitted the Chinese domestic politics and foreign policies by a single but strong string. As a consequence, the leaders easily make a quick relationship between internal and external threats. They identify the internal problems as instigated and funded by the foreign governments and simultaneously, depict other's policies as conspiracy to impede the prosperity of China. According to CPC leaders, they are the agent of "The China Dream", national revival (Lampton, 2014, p. 77) and any change in the ruling party will bring back China from a rising power to the previous period of shame and disorder. Interestingly, the state carries dual character in international politics. It expects to be treated as great power among the states for its past glory but shows little willingness to obey to the international obligations in the march of its rapid development. Before the underdeveloped countries, it, showcasing itself as the alike victim of exploitation by the imperialist powers, ethically justifies its trade and investment there as equal benevolence.

### **6.1.1 The Current Geopolitical Agencies of China**

China is now considered the second world power (Rousset, 2018) and since the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 and the Euro Debt Crisis of 2009–2012, counted as the rising power against the established power, the United States. For Chinese scholars and policymakers, these crises are the beacons of correlative decay of Western hegemony in contrast to the rise of China. This has provided the country a feeling of repossessing its past prestige that it had lost during its "Century of Shame" (Nike, 2003). Among seven phases of China's diplomatic cycles (1840–

1860, 1861–1895, 1896–1919, 1919–1949, 1949–1979, 1979–2009, and 2009– 2039), it is now in the last phase, called, China’s seeking Great Power Status (Flint & Xiaotong, 2019, pp. 310-15). That is why Xi Jinping, abandoning the defensive strategies in geopolitics that prevailed during the Maoist time, has selected offensive. The prevailing view among Chinese policymakers concerning international affairs is that power dynamics are constantly being adjusted, which in turn affects how states distribute their gains and losses. These adjustments can be achieved through acquiescence, negotiations, or conflict and war (Lampton, 2014).

Hence, China believes that it no longer needs to endure the old inequalities of past order; rather other states should accommodate with the new and stronger China. It is true that Beijing is not directly seeking the military power right now to rectify the old arrangements but it must maneuver diplomatic and economic tactics (Lampton, 2014). Similarly, whatever it thinks about the world political system, Beijing is not showing any curiosity to the types of government regime with which it is engaged by. The extended geopolitical agencies of China all over the world can be summarized in the following way.

- Africa is highly rich with natural resources particularly of oil and minerals and historically this region is more comfortable with China than western powers due to similar experience in the hands of the imperialist states.
- Indian Ocean and South China Sea will provide both port access and connectivity with hydrocarbon-rich Arab-Persian world as well as help to implement the One Belt One Road.

- The presence in the Bay of Bengal will enable China to monitor and survey the activities of regional and western allies both in the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca.
- Engagement with the Southeast and East regions will prevent USA's dominance there.
- Effective control over Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan will smooth the access to the ample natural resources and make the Chinese border and popularity of ruling party safer and stronger.
- Recapture of Mongolia and Russian Far East will restore the past dignity of Chinese empire and testify the capability of present China.
- Close relationship with Myanmar will assist to accomplish multiple interests of China, such as developing the western provinces of China, as well as control in the politics of Asia.

To be sure, the country is acting very sharply and realistically. It is choosing its friends and allies from the states of same interests not mandatorily of same ideologies. It has just concentrated its all energies to ensure the growth and stability in all sectors of development so that it can be the proprietor of the new order.

## **6.2 Geopolitical Interest of China in Myanmar**

China has been the second largest economy of the world since 2014. As all the functions of modern welfare states like running schools, hospitals, mill-factories, shopping malls, multi-stored buildings with electric elevators, as well as vehicles and different kinds of house-chores are highly depended on energy; economic growth and stability of China also



greatly relies upon its secured and continuous supply of energy. Realizing this fact, its predecessors' foreign policy, like, Jiang Zemin's "going out" strategy in 2001, Xi Jinping's a "new normal" for Chinese economic progress, have always kept a careful eye on energy supply and security (Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, 2014). Myanmar is one of the richest countries of natural resources and being a close neighbour of giant China, it generally draws the edacious attention of that. Myanmar's large population with almost closed economy is a big market for Chinese products. Below, the geopolitical interests of China in Myanmar have been narrated.

### 6.2.1 Search for Energy

Pradhan (2021, p. 2) believes, “Geopolitics in recent years has been revolving closely around energy and the geographical landmasses rich in sources of energy”. The Republic of China stands second in the queue of the world’s largest petroleum consumers in 2011 and the leading net petroleum importer in 2014 (Cole, 2016, p. 134). It has also become the principal oil importer, having 57 percent imported oil in 2014 (Cole, 2016, p. 90). Anticipation made by the International Energy Agency (IEA) shows that “China’s oil imports will rise more than five-fold by 2030” (Herberg, 2008, p. 72). Another source forecasts that Chinese demand for oil will rise from about 10.6 million bpd in 2013 to 19.8 million bpd by 2040 while its demand for gas may rise almost five percent per year by 2040 (Rehn, 2014). Consequently, its dependence on external resources for gas will be as high as nearly 65% in 2030 (British Petroleum, 2020). In sum, growing population, urbanization, industrialization, fast economic development and growing trade partnerships are making China’s reliance on foreign energy resources like oil, natural gas, electricity, coal, nuclear power, and hydroelectric resources increase in a way that such dependency is expected to be as high as 75% by 2030 (EIA, 2022; Durden, cited in Cole, 2016).

Hence, the foreign policy of Beijing, led by the stress of securing undisrupted energy supply, has tended to its naturally bestowed neighbor, Myanmar, which is significantly different from others for its attractive location, proximity and historical intimate relationship with China. Myanmar, one of the world's oldest petroleum industries, has now gained the status of leading natural gas producers on the Asian continent. In 2012, the gas reserved in Myanmar have been proved to be of 10 trillion cubic feet, which can produce 416BcF gas yearly (Oil &

Gas Energy in Myanmar, 2022). Moreover, 50 million barrels oil with a production capacity of 21,000 bbl/d is expected to be in Myanmar's reserves in 2013 (Oil & Gas Energy in Myanmar, 2022). The following table 2 (Worldometers, 2016) presents the reserved gas and oil of Myanmar and its neighbours in the world rankings.

**Table 2**

*Oil Reserves in Myanmar and its Neighbours*

<b>Global rank</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Oil reserves (barrels) in 2016</b>	<b>World Share</b>
<b>1</b>	Venezuela	299,953,000,000	18.2%
<b>2</b>	Saudi Arabia	266,578,000,000	16.2%
<b>3</b>	Canada	170,863,000,000	10.4%
<b>14</b>	China	25,132,122,000	1.5%
<b>25</b>	Vietnam	4,400,000,000	0.27%
<b>27</b>	Indonesia	3,692,500,000	0.22%
<b>50</b>	Thailand	404,890,000	0.025%
<b>76</b>	Myanmar	50,000,000	0.0030%
<b>82</b>	Bangladesh	28,000,000	0.0017%

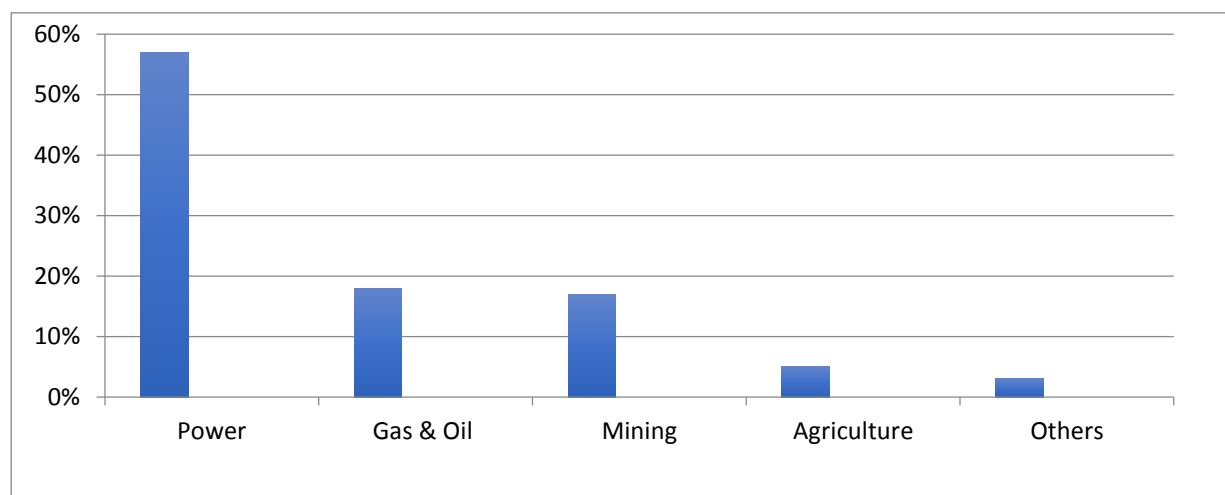
According to Table X, among the neighbour states Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand which have large amounts of oil reserves, Myanmar is the closest one after Vietnam to China. Calculating the easy access and lower cost of oil transfer in short time in comparison with others, Myanmar has a special appeal to Beijing.

Similarly, in case of gas reserves (see table 3), Myanmar has been holding a good position in the rankings. Among the neighbours adjacent to the China border and rich in gas reservation, Myanmar takes third place (CIA, 2016).

**Table 3***Natural Gas Reserves in Myanmar and its Neighbours*

Global rank	Country	Proven reserves (bcm)
1	Iran	34,020
2	Russia	32,600
3	Qatar	25,070
11	China	3,300
13	Indonesia	3,001
30	Vietnam	699
39	Myanmar	283
43	Thailand	256

Myanmar has been considered a lucrative destination for the energy seekers for a long time. Although internal factors impede the trade and external investment in Myanmar from the beginning of its independence, the recent changes in home and abroad has brought some easiness. As of 2015-16 FDI, Myanmar has counted \$4.8 billion (the highest amount in the history of the country) of foreign direct investment in the petroleum industry (Roman, et al., 2017). The following bar shows that the highest proportion of Chinese investment in Myanmar goes to power, and it amounts about 57%. The gas and oil sectors have jointly 18% of that investment while mining has 17% (Lwin, 2019).

**Figure 2***China's Investment in Myanmar's Energy & Other Sectors*

*Note.* Made by Author Based on Lwin (2019)

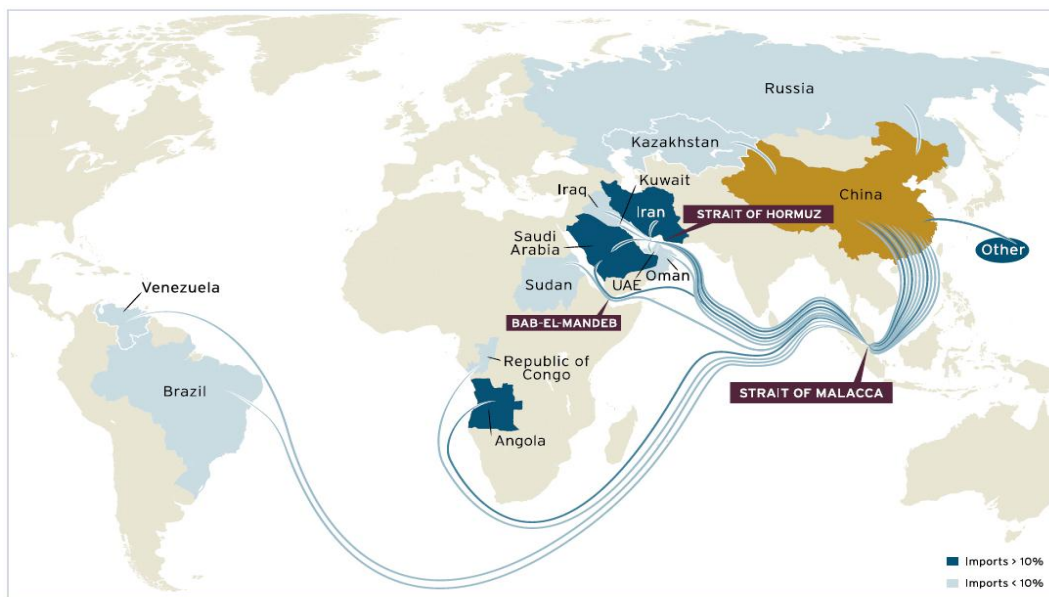
### 6.2.2 The Malacca Dilemma and Alternate Sea Lane

Chinese economy is now largely depended on imported energy flowing from different parts of the world. According to Zang & Cao (Cole, 2016), 68% of imported oil in China in 2014 comes from different parts of Middle East, Central Africa, and Russia. Also, the rush for energy has made China strongly present in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, South America, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and this trend is now expanding to even Iceland and Greenland (Boersama & Foley, 2016; Wang, 2015: cited in Cole, 2016). However, 95% of imported energy from these parts of the world arrive in China by sea and almost 80% of that traverse happens through the Malacca Strait (Topcu, 2020). Additionally, 85% of its exports

rely on sea routes (Bert, 2004). Increasing dependency on imported energy for rapidly growing economies and having a vast serviceable coastline has so augmented Chinese reliance on sea lanes especially on the Malacca Strait that now this reliance is coined as the “Malacca Dilemma” by President Hu Jintao in 2003 (Khan, 2019). A little disturbance of supply connection will amount disastrous troubles not only to the Chinese economy but also to the global market.

## Map 2

### *The Strait of Malacca*



Basically, the Malacca dilemma is rooted in the “vulnerability to a naval blockade” (Paszak, 2021) by western powers. Malacca, “a narrow stretch of water between the Indonesian island of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula” (Khan, 2019), has become a natural chokepoint.

Since its eastern side is located along Singapore, which is prominent for its western alignment and fear of Chinese leadership, may easily blockade (in favour of western powers or directly the USA) all sorts of supply connection to China in case of a conflict. Even other anti-Chinese forces, according to Chinese military experts, can hamper the Chinese oil tankers intentionally in the guise of pirates during such a critical situation. The Chinese military and energy strategy expert Wang Haiyun notes that “The US has military forces stationed on all the world’s major shipping routes—if something was to happen it could easily control China’s energy supply” (Yi, 2013). Additionally, there are risks of piracy, kidnapping, hijacking, firing and other traditional maritime insecurity in the Strait of Malacca. Considering all consequences of over-reliance on the strait, China wishes to diversify its energy and trade supply routes.

In order to avoid the Malacca strait, it has already stepped toward building oil and gas pipelines with different countries. Among those alternate ways to import energy, China-Myanmar oil and natural gas pipelines are mentionable. The gas line has come into operation from July, 2013 and China has imported 3.4 million tonnes of gas via this pipeline in 2019, up 54% of what was brought in 2018 (Xioxia, 2020). It is estimated that when the pipeline comes to full capacity, it will constitute 9.8% of imported gas in China. Moreover, different sources point out that this gas line can reduce Chinese dependence on imported LNG by 4.3% to 16.4% (Topcu, 2020). However, China has imported 10.8 million tons of crude oil in 2019 through the China-Myanmar oil pipeline that has been put into operation from June 2017 (Xioxia, 2020). Its full capacity will augment Myanmar’s contribution to Chinese imported oil from 0.76% (in 2017) to 4.3% (Topcu, 2020). Another project of constructing Kyaukpyu deepwater port in Rakhine State, shortening the dependence on the Malacca Strait for shipping oil, will facilitate the China’s Belt and Road initiative, as well as break out of America’s Pacific “encirclement”.

### 6.2.3 Border Security

The Republic of China shares a 2200 km border line with two provinces of Myanmar, respectively Kachin and Shan. These border areas in Myanmar have heightened the tension of China for several reasons. Both Kachin and Shan are fertile grounds of ethnic conflicts. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) of the upper Myanmar are the strongest ethnic revolutionaries. The fight between the Tatmadaw and these groups occurs regularly which leads the shellfire within the Chinese boundary and causes the hamper of properties and lives. In a fight with the MNDAA in 2015, several Chinese were killed (Bi, 2018). The fear of a large number of refugees (Kokang and Kachin ethnics) that can flow from the north of Myanmar to China, and massive Chinese investment in the energy sectors in Kachin worries China of these prolonged quandaries. In order to secure the investment and the border area, China has been actively working with the Myanmar government and the ethnic armed forces. However, other countries' interests (ex. the USA, UK & EU) in the name of mediation in the ethnic conflict in those areas seems to Beijing as another security threat (Han, 2017). Against the continuous power projection of the USA in the Indian Ocean, China considers Myanmar as its buffer zone (Mannan).

To be sure, the central government of Myanmar has limited access to the hilly provinces in the north. That is why the remnants of the Kuomintang troops of China with the help of CIA could utilize the Myanmar's north border to disrupt the Communist government in China after its inauguration in 1949 (Kemenade, 2008). However, a large number of expatriate Chinese do not only live there genetically but also attract the Chinese citizens in their illegal activities.



Ruili, Mong la and Muse towns are the centres of drug trafficking, gambling and prostitution. With the investment from Hong Kong and Taiwan, the Yunnanese have built up ultra-modern casinos here that are opened for business 24 hours a day. The Chinese laymen, government officials, party leaders even the police regularly visit these establishments, which results in wasting money and submitting public property (such as official cars) as a guarantee to pay debts (Kemenade, 2008). Thus, the law-and-order situation, as well as normal social life, are hindered in the border areas of China. In sum, the northern part of Myanmar, known as the “golden triangle” for the world-record opium production, is one of the main points of the spread of the HIV virus among Chinese. Therefore, Beijing requires a safe border that will not be used against its interest by any foreign power, drug traders, criminals, or other antagonists.

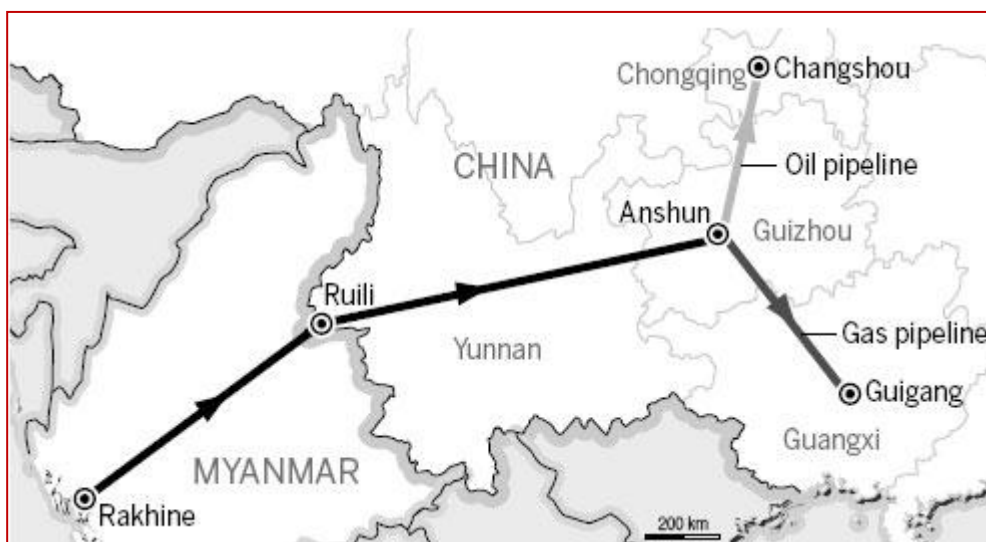
#### **6.2.4 Development of Western Province of China**

The long-standing economic disparity between the western land-locked regions and eastern coasts is a matter of great headache for China. Since the open-door policy in 1978, the western region of nine provinces and autonomous regions Gansu, Guizhou, Ningxia, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Tibet, Xinjiang and Yunnan, with a municipality Chongqing, lagged behind the eastern part severely in all aspects of development. However, the ‘Great Western Development Strategy’, declared in 1999 by General-Secretary Jiang Zemin has brought Myanmar at the centre of its foreign relations. As part of this developmental project, Beijing is contributing in the “Myanmar’s infrastructure, deep-sea ports, roads and airports with Chinese aid in the form of interest-free loans, investment and manpower” (Kemenade, 2008, pp.174-175). Moreover, the Yunnan province of southwestern China is the key medium of China-Myanmar relationship. Yunnan is bordered by Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam which gives

Beijing the opportunity to integrate the Yunnan's economy with ASEAN) and SAARC members (Singh, 2016). Particularly, the development of the western region and the economic and diplomatic engagement with South Asia and Southeast Asia are now merged in a single plan. And here Myanmar is the buffer state (Tibet is another alternative but sensitive option) to implement the plan through Yunnan. That is why the province has been made a major part of different development projects connected with Myanmar, such as the "Greater Mekong Sub-region project" including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam and Yunnan and the "Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) initiative" (Singh, 2016).

### Map 3

*Energy transfer from Rakhine to Yunnan, Guanxi, Guizhou & Chongqing of China*



Beijing has been contributing to the construction of thirty dams in Myanmar which will provide its Yunnan Province and Myanmar with electricity and irrigation water (Steinberg, 2010). Additional to the large share of the offshore Rakhine gas, China has built a second pipeline of crude oil between Myanmar and Yunnan. In accordance with China-Myanmar

Economic Corridor (CMEC) plan, a road and railway connecting Yunnan and Myanmar through the Muse-Mandalay-Kyaukpyu are going to be built. Even a port and special economic zone at Kyaukpyu (Rakhaine state) are in consideration. China is hopeful about its massive infrastructure construction and investment both in Myanmar and the Chinese provinces Yunnan, Guanxi, and Guizhou that will further adjust the industrial and economic growth in the western region.

### **6.2.5 Raw-materials**

Myanmar has a lot of valuable gemstones, minerals (base metals & industrial metals, such as gold, copper, silver, lead, zinc, tin, iron, jade, rubies, sapphires, etc.) timber, fish and seafood, forestry products and various types of grains which have earned the country a reputation in the global market. Like China, the USA, France, Germany, Japan, India, and Indonesia, Myanmar is now considered one of the major exporting countries of agricultural goods. In the global market, there are appreciating demands for Burmese pulse, cereals, sugars, vegetables, baked goods, pasta, sweeteners, tree nuts, beverage bases and processed fruit. Beyond gas and oil, the garment, IT, food, and beverages sectors are attracting huge foreign investment in Myanmar for its available large labour force, natural resources and particular location at the juncture of East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia. There was a time when Myanmar alone supplied, approximately, 90 percent of the world rubies.

However, China holds a strong position in importing various types of goods and products additional to energy from Myanmar. In spite of having the biggest tin resources in the world, China imports an additional 30-35% tin from Myanmar for circuit-board soldering (Samsani, 2021). About 50% of different types of rare earth metals used in manufacturing,

Chinese military equipment, and consumer electronics come from Myanmar. According to Chinese customs statistics (Richer, 2014), timber and forestry products, purified copper, and many agricultural goods are in the long list of Myanmar's export to China.

### **6.2.6 One Belt One Road**

'The One Belt One Road' (OBOR), also known as 'The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is basically an amalgamation of two Chinese billion-dollar projects, 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and '21st Century Maritime Silk Road'. It is President Xi's brainchild to regenerate and expand China's historic silk trade routes on land and sea. President Xi primarily introduced the first part of the plan as the "Silk Road Economic Belt" in September 2013 through which China assumed to be connected with Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe via land route. Then Xi merged the sea-based "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," project with the former to append China's southern coast to the Mediterranean region, Africa, South-East Asia, and Central Asia (Seth, 2020). However, this grand project linking world regions is full of different infrastructural investments in ports, multi-stored buildings, roads, bridges, dams, railroads, airports, and coal-fired power stations, as well as tunnels. The following table of economic corridors of OBOR is based on Seth's data (2020).

## Table

### *Six Economic Corridors of OBOR*

	<b>Name of Road / Corridor</b>	<b>Chinese Part</b>	<b>Outside Part</b>
<b>1</b>	The New Eurasian Land Bridge	Western China	Western Russia
<b>2</b>	The China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor	North China	Eastern Russia via Mongolia
<b>3</b>	The China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor	Western China	Turkey via Central and West Asia
<b>4</b>	The China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor	Southern China	Singapore via Indo-China
<b>5</b>	The China-Pakistan Corridor	South Western China	Arabia sea routes via Pakistan
<b>6</b>	The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor	Southern China	India via Bangladesh and Myanmar

*Note.* Made by Author Based on Seth (2020)

Analysts have found two-fold Chinese interests behind the project. The prime concerns of this initiative are to secure “Chinese sovereignty, development and security, national reunification, territorial integrity, and the continued centrality of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)” (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, pp. 3-36). The secondary interest is identified as the regional strategy which will ensure China’s core interests through pursuing “its main strategic goal of rising peacefully” (Boon, 2016, pp. 656-57). Interestingly, the secondary goal has been so prioritized strategically in the international politics that Washington has promptly started to push Japan (2007) to lead the Free and Open Indo Pacific strategy (FOIP) (Gong, 2020). Chinese commentators claim that the OBOR is essentially a defensive measure in reaction to the 2011 "strategic rebalance" in the Asia Pacific region by the Obama administration (Gong, 2020).

It is clear from the major powers contention that the initiative has not only economic importance but also geopolitical significance. India, aligned with USA and Australia, has already denied participating in the OBOR project and collectively begun to impede the advancement of the project. According to New Delhi's assertion, the port projects especially in Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are threat for India's security. The role of Myanmar in this security dispute is like a "chafer state" (Shambaugh, 2018, pp. 100-102) which maintains close tie with China (without any option) and that is why it is circumstantially bound to bring in the light of Beijing's desire to connect China with the Indian Ocean.

### **6.2.7 Surveillance Capacity Building**

In order to keep an eye on the rivals, the surveillance capacity is very important. Beijing is very carefully checking and monitoring the US, Japanese, Australian and Indian steps against the expansion of China's influence. As it is true that the USA has been projecting power in Asia, especially in Southeast and East Asia, to keep China in control, China is also actively augmenting its presence outside to breakdown that encirclement. Consequently, the Republic of China is now very assertive to expand its naval power particularly in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Beijing's maritime strategy highly follows the Mahan's Sea power theory that emphasizes the naval capacity to support trade and dominate the strategic waterways (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2005, p.25; Kanwal, 2018, p.14). China wants to establish its control over the Indo-Pacific "Sea Lines of Communication" (SLOC) as per Mahan's hypothesis that whoever has the domination over the Indian Ocean, will rule Asia (Kanwal, 2018, p.14; Mannan, 2020, p.192). China has designed the 'String of Pearls' to connect its military and commercial facilities as well as relationship along the SLOC in Asia, Africa and Europe

(Lanteigne, 2019). In order to implement the plan over the Indo-Pacific region, China needs Myanmar significantly.

Like Pakistan's Gwadar port and Sri Lanka's Hambantota, Myanmar's Kyaukpu port is considered another important pearl of this string. The Kyaukpu port will help the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to shorten the distance by 3000 km between China and the Indian Ocean (Zhao, 2008). Also, Myanmar's 2276 km long coastline along the Bay of Bengal is a vantage point for establishing surveillance over India's Coco Island and the Andaman Sea. In 2003, China has assisted Myanmar in building an 85-meter jetty to naval facilities at the Alexandra Channel in the Andaman Sea. From this jetty, it will be easier to monitor India's military movements including missile testing in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, India will be strategically uncomfortable in its naval activities there. China has also been providing Myanmar with radar and other facilities to develop naval bases in Sittwe, Hianggyi, Mergui and Zadetkyikyan. It is also promoting the airfields in Mandalay Meiktila and Pegu in order to have air access over the Bay of Bengal (Bert, 2004). Clearly, China's assistance in Myanmar to develop roads, railways, ports, inland waterways, and to enhance the naval capacity is part of its broad policy of the marine security. The maritime ambition of China through Myanmar can be summarized as following.

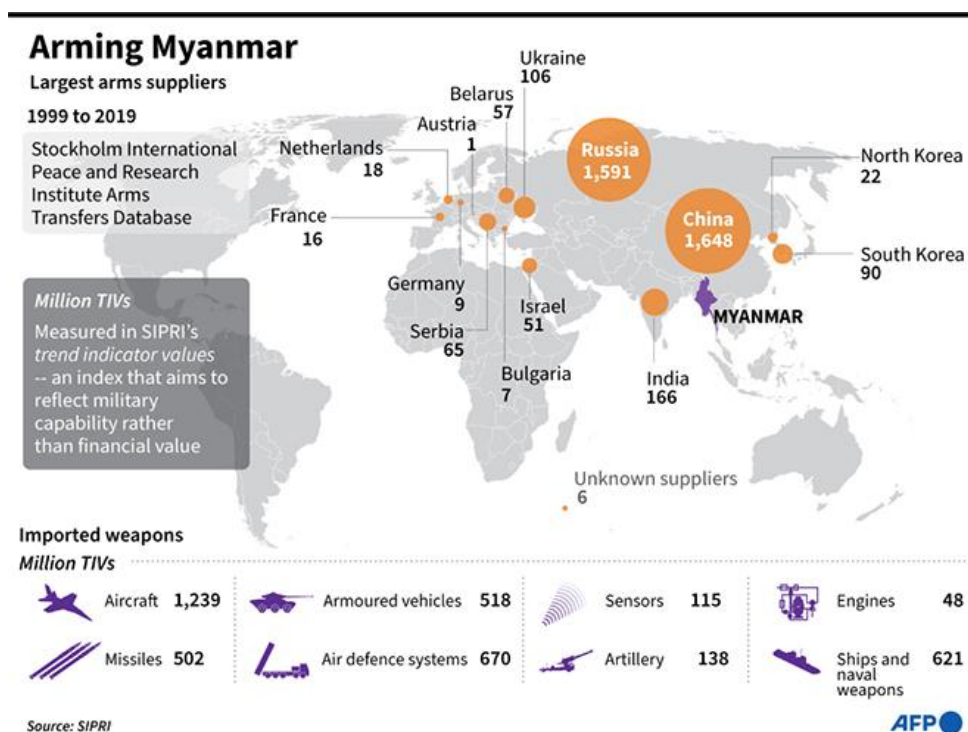
- a) Facilitating its access to the Indian Ocean via the Bay of Bengal,
- b) Monitoring India's naval activities around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands,
- c) Securing energy supply of Myanmar by avoiding the Malacca Strait and

d) Controlling the traffic in the Indian Ocean and the western part of Malacca Strait via Myanmar islands.

Another significant issue is that Myanmar has been heavily armed since 1988. And China is one of the largest military suppliers. Different types of radars, warships, combat and trainer aircraft, armored vehicles, missiles, armed drones have been purchased from Beijing in order to suppress the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. According to Samsani's (2021), China has already projected a number of PLAN ships, research vessels and submarines in the Andaman Sea with a military purpose.

Map 4

*Arming in Myanmar by Different Countries Between 1999 to 2019*



*Note.* Adopted from Samsani (2021)



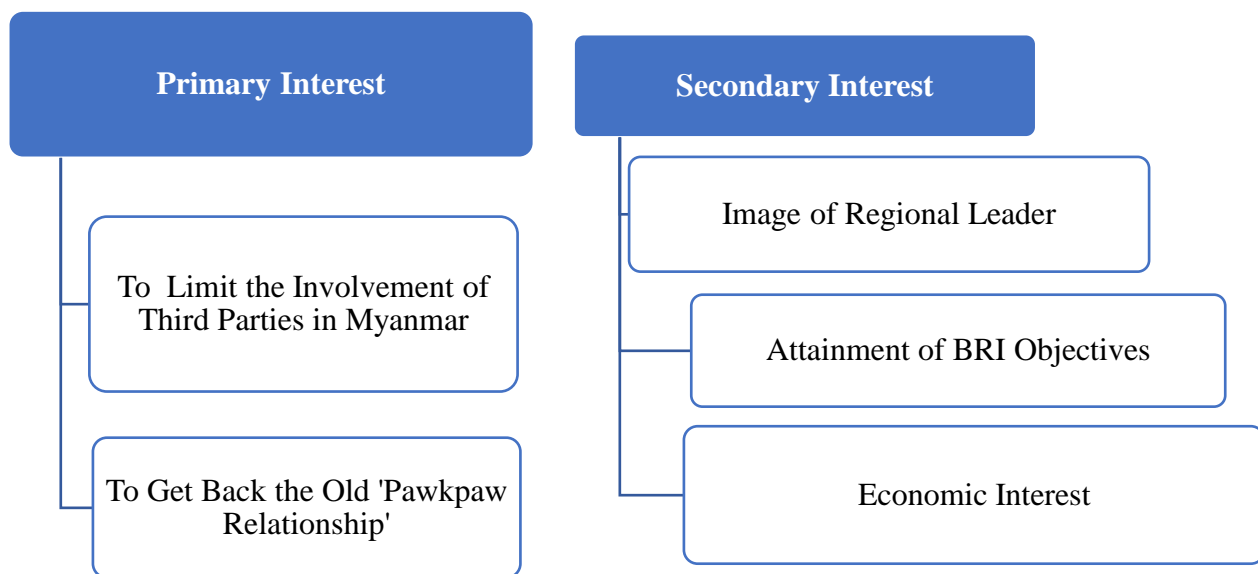
In fact, China is very much aware of the importance of its local and regional neighbors in relation with its acceptance as a global power. To get the necessary clench, it has increased the political, economic, diplomatic and strategic engagements with those states. Among its different mega projects, OBOR is mentionable as it is connecting many countries on different continents by land, air, and water. Myanmar is an indispensable part not only of the OBOR but also all other mega economic and strategic programs of China. All the projects are designed to securitize China's energy and strategic position, expand its economy, development of its landlocked provinces and ensure the supply of raw materials by Myanmar. The accomplishment of these goals will ultimately strengthen China's position in the world stage.

## **Chapter 7: Immediate Threats and Opportunities to Chinese Interests due to the Rohingya Crisis**

The republic of China has observed the situation of the Rohingya crisis very cautiously. For it, it is not an option to deny Myanmar's government brutality over the 'Rakhine Muslim' people; it also might be a great opportunity for the Chinese government to portray itself as the safeguard of global humanity. But the pragmatic view of the Chinese politics that highly conveys the neo-classical geopolitical thought did not hesitate to prioritize the geopolitical interest of all without any pretension. If China, following the global community, caste vote against Myanmar in the UN or supported the Rohingyas before the media, something challenging China's security and interests might happen. If it backs up Myanmar, something benevolent to China's interest might come out. In this chapter, the author will answer the quesiton "Which geopolitical interests of China were immediately threatened and generated due to this crisis?"—the second sub-question in this study. The answer of this question will help to understand why China has decided to back up Myanmar on the issue. To better understand the significance of those geopolitical interest, I have divided those between two groups-a) Primary interests and b) Secondary interests.

## Chart 2

### *Interests of China in Myanmar on the Rohingya Issue*



### 7.1 Primary Interests

The national sovereignty and security are the prime concern of the nation states. The geographic location of Myanmar has not only tied it with the strategic arena of China but also with the security concerns of the state. The current crisis in the Rakhine state has just triggered this anxiety. Simultaneously, it has reopened the door of old Sino-Myanmar 'pawkpaw' relationship.

#### 7.1.1 To Limit the Involvement of Third Parties in Myanmar

The term 'third party' refers here to the presence of China's rival states or any organization involved with those counterparts aiming at punishing or influencing the government

of Myanmar centering at the Rohingya issue. Myanmar's position within the Indian Ocean and direct border with China's southern region turns it to a gateway for China (to avoid the Malacca dilemma) but the easy entrance for its rivalries into the China's area of domination. Avoiding the Malacca strait China easily can reach the Indian Ocean via Myanmar and continue its general trade, as well as communication with Asia and Africa in case of any major power conflicts. Simultaneously, rivals will be able to monitor China's activities easily if once they can establish their hegemony over the Myanmar territory. That means no direct invasion into Beijing's border or taking any aggressive position (verbal threat or strategic position), China's competitors will have the capacity to control Beijing's choices in international affairs. China's concern for Myanmar is very inherent thereof. Nielsen (2022) argues that China views Myanmar as a constituent component of its neighborhood, supplement of its national interests, and deeply susceptible to any western intervention along its borders. Similar views have also been expressed in interviews with Mannan<sup>2</sup> and Nathan<sup>3</sup> (2022). The following map of the Southeast Asia represents this alarming situation.

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<sup>2</sup> Md. Abdul Mannan, an interviewee, is a professor of the department of International Relations in University of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Nathan, an interviewee, is a professor of the department of Political Science in ColumbiaUniversity. In 2022, he exchanged his view with the author by email.

## Map 5

### *Southeast Asian countries' Border Shared with China*



If China did not emphasize that the Rohingya crisis is a Myanmar's internal affair that should be solved domestically, the USA would have had the opportunity to come closer to China's border in the name of 'terror on war'. China is not only a witness of the American imperial interference in Asia but also a real victim of American cold war geopolitics. Obviously, Beijing has not forgotten the USA's arduous attempt to prevent the communist government in China using the land of northern Myanmar during this period (Wikipedia). Besides, China had fought against the American invasions directly in the Korean and Vietnam wars. China has never accepted USA's interference (especially military presence) in Asia and will not do it ever. Consequently, there is no reason that China's reaction to the USA led UN's military presence in Myanmar, which shares a border of 2000 km with China would be an exceptional one. According to Aung (2020), China has been blocking US and EU engagement in the Rohingya issue because it does not want them to meddle in Myanmar.

Myanmar is accused of the crimes of genocide and ethnic cleansing against the Rohingyas. If China did not veto the UN's resolutions regarding the Rohingya crisis, under the R2P (Responsibility to Protect) principle of the UN Security Council (the UNSC), the USA might have had another chance to enter Myanmar. This principle would not allow only the USA-led Security Council or its peace keeping military force but also the easy access to any major powers in the name of cooperation. Rahman<sup>4</sup> (2022) argues "if China wouldn't have support Myanmar I believe Myanmar would have face more pressure from the international community". Myanmar might be a field of major powers competition for influence that will not only be a great challenge to China's sovereignty but would also disturb the stability of Southeast Asia. According to Korybko (2017),

The UN tries to push through heavily politicized resolutions which could open the door for multilateral military intervention just like they did in Libya, but this attempt proved unsuccessful as it was in Syria because Russia and China united in opposing it.

### **7.1.2 To Get Back the old 'Pawkpaw Relationship'**

As a symbol of strong bond, the first non-communist country, Myanmar, recognized the communist-led People's Republic of China at its foundation in 1949. The 1967 anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon resulted in the cleavage in Sino-Myanmar 'pawkpaw' relationship and an undeclared war in 1968 (Fan, 2012; Kemenade, 2008). However, Myanmar's stand with China on 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre kept the two neighbours closer again and that continued until the ascendance of democratic regime in Myanmar in 2011. The slow but steady openness

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<sup>4</sup> Md. Mizanur Rahman, an interviewee of the study, is an assistant professor of the department of Anthropology in Jagannath University.

of the prolonged isolated Myanmar since 2011 gathered so much international interests that it was encouraged to reduce the dependency on China and erect itself between the USA-India and China influences. Following Geng's phases of China-Myanmar kinship (2006), we can expand it to the present days in the following way.

**Table 5**

*Different Phases of Sino-Myanmar Relationship*

<b>Tenure &amp; Nature of Myanmar Government</b>	<b>Nature of Sino-Myanmar Relationship</b>
1949-61 (Democratic)	Ambivalent Peaceful Coexistence
1962-70 (Military)	Temporary Setbacks
1971-88 (Military)	Improved Relations
1989-2011 (Military)	Closer Ties 1
2011-17 (Democratic)	Balanced Relations
2017-Present (Democratic, Military since 2020)	Closer Ties 2

*Note.* Made by Author based on Gong (2006)

Due to the different economic sanctions on Myanmar's military government, it was highly dependent on the Chinese economic and political support and military assistance for a long time. In the meanwhile, the anti-Chinese sentiment was growing day by day due to the strong but unequal trade between China and Myanmar. The high price for low quality increased the sufferings of people. The shared long border provides the opportunity to a large number of

Kokang, Hui Chinese, as well as remnants of destroyed Chiang Kai-shek's armies to establish localities in Northern Myanmar. The control over sixty percent of Myanmar economy in the central Mandalay, influences illegal business over the villages in Shan state, and spread of Mandarin in the northern parts causes the resentment among the Myanmar citizens (Kemenade, 2008; Tea, 2010). The large-scale investments and energy extraction of China have brought many Chinese experts and labourers in Myanmar but has provided employment to few of the local people. These economic functions have drained money to government's funds but the local people were hampered and aggrieved. They lost their lands and properties without compensation, and indigenous livelihood but forced labour. The ever-present military protecting Chinese economic activities, along with the deterioration of social life due to drug trafficking, prostitution, and violence against women accumulate the wrath toward China.

In this context, the democratic government was bound to challenge several Chinese projects and even to suspend the Myitsone dam in 2011 (Gong, 2022), Kyaukpyu-Kunming railway project in 2014 (Engyin, 2018), and to renegotiate the Letpadaung copper mine project after its suspension of two years, (Zhang, 2020). Similar accusations have also been raised by the Rakhine farmers, fishermen and other local people against the China backed Shwe gas project at Maday Island and the Kyaukpyu oil pipeline project (Lwin, 2021; Joy, 2018; Aung & Win, 2013). Overall, the ongoing challenges toward the million-dollar Chinese investments and the increasing influences of India and the USA over Myanmar had placed a question mark on Beijing's capacity to influence Naypyidaw in the guise of Sino-Myanmar kinship.



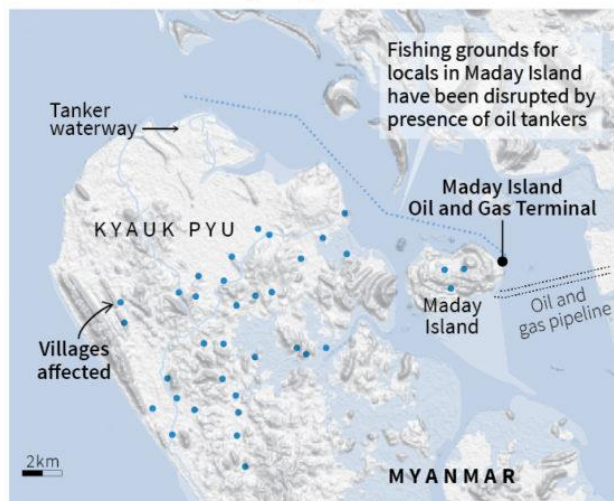
## Maps 6

### *The Chinese Investment in Rakhine State and Environmental Degradation*

#### Myanmar's Kyauk Pyu port

The port is the entry point for a pipeline that pumps oil 770 km (480 miles) across Myanmar to southwest China and forms a crucial part of Beijing's "Belt and Road" project.

The Kyauk Pyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ), including a deep water port, could displace settlements. Government officials said it could affect the livelihood of some 20,000 residents from 35 nearby villages.



Sources: Myanmar Information Management Unit (village locations); General Administration Department of Kyauk Pyu; Shwe Gas Movement

J. Wu, C. Inton, W. Foo, 09/06/2017

REUTERS

However, the worldwide condemnation against the military crackdown on Rohingyas supported by the civilian people and their government has isolated Myanmar again. The government, reluctant to accept the Rohingyas as citizens, has resorted to the only one “veto power” holder Asian country, China. The republic of China has also grasped the opportunity to portray itself as the protector and only one true friend of the Myanmar nation at the cost of its global image. On behalf of the Myanmar government and the clarification of its attitude toward the domestic Muslim community, China has highly criticized western values (The Global Times, 2017). As a result, the Sino-Myanmar governments have already signed several

important agreements. Myanmar has reasserted its position for “one China” including the contentious lands of Tibet, Xinjiang (The land of Uyghur Muslims) and Taiwan (Ott, 2020).

On the other hand, though Bangladesh maintains a good relationship with China, its good bonding with India is well known. From the economic perspective, some Chinese projects like building a deep-sea port at Sonadia Island have been rejected by Bangladesh because of pressure from India and the USA. In the words of Zahed, “China could not monopolize Dhaka” (Zahed, p. 109). India conveys greater influence on Bangladesh politics than China. That is why China chooses an ally who likes or does not like but is fastened to stay within Chinese influence and that obviously is Myanmar!

## **7.2 Secondary Interests**

The secondary interests of China have been generated from its mid- and long-term policies toward Myanmar. These policies contain China’s ambitions for establishing its image as a global and regional power, fulfillment of BRI goals and economic security. The challenges and opportunities that have originated from the Rohingya crisis to Beijing interests are discussed below.

### **7.2.1 Image of Regional Leader**

In the Asian affairs, the Rohingya crisis has established a situation where all powers have to consider China’s wish. China’s influence on the Myanmar government to be flexible toward the 2007 saffron revolution (Tea, 2010), its cooperation with the international community to reach the relief for cyclone-Nargis, which affected Burmese people in 2008 and transferring power to the democratic government in 2011 has revealed China as the promoter of

regional peace and stability, as well as a dominant actor of Asia. Firstly, Beijing's shadow over Myanmar and then its mediating role between Myanmar and Bangladesh exposes some crucial message toward Asians and Westerns. The USA's or the UN's toxic condemnation could not place Myanmar and Bangladesh at the same table, but China could. India does not have capability to protect Myanmar from the Security Council's punishment but China can. It is the only nation of Asia which enjoys the right of veto in the United Nations. Western nations are now bound to ensure Beijing's involvement in their campaigns of human rights in this region.

The gradual openness policy and the zero-sum strategy of the democratic government of Myanmar have paralleled the competition between China, Japan, India, the UK, the USA and other ASEAN and European nations. The US Secretary Clinton's visit in Myanmar in 2011 and President Obama's meeting with his equivalent in Myanmar brought Naypyidaw closer to western nations. Siding China, the USA and the European nations forwarded to mediate conflict between the Kachin and the GoM, an attempt that later failed due to China's pressure on Naypyidaw (Byrd, 2020). However, the equivalent position of the competitors and the fear of image loss had created a dilemma within China for a while to ascertain its position on the Rohingya issue.

While India is still struggling to penetrate Southeast Asia through Myanmar (as a part of its east policy), China already has most of the members of the region under control. ASEAN members need China for promoting their internal development via Chinese foreign investment (Dapice, 2015). Though India acts like a big brother to the smaller states of South Asia, most of the countries are under the shadow of China. Among the eight members of this region, Maldives (an airport, artificial island, etc.), Sri Lanka (Hambantota port, etc.), Pakistan

(Gwadar deep sea-port, the CPEC, etc.), and Nepal (Kyirong-Kathmandu railroad, BRI projects etc.), are implementing Chinese ambitions in their territory. Leaving uncertain Afghanistan, India has a little domain to influence in Bangladesh and Bhutan but none of them wish to brother China with a conflict of national interest. Through the Asia-Africa growth corridor (AAGC), China has been expanding its realm of influence all the way to Africa. However, Venkataraman<sup>5</sup> (2022) argues that the Rohingya crisis has brought an opportunity for China to “oppose or sideline India’s close relations with Myanmar”. Similarly, Rahman (2022) believes that the rivalry between China and India is redundant in the context of Rohingya crisis.

In this context, the individual failure of the USA, India, Japan and Australia has led them to jointly form the ‘Quad’ to encircle China’s strategic movement. Beijing’s firm position in Myanmar and recent close ties with Bangladesh are a barrier to this goal of this joint enterprise. China’s a slip from the line could fell Myanmar under the India’s domain of influence at any time for its survival need (fear of prolonged poverty and economic sanctions) in front of a global condemnation. India has proved this possibility through backing Myanmar continuous encouragement to its Rakhine policy. Otherwise, it could be under military mission of the US-led UN which would not be comfortable at all for China. However, China’s stand with and protection to Myanmar at the Rohingya quandary is a symbol of failure of the western powers to handle the situation that has already been reflected in their quick perseverance to line the ally states after the quad.

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. M Venkataraman, an interviewee of the study, is an assistant professor of the Department of Defence and Strategic Studies in University of Madras, Chennai, India.

### 7.2.2 Attainment of BRI Objectives

The Republic of China has always viewed the global geopolitical structure as made of American cultural, political, and economic principles and institutions where only the USA and its allies have been enjoying the amenities. This American order needs to be reconstructed if China wants to securitize its peaceful rising. The attempt of President Xi Jinping to incorporate the world community with China's ambition represents that goal to portray whatever China wishes, the globe wishes (Jinping, 2017; Engyin, 2018). The 'One Belt One Road' or the BRI is a framework of creating new Chinese global context where most of the states' energy sources and strategic locations will be connected through Chinese finances, currency, technology, infrastructure, transportation, experts, skill labour forces, and so on. Myanmar is a crucial point of this historical Silk Road across the land and sea. Its strategic location between the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean mounts the importance of its natural resources toward global powers.

Rahman argues that "China has multi-million-dollar project called Built Road Initiative (BRI) and Myanmar is crucial for its implementation". Though Myanmar has not officially joined the project, it has welcomed the Chinese initiative (Engyin, 2018). It is well-known that the Kyaukpyu project with an oil pipeline and a gas line at Rakhine state of Myanmar is part of China's Silk Road project plan. The implementation of the project will reduce the distance, time, and transaction costs of Chinese exports and imports via Kayukpyu port. Moreover, it will act as the gateway for China's southern-western part to South Asian, African, and European markets, as well as to the Indian Ocean. China has invested approximately 10 billion dollars to materialize a deep-sea port, a trade real estate, a special economic zone and others supplementary industrial and infrastructural clusters.

The BRI has been designed to materialize China's goal for founding the base of Chinese economic and global leadership. India's influence, the western sanction over the Myanmar government, or the UN's presence in Rakhine state might generate obstacles to the fulfillment of the BRI projects. It cannot be denied that Chinese investments and developmental projects have brought more sufferings than the improvement of the indigenous people. The inhabitants of the Rakhine state are also against the Chinese projects in the region due to low payments, uncompensated land confiscation, environmental degradation, and disruption to the traditional life and livelihoods (Joy, 2018). Among various Chinese projects, the construction of the Rakhine-Yunnan railway, a part of Kyaukpu project has also been canceled due to public agitation.

**Table 6**

*Suspended Chinese Projects due to Public Protest During Democratic Period*

<b>Chinese Projects</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Suspension</b>	<b>Restoration</b>
Myitstone Dam project in Kachin State	\$3.6 billion	September 2011	
Lepetdaung copper mine	\$1 billion	2012	2016
Railway link between Rakhine State and Yunnan Province of China	\$20 billion	July 2014	
Permission for preliminary ground inspections for a mine in Salingyi	-	2018	-

*Note.* Made by Author based on Mann (2019); Slow, Aung & Mon (2019)

China believes that the US-sponsored NGOs are responsible for cancelling these multi-million projects in Myanmar (Sun, 2014). In this situation, if the competitors got the opportunity to influence or force the Myanmar government to act on their wish, they could bring charge on a number of issues against the Chinese companies. Even the ARSA may attack the Chinese workers or the project areas and draw global attention. The Myanmar government might also charge more share and profit from these projects that the democratic government did with the CITIC Group. It obliged the CITIC Group to reduce its share from 85% to 70% ownership of the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone (Joy, 2018).

Such suspicion is not totally baseless. The weak government of Myanmar might do anything at any time at the exchange of support for its mass favoured atrocities over the Rohingyas. The cancellation of different international projects after the coup in 2021 proves the base of this fear. Obviously, China, owing multi-billion dollars investment there, had become worried of losing the good tie with the Myanmar government and the consequence thereof.

**Table 7***Suspended International Projects After the Change in Government in 2021*

<b>Project</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Suspension</b>	<b>Restoration</b>
Yangon-Dala Bridge,	South Korea	After the Coup on 1 <sup>st</sup> February, 2021	September, 2021
Thanlyin Bridge	Japan	After the Coup on 1 <sup>st</sup> February, 2021	-----
Upgrade of the Yangon circular railway	Japan	After the Coup on 1 <sup>st</sup> February, 2021	June, 2021
Upgrade of the stretch of railway between Bago and Taungoo	Japan	After the Coup on 1 <sup>st</sup> February, 2021	December, 2021

*Note.* Made by Author Based on The Irrawaddy (2022)

### **7.2.5 Economic interest**

The Republic of China is very much aware of its neighbour's economic vulnerability. The Myanmar economy, highly dependent on agriculture, fisheries, and forestry, ranks at the bottom of the development scale in the region. In 2017, if China did not support Myanmar at the Rohingya issue, the country might, in the face of isolation from the global economies, be influenced by its rival parties in any way or direction. It should not be forgotten that China has

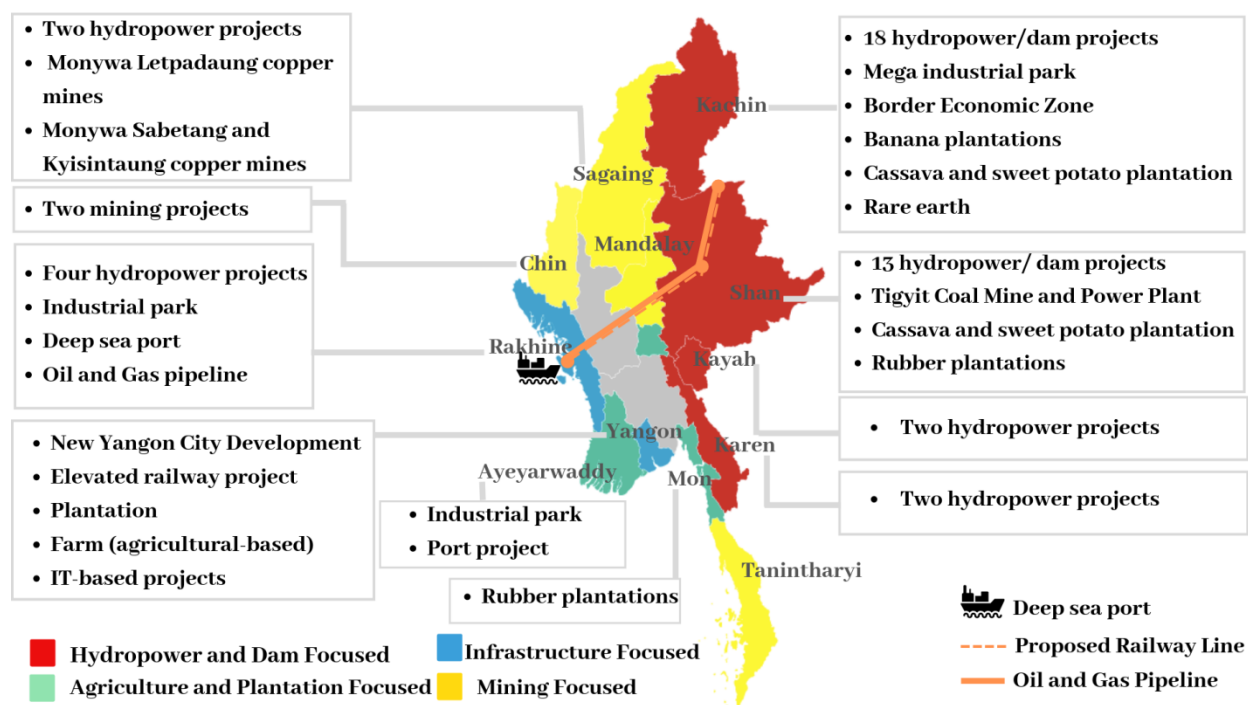


been taking the advantage of the poor economic condition of Myanmar due to international sanctions over it since 1988.

Over the years China has invested billions of dollars in multi-projects in Myanmar to exploit its raw materials, natural gas, oils, coals, petroleum and hydroelectric resource. It has cooperated with the Myanmar government to industrialize the economy with considerable amount of preferential loans, aids, and donations and sometimes dismissing the huge number of debts. Consequently, many state-owned sugar plants, plywood plants, textile factories, rice mills, satellite-ground station have been established in Myanmar.

## Map 7

### *China's Multi-Sector Investment in Myanmar*



*Note.* Adopted from Lwin (2019)

Thailand and South Korea have several mega-projects in energy exploration and exploitation in Myanmar. India has 30% share in the Shew gas project (current block A1 and A3 at Rakhine) with the Korean (60%) and Myanmar (10%) consortium but has lost the “status of preferential buyer” to PetroChina (Zhao, 2008, pp. 185-186). The PetroChina has also got the gas distribution rights. Simultaneously, Chinese companies have also taken the exploration rights to seven blocks, which cover almost 9.56 million hectares. Such competition has expanded both the Chinese and Indian investment in multi-modal projects. The Indian Kaladan Multi-modal project at Sittwe (the capital of Rakhine state), has been designed to have a connection between the Kolkata port and Sittwe port, establishment of an industrial zone, and setting up of an inland water terminal at Paletwa (Laskar, 2021). The project worth about \$484 million has been extended to the northern borderland Mizoram through a road and gas pipeline. The purpose of India is to counter the Chinese Kyaukpyu project in the same state, to ensure its share on Rakhine’s offshore gas and oil, as well as to keep an eye on the Chinese activities from this ground.

However, China is exceptional here as its involvement in Myanmar not only to feed the domestic hunger for energy temporarily, but also to securitize its future needs. It wishes to boost the national development through promoting the local economic and social development in all parts of the country. In this regard, Myanmar is very important to ensure a large amount of energy, natural resource, connection with Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean, as well the access to the all-regional markets. As all are competing for securitizing the lion share on the Myanmar’s energy and resources, their aim is to satisfy the Myanmar government in all aspects and China has done so with the Rohingya crisis.

## **Chapter Eight: Discussion and Conclusion**

The considerable land border, along with other territorial attributes of Myanmar, has projected it within the orbit of China's regional and global ambitions. Addressing each other as a "pawk-phaw" has, therefore, both diplomatic connotation and cultural meaning. The inhabitation of a large number of Chinese descendants and ethnic belonging in the north of Myanmar has been positively and negatively affecting Sino-Myanmar bonding. In this context, neo-classical geopolitics provides a well-equipped analytical tool to explain China's stand with Myanmar on the Rohingya issue. This lens has an open floor to connect the economic and military cooperation for the national interest, as well as socio-cultural aspects of political and historical relationship between two political entities.

### **The Structural Analysis of the Rohingya Crisis**

The brutal cleansing operation of Tatmadaw in the Rakhine state has brought some significant changes in the international affairs and relations. The worldwide criticism against the Myanmar government and its military has bittered the relationship that it was promoting since 2011 between western countries and Myanmar. Many Europeans had withdrawn their new investments and stopped the supply of weapons to Myanmar. Diplomatically, politically and economically, Myanmar has become sided from the rest of the world, except China. Along with the United Nations and the European Union, the USA as the global leader and protector of peace and human rights was legally bound to condemn this heinous activity against Rohingya. But China as a follower of 'non-interference policy' was free of such ideological barriers. However, China, Japan, India, and the USA were competing in the region for strengthening

their grasp in Myanmar in the name of providing diplomatic support and military cooperation to prevent the terrorist attacks of ARSA or completing the responsibility to protect humanity.

### **Agent's Perception**

The global context that has been affected by the military crackdown over the Rohingyas, has disclosed both challenges and opportunities for China. The US, EU, and India's swift engagement with the Myanmar government after its hug with democracy had somewhat cornered China's historical relationship with Myanmar. Some multimillion Chinese projects were suspended due to this (China sees it this way). However, the brutal ethnic cleansing operation against the Rohingyas has separated Myanmar from the western allies but opened the floor for China. China has taken this situation both as challenges toward its diplomatic capability and economic interests, as well as opportunity to side other powers from the Myanmar's intimacy. China's overall perception about its systematic stimuli, can be divided between a) challenges and b) opportunities.

#### **a) Challenges:**

Myanmar's geographic location is an important factor for shaping China's perception. Due to sharing a large border with Myanmar, China considers the security of Myanmar as an indispensable part of its own sovereignty. The situation of a third-party involvement in Myanmar to stop the government atrocities and penalize the governmental and military officials for their crime did not only frighten Myanmar but also created a risk to Chinese security. Therefore, most of the interviewed scholars and all the legal experts opined that this critical situation worried China a lot. Especially, the USA would get the opportunity to apply "the

responsibility to protect” principle in Myanmar if China did not veto the resolutions in the United Nations. Khair<sup>6</sup> (2022), a legal expert, remembers the devastating application of this principle in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Libya. As a neighbour of Myanmar, Beijing must be afraid of such intervention.

The third-party involvement in the crisis and the domestic stability in Myanmar are interconnected. China wants to ensure the good neighbour policy with its border countries and that is why it needs a stable Myanmar. China’s Yunnan province and Myanmar’s Shan and Kachin state share the same border, ethnic minorities, and a number of expatriate Chinese. Kondapalli<sup>7</sup> and Nathan (2022) think that an unstable Myanmar would speed the refugee flow in the Chinese frontiers. That is why in this study, the threat of sovereignty to China is the primary interest regarding the crisis.

However, scholars agree that the huge Chinese investment in Myanmar’s infrastructure and energy sectors is an important factor in shaping China’s perception of risks. Obviously, these projects would have been hampered if any of China’s rivals could establish mediatory role between Bangladesh-Myanmar, ARSA-Myanmar, Rohingya-Myanmar, or invade Myanmar in order to stop the atrocities on Rohingyas. China might also lose its opportunity to reach safely the Indian Ocean via Myanmar avoiding the Malacca strait. Along this, China has also been able to securitize its investments and mega projects that are inevitable for the development of its western parts and the successful implementation of the Belt and Road

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<sup>7</sup> Srikanth Kondapalli, an interviewee, is a Professor of the School of International Relations in Jawaharlal Nehru University, India.

initiative. Kondapalli (2022) states that the juncture has increased economic gaining of China by selling weapons to both Bangladesh and Myanmar.

**b) Opportunities:**

Among all darkness, it was hopeful for China that China's support to the Myanmar government in opposition to western's criticism would back Naypyidaw to its historically close relationship. Kondapalli and Mannan (2022) opine that Sino-Myanmar relationship is historically tributary and intimate. Moreover, this crisis has brought Myanmar once again closer to China. The increasing distance between neighbours during the establishment of semi-democratic government did not only worry China regarding Myanmar's loyalty but also became a matter of prestige issue for losing its old ally and advantage. However, China has very cleverly stood beside Myanmar and proved its real friendly nature to Naiypidaw taking the advantage of the situation. This strong bonding has multiplied the advantages of common border between these neighbours in the international relations and so resurgence of this relationship was China's primary interest during the juncture.

Moreover, this quandary has opened the door for China to be a mediator between Bangladesh and Myanmar. According to Kondapalli and Mannan (2022), "The mediatory role of China ousted the other powers from the influencing role in Myanmar". Forwarding one step, Venkataraman says if China did not support Myanmar, India was ready in the region to work for Myanmar. On the other hand, Nathan thinks that the Sino-USA rivalry tended Beijing to take such a decision. All the opinion shows that the decision to be with Naypyidaw is a diplomatic victory of China as all the major states were ready to pick the benefit of the critical situation in Myanmar.

### **China's Stand on Rohingya Issue**

The systematic stimuli and the agent's perception, as well as its capacities, play an important role in formulating foreign policy. China believes that all the rival powers are ready to encircle China through the interference in Myanmar's affairs. Therefore, it took decision to support Myanmar in the Rohingya crisis. The decision-making was not easy. China had to impair the image value of an incoming benevolent global leader in exchange of improving Sino-Myanmar bonding with Naypyidaw. In order to tackle the growing alignment in the region, specifically the "Quad", Myanmar's geographic location is very crucial for China. However, China's perception about the global affairs undermines the humanitarian nature of the crisis as well as the tremendous sufferings of Bangladesh.

### **China's Role in Post-Coup Civil War in Myanmar**

The military coup on 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2021 has dramatically shifted the political landscape in Myanmar. Alleging the widespread fraud in the 2020 election, the junta government has prisoned the NLD (National League for Democracy) leader Aung San Suu Kyi and notoriously crushed the anti-coup movement. The elected officials who could evade from the military aggression and the ethnic leaders have formed the "National Unity Government" (NUG) and "People's Defense Force" (PDF) in 2021 against the brutal repression of the military rule. From the "Civil Disobedience Movement" to NUG urged "People's Defensive War" in 2021 led to widespread civil war in Myanmar and the anti-coup protesters crowded border areas have become the bloody battlefield. All of these events did not only unsettle the China-Myanmar, India-Myanmar and

Bangladesh-Myanmar borders but also geo-political interests of external powers in Naypyidaw (see Thiha, 2023; Michaels, 2023).

While the USA could not enter Myanmar through the security council of the United Nations due to the veto of China on the Rohingya crisis, now its presence is felt there by dint of Burma Act. The promulgation of Burma Act in 2022 and then its incorporation into the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) by the USA has removed the legal barriers for Washington DC to provide the pro-democracy movement and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) with ‘non-lethal assistance’ and heightened the psychological pressure for the military government as well as China (see Hein, 2023). China has taken the parts of Burma Act and the NDAA as the challenges to its security from the USA while Naypyidaw’s domestic crisis is just an excuse (Thiha, 2023). Moreover, the foundation of the representative office of NUG in the Washington DC in 2022 and the PDF’s training under the retired Burmese-American soldiers along the Thai-border have provoked Beijing to be vigorously active in Naypyidaw’s civil war (see Thiha, 2023; Michaels, 2023). In the previous chapter 7, the author also was trying to say this that Beijing’s fear of the USA or other 3<sup>rd</sup> party’s direct involvement in Naypyidaw’s domestic crisis had instigated to take side with Myanmar. The USA’s those creative steps at this civil war have proved that China’s anxiety was not baseless.

Like the USA, China did not condemn the military junta but kept a moderate distance in relation. But following the Burma act, Beijing has adopted the “re-engagement policy” with both the military government and the ethnic groups in early 2023 (Michaels, 2023). It has sent special diplomatic envoys there to pursue the peace talk and revitalize the Sino-Myanmar relation and economic activities. In order to keep aloof the USA influenced NUG from the national politics, it has persuaded the EAOs to avoid the military solution and prioritized the loosely confederated



the “Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC)” in the dialogues with the military junta (Michaels, 2023). Even the Three Brotherhood Alliance has met the junta because of Chinese pressure. Whatever, the US support to the NUG and its armed force ‘the PDF’ has consolidated China’s consultative role to the military government.

The civil war has again vibrated Rakhine state and the Arakan Army, an ally of Brotherhood Alliance, has been fighting at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border against the military junta. Some Bangladeshis and one Rohingya died and some were injured at the frontier by the mortar shells coming from the battlefield (Hossain, 2024; Tayeb, 2024). While hundreds of members of Myanmar’s border and security forces have resorted to the Border Guard Bangladesh, thousands of Rohingyas are waiting at the frontier to enter Bangladesh. At this critical situation, Bangladesh government has again asked for China’s intervention to diffuse the tension between the conflicting groups in Myanmar (Tayeb, 2024). Thus, China holds a strong position in Bangladesh and Myanmar policy until the Rohingya crisis is resolved and the present political landscape of Myanmar clearly visualizes that this crisis is not going to be solved easily.

## Conclusion

The tremendous consequence of the US led invasion in Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of preventing terrorism, and its interference in the Arab spring in the name of people's democracy cannot be forgotten ever. Similarly, another US involvement in Myanmar in the name of protecting humanity may bring another devastation in human history; such fear especially beside China's border and in the China's ally territory has been a strong reason to provoke Beijing stopping a third party's involvement in Myanmar at any cost. This risk of third party's engagement had worried China more than the conventional Sino-India and Sino-US rivalries. The promulgation of Burma Act to provide moral support and non-lethal assistance to the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar by the USA has proved Beijing's such kind of fear again. That is why this study kept in focus this challenge in the primary interests immediately originating from the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. As other factors, such as preserving China's regional role in Asia and undeniable economic, energy, and strategic goals are highly connected with the peace in Myanmar, these have been discussed in the secondary interests. If the primary interests can be protected, then the secondary goals will be ensured.

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## **Appendix: 1.1**

### **Glossary**

**Agency:** “the act of trying to achieve a particular goal” (Flint, 2006, p.24)

**Agent:** simply refer to ‘doer’. The list of geographical agents may list from the individuals to group of individuals in the different scales like local, national, regional and global.

**Century of Shame (1839-1949):** also known as the century of humiliation, means the political, diplomatic, economic and military subjugation of China to western powers through a series of defeat in war and unequal treaties like 1<sup>st</sup> Opium War (1839-42), 2<sup>nd</sup> opium war (1856-60), Sino-French War (1884-1885), 1<sup>st</sup> Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), 2nd Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), Nanjing Treaty (1942), Whampoa (1884), Aigun (1858) and Shimonoseki (1895). As a consequence, China was coerced to open its many ports for trade, cede or lease lands to foreigners, pay compensations, moreover, lost sovereignty of its many areas to the western forces.

**Defensive Strategies:** were prevailed during the Maoist era in China. Any invader would face a people’s war in the vastness of China.

**Geo-economy:** a branch of geopolitics which explains the geographical influences on national and international economic activities.

**Geography:** a branch of knowledge that study the features, process and systems of the surface of the earth and environment including, land, river, sea, mountains, lakes, continent and so on along with their interaction with the human life.

**Geopolitical Code:** the manner by which a country determines its allies and enemies as well as the way of interaction among them.

**Geopolitical Representation:** the expression of geopolitical codes of a state before the audiences for attaining public support. Contains the material value and moral value of the codes but generally the moral values of a foreign policy are presented to the public.

**Geo-Strategy:** a -branch of geopolitics that accepting the limitations of national resource, insists on the military and political presence on the strategic areas of the world.

**Offensive Strategies:** China adopted this strategy to ensure the expansion of the new imperialism, the sea and the navy have become key - both for general reasons (every great power must ensure its maritime presence in the world) and specific ones: China has an immense coastline and must ensure secure access to the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

**The Responsibility to Protect/ R2P:** a principle to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. It has been formulated in 2005 by the UN. According to this principle, if the state fails to protect its population from the mentioned threats, then the states will take the collective action to stop those crimes.



5. Do you think, China would protect Myanmar in the same way like now if it would not have economic interest in Myanmar? Please explain your answer mentioning yes/no.
6. Did not the 'Rohingya Crisis' brought any opportunity to China?  
If yes, what are the benefits?

If no, why do not you think?

7. Some are talking about the China-India rivalry and some about the China-USA competition for pushing China behind the Myanmar government at all stake. Is there any possibility to connect both rivalries in a single thread here?
8. China had pressurized Bangladesh to solve it bilaterally. Then it came forward to fix it between them? Is there any benefit of this bilateral or China's mediation approach for China?
9. Do you think, China's mediation will help to resolve the problem, when it has already taken the side of one?
10. Is the developmental approach of China applicable for conflict resolution in Rakhine state when the government does not recognize the Rohingyas as citizens?
11. Almost all of the countries of Asia experienced colonialism, but the fear of sovereignty in Myanmar has been getting a particular attention from the global leader. Is it really a fact or an excuse to cover own failures to treat Myanmar on the right way

### **Appendix 1.3**

#### **List of Interviewees**

1. Andrew Nathan

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Date of Interview: 14/7/2022

2. Md. Abdul Mannan, PhD

Professor

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Date of Interview: 3/7/2022

3. Md. Mizanur Rahman

Assistant Professor

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Date of Interview: 13 /8/2022

4. Srikanth Kondapalli

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Date of Interview:25/9/2022

5. Khair Mahmud

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6. Dr. M Venkataraman

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