

# ISAS Brief

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## **The Rohingya Crisis: Potentials for Possible Changes in the Regional Security Architecture**

*The Rohingya issue has placed Bangladesh in a difficult situation. Dhaka cannot urge the displaced persons to go back to Myanmar of their own free will. At the same time, it cannot host them for too long a period without damaging its own economy substantially. The challenge for Bangladesh is to be able to muster sufficient pressure on Myanmar to create a situation whereby the Rohingyas could return home in safety and live with honour and security. The efforts in this regard could alter the ramifications of the regional politico-diplomatic architecture in South Asia.*

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Following the onset of the Myanmar Army's campaign in the Rakhine State since late-August 2017, according to the United Nations (UN) authorities, 582,000 Rohingyas have crossed over to Bangladesh. Nearly 300,000 had done so earlier. For a technical reason, the Bangladesh government prefers to call them 'displaced Rohingya Myanmar' rather than 'refugees'. Under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, refugees can only be persuaded to return voluntarily, and it is unlikely that the Rohingyas will go back unless there is a

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substantive change on the ground in the Rakhine State. On the other hand, Bangladesh cannot host them without a severe dent in its economy. So, for the Bangladesh government, the goal has got to be to ensure that necessary changes in the Rakhine State are effected to enable the Rohingyas to return home in safety, and live with honour and security. In the meantime, Bangladesh is planning to set up what could become the world's largest camp for displaced persons, to accommodate around 800,000 Rohingyas.

At the UN General Assembly, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina proposed a five-point plan of action. A key component was the creation of 'safe havens' in the Rakhine State for the Rohingyas under international or UN auspices. This is increasingly unlikely to happen as the Myanmar Army is not even allowing UN humanitarian access at this time – a senior UN official, Under Secretary General Geoffrey Feltman has just returned 'empty-handed' after futile talks with the Myanmar authorities. UN Secretary General António Guterres and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Prince Zeid bin Ra'ad Zeid al-Hussein have adopted a strong position that the Myanmar authorities are conducting 'ethnic cleansing'. President Emmanuel Macron of France has called it 'genocide'. A human rights body has described it as a 'crime against humanity'. Now all these three categories of action have distinct legal connotations that theoretically justify international intervention, for instance, under the principle of 'Responsibility to Protect', or simply 'R2P'.

However, this would require a UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution. China, and perhaps Russia, could veto that. China has great interest in the western Rakhine State. It includes the construction of a US\$7.2-billion (S\$9.8 billion) deep-sea port, where China's oldest financial conglomerate, the Beijing-based China International Trust Investment Corporation is involved. The Kyauk Pyu port is part of China's ambitious Belt and Road initiative. This infrastructure project on the Bay of Bengal would provide an entry point for a Chinese oil and gas pipeline that will give it an alternative route for energy imports from the Middle East, avoiding the Malacca Strait, a shipping choke point. There is also a plan for an industrial park as part of a special economic zone in the Rakhine State. Critics of China allege that it would require land for the industrial park, which is being facilitated by the Rohingya displacement, although others have deemed it to be a harsh judgment. Apart from China, Russia is likely to oppose any United States (US) or Europe-led initiative in the UNSC.

As such, the diplomatic challenge for Bangladesh and its supporters, such as, in this case, the US and the European Union, is to circumvent the UNSC, if possible. This can perhaps be done in three ways. First, they should initiate severe targeted sanctions against Myanmar's military leaders. Already Myanmar's military leaders are being seen as distinct from the toothless civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi which seems to have no influence. Also, it is widely believed that she is being used as a shield by the military to reduce international opprobrium against their activities. Her own reputation as a Nobel Peace Laureate has taken a serious beating. Since the prize cannot be rescinded, there is a growing call upon her to donate her prize money to the Rohingya welfare, which, if done, may be applauded abroad but taken harsh note of by her military, to whom now she seems content to play second fiddle. It appears as if she is infected by the 'Stockholm syndrome', an emotional behaviour pattern whereby the captive develops empathy for the captors (in this case the Myanmar Army). The sanctions may include freezing the relevant bank accounts in the US and Europe (already this is being mooted) and banning travels by the Myanmar authorities. Secondly, arrest warrants could be issued by Interpol and international or even local foreign courts under municipal law (possible in some countries) against Myanmar's military leaders and their civilian collaborators. Thirdly, all arms sales to the Myanmar Army could be blocked. Certain leaders in the West, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson included, still see Suu Kyi as the last remaining hope for a democratic Myanmar; hence, there is an ongoing effort to delink her from the military leadership. It is difficult to see how this could ever happen as the control by the military is now structural, endorsed by the Constitution. However, the almost unexpected support for Dhaka from Washington, as evidenced in US Ambassador Nikki Haley's strong critique of Myanmar, could have an impact on the politico-diplomatic security architecture in the region, reshaping the concepts held to-date by received wisdom.

Dhaka's last preferred option is military. Time is running out for Bangladesh here as massive procurements by the Myanmar Army could soon turn the balance in its favour. The sources of arms purchases by Myanmar are mainly China and Russia. Recently, Myanmar reportedly ordered 16 Chinese-Pakistani JF Thunder Multiple Fighters of which initial deliveries are expected to begin later this year. Their budget is of the order of US\$2.14 billion (S\$2.9 billion) and US\$2.33 billion (S\$3.16 billion), and Myanmar's military which controls the Parliament anyway can, through the Special Funds Law, grant itself additional resources. As of now, Bangladesh has a troop division forward-deployed close to the border with Myanmar.

The terrain in the Rakhine State is similar to that on the Bangladeshi side, giving Bangladesh an operational edge. There is an airfield in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh and some Rakhine targets could be within a striking distance of aircraft from there. The Bangladesh Navy also now has two submarines, with prospects of increased numbers. However, as stated above, the military balance may be changing with the passage of time.

Diplomatically, though, a military conflict will not be in Bangladesh's interest. First, it will shift the focus from the humanitarian crisis to a war situation, which has a completely different set of ramifications/implications. The international predilection could then be to secure a ceasefire, and the resolution of the substantive Rohingya problem would take a back seat. Second, there would be then a tendency of the young Rohingya males to join the war effort, turning the current resistance into long-term insurgency, which if Bangladesh supports – as it may find itself obliged to – would erode international empathy and goodwill. Unfortunately for it, this places the Bangladesh government between the devil and the deep blue sea.

The general sense in Bangladesh is to deploy its diplomatic assets to a maximum extent now (particularly in Beijing, Moscow and New Delhi). If the social media is a yardstick of judging public opinion, many Bangladeshis see China's lukewarm attitude towards their country as the price being paid for Dhaka's proximity to New Delhi, which bore no fruit either. India's failure to stand by Bangladesh, especially India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trip to Myanmar and the holding of Suu Kyi's hand, has not gone unnoticed in a country that was India's closest friend in South Asia, as also China's negative attitude towards it. Unexpected American support has been favourably noted. It seems, all of a sudden, the diplomatic-security architecture in the South Asian region could see some renovation. While there is an overwhelming sentiment not to take the military route, the Cromwellian dictum is not being disregarded by the Bangladeshis. Oliver Cromwell had famously urged upon his troops during the English Civil War, "Have faith in God, my men, but keep your powder dry!"

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