



China meets India in Rakhine

Implications for Bangladesh

M. Shahidul Islam

The Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) conducts research on and facilitates collaborative efforts among the academic community, government, private sector, civil society and development partners on governance, security, economic and human resource development, political and social order, and democratization.

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I. Introduction

Nearly one million Rohingya have poured into Bangladesh in the past few years caused by escalating violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State. This has created enormous demographic and economic pressure on Bangladesh. The demographic picture of the southernmost parts of Chattogram division has altered markedly generating a host of problems. The cost of delay in the repatriation of Rohingya refugees is staggering. An estimate suggests that considering the refugee population alone, the annual cost of food, shelter, education, and other basic needs would be a minimum of \$1,219 per refugee. The cumulative amount required to support refugees for a few years could be as high as \$12 billion. Under the most optimistic scenario based on a faster repatriation process, the cost would be about \$3.0 billion.

It was hoped that the world leaders would take a strong stance against the Myanmar government, forcing the regime stopping the violence in Rakhine as well as facilitating the repatriation process of the refugees. However, no permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (also known as the Permanent Five, Big Five, or P5) has strongly backed Dhaka to deal with the refugee problem. China and Russia render their support to Myanmar at the United Nations (UN) when the issue is debated. United States' (US) intention to solve the problem is at best half-hearted reflected by the fact that the issue was not even mentioned in President Trump's speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2017. Although owing to domestic political imperatives in Bangladesh, there is little interest to engage US in solving the Rohingya refugee problem. India, though it does not have a loud voice at UN, instead supports Naypyidaw condemning the terrorism in Arakan ignoring the flight of thousands of Rohingya people who mostly have taken refuge in Bangladesh. Similarly, Japan, another influential Asian power, backs Myanmar. As a result, Myanmar does not face any immediate security or economic threats such as sanctions forcing Naypyidaw, capital city of Myanmar since 2006, to solve the ongoing crisis.

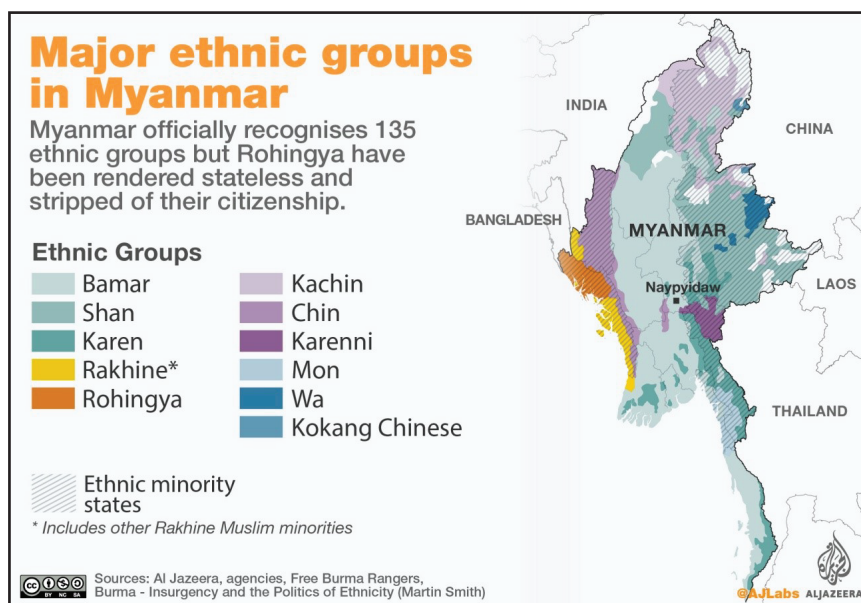
Why have several influential global and regional powers defended Myanmar even though the country has grossly violated human rights killing hundreds of people in troubled Rakhine state? What are their stakes in Myanmar? That said, this study discusses major regional powers, in particular, China and India, economic and geo-strategic interests in Myanmar following a brief overview of the country, and its historical and contemporary relations with Bangladesh. Then it focuses on how Bangladesh has missed opportunities to compete with the country's 'near-far neighbour' banking on its favourable geography. The final section provides policy suggestions.

II. Myanmar: An anthropologist's paradise and a statesman's nightmare

Myanmar is a highly complex society given the presence of a large number of ethnic groups and the country's linguistic and cultural diversity. It has 11 major ethnic groups (Graph 1).

There are Seven Bamar regions and seven ethnic states and six self-administration areas. The country has 93 political parties, two-thirds of which are ethnic-based. There are 110 armed organisations of varying sizes, most of them ethnic-based.

Graph 1: Major ethnic groups in Myanmar



Civil war and ethnic conflict have been a constant feature of Myanmar's socio-political landscape since the country attained independence from the British in 1948. In fact, ever since the British landed in Burma in 1886, it adopted infamous 'divide and rule' policy empowering the ethnic minorities instead of Bamar, majority of the population, sowing the seed of century-long ethnic conflicts. During World War II, ethnic minorities fought defending Britain. On the other hand, Aung San, the Burmese nationalist leader, and father of Aung San Suu Kyi led the Bamar backed Japan, but switched sides at the eleventh hour when the allied victory was apparent. Burma's ethnic conflict is the world's longest continuing civil war in which the ethnic Bamar Buddhist majority seeks to dominate dozens of non-Buddhist ethnic minorities resulting in enormous cost for the country. Consequently, from being the best-educated (apart from Japan) country in East Asia, it spiralled down over the ensuing 65 years to being possibly the worst educated as well as one of the poorest.

After independence, the Burmese military controlled the country fighting communists and various ethnic groups. The military has been involved in long term conflict with several ethnic groups. They include the Kachin conflict, between the Pro-Christian Kachin Independence Army and the government, a civil war between the Rohingya Muslims, and the government and non-government groups in Rakhine State, and a conflict between the Shan, Lahu, and Karen minority groups. Armed conflict between ethnic Chinese rebels and the Myanmar

Armed Forces resulted in the Kokang offensive in February 2015 forcing 40,000 to 50,000 civilians to flee their homes and seek shelter on the Chinese side of the border. The actions of the Burmese army, particularly in eastern Burma, have been argued to count as. The Burmese government's oppression against the Rohingya Muslims has been termed as a textbook case of ethnic cleansing by the United Nations. In its recent crackdown, over 3000 Rohingyas were killed, and half a million sought refuge in Bangladesh.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the military aimed to crush the ethnic armed groups. Having failed to do so, the government has adopted a reconciliatory approach in the 1990s assimilating all ethnic minorities, and faiths save Rohingya Muslims into the Bamar Buddhist majority. During 2011-16, a national ceasefire agreement was reached involving armed ethnic groups, although half of them did not sign on it.

In addition to adopting a reconciliatory approach with various ethnic groups, the military government initiated democratic reforms in the mid-2000s. In this pursuit, a new constitution was adopted in 2008, and a national election was held in 2010, resulting in a quasi-democratic government dominated by the military. However, in a free and fair election in 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi won in a landslide. Aung San Suu Kyi and her party took office in April 2016, although she was barred from the presidency. A new position is created titled state counsellor (Union Minister for Foreign Affairs), but analysts believe that it is the military that pulls strings behind the scenes. Thus, the country's democracy is very fragile, given its incomplete democratic transition, which left the military with three key ministries, a quarter of seats in parliament and control over the army and police. Some even doubted that if the country will at all make the transition. As a seasoned expert of the country's politics observed that "if the elected civilian government cannot make attempts to change the game, the transition will die a slow death, in the graveyard of hybrid regimes."

III. From Bangladesh's close neighbour to "near-far" neighbour

Myanmar is bordered by Bangladesh (170 km) and India to its west, Thailand and Laos to its east and China to its north and northeast. To its south, about one-third of Myanmar's total perimeter of 5,876 km forms an uninterrupted coastline of 1,930 km along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea.

Myanmar is also termed as 'near-far' neighbour of Bangladesh as there has been little business and people-to-people exchanges between the two countries in recent decades. Although there is a sub-regional initiative to forge greater connectivity and trade relations under the aegis of BCIM- EC (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor), the entity has made little headway in recent years, mainly owing to the rivalry between China and India. Nevertheless, there were long historical ties between the people of both

Bangladesh and Myanmar starting from the pre-Mughal era that continued till the British period. However, the relationship between the two nations deteriorated when the Rohingya issue surfaced in the 1970s.

The Rakhine state of Myanmar, formerly known as Arakan, where Rohingya people live has had very long relations with Bengal, in general, and Chattogram, also known as Chittagong, Chhattagrama, Chatigrama, Chatgaon, Chatgam and Chateeg , in particular. Because of its geographical proximity to the southeastern parts of Bengal, Arakan developed both political and cultural ties with Bengal. Being attracted to the splendid port privileges of Chattogram in the Indian Ocean, the interest of Arakanese in this part revolved around one hundred and fifty miles up the coast from the Mrohaung (Mrauk U), the capital of Arakan. The kingdom based in the city of Mrauk-U encompassed what is now known as Rakhine State, Myanmar, and Chattogram.

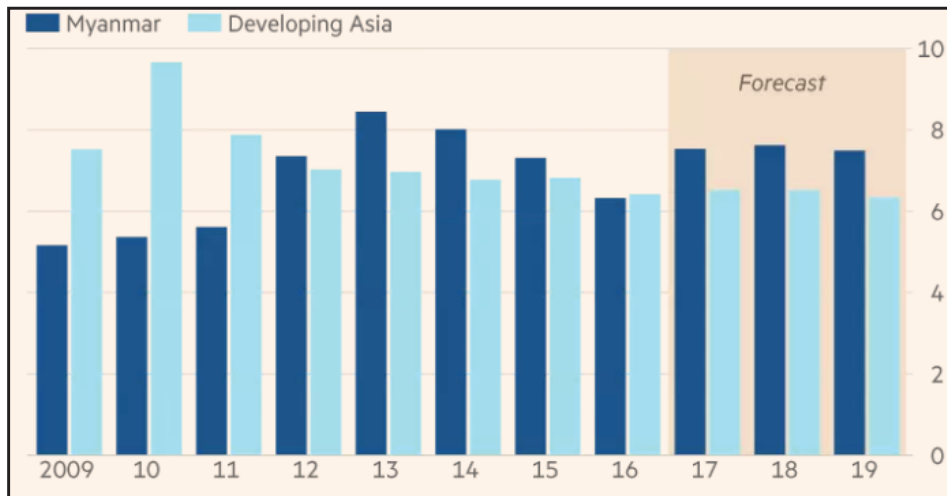
The recorded history shows that after 24 years of exile in Guar, the capital of Bengal sultanate, King Naramaikhla (Min Sowa Mun, 1404-1434), the ruler of the Kingdom of Mrauk U in the early 15th century, regained control of the Arakanese throne in 1430 with military assistance from the Sultanate of Bengal, becoming a tributary and remaining subordinate to Bengal until 1531. Following the death of King Naramaikhla, Arakan and Chattogram were involved in conflicts. The Arakanese king had firmly established his authority over Chattogram in 1575 and continued their rule up to 1666 when it lost control of it after a war with the Mughal Empire. After the fall of Chattogram in 1666, the kingdom of Arakan was reduced to vassalage.

Various parts of Burmese territories, including Arakan, were annexed by the British after their victory in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26). The First Anglo-Burmese War arose from friction between Arakan in western Burma and British-held Chattogram to the north. The lower Burma was annexed in 1852 after the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852-53). The annexed territories became the minor province of British Burma in 1862. Arakan became part of the province of Burma of British India in 1886 eventually becoming part of the Crown Colony of British Burma which was split off from British India in 1937. After the end of British rule in the sub-continent, Rakhine became part of the newly independent state of Burma. In 1973, Arakan became a state of Burma.

IV. China and India's interests and stakes in Myanmar

Myanmar's interaction with the rest of the world has been limited until the country initiated democratic reforms in post-2010s, resulting in low growth and development. However, since its transition to democracy, the country witnessed higher GDP growth, although in recent years, growth has shown a declining trend (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Myanmar's annual GDP growth rate (%)

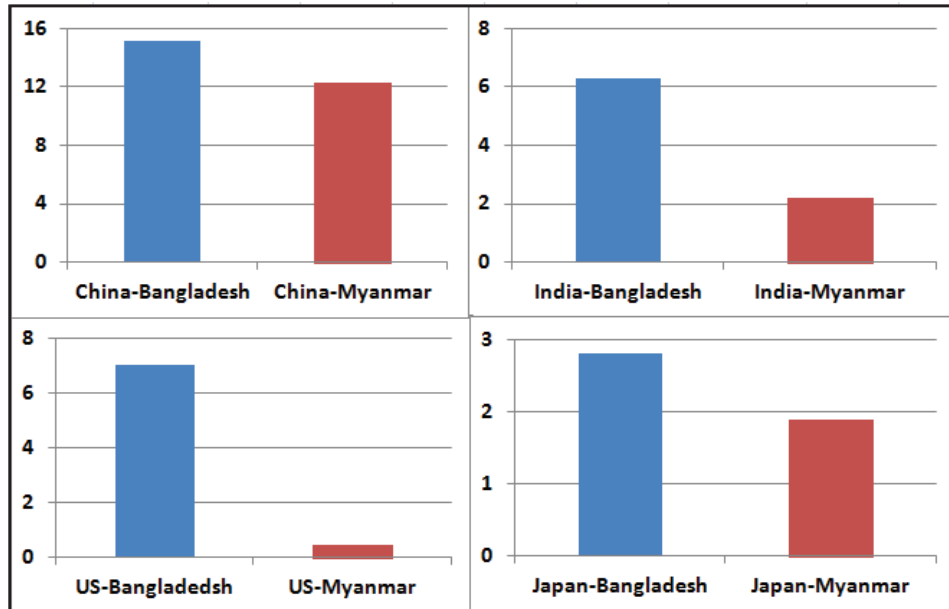


It is interesting to note that Bangladesh is in better-placed vis-à-vis Myanmar when it comes to trade relations with almost all the major regional and global powers. As reported in Figure 2, even the two-way trade between China and Bangladesh is higher than Myanmar-China trade. Similarly, Bangladesh is ahead of the country when it comes to trade with India, Japan, and the United States. Then what makes Myanmar so crucial to big powers, notably China and India?

Myanmar importance lies in its geographical location. Thanks to its favourable geography, the country is becoming a vital connectivity hub of Asia. There are at least three cross-border transport corridors being developed in Myanmar. They are:

- i. **East-West Corridor: Patheingyi - Yangon/ Thilawa - Bago - Thaketa - Hpa An - Kawthareik - Myawaddy - Mae Sot - Tak - Bangkok:** promises a strong potential to become an economic corridor in Myanmar providing easy access to regional and global markets and value chains.
- ii. **The Northern corridor: Ruili – Muse – Lashio - Mandalay – Monywa - Kalewa - Kale - Tamu - Moreh - Imphal.** It is a strategic corridor of India, Myanmar, and China with strong potential for growth in the medium and long term. It could potentially benefit Bangladesh as well if BCIM EC eventually takes off.
- iii. **The Southern Corridor:** Dawei - Kanchanaburi - Bangkok (Thailand) - Cambodia - Vietnam.^{xxv}

Figure 2: Bangladesh and Myanmar's trade with China, India, United States and Japan
(in Billion US\$, 2016)



The Ministry of Construction of Myanmar has been upgrading 36 North-South roads and 45 East-West roads to Union Highways forming a national network of highways. The aim of these projects is to upgrade all Union highways to tarred road when the ASEAN community takes shape in 2020 to promote the balanced development of all regions and states of the country.

Besides, the government has been developing three special economic zones along with three rivers and ports, namely, Thilawa, Dawei, and KyaukPhyu. Thilawa is a deep river port, located 25 km off south Yangon. The Dawei deep-sea port and special economic zone are located in Tanintharyi Region, closer to Thailand. The government aims to transform Dawei into Myanmar's and Southeast Asia's largest industrial and trade zone. The KyaukPhyu project, which is the largest of all, is located in Rakhine state. China is the key stakeholder of the \$10 billion megaproject. That said, we now look at two major powers, namely China and India's interest and stakes in Myanmar.

China and India's stakes in Myanmar

While economic interdependence between China and India increases, their geopolitical rivalry is also on the rise. Beijing and New Delhi have competing for visions to expand their geo-economic interests and perhaps supremacy in the region and beyond.

China has launched its grand vision under the aegis of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), previously known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR) in 2013. The ocean-based 21st Century Maritime Silk

Road and the overland Silk Road Economic Belt to increase trade and connectivity are backed by Beijing's financial might. India's vision is to expand its economic and strategic interests in its immediate neighbourhood and forge comprehensive ties with ASEAN. New Delhi intends to access overland routes to Europe and Central Asia bypassing Pakistan, reflected in its port development in Chabahar, Iran.

China is well ahead of India at this stage, expanding its strategic vision with an expectation that all roads will lead to Beijing. New Delhi is opposing China's BRI leading to geopolitical rivalry in Asia. There are heightened tensions between China and India on the former's development of multibillion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

The standoff between the two giants at the high altitude of Himalaya (Doklam) in 2017 is yet another example of New Delhi's policy to arrest Beijing's strategic interests in South Asia. It is China's port, and other strategic infrastructures build up in Sri Lanka, particularly during the regime of Mahendra Rajapaksa, that forced India to adopt a more pro-active stance against Chinese infrastructure build-up in the Bay of Bengal, in particular, and the Indian Ocean, in general.

Nevertheless, Myanmar is the place where both China and India's presence is visible more than anywhere else. To be more precise, it is the troubled Rakhine State of Myanmar, bordered by Chattogram to the northwest and the Bay of Bengal to the west, which sees greater presence of China and India with their investment and influence. Myanmar, which has been highly dependent on China for political and economic backing in the past, is now diversifying its portfolio partnering with India and other countries, including Japan.

China's stakes in Myanmar

China and Myanmar share a close linguistic link. The Burmese and Chinese are both parts of the Sino-Tibetan language and people. They were also involved in war and conflict in the past. The Qing dynasty fought the Sino-Burmese War (1765-79). Myanmar was the first non-communist country to recognise the People's Republic of China. It was the critical times of World War II China realised that Burma occupied a military necessity and geostrategic position of some importance. Not to mention the "Burma Road" has become a concrete and the most well-known example illustrating Chinese understanding of Myanmar's importance for China.

Yunnan province that shares a long border with Myanmar opens China to the Southwest connecting two oceans, the Pacific and the Indian, as well as East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. Yunnan shares 4,060 km land border with Laos, Myanmar (2000 km) and Vietnam. There are 11 first-category ports, 9 second-category ports, and over 90 passages to the outside world in Yunnan province. It is the linkage point between China's southwest, the Southeast Asian peninsula, and the South Asian Subcontinent. The province is the starting

point of the Yangtze River Delta economic zone as well as the Pearl River Delta economic zone. Sharing borders with Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Vietnam, Yunnan serves as the connective link between China, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. It offers an alternate route to the passage of goods through the Straits of Malacca and is the fastest land route for goods to travel from China to South Asia, the Indian Ocean, Europe, and Africa.

Beijing intends the country's frontier provinces Yunnan and Xinjiang, in particular, play a vital role connecting international borders facilitate trade, commerce, and other interactions. In this connection, Myanmar becomes very critical to Beijing, both economically and geo-politically. The government of Yunnan Province has invested US\$10 billion in Myanmar (in hydroelectricity, minerals, and agriculture), while Myanmar entrepreneurs have also invested \$100 million in the province. Overall, between 1998 and 2014, China invested nearly \$15 billion in the country in a host of infrastructure and industrial projects (Graph 2).

Graph 2: Key Chinese projects in Myanmar



Source: "China Moves to Revive its Sway in Myanmar", *The Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2016

Yunnan province has a strategy on transport connectivity termed 'Yunnan International Passage' consisting of three vertical lines, three horizontal lines, and nine passages. In light of Yunnan's road layout on International Passage, three road lines are reaching the China-Myanmar border in the six lines of three vertical and three horizontal. In "Nine passages", two passages are leading to Myanmar. The roads of Kunming-Ruili-Yangon and Kunming-Tengchong-Myanmar-India are the updated versions of the Burma Road (the Stilwell Road).

The Kunming-Ruili-Muse-Mandalay-Yangoon is the leading trade and connectivity route of China and Myanmar. In the China-Myanmar border, there are two main trading ports and cross-border industrial zones- Ruili and Wanding. The project on Opening-up and Experimental Zone and the Border Financial Comprehensive Reform Pilot Area in Ruili has been adopted.

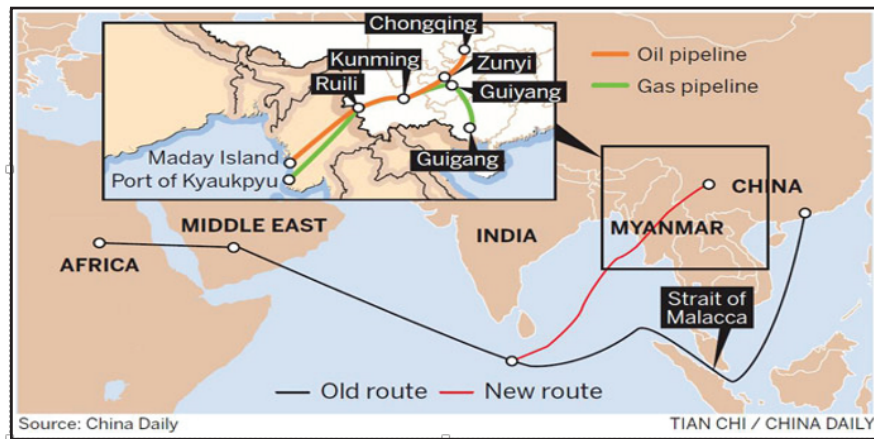
Bordering Myanmar, the Ruili Development and Experimental Zone (RDEZ) was established in Ruili, which is the biggest land port of Yunnan. RDEZ is located at the intersection of Southeast Asia and South Asia. The China-Myanmar oil and gas pipeline (793 km gas pipeline and 771 km oil pipeline) project also passes through the region. Ruili is linked with Muse, a border town and port in Myanmar's northern Shan state, which is connected to Myanmar's second-largest city Mandalay via Lashio. The historic Burma Road (the Ledo Road) reaches Yunnan through Mandalay, Lashio, and Muse.

China's \$10 billion investment in Rakhine state

China has invested heavily in Rakhine state. A \$2.45 billion pipeline from Rakhine to China's Yunnan province is already operational, securing a key route for Beijing to import crude oil from the Middle East (Graph 3). The pipeline that stretches 770 kilometres from Kyaukpyu in western Myanmar (Rakhine state) to Southwest China is aimed at reducing the country's reliance on oil supplies that pass through the US controlled Strait of Malacca, giving the country greater energy security. The pipeline can carry up to 22 million tons of oil a year, about 5 to 6 per cent of China's annual oil imports.

Moreover, it has an ambitious infrastructure development plan worth \$7.3 billion in the state. The Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone and deep-sea port project is one of the major projects of China's BRI project in the region connecting the country to the Bay of Bengal. A consortium led by China's CITIC Group has proposed taking a 70-85 per cent stake in the \$7.3 billion deep seaport, which is far higher than the joint venture (50/50) proposed by Myanmar. The port is part of two projects that include an industrial park, to develop a special economic zone. CITIC was awarded the lead role in both initiatives in 2015.

Graph 3: China-Myanmar Oil and Gas Pipeline



India's stake in Myanmar

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, was once the province of British India in 1886. In 1937, it was made a crown colony of Britain using it as a buffer zone between India and the rest of Asia. The British initially termed the country 'Further India'. However, in the post-independence era (after 1948), the relations between India and Myanmar varied markedly. While China backed the Military government of Myanmar, India rendered its support to the country's pro-democracy movement. However, since the 1990s the relationship between the two countries has changed for the better as Delhi reversed its decades-old policy of isolation and began to deal directly with the Military junta.

New Delhi's adoption of Look East Policy in the 1990s lifted Myanmar's importance as it is the land bridge between South- and Southeast Asia. India's current Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled India's new "Act East Policy," in 2014 convincing Southeast Asian countries that his government is serious about boosting ties with the region. From security perspectives, Myanmar is very critical to maintaining political stability in Northeast India. The four states of NEI (Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland) share a common border of 1,643 km with Myanmar. India and Myanmar work closely to limit the influence of Naga insurgency. Moreover, as China's clout increases in Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal, New Delhi intends to counter the influence increasing its presence in the country. The confluence of all these factors has prompted Delhi to initiate maritime and other infrastructure development in Myanmar. They include the Kaladan multimodal project, a road-river-port cargo transport project, and India-Myanmar-Thailand Asian Trilateral Highway.

In April 2008 India and Myanmar signed the agreement of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. The project, consisting of river dredging and port and road construction, will connect Sittway in Rakhine State with Mizoram in India, providing land-locked

northeastern India with a vital route to the Bay of Bengal along the Kaladan River (Table 1). The project is divided into three phases and is being pushed forward with the redevelopment of Sittway port.

Table 1: The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project segments

<u>Stretch</u>	<u>Mode</u>	<u>Distance</u>
(1) Kolkata to Sittwe port in Myanmar	Shipping	539 km
(2) Sittwe to Paletwa (River Kaladan)	Inland Water Transport (IWT)	158 km
(3) Paletwa to Indo-Myanmar Border (in Myanmar)	Road	110 km
(4) Border to NH.54 (Lawngtlai) (in India)	Road	100 km

Source: Ministry of Development of Northeastern region, India

India-Myanmar Friendship Road and Border Road in Chin State

The India-Myanmar Friendship Road is an integral part of India-Myanmar-Thailand Tripartite highway. The 160 Km Tamu-Kalewa road in Sagaing Region was built and commissioned in February 2001. Upgrading of the road had been carried out in recent years.

In addition to Tamu which was opened as a border trade point in April 1995, while the second Myanmar-India border trade point Reedkawdah in Chin State was launched in January 2004. There are two border roads linking India and Myanmar in Chin State, namely the Falam-Reedkawdah Road (67 miles) and Tiddim-Reedkawdah Road (32 miles). Myanmar and India have agreed to upgrade the Tiddim-Reedkawdah Road. The road currently is an earth road and Public Works of the Ministry of Myanmar is commissioned to upgrade it phase by phase.

China is ahead of India in terms of investment and influence in Myanmar. However, New Delhi is an answer, at least partly, to Naypyidaw's current policy to reduce its over-dependency on Beijing. In doing so, the country faces enormous diplomatic challenges to manage the two Asian giants. Nevertheless, there are some real challenges both for China and India beyond their rivalry. Myanmar's volatile politics and fragile society are some constant worry for Beijing and New Delhi as they pump billions of dollars in the country. While there is a ceasefire with several ethnic groups, the country has been waging the world's longest continuing civil war in which the ethnic Bamar Buddhist majority seeks to dominate dozens of non-Buddhist ethnic minorities. The volatile Rakhine, the home of Rohingyas, is a real worry for all the parties.

V. Bangladesh loses its geo-economic importance to Myanmar

Bangladesh's trade and other economic advantages are probably not enough to compete with Myanmar when it comes to the latter's geography. It is no denying that Myanmar has an edge vis-à-vis Bangladesh in terms of geographic location as it lies at the intersection of Southeast Asia and South Asia. Nonetheless, Bangladesh's geography is no less critical, at least as far as India and other smaller nations of South Asia are concerned. Given its size of domestic market and location, Bangladesh is equally attractive to China. China's interest not limited to the shores of Rakhine. It has been eyeing to develop similar maritime and other infrastructure in Chattogram, barely 150 km from Rakhine, further expanding its interest in the world's largest bay. India is visibly nervous as China's presence in Bangladesh rises. New Delhi has been successful thwarting Beijing's multi-billion dollar plan to develop a deep seaport in Chattogram for sine die resulting winners and losers in regional geopolitics.

Thus, the key difference between Naypyidaw and Dhaka is that the former has been successful in utilising its geography, creating a competitive space for China and India, among others. Both Beijing and New Delhi are developing ports, including a deep seaport, and Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in Rakhine. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has not utilised its geography strategically. In recent years not only Myanmar, even small island country Sri Lanka has developed sophisticated maritime infrastructure including a deep seaport. Pakistan has built Asia's one of the largest deep seaports in Gwadar, and it is currently developing multi-billion-dollar SEZ with the help of China. India has at least ten significant seaports and currently building one in Kerala. Bangladesh is the only the country in this part of the world that has failed to modernise its maritime infrastructure utilising the country's thousand-year-old port city Chattogram, located at the heart of Bay of Bengal.

Beijing's interest to develop a deep seaport in Chattogram was successfully thwarted by some influential regional powers on security concerns. They reasoned: China's 'string of pearl' strategy, which is associated with a series of port and other maritime infrastructure build-up in the Indian Ocean is a security threat. There were, however, proposals from UAE and the Netherlands, both have experience in port development, to build maritime infrastructure in Chattogram. However, successive governments in Bangladesh have failed to capitalise those opportunities leaving Chattogram impoverished, ultimately jeopardising the country's core interest.

The cost of not having a deep-sea port is enormous. The existing infrastructure of Chattogram port has reached its limit long ago. The cost of cargo handling is much higher in Chattogram port as mother vessels cannot dock at the port. A deep seaport could not only help Bangladesh economy; it is also bound to reshape the economic geography of the region. Such an infrastructure is often followed by the development of SEZs drawing substantial investment. However, surrendering to regional powers, the current government has adopted the second-best solution developing limited scale ports in Payra and Matarbari.

Not only in terms of maritime infrastructure, in the past few years one observes the centre's neglect of Chattogram. The so-called commercial capital is lagging behind Dhaka. Per capita capital expenditure, critical for its long term development, for instance, in Chattogram is barely \$3 compared to Dhaka's \$11. Had the capital was serious in developing its port city, Bangladesh's position in regional geopolitics would have been very different from what it is today.

Bangladesh's domestic politics is to blame

It is the domestic political weaknesses of Bangladesh that bar the country taking independent decisions to develop maritime infrastructure. Given the country's weak political institutions, it often fails to form a bi-partisan consensus on core national interests. This allows the regional powers meddle through in its internal politics jeopardising national interests.

There is no consensus between the major political parties, the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), on deep-sea port development and transit facilities to neighbouring countries, among others. As a result, the country has largely failed to exploit benefits from its favourable geography. Like most other issues, on the question of Rohingya refugee crisis, the AL government has put the party's interest ahead of the country dismissing the need for a bipartisan consensus.

Whereas, it is remarkable to see that on the question of development of Rakhine and Rohingya refugee issues, there is a consensus between the Myanmar military echelon, Bamar nationalists and Aung San Suu Kyi-led NLD.

VI. The way forward

In the post-American South Asia, China and India have emerged as both economic partners and geopolitical competitors. Myanmar's Rakhine, which is barely 150 km away from the Southern part of Bangladesh, is fast becoming an economic and geostrategic hotspot of the Bay of Bengal. This offers both challenges and opportunities for Bangladesh.

If Bangladesh intends to be an influential economic and geopolitical player in the Bay of Bengal, there is no alternative but to develop maritime infrastructure in Chattogram. The settlement of maritime boundaries with India and Myanmar is a significant advantage in this regard. It is now high time for Bangladesh to develop blue economy capitalising the opportunities arise from China's BRI and Japan's Big-B (the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt), among others.

There should also be efforts to negotiate with New Delhi and Naypyidaw to link Chattogram with the Kaladan Multimodal Transport and Transit Project to access ASEAN markets taking the

advantages of geographic proximity and economic complementarities. Not to mention, India is getting similar benefits connecting the Northeast with its core utilising Bangladesh's geography.

There should be diplomatic efforts to resolve security issues involving Rakhine and Southern Bangladesh looking at the issue beyond refugee crisis. Given the experience dealing with the Rohingya refugee crisis bilaterally, there is a need for engagement of US and other European powers. Their involvement could exert significant pressure on Myanmar and could lessen Dhaka's dependency on Beijing and New Delhi in dealing with the ongoing refugee crisis as well as preserve other geopolitical interests in the Bay of Bengal and beyond.

Finally, there is a need for national consensus, in particular, the political consensus among major parties on Bangladesh's core national interests. Otherwise, all these opportunities will remain elusive. Unless Dhaka wakes up, Rakhine will forge ahead becoming one of the most critical geo-economic hotspots of Bay of Bengal leaving Chattogram further improvised and making Bangladesh subservient to regional powers.

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(Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own)

ⁱ According to a report United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), owing to refugee activities at least 100 hectares of croplands in Teknaf-Ukhiya region were damaged and about 4,818 acres of reserve forest destroyed. The Rohingya influx has caused 14.3 percent wage reduction of all labourers among the host community in Teknaf. The region's social sector, notably health and education, is ill-equipped to provide services even to the local population (Daily Star 2019 and Islam 2019).

ⁱⁱ Islam, M. Shahidul. 2019. Rohingya crisis: donor fatigue: risk of social and political unrest. Financial Express, 26 July 2019. Available at: <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/views/rohingya-crisis-donor-fatigue-risk-of-social-and-political-unrest-1563720788>

ⁱⁱⁱ The two other veto powered United Nations' European members- England and France - also did not take a strong position on the Rohingya refugee issue. Although these three trans-Atlantic nations expressed their concerns on the plights of Rohingyas and urged Naypyidaw to solve the crisis taking back the displaced people.

^{iv} There is a limited security sanction- the US government has imposed sanctions on Myanmar's military leaders over Rohingya abuse.

^v The Bamar are the dominant ethnic group in Myanmar. Bamar people live primarily in the Irrawaddy River basin and speak the Burmese language.

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- vi Aung, Khin Mai. 2017. The Colonial Roots Of Myanmar's Rage Against The Rohingya And Why I Didn't See It Earlier. Huffington Post, 19 December 2017. Available at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-colonial-roots-of-myanmars-rage-against-the-rohingya_b_5a388f2ee4b0c12e6337b051
- vii Stanley A. Weiss. 2017. Did Aung San Lead at Panglong – or Follow? Myanmar's ethnic minorities have a different view on Aung San's place in history. *Diplomat*, July 21
- viii Lex Rieffel. 2017. Peace in Myanmar depends on settling centuries-old ethnic conflicts, Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2017/03/20/peace-in-myanmar-depends-on-settling-centuries-old-ethnic-conflicts/>
- ix Burmalink. Overview of ethnic conflict. Available at: <https://www.burmalink.org/background/burma/dynamics-of-ethnic-conflict/overview/>
- x *ibid*
- xi The military government of Myanmar has been negotiating separate ceasefire agreements with each group narrowing the conflict to a handful of groups but not in resolving the basic conflicts.
- xii Lex Rieffel. 2017. Op. cit.
- xiii Financial Times. 2017. Myanmar's new regime flounders over Rohingya crisis. September 29.
- xiv *ibid*
- xv These place-names are available in numismatics, archival and literary sources of the medieval and early modern periods.
- xvi *ibid*
- xvii Chittagong which has been a seaport since ancient times fell under of the rule of the Gupta Empire, the Pala Empire and the Vesali kingdom of Arakan till the 7th century.
- xviii Islam et al, forthcoming
- xix He shifted the capital from Launggayet to Mrohaung near the frontier of Bengal. Also see, Bengal-Arkan relations: A study of historical perspective. Available at: <http://rohingyastudentunion.com/2014/04/02/history/the-significance-of-the-termkulafor-the-rohingyas-and-burmese-muslims/>
- xx The Arakanese king in fact operated as a satellite of Sultan of Bengal and orbited around assuming a Muslim name and striking coins with Muslim Kalima.
- xxi After gaining independence from Bengal, it prospered with help from the Portuguese settlement in Chittagong. The Arakanese carried out slave-raids by sea and relocated their captives as farm labourers in the kingdom of Arakan.
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- xxiii See Banglapedia. Available at: <http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Arakan>
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- xxviii The Sino-Tibetan languages, also known as Tibeto-Burman or Trans-Himalayan, are a family of more than 400 languages spoken in East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia.

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