

Rohingya: Victims of a Great Game East

In the vulnerable southeastern Bangladeshi city, Cox's Bazar, an estimated 1 million Rohingyas languish in spartan refugee camps following brutal ethnic cleansing from their homes in Rakhine, a state over the border in western Myanmar (see Figure 1).¹ This was not the first—nor likely to be the last—catastrophe to fall upon the Rohingya, but it has been the most devastating since anti-Rohingya violence in the country began escalating in the early 1990s. Since independence from the British in 1948, the Rakhine state has generally been neglected by Myanmar's capital, Naypyidaw, affecting the state's Buddhists, Muslims (not all of whom are Rohingya), Christians, animists and others. There is a long-standing belief among the Buddhist majority that Muslims seek to undermine Myanmar's Theravada Buddhist identity, stemming from fears of Rohingya Muslims in particular, but increasingly toward all Muslims in Myanmar generally. Myanmar's extremist clergy, called Sangha, and their followers are joined by counterparts in Sri Lanka and Thailand who also espouse conspiratorial canards of Muslims weaponizing their fertility and male virility to achieve numerical, social, religious and cultural dominance in these countries, and thus eradicate Theravada Buddhism in those nations.

Buoyed by the support from key international partners, Myanmar has both downplayed the extent of the alleged atrocities and justified the actions it admits to taking against the Rohingya by insisting that even ordinary Rohingya are coconspirators with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which launched several high-profile insurgent attacks against security forces based in Rakhine in October 2016, August 2017, and most recently in January 2018. Myanmar contends, with

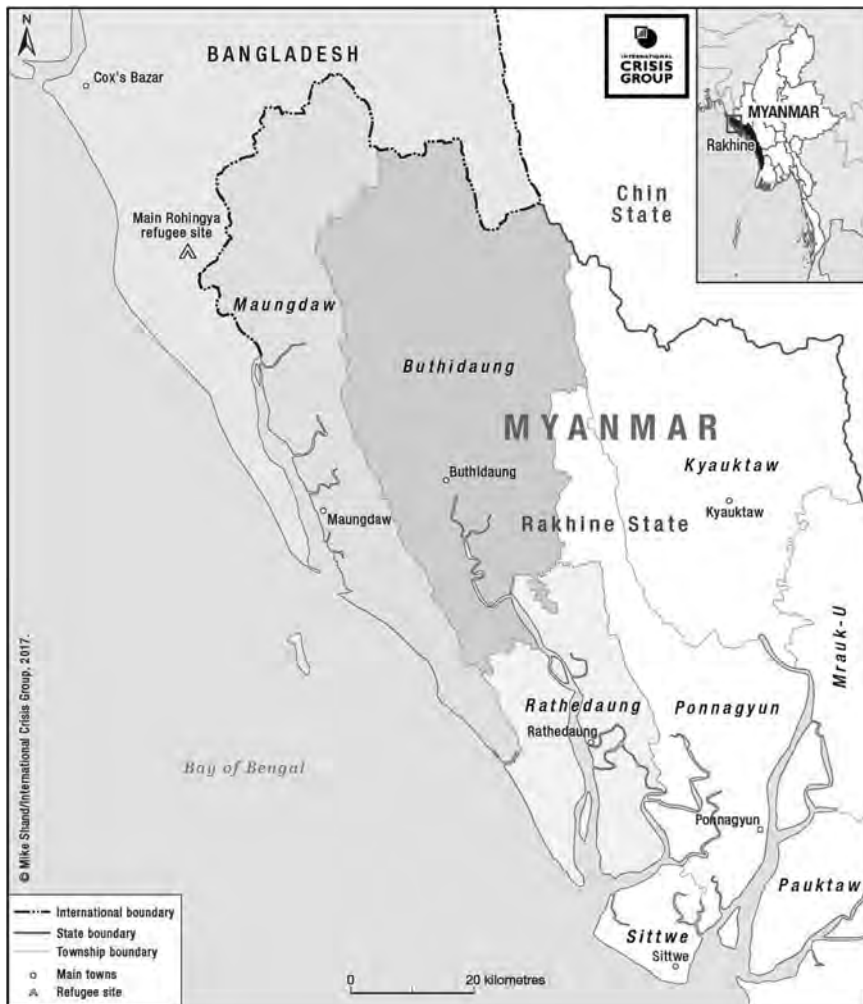
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Figure I. Map of Rakhine Townships in the Region



Source: International Crisis Group, “The Long Haul Ahead for Myanmar’s Rohingya Refugee,” Crisis Asia Report no. 296, May 16, 2018, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/296-the-long-haul-ahead-for-myanmar_0.pdf.

very little substantiation, that ARSA is an Islamist militant group that aggregates the interest of Myanmar’s Muslim mosaic to undermine the Buddhist nature of the state.² Some authors and journalists alike have been quick, with just as little evidence, to assert that the Rohingya are the next wave of jihadists.³

While the Rohingya endure a life of hardship in the world’s largest and most population-dense refugee camps, the paralyzed international community remains unable to persuade Myanmar to create conditions to facilitate their voluntary and safe return, due to conflicting equities in what Bertil Litner, a respected

Thailand-based scholar of Asian affairs, has rightly called *The Great Game East*, referencing the strategic competition between India and China in Southeast Asia.⁴ In the meantime, Bangladesh has been forced to manage the situation largely on its own, with financial support from segments of the international community.⁵ While the international community is paralyzed into inaction by conflicting strategic interests, domestic politics within Bangladesh and Myanmar foreshadow an arduous and miserable road ahead not only for the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, but for the remaining 100,000-250,000 Rohingya who are still in Myanmar's Rakhine state, many of whom are in camps in the city of Sittwe or denied freedom of movement in their home townships.⁶

There are disturbing implications of the current impasse.

Why are the people who call themselves “Rohingya” statelessness and suffering? What are the international and domestic factors that preclude any meaningful access to justice for these people? And what are the disturbing implications of the current impasse and some of the worrying futures we may confront?

“Rohingya”: An Ethnicity Forged Through Communal Violence?

If you use the word “Rohingya” in Myanmar, you will be met with consternation; the Buddhist majority deplors it as a loaded neologism created by Chittagonian Bangladeshis to both establish a unique ethnic identity within Myanmar and to lay claim to a Myanmar-based heritage and lineage that Buddhists vigorously oppose.⁷ Bangladeshi citizens are similarly dubious of the term, asserting that Rohingyas are not indigenous to Bangladesh and belong instead in Myanmar.⁸ Why do the self-proclaimed Rohingyas insist upon a designation that alienates them from both countries whose border their stateless population straddle?

It is important to acknowledge that the scholarship on this word's ethno-historical origins itself is riven with partisanship that indicates the scholars' stances on the politics of the term. Those who deny the indigeneity and long Myanmar lineages of this group denounce “Rohingya” as an invented word in order to undermine their claims to rights in Myanmar. Those who align themselves as activists on behalf of the Rohingyas insist upon its use and posit a long pattern of settlement in Rakhine that entitles them to Myanmar citizenship. While I am uninterested in mediating this debate, features of this dispute are salient to the fate of these people languishing in camps in Bangladesh and within Myanmar.

According to reputed historian Jacques Leider, the word itself is simply an Sanskritized form of Rakhine, which is derived from well-known linguistic transformational patterns of specific characters. In other words, Rohingya (and its

variants such as Rakkhanga, Rakhanga, Rooingya, etc.) simply is a geographical reference rather than an ethnicity. (By way of example, while Indiana denotes a place where I lived, it does not say anything about my ethnicity.) Leider asserts that there is but one precolonial use of the word (in the variant of “Rooinga”) that occurs in a 1799 article on the comparative vocabularies of spoken languages in the Burma Empire.⁹ These Muslims’ ancestors began arriving in Arakan (the previous name for Rakhine) from Chittagong (in contemporary Bangladesh) in the 19th century.

Leider, mobilizing earlier scholarship and primary sources, argues that the term’s origins as an ethnic identifier should be situated in 1942 when the Japanese invaded what was then known as Burma, resulting in the March/April collapse of the British administration of Arakan. Within days, communal violence erupted when Arakanese Buddhists—who largely sided with Japan as part of a larger struggle to secure Burma’s independence from the British—attacked Muslims in many Arakan localities in the south, killing or driving them away. In retaliation, Chittagonian Muslims, as they were then known, attacked Arakanese Buddhist villagers in the north, essentially cleansing these townships of Buddhists and precipitating an ethnic dispersal between what would become an essentially Muslim north and a Buddhist south in what is now Rakhine.¹⁰

As India’s and Pakistan’s independence neared, several Muslim leaders from Rakhine met with Muhammad Ali Jinnah (the leader of the All India Muslim League and chief proponent of the Pakistan movement) in Dhaka (the capital of contemporary Bangladesh) in July 1947 to discuss the possibility of including the Muslim-dominant areas of northern Rakhine into what would become East Pakistan. (In 1971, East Pakistan became Bangladesh after a civil war in which India intervened.) Jinnah rejected arguments to appropriate Burmese sovereign territory into his emergent Pakistan to avoid antagonizing the soon-to-become independent Burma, reassured General Aung San (considered to be the father of Burmese independence and the father of current state counselor Aung San Suu Kyi) that he supported these Muslims’ integration into what would become independent Burma. Jinnah died in 1948, shortly after independence, and the issue of Muslim-majority townships in Burma joining Pakistan did not arise again.¹¹

As late as 1960, both Muslims and Buddhists of Rakhine were clearly courted during the Burmese election campaign: Prime Minister Nu promised that Rakhine would be granted the status of an ethnic state, just as many other major ethnic areas were designated to appeal to Buddhists, *and* that there would be an autonomous zone within Rakhine to court the Rakhine Muslim vote. The plan to grant statehood to Rakhine evaporated following army chief Nu Win’s 1962 military coup, which began the long-lasting military control over the country’s affairs. By the time the idea for Rakhine autonomy surfaced again in 1973, the *junta*’s new

constitution ultimately made Rakhine a separate state, but jettisoned any notion of an autonomous area for Rakhine's Muslims.¹²

Throughout the next 40 years, the military *junta* viewed Muslims warily, and conducted brutally violent operations in Rakhine, including a 1977 operation to tackle illegal immigration (Nagamin or "Dragon King"), which drove some 200,000 Rakhine Muslims to flee to Bangladesh. Most returned within a year due to pressure from Bangladesh, which was itself under a military dictatorship. Later in 1992, a quarter of a million Muslims fled to congested camps in Bangladesh after the junta imposed draconian conditions—including seizing agricultural lands and imposing forced labor. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) oversaw the repatriation of about 200,000 of these refugees, even though it decried the poor conditions under which repatriation took place including involuntary repatriation.¹³ By the early 2000s, a restless peace settled in Rakhine with notable exceptions of anti-Muslim violence in 2001.

Rohingya in Contemporary Myanmar's Politics

In 2010, after 20 years, Myanmar's citizens participated in multiparty elections, which were marred by the *junta*'s tight control over the exercise. Rakhine Buddhists were outraged when the junta-established Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) pledged to grant Rakhine Muslim citizenship as a part of those elections in which they were allowed to vote. In May 2012, Buddhists' simmering contempt for Muslims exploded into violence in the northern part of Rakhine state, as well as in and around the provincial capital of Sittwe, after several Muslim men raped and killed a Buddhist woman. Later in June, a mob in central Myanmar, incited by an anonymous campaign of inflammatory flyers targeting Muslims, lynched a group of ten Muslims. As retaliatory violence spread back and forth, the government declared a state of emergency and deployed additional troops to enforce it. During this period, although a modicum of order resulted for a few months, several hundred Rakhine Muslims were killed or injured according to government figures, in addition to over 5,000 homes destroyed, mostly belonging to Rohingya, and another 75,000 people—again mostly Rohingya—displaced.¹⁴

While the Muslims of Rakhine state have long been rendered stateless and subject to longstanding deprivation of basic human—much less civil—rights, what has generally been noted is their lack of violent mobilization with exceptions of small-scale and ineffectual periods of violence.¹⁵ This appeared to change in October 2016 when a previously unheard-of group,

The Muslims of Rakhine state have long been stateless and deprived of basic rights.

Harakah al-Yaqin, waged a series of attacks on the headquarters of Myanmar's Border Guard Police and two other bases. Harakah al-Yaqin subsequently rebranded itself as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in English. Whereas previous Rohingya militias were based in the hills along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, and launched hit-and-run attacks from sanctuaries in Bangladesh, ARSA is based within Rohingya villages in Myanmar using a cell-based structure lead by local religious leaders (maulvis). In response to the 2016 attack on the border guard police, the military responded brutally and launched clearance and counter-insurgency operations. Tens of thousands of Rohingya again fled to Bangladesh and elsewhere after which security forces burnt their homes, prompting renewed if brief global recognition of the Rohingya's fate.

Despite those security operations, ARSA continued to consolidate their presence in northern Rakhine by killing Rakhine Muslims who collaborated with the government, expanding training facilities in the hills of Rakhine, and producing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in safe houses. Despite ARSA's claims that it does not attack civilians, after a robust study, Amnesty International concluded that ARSA "brandishing guns and swords is responsible for at least one, and potentially a second, massacre of up to 99 Hindu women, men, and children as well as additional unlawful killings and abductions of Hindu villagers in August 2017."¹⁶ This butchery seems to have precipitated a targeted influx of several hundred Hindu refugees from Rakhine who are currently sheltered in a small IDP camp, apart from the massive complex of camps housing Rakhine Muslims.¹⁷ As of this writing, ARSA has largely been silent since January 2018, except for its peculiarly competent Twitter feed.

The international community agrees that in 2017 Myanmar's military forces, the Tatmadaw, responded to these outrages with catastrophically brutal force that did not discriminate between militants and the general population. Subsequently, the government imposed draconian movement restrictions that imperiled livelihoods and prompted the massive exodus of Rohingyas to Bangladesh that now number between 888,000 and one million.¹⁸ While conceding that an accurate understanding of what has transpired is hindered by Myanmar's refusal to allow independent investigators access to northern Rakhine, the UN's commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, described the details of the military operations and supporting vigilante campaign of anti-Muslim violence as "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing." He urged Myanmar to stop peddling the absurd canard that "the Rohingyas are setting fire to their own homes and laying waste to their own villages" as not only an abject "denial of reality" but also a strategy that is "doing great damage to the international standing of a Government which, until recently, benefited from immense good will."¹⁹ The United States has also endorsed this position as well as the findings of other international actors such as the International Crisis Group, which have documented the

“multiple massacres, rape and other forms of sexual violence against women and children; the widespread, systematic, pre-planned burning of tens of thousands of Rohingya homes and other structures by the military, [Border Guard Police] and vigilantes across norther Rakhine state ... and severe ongoing restrictions on humanitarian assistance for remaining Rohingya villages.”²⁰ In late August 2018, after a year-long study, the United Nations concluded that there is adequate evidence of genocidal intent to “warrant the investigation and prosecution of senior officials in the Tatmadaw chain of command, so that a competent court can determine their liability for genocide.”²¹

In December 2017, the International Crisis Group assessed that some 85 percent of the Rohingya population in the three townships in which most reside (i.e. Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung) have fled to Bangladesh. Those who remain face daunting obstacles to living and are virtually dependent upon the United Nations for food.²² To further exacerbate matters, Myanmar has not only undertaken these efforts to erase the presence of Rohingyas, it is also encouraging Rakhine Buddhists to move into the areas “cleared” of Rohingya.²³ This will make the return of Rohingya all the more impossible.²⁴ The UN reports that as of May 31, 2018 there are some 128,000 Rohingya living in 23 camps across Rakhine, much of which are near Sittwe.²⁵ Unable to leave to access jobs, food or medicine, they are completely dependent upon the international community, to which Myanmar seemingly whimsically grants access.²⁶

Resolutions to This Impasse? Not Likely

Bangladesh is adamant that the Rohingyas return to Myanmar voluntarily, which requires Myanmar to make conditions that are propitious to their return including political and legal guarantees as well as protection from Tatmadaw or vigilantes. Whether or not there is any accountability for excessive—even genocidal—use of force by the Tatmadaw, providing safety in a country undergoing a convulsion of radical Buddhist extremism and anti-Muslim sentiment will be even more difficult without massive political will in Myanmar and supporting pressure from the international community.

This hatred for Muslims generally and Rohingya in particular is stoked by radical monks, particularly through Facebook. For most people in Myanmar, Facebook is, for all intents and purposes, the internet.²⁷ Alan Davis, an analyst from the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, after concluding a two-year study of hate speech in Myanmar, observed that in the months before August 2018, Facebook posts had become “more organized and odious, and more militarized.”²⁸ His team discovered deviously fictive posts about Muslims stockpiling weapons in Yangon mosques with the intent to destroy various Buddhist pagodas, including

the Shwedagon pagoda, the most sacred Buddhist site in Yangon.²⁹ Raymond Serrato, a digital researcher with Democracy Reporting International, came to similar conclusions about the role of Facebook in facilitating a “concerted effort to influence the narrative of the conflict by the military and by Buddhist nationalists.”³⁰

Political will to address the varied issues required for a safe and voluntary return of the Rohingya is in short supply for several reasons.³¹ For one, Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar’s state counselor once revered within the human rights community, faces an election in 2020. While she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her resolute opposition to the military junta in Myanmar, her refusal to speak out against the anti-Rohingya violence or even suggest a modicum of accountability has been heavily criticized.³² (Because she has always opposed the notion that Rohingya are Myanmar citizens, this should have come as no surprise to longer-term Burma watchers.) While Aung San Suu Kyi has disappointed the international community, she also has failed to impress at home. Many in Myanmar are rediscovering that she is an aristocratic, Burman elite who espouses a political platform informed by Theravada Buddhist principles and has systematically failed to forge a coalition with Myanmar’s

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various ethnic groups. (While the country adopted the name “Myanmar” ostensibly to downplay the privileged status that the ethnic majority Burmans enjoy; Burman aristocrats still embrace pro-Burman chauvinism.) This means that other forms of Theravada Buddhist practices (such as the unique seasonal festivals and rites of passage of the ethnic Shan in an eponymous state sharing borders with China,

Laos and Thailand) are denigrated as folk superstition,³³ even while these very ethnic groups were responsible for her landslide electoral victory in 2015.³⁴

These ethnic groups who have been disappointed by her pro-Burman record may not support her in 2020 and may instead align with the myriad, smaller, identity-based parties, potentially swinging the overall outcome of the election. The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has an easier path to victory than her National League for Democracy (NLD) party because the 2008 constitution, which the junta drafted before handing power to President Thein Sein in 2011, allocates one fourth of the parliament seats for the military. Thus, only 75 percent of the parliament’s seats are competitive. This means that the NLD has to win more than two thirds of the contested seats to have an outright majority in the parliament. Myanmar’s ethnic groups have the power to unseat her by voting for the USDP (which is unlikely) or for opposite ethnic parties which can then form a coalition with USDP and outflank the NLD.

At present, the military is viewed in a surprisingly positive light in Myanmar *because* of the operations against the Rohingya, not in spite of them. Moreover, Suu Kyi also enjoys support for her stance against the Rohingya.³⁵ From the point of view of the average Buddhist in Myanmar, the Tatmadaw provided a public good by ousting the Rohingya from the country. Moreover, ARSA's audacious attacks on the security forces, coupled with the narrative that ARSA is an Islamist jihadist organization with foreign backing,³⁶ has garnered public sympathy for an organization long reviled for oppressing freedom in the country. Even if Aung San Suu Kyi *wanted* to create conditions on the ground for a safe and voluntary return, such actions would give a boost to her competitors at the polls.

While Aung San Suu Kyi is hemmed in by domestic political considerations and her own prior biases against Rohingya, so is Bangladesh's prime minister Sheikh Hasina who faces elections in 2019. (International and domestic observers doubt that those elections will be any fairer or freer than the 2013 elections that reconfirmed Hasina's position as Prime Minister.³⁷) The Rohingya issue is a proverbial third-rail in Bangladeshi politics. Sheikh Hasina, aware of her citizens' disdain for the Rohingya, initially refused to open the border following the 2016 violence, explaining to the parliament that "We cannot just open our doors to people coming in waves."³⁸ However, Hasina miscalculated the sympathies for the plight of the Rohingyas and later reversed course, opening the borders after the August 2017 atrocities.³⁹

Hasina knows that while her citizens are currently sympathetic to their plight, as the IDPs linger in Cox's Bazar, domestic sentiment may well sour because of attendant deforestation, the behavior of international aid workers, and other strains on the host community. While it may seem logical to disperse the nearly one million refugees throughout Bangladesh, she will not do so. Dispersal has many costs. First, it may simply spread irritation with hosting Rohingya throughout the country, and second, as long as they are clustered for all to see in the camps in Cox's Bazar, the political eyesore for, and pressure on, Myanmar will not go away. For the Rohingyas in the camps, this is bad news: the hastily built camps are often on low ground, surrounded by deforested hills.⁴⁰ This has rendered them deeply vulnerable to ongoing monsoons, which have been more extreme than past years. Many of the efforts to shore up the camps and mitigate the ravages of the monsoons have failed, limiting access to healthcare and exposing to them to water-born illness as well as malaria, chikungunya and dengue.⁴¹

Pawns in the Great Game East

Without local political champions, the next best hope for the Rohingya would seem to be support from the international community. However, Myanmar is

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not likely to respond to international pressure generally nor that of the United States specifically, largely because it has other important benefactors at the UN with strategic equities in Myanmar and the regions of South and Southeast Asia, namely China, Russia and India. Myanmar's relations with these key states will supersede any bilateral concerns that any of these states have with Bangladesh—which is shouldering most of the burden—suggesting that Myanmar will essentially be able to abscond from the crimes against humanity it has committed.

China: It's about Economic Colonization

China has supported Myanmar's security operations against the Rohingya for several reasons. First, at a general level, Myanmar and China have forged common ground about the existential threat their relatively miniscule Muslim minorities pose to their respective states. Both have used similar mechanisms to manage these purported threats from Muslim minorities, including brutal force and camps in which Muslims are concentrated and unable to move freely.⁴²

Second, China is eyeing Myanmar's conflict-ridden Rakhine state for a series of projects that are part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2015, a Chinese consortium won a bid to build both a special economic zone and a deep-sea port on the island of Kyaukphyu, off the coast of Rakhine state. In early 2017, China opened a long-delayed crude pipeline that permitted China to further reduce its dependence upon the contentious South China Sea by offloading crude oil at Kyaukphyu port and onward through the pipeline. However, China wants yet more infrastructure deals that Myanmar has been hesitant to grant, in part because local Myanmar residents oppose China's land acquisition strategy, putting Aung San Suu Kyi in a politically difficult position.⁴³

China has played interference on behalf of Myanmar at the UN Security Council and will expect concessions on its Rakhine infrastructure in exchange for continuing to shelter Myanmar from the much-deserved international opprobrium, while Beijing also sustains criticism for doing so. China's extraction strategy appears to be paying off: in early July 2018, it was reported that the ongoing negotiations between Myanmar's Commerce Ministry and the China International Trust and Investment Corporation is expected to reach an agreement soon despite local opposition.⁴⁴

Russia: It's about Arms

Russia has also shielded Myanmar from any censure at the UN Security Council, although its motives are less apparent at first blush. Like China, Russia fears its own Muslim minorities and has defended its own ruthless methods to put down Muslim uprisings and suppress Muslims more generally.⁴⁵ Russia also takes a keen interest in challenging U.S. efforts to resolve the situation—as it has done in Syria, Iran and Pakistan. However, there is yet another reason why Russia is keen to facilitate Myanmar's impunity: arms sales.

Myanmar's armed forces have long relied upon Chinese weapons systems, although the Myanmar military has become wary for a number of reasons. First, they have long been dissatisfied with the quality of Chinese combat air platforms and other military hardware.⁴⁶ Second, China has given extensive support to several of Myanmar's ethnic militias. China's support of United Wa State Army (UWSA),⁴⁷ based in Myanmar's northeast, exceeds the usual small arms that are awash in the region, and includes Chinese towed artillery and anti-tank guided missiles as well as missile-equipped combat helicopters.⁴⁸ Needless to say, these weapons systems are intended to fight the Tatmadaw. While Myanmar may want to minimize its reliance upon Chinese weapons to fight its internal foes also funded by the Chinese, Myanmar understands that China wields the power in Asia and it needs Chinese investments elsewhere.

To balance its overwhelming dependence upon Chinese weapons systems, Myanmar's air force has been purchasing air platforms from Russia for some time, including fixed wing and rotary fighter aircraft. Myanmar is part of Russia's pivot to Asia and a foothold for extending its influence throughout South-east Asia.⁴⁹ In fact, when measured in dollars, of the \$2 billion of arms that Myanmar has imported from 2011-2017, Russia makes up about 33 percent compared to China's 59 percent, with aircraft expenditures accounts for the largest percentage of imported arms purchases (38 percent).⁵⁰

India: It's about China

India has long been worried about Chinese expansion in its extended backyard. India inherited un-demarcated borders with China—precipitating a number of border conflicts over time including the 1962 war in which China decisively defeated India—and the two countries continue to dispute the meanings of the ambiguous historical sources on this topic.⁵¹ India and China compete throughout East Africa and Asia principally for political influence, hydrocarbon sources, commercial markets and business opportunities, as well as access to sea lanes of control. China has also long alarmed India by its enduring military support to Pakistan, which has included every manner of assistance including the transfer of nuclear

weapons technology and their delivery platforms.⁵² China continues to shield Pakistan from sanctions at the UN over its innumerable terrorist outrages in India. For these among other reasons, India made a “pragmatic shift” in the early 1990s to engage with Myanmar, which was also being courted by China, abandoning its precondition that Myanmar democratize first.⁵³

India also has a vested interest in Myanmar for potential connectivity projects and border patrol cooperation. India, like China, eyes connectivity projects in Rakhine that would allow India to supply its northeastern states via the Bay of Bengal and through Myanmar, which would take pressure off the narrow Sillguri Corridor that connects the northeast with the rest of India. (At its narrowest, the corridor is about 12 miles wide.⁵⁴) India has built a port in Sittwe that will serve as one of the anchors to this planned ground supply route. India also shares a long border with Myanmar along India’s restive northeast where insurgent groups have long exploited the porous border to obtain sanctuary, small arms, engage in criminal economic enterprises, and rendezvous with sources of external support for their intermittent war with Indian forces.⁵⁵ India needs robust relations with Myanmar both to ensure Myanmar’s cooperation against Indian insurgents on its soil and to facilitate Indian cross-border operations on the same.⁵⁶

While India also has clear strategic interests in Bangladesh particularly with regards to Islamist extremism and political Islam, courting Myanmar takes precedence. In considerable measure, India takes Bangladesh for granted under Sheikh Hasina’s leadership because it is in her own interests to use her powers to limit Islamists and their supporters because they are her principal political rivals. Although the strategic balance provides little incentive for India to push Myanmar to create the necessary conditions for a safe and voluntary return of Rohingyas, India also faces domestic pressures. India’s Hindu chauvinist government and its sometimes-deadly Islamophobic supporters have tended to portray the downtrodden Rohingyas as either terrorists or would-be terrorists and is actively trying to expel the Rohingya population currently in India.⁵⁷ When push comes to shove, India will likely demure from pressuring Myanmar. In fact, India (along with Congo, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Japan, Kenya, Mongolia, South Africa and Venezuela) abstained from voting for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation-sponsored UN General Assembly condemnation of Myanmar in December 2017.⁵⁸

The United States: Big Fists, But Its Hands Are Tied

Despite the Trump administration’s clear anti-Muslim rhetoric and action (e.g. the “Muslim ban”), the United States has been the most consistently vocal critic of Myanmar’s brutality toward the Rohingya and the most supportive of Bangladesh. Rex Tillerson, the previous U.S. Secretary of State not known for

humanitarian leanings, accused the Myanmar government of “ethnic cleansing” in November 2017.⁵⁹ The U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, has been an indefatigable critic of Myanmar’s treatment of the Rohingya, the countries that shield Myanmar, and a clear advocate for accountability for the atrocities committed and expeditious redress.⁶⁰ Myanmar watchers attribute this acute focus to the appointment of Ms. Kelley Currie as ambassador on Ms. Haley’s team as the U.S. representative to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. She has been a well-known activist on this issue during her distinguished career at the Project 2049 Institute where she founded the organization’s Burma Transition Initiative and her various senior policy positions within the U.S. State Department and the International Republican Institute (IRI).⁶¹

However, it should be recalled that the United States has long been active in courting Naypyidaw because of its fears of Chinese ascendancy in the region. While some critics of Myanmar are floating the specter of new sanctions, others yet are calling for *deepening* of U.S.-Myanmar ties, including the expansion of the International Military and Education Training (E-IMET) program to Myanmar, among other lines of engagement.⁶² Critics of sanctioning Myanmar again note that the sanctions are not what compelled the Tatmadaw to begin its democratic reforms, however limited.⁶³ Nonetheless, in December 2017, Washington (along with Canada and the European Union) imposed sanctions on 13 “serious human rights abusers and corrupt actors,” which included General Maung Maung Soe, who oversaw the heinous brutality against the Rohingya earlier that year.⁶⁴ Myanmar responded by firing him but took no other actions to address the larger concerns that precipitated the sanctions.⁶⁵

In August 2018, the U.S. Treasury issued additional sanctions against Tatmadaw commanders Aung Kyaw Zaw, Khin Maung Soe and Khin Hlaing; Thura San Lwin, a Border Guard Police commander; as well as the army’s 33rd Light Infantry Division and the 99th Light Infantry Division. This move will make it very difficult for the U.S. military to conduct exercises with these units or otherwise work with them. Other countries may also follow suit.⁶⁶ Despite the critical rhetoric coming from Ambassador Haley, it is not clear whether the United States will adopt more capacious sanctions.⁶⁷ Given both the varied political will across the U.S. government to do more and the quixotic nature of the Trump administration, which includes erratically appeasing and antagonizing Beijing, it is difficult to imagine that the United States will take more sweeping measures against Myanmar. Such actions, in any event, would have questionable efficacy in

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compelling the country to reverse course on the politically popular ethnic cleansing of Muslims, and would also give China a freer hand in the country and beyond.

What Fate Awaits the Rohingyas?

On balance, the Rohingyas are unlikely to receive any respite in light of the domestic politics in Bangladesh and Myanmar, as well as the geopolitical interests of the main actors who could push Myanmar to reverse course on its genocidal path. Even though, in principle, the government of Myanmar and the UN ostensibly reached some sort of agreement on resettlement of the Rohingya in June 2018,⁶⁸ only the most optimistic observers expect Myanmar to make any substantive moves. Doing so would be politically toxic domestically and Myanmar has no genuine reason to expect any of its key international supporters to undertake significant punitive measures to alter this domestic cost-benefit equation. Even if the United States adopts more strenuous sanctions rather than the entity-specific sanctions applied to date, Myanmar has plenty of other options. Notably, even though Aung San Suu Kyi's laurels as a democracy and peace activist have already been tarnished, she seems uninterested in varnishing them.

Curiously, in spite of the grotesque brutalities they have endured, the Rohingya have not articulated a separatist demand. All they want is to return to Myanmar with citizenship and, problematically, recognition as an ethnic group. Moderates

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in Myanmar can envision a process to citizenship, but vigorously oppose the idea of recognizing the Rohingya as a distinct ethnicity. Even ARSA has consistently messaged that it has no larger Islamist agenda such as a separate state or imposition of Sharia law. (Problematically for ARSA's messaging, its flag depicts all of Rakhine state which encourages Buddhists to worry that ARSA's agenda is not simply

securing the political conditions for Rohingya to safely return, but a larger agenda to assert dominance over the Buddhist-majority Rakhine state.)

That said, the non-Islamist past may not be the best predictor of ARSA's future or that of other Rohingya mobilization for several reasons. First, the current exodus is thoroughly unprecedented in scale, scope or the rapidity with which it transpired. Given the massive scale of these atrocities, some Rohingya may begin to situate their own misery within a larger landscape of Muslim suffering and succumb to the appeals of Islamist terrorist groups discussed below.⁶⁹ Second, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Hasina, to mitigate criticism that she is anti-Islam, has

partnered with the radical and occasionally violent Hifazat-e-Islam (known variously as Hifazat or Hifajat), which nearly toppled her government several years ago.⁷⁰ She has permitted the organization to open thousands of *quami madaris* (religious seminaries that do not teach Bangladesh's school curriculum) in the camps in Cox's Bazar, and young men can be seen wearing the iconic skull cap that identify them as madrassah students.⁷¹ Sarwar Jahan Chowdhury, the Head of Operations at the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development in Dhaka, has written of these institutions, that their most worrisome aspects include a "rejection of modernity as a whole, including modern education, and their employment of vigorous indoctrination techniques rather than methodical pedagogy"⁷² as well as ties to terrorist groups in Bangladesh.⁷³ At the same time, her government has eschewed any form of education that would permit the Rohingya to integrate into Bangladesh's formal economy.⁷⁴

Hasina's adamancy that Rohingya remain in the camps and her actions depriving them of any means to economically integrate legally will likely force them to eke some form of a living through illicit means, as has occurred in the past. Even though the village-based organizational structure that ARSA used to organize violence in Rakhine is not intact in the camps in Cox's Bazar, the harrowing conditions of the camps may be propitious to subsequent recruitment by ARSA through other means. More worrisome yet, both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda Indian Subcontinent have identified the Rohingya as a target of opportunity.⁷⁵ Equally disconcerting is that a variety of Pakistan-based and international terrorist organizations have set their sights on recruiting the Rohingya.⁷⁶

Even though there is no evidence that the Rohingya in these camps pose a regional—much less a global—security threat, many writers have depicted them as such, as noted earlier.⁷⁷ The task of shielding the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya simply trying to survive from the predations of the security lens will become nearly impossible if even a few Rohingya from these camps end up in the ranks of terrorist groups. Equally important, the task of funding the aid missions in Bangladesh will become inordinately more difficult should any Rohingya from these camps join terrorist groups. Aid agencies are already alarmed because current levels of funding are inadequate for the immediate needs of the Rohingya, much less the long-term assistance.⁷⁸ There is little concern for Muslim victims of atrocities given the overwhelming popular fixation with depicting Muslims as perpetrators of terror.

In addition to these security concerns, Bangladesh's refusal to disperse the refugees throughout the country will continue to tax the host community, including the imperious behavior of the aid workers in the camps. As mentioned, while it

The future looks depressingly bleak for the Rohingya and Bangladesh.

may be best for security and the host community to disperse the refugees, Hasina is unlikely to undertake these measures for political reasons. There is little short-term benefit to dispersing them, and at the same time, most Rohingya have expressed little interest in migrating onward. This is fortunate because there are few countries who want to receive more of them.

For the foreseeable future, the Rohingya are most likely to be confined to the camps in Bangladesh, no matter how crowded or dangerous. Given that the international community is unlikely to muster any pressure on Myanmar, the least international actors can do is continue to help Bangladesh support this hapless community while longer-term solutions are sought, while monitoring the situation closely for any developing security concerns. The future looks depressingly bleak for the Rohingya and Bangladesh, which seems increasingly likely to be their home for the indefinite future.

Endnotes

1. Official estimates suggest that 888,111 have arrived in Bangladesh following the vicious military action against the Rohingya by Myanmar's Tatmadaw, the country's armed forces. As of June 30, 2018, the UNHCR claims that there is 888,111 individuals and 204,472 families housed in the sprawling camp complex in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar. UNHCR, "Bangladesh Refugee Emergency Population factsheet (as of June 30, 2018)," July 4, 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/64651>. Also see International Crisis Group, "Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase," International Crisis Group Asia Report no. 292 (Belgium: International Crisis Group, December 7, 2017): <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/292-myanmar-s-rohingya-crisis-enters-a-dangerous-new-phase.pdf>. However, Bangladeshi and international NGO officials interviewed by me in June of 2018 assert that the number is more like 1 million. This is in addition to Rohingya in the country from previous exoduses from Myanmar.
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