



Rohingya refugee crisis: impact on Bangladeshi politics

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Question

How does the influx of Rohingya into Bangladesh affect Bangladeshi politics and the potential for local or regional tensions and conflict?

Contents

1. Overview
2. Bangladeshi politics
3. Religious extremism
4. Regional relations
5. References

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1. Overview

The huge Rohingya refugee influx into Bangladesh is seen in the literature as likely to strengthen the position of the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League party. However, there are concerns that it will lead to further authoritarianism in the country, as well as fuel extremist sentiment. The Bangladeshi public are generally supportive of the government's stance of allowing refugees in, but again there are concerns about the longer-term impact, particularly in the Cox's Bazaar area. The literature highlights the fact that radical Islamist movements, notably Hefazat-e-Islam, are gaining from the crisis, and the potential for Rohingya refugees to be recruited by extremists/jihadists. There are also worries that the Rohingya crisis could fuel militancy in other countries in the region. In terms of regional relations, aside from the expected heightened tension between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the crisis is leading to a rift between Dhaka and New Delhi. China is seen as seeking to exploit the crisis to strengthen relations with Myanmar as well as Beijing's own position in the region.

Key findings are as follows:

- **So far Sheikh Hasina's handling of the crisis is strengthening her domestic position** – The literature indicates that the Bangladeshi public are generally supportive of the Prime Minister's decision to allow Rohingyas into the country, and her party is gaining popularity as a result. This could translate into electoral success in the next national polls in early 2019.
- **Rising authoritarianism** – There is concern that the government could use the crisis to continue along the path of authoritarianism (suppressing opposition groups, the media, freedom of expression) it has followed in recent years.
- **Concerns among public about protracted refugee presence** – While supportive of the government, Bangladeshis – particularly in the Cox's Bazaar area – are voicing worries about the impact of the refugee influx on jobs, prices, resources and the environment. The question about who will pay for the refugees is also paramount.
- **Island settlement and safe zones** – In response to public concerns, the Government of Bangladesh has proposed settling the refugees on an uninhabited island far from the mainland. A second proposal is to establish safe zones in Myanmar so the refugees can return to that country. Both proposals have been criticised by rights groups.
- **Impact on Islamist groups** – Hefazat-e-Islam, which has its headquarters in Chittagong, has an active presence in the affected Cox's Bazaar region, and is building its national profile as a result of the crisis. However, it is a movement rather than a party, and the literature does not indicate that Islamist political parties are benefiting.
- **Potential for militant recruitment within Bangladesh** – There is consensus in the literature that Rohingya refugees are vulnerable to recruitment by extremist/jihadist groups; indeed, Hefazat-e-Islam and Jamaat-e-Islami are reported to have been actively operating in refugee camps even prior to the current influx.
- **Potential to fuel militancy in the region** – The literature indicates that anger at the plight of the Rohingya refugees could be used by extremist leaders in Indonesia, Malaysia and other countries in the region to fuel religious identity politics, and by groups

such as Al-Qaeda to promote extremist violence. The Bangladesh government has highlighted the security threat posed to India.

- **Indian stance on crisis angering Bangladesh** – Motivated by key economic and strategic interests, India has been strongly supportive of the Myanmar government and only reluctantly expressed concern about the refugee crisis following protests from Bangladesh. Bangladesh has been angered by the Indian position, and there are signs that the growing bilateral tension is affecting wider regional initiatives, as well as pushing Bangladesh to seek closer ties with Muslim countries.
- **China seeking to use crisis to further geopolitical interests** – Like India, China has vital geopolitical interests in Myanmar; it also sees the crisis as an opportunity to re-establish close ties with Myanmar (following the latter's drift to the West in recent years). China has therefore also been very supportive of Myanmar.

The literature drawn on for this review was almost entirely comprised of newspaper articles/think tank pieces. Given the fact that the crisis is still unfolding, no academic literature was found on the current situation though the review did come across a few papers on the historic problem of Rohingya refugees. The review found no literature looking at the impact of the Rohingya crisis specifically from the gender perspective or from that of people with disabilities.

2. Bangladeshi politics

Awami League-BNP rivalry

Bangladeshi politics has long been characterised by rivalry between the two main parties: the Awami League (AL) led by Sheikh Hasina and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Khaleda Zia (Idris, 2017). The general consensus in the literature is that politically, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will be strengthened by the refugee influx – or rather by her handling of it – and her party, the Awami League, will benefit in the next parliamentary elections due to be held no later than 28 January 2019 (Lintner, 2017). Cookson (2017a) points out that, at least for the next six months, the refugee crisis will overshadow political developments and distract attention from electoral politics, constitutional amendments, and other such issues. Felix-Joehnk (2017) writes that, 'Partly in response to the Rohingya crisis, which is widening existing political fractures in Bangladesh, Ms. Hasina continues to consolidate power'.

A related point is that the crisis is enhancing Sheikh Hasina's standing in the international community, with consequent positive effects on her popularity at home (Chowdhury, 2017). The Bangladeshi Prime Minister has been able to present herself 'as the humanitarian, while her Myanmar counterpart, Suu Kyi has been obviously demonised as henchwoman of the killer Myanmar army' (Chowdhury, 2017). There have even been calls within Bangladesh for Sheikh Hasina to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. By contrast, opposition leader Khaleda Zia has not been very visible in the context of the refugee crisis, and her party has been prevented from distributing relief (Chowdhury, 2017). Chowdhury (2017) cautions that it is too early to predict what will happen next, but so far, 'domestic politics wise, its Sheikh Hasina who has come out looking better'.

Authoritarianism

The Awami League's rivalry with the BNP has led it to adopt increasingly harsh measures to target its political rivals, and indeed to suppress any form of criticism (Idris, 2017). The literature reports extensively on human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, beating and harassment of opposition groups. These have become more frequent as tensions with the BNP have escalated; opposition leaders and activists constitute a significant proportion of the victims of such abuses (ICG, 2016: 10-11). The ICG notes that the government appears bent on using law enforcement machinery to silence legitimate dissent and criticism. 'Freedom of expression and civil liberties are under assault with restrictions on the media reaching proportions that are unprecedented and alarming' (ICG, 2016: 21).

There is concern that the Rohingya crisis could facilitate further authoritarianism on the part of the government. 'The Rohingya refugee crisis is shaking Bangladesh's body politic to the core, and in ways that may hasten the country's ongoing slide toward authoritarianism' (Felix-Joehnk, 2017).

Public opinion

Nationwide support

The literature suggests that public opinion in Bangladesh is broadly supportive of the government's decision to allow Rohingya refugees into the country (Felix-Joehnk, 2017). Massive demonstrations in support of the Rohingyas have been held in several cities in Bangladesh (Lintner, 2017). Grassroots campaigns have sprung up across the country to collect donations for the refugees: 'there is great sympathy for the Rohingya's tales of persecution and abuse in largely Buddhist Myanmar' (Alam, 2017).

Concerns among population of Cox's Bazaar

But the literature also points to concerns about the protracted presence of such large numbers of Rohingya refugees in the country. 'The impact on the southern part of Bangladesh along the border with Myanmar will be devastating' (Cookson, 2017a). 'Some in this already impoverished and overpopulated nation... have begun to worry that the staggering influx of people could sap Bangladesh's resources and push the economy – and those already struggling to compete in it – to the brink' (Alam, 2017). Local people are already voicing worries about the economic and security impact of the refugee influx (Hoekstra, 2017):

- A citizen, who felt pride in the government's response to the crisis, added: 'With all these extra people the prices of food and transport have increased a lot over the past weeks. And I have concerns about our security. These refugees are so poor and hopeless. At some point they may go out stealing'.
- A local pharmacist expressed fears that the Rohingya influx would lead to unfair competition in the job market: 'This could be really bad for us. The Rohingya may take our jobs. They now have nothing and I'm sure they are willing to work for less money than we do'.
- A teacher called for a quick solution, fearing that otherwise serious problems could arise: 'We don't have enough land here to settle all these people. It will be a disaster if they have to stay for a long time'.

Cookson (2017a) warns that the refugees will not be able to return to Myanmar in the next one to two years, and adds that 'it is unlikely that they will ever return'. As the refugee presence becomes more permanent, and as the economic impact of the influx – particularly locally in the Cox's Bazaar area - becomes apparent, public opinion could well shift to becoming more hostile to the refugees and the government.

Worries about economic impact

Cox's Bazaar is a traditional tourism destination within Bangladesh, but the refugee influx will negatively impact tourism revenue to the area (Cookson, 2017b). It will also negatively affect the environment and natural resources. Referring to the Rohingya refugees who have been in Bangladesh for several years, Rahman (2010: 237) notes: 'The high number and prolonged residence of refugees increases the rate at which land and resources are used up, a process which accelerates environmental degradation and in turn leads to greater competition between natives and refugees for scarce land and resources'. In the current influx, the government claims the forests cleared for new refugee camps were worth USD 18 million (Alam, 2017). It will cost

tens of millions of dollars to provide for the Rohingya refugees, and there are fears that this burden will fall on Bangladesh (Alam, 2017). A Bangladeshi economist complained that, 'The figure we get from the UN is huge, and only a portion is coming from aid agencies and [the] international community. What will Bangladesh do for the rest?' (Khondaker Moazzam, cited in Alam, 2017).

Economic losses due to the refugee crisis will be countered to some extent by the influx of foreign aid workers. Foreign aid inflows and increased expenditures necessitated by the crisis could even have an expansionary effect on the Bangladesh economy with more rapid economic growth (Cookson, 2017b). Parnini (2013: 288) points out that much of the economic burden of providing for previous Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh has been borne by UNHCR, donor governments and NGOs: 'if anything, the UNHCR relief operation has led to a net financial gain for the Bangladesh government and its citizens, as it has increased employment'. Nonetheless, given the vast scale of the current influx and the likely protracted nature of the crisis, Bangladeshis have serious worries about its economic toll.

Other options: island settlement and safe zones

One option being considered by the Government of Bangladesh, likely in response to the concerns about the economy and security being voiced by local people, is to settle the Rohingya refugees on an uninhabited island, Thengar Char¹, off the coast of Noakhili district (Sen, 2017). With an approximate area of 40 square kilometres, Thengar Char only emerged from the sea about 11 years ago: it lacks basic facilities and agricultural conditions are not suitable for subsistence farming (Sen, 2017). Moreover, its location is quite remote – it can only be reached by a two-hour boat journey from the Bangladeshi mainland. The government's intention is to first move those Rohingya refugees who came to Cox's Bazaar following disturbances in Rakhine last year, i.e. from refugee camps at Kutapalong and Nayapara (Sen, 2017).

There are reports that the Government of Bangladesh has been trying to mobilise international support as well as funding for its rehabilitation initiative, including 'a sensitisation drive with foreign missions and their diplomats in Dhaka as well as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees with a view to gain international acceptability' (Sen, 2017).

Not surprisingly, the government's rehabilitation plan has come in for strong criticism, not least because it would violate the principle of non-refoulement, whereby refugees cannot be forcibly sent back to the places from where they have fled or to locations against their will. There is also the risk, given the inhospitable conditions on the island, that refugees will seek to leave and head to countries further east such as Indonesia, as well as to the Indian Sunderbans in the west (Sen, 2017). As well as the dangers involved in long sea journeys, the refugees would face further challenges in whichever country they were able to reach – and vice versa.

A second option being proposed by the Government of Bangladesh is to establish safe zones within Myanmar, enabling the refugees to return to that country. According to Bangladeshi media reports, Dhaka wants India, Germany, the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross to set up this zone (Mitra, 2017). This proposal too has come in for strong criticism, with Human Rights Watch claiming that safe zones 'rarely if ever live up to their name' (Hoekstra, 2017). It cites the experiences of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sri Lanka, 'pointing out that in both countries

¹ This is referred to in another article as Bhashan Char (Hoekstra, 2017).

large numbers of civilians were executed in safe zones' (Hoekstra, 2017). The safe zone option is unlikely to materialise, not least because allowing the Rohingya back would undermine the Myanmar government's main assertion 'that there is no such ethnic group as Rohingya and those living in the country have illegally migrated from Bangladesh' (Alam, 2017).

3. Religious extremism

Islamist groups

Appeasement of Islamist movements and parties has been a characteristic of Bangladeshi politics for some time, practised by both the Awami League and BNP. One of the leading Islamist movements, Hefazat-e-Islam, has staged demonstrations with hundreds of thousands of people in Dhaka calling for sharia law, separation of the sexes, and death sentences for atheists. The government has done little to confront the movement (Idris, 2017). Indeed, Hefazat-e-Islam successfully blocked government regulation of its madrassahs² (ICG, 2016: 7) and blocked laws protecting women's rights, e.g. a law proposing equal inheritance rights for men and women (Allchin, 2016, cited in Idris, 2017).

The Bangladeshi government's decisions to allow refugees into the country 'could upset the very precarious balance between secularism and religion in Bangladeshi politics' (Felix-Joehnk, 2017). Hefazat-e-Islam has its headquarters in Chittagong, in the area of Bangladesh adjacent to Rakhine in Myanmar, from where the Rohingya have fled. The movement has called for the liberation of Rakhine, and has threatened to wage 'jihad' on Myanmar 'if the army and its associates do not stop torturing the Rohingya Muslims' (Felix-Joehnk, 2017). Felix-Joehnk (2017) argues that the Rohingya crisis is giving Hefazat-e-Islam a greater role in Bangladeshi national politics, and putting liberalism under threat. However, there is little evidence that Islamist political parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami are benefiting from the crisis.

Security threat from militant groups

Within Bangladesh

The literature highlights the potential for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh to be recruited by extremist groups. This stems in part from previous experiences of Rohingya refugees already in Bangladesh. In January 1998, for example, armed refugees thought to be from the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) seized the Nayapara refugee camp; three were killed in clashes with Burmese security forces near the Bangladesh border (Ullah, 2011: 154). Also in 1998, 64 refugees were jailed after clashes with police (Ullah, 2011: 154). Lintner (2009, cited in Ullah, 2011) claims that existing Rohingya camps (for refugees who fled to Bangladesh in earlier years), were being run by Harkat-ul-Jihad-i-Islami (HuJI). He points to connections between militant groups in Bangladesh and those in Myanmar: for example, Jamaat-i-Islami has been known to finance the RSO (Ullah, 2011: 156).

The militancy potential of refugees is echoed by Rahman (2010: 235): 'The Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazaar District are fertile grounds for recruitment by Islamic militants. With little love for Myanmar, and alienated from Bangladesh, the stateless Rohingyas are vulnerable and

² Religious schools.

desperate, and likely become militant in an effort to uphold their interests'. Similarly, a risk assessment conducted by USAID in 2012 warned that the plight of both Rohingya and Bihari refugee communities in Bangladesh – denied citizenship rights and facing persecution – could make them susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups (USAID, 2012, cited in Idris, 2017).

Fair and Oldmixon (2015) also claim that militant groups related to Jamaat-e-Islami have been actively recruiting from Rohingya refugees in the past, and are doing so in the context of the current refugee influx. They warn that, 'As the Rohingya crisis continues to deepen, Bangladesh will become ever more attractive to an array of Islamist militant groups seeking to recruit the hapless victims of the Burmese government' (Fair & Oldmixon, 2015: 5).

Cookson (2017b) sees militancy among Rohingya refugees as inevitable: 'Why would you think otherwise when the young men have seen their families abused and killed? Young men will seek outlet for their anger. Most Rohingya will find solace in God and in prayer. ISIS agents and promoters of fundamentalist views will try to corrupt the Rohingya and lead them towards violence'.

Rahman argues that the way to prevent long-term encampment of refugees and militarisation of Rohingya camps is to 'make the Rohingya community workable by uplifting them educationally, socioeconomically and politically' (2010: 238). He calls for a refugee law that gives the Rohingyas work permits, and even short term dual citizenship (Rahman, 2010: 239). But given the much bigger numbers of Rohingya entering Bangladesh in the current wave, and the sensitivities around allowing refugees to integrate with the local population, it is unlikely the government will follow this course. Cookson (2017b) urges the government to focus on measures to prevent indoctrination of young men and women by jihadist recruiters, and highlights the importance of the education system in this effort.

In the region

One analysis sees the Rohingya crisis as fuelling jihadist sentiments in other countries in the region, notably Indonesia and Malaysia (Singh & Haziq, 2016). Calls for 'jihad' in Myanmar were made by extremist groups in all these countries following the 2012 Rohingya refugee influx into Bangladesh, and the authors claim 'a similar jihadist flare-up is now developing in the wake of the latest atrocities reported' (Singh & Haziq, 2016: 2). They cite evidence for this from Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan. In Indonesia, for example, 'the Indonesian online jihadist community even furnished their Facebook pages with various Rohingya-related propaganda posts and pictures, including a map which provides a possible travel route for potential Indonesian jihadists to enter Myanmar via Aceh' (Singh & Haziq, 2016: 3).

Such warnings of the regional security implications of the Rohingya refugee crisis are echoed elsewhere, with it seen as 'threatening to deepen sectarian tensions across the region....as Muslim communities...grow increasingly angry over the treatment of Muslim Rohingya by Buddhist Rakhine' (Japan Times, 2017). The paper argues that politicians in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh and India could exploit such sentiments, and promote identity politics, thereby increasing the risk of religious conflict. Al-Qaeda has urged Muslims in Southeast Asia (including Bangladesh) to support the Rohingya in Myanmar 'financially, militarily and politically' and has warned that: 'The savage treatment meted out to our Muslim brothers...shall not pass without punishment. The government of Myanmar shall be made to taste what our Muslim brothers have tasted' (Japan Times, 2017).

The Government of Bangladesh has highlighted the security threat posed to India, in particular, by the militancy potential of the Rohingya refugees – this is part of its efforts to pressure India to address the crisis (see below). The Bangladesh High Commissioner in Delhi said Dhaka wanted ‘our friends to help us for the sake of peace and security in the region’, implying that the security situation could worsen due to the refugees becoming ground zero for Islamist groups looking for fresh recruits (Mitra, 2017). As one analyst put it: ‘You can argue for security to say that this has impact for India’s own security. So what is happening there [in Bangladesh] will spill over for India’ (World Bank adviser on regional integration cited in Mitra, 2017).

4. Regional relations

The Rohingya crisis is having a strong impact on Bangladesh’s relations with Myanmar, but also with other countries in the region, most notably India.

Bangladesh-Myanmar

The Rohingya issue has long overshadowed bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Persecution of Rohingyas in Rakhine over the past few decades led to periodic refugee influxes into Bangladesh. In the initial refugee influxes, tripartite talks between the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar and the UN led to the majority being repatriated (Rahman, 2010), but in later years most stayed in Bangladesh. Before the current crisis an estimated 200,000-400,000 Rohingya refugees were already living in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2010: 235; Cookson, 2017a). Other historic sources of tension between the two countries include disputes over maritime boundaries, arms trafficking and cross-border movement of armed insurgents (Parnini et al, 2013). Not surprisingly, bilateral trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar has been limited, amounting to USD 100 million in 2010 (Parnini et al, 2013: 142).

However, there were signs of improvement in bilateral relations from 2011. During Prime Minister Hasina’s visit to Myanmar at the end of that year, the Myanmar president expressed willingness to cooperate with Bangladesh on resolving the Rohingya issue and agreed to take back documented Rohingya refugees (Parnini et al, 2013: 141). In January 2012 the Government of Myanmar specified that it was willing to take back 9,000 out of the 28,000 registered Rohingya refugees encamped in Cox’s Bazaar. (Parnini et al, 2013: 141). The maritime boundary dispute between the two countries was resolved peacefully through international arbitration in March 2012, ‘allowing Bangladesh to stake its claim over the resource-rich Bay of Bengal’ (Parnini et al, 2013: 141). Had the commitments by Myanmar on the Rohingyas been fulfilled, there was optimism that bilateral trade could grow to USD 1 billion by 2014 (Parnini et al, 2013: 142).

With the current massive outflow of Rohingyas into Bangladesh, those hopes have clearly been dashed, and relations with Myanmar look set to be extremely tense for the foreseeable future.

Bangladesh-India

Indian stance on Rohingya crisis

India has to date strongly supported the government of Myanmar. As well as fears that the Rohingya refugees fleeing to Bangladesh could travel further to India, New Delhi needs Myanmar’s cooperation to combat insurgents in India’s north-eastern states, who use Myanmar as a base (Hasnain, 2017; Alam, 2017). India also has strong economic and strategic interests in

Myanmar, for example the India-funded Kaladan multi-modal project which is designed to provide a sea-river-land link to its remote northeast through Sittwe port (Bhaumik, 2017). This has led one analyst to write that India is actually using the crisis to improve relations with Myanmar (Lintner, 2017). In an official visit to Myanmar in September 2017, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not mention the refugee crisis, but rather expressed concern about 'extremist violence' in Rakhine, and solidarity with the Myanmar government in its fight against terrorism (Lintner, 2017; Mitra, 2017).

India has also said it will expel the roughly 40,000 Rohingya already living in the country (Alam, 2017; Japan Times, 2017). The government told the Indian Supreme Court, which is hearing a challenge against the decision, that their presence poses 'a threat to national security'. Of the 40,000 Rohingya in India, nearly 15,000 have received refugee documentation, but India wants to deport all of them (Japan Times, 2017). The move has been strongly condemned by the UN (Bhaumik, 2017).

Anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh

The Indian stance on the Rohingya crisis has led to anger in Bangladesh. New Delhi's threat to deport Rohingyas in India was not well received in Dhaka. The failure by Narendra Modi to address the refugee crisis facing Bangladesh during his visit to Myanmar aroused particular anger. Soon after that visit, the Bangladesh High Commissioner in Delhi met the Indian Foreign Secretary; in a subsequent public statement the former stressed that the refugees were Myanmar's responsibility and said regional neighbours should 'use their good offices to emphasize this point to the Myanmar government, about the ground reality' (Mitra, 2017).

India did later issue a statement expressing concern about the outflow of refugees from Rakhine (Mitra, 2017), and it has been sending humanitarian assistance to Chittagong. However, some argue that the motivation in this is less to help Bangladesh as to further Indian interests. Constantino Xavier (cited in Japan Times, 2017) argues that, as well as reflecting 'India's increasing willingness and capacity to act as a first responder to emergencies in the region', the aid indicates 'its preoccupation in stemming the refugee flow in Bangladesh, reducing their incentives to cross the border into India'.

According to the literature, the sentiment gaining ground in Bangladesh is that India is giving priority to its strategic goals in Myanmar: 'In a sense, Bangladesh's strategic problems are being sacrificed for the meeting of those goals. So people are saying that we have done so much for India in terms of meeting its security concerns but now that we have a security problem, India is shying away and focusing only on its own security' (World Bank adviser on regional integration, cited in Mitra, 2017). Chowdhury (2017) notes that among Bangladeshi citizens 'popular perception is rather anti-Indian'. There is disappointment and frustration with India because of Bangladesh's previous support for that country, and because India had been seen (prior to the crisis) as 'a special friend' of Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2017; Mitra, 2017). Alam (2017) argues that the crisis: 'is stoking divisions along pro- and anti-India lines within the government and between some government factions and the army. Principally it is bringing out distrust of India...in the Bangladesh army and so complicating civilian-military relations in Bangladesh'.

Impact on regional initiatives

There are signs that the growing tension between Bangladesh and India is having wider ramifications. On the one hand it is pushing Bangladesh to seek closer relations with Muslim countries in the ASEAN region and the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as well as the West and the UN (Mitra, 2017). One analyst (Rashid, cited in Mitra, 2017) claims that India's 'disregarding [of] the Rohingyas' plight' is fuelling not just anti-India feelings within Bangladesh but also Islamist rhetoric. On the other hand, it is affecting other regional initiatives. In early September, India dissociated itself from the Bali Declaration of the World Parliamentary Forum of Sustainable Development after clauses were introduced by Turkey (seconded by Bangladesh) on the Rohingya crisis (Mitra, 2017). In the same month Sheikh Hasina used a speech to BIMSTEC,³ ostensibly a platform for economic cooperation, to highlight the challenges faced by Bangladesh in relation to the Rohingya refugee influx (Mitra, 2017).

China

Like India, China has vital geopolitical interests in Myanmar. The country provides China with access to the Indian Ocean: China is funding Kyauk Phyu port, which is to be the starting point of an oil-gas pipeline and road link from the Bay of Bengal, through Myanmar to Yunnan province, shortening supply routes from the Middle East (Bhaumik, 2017; Lintner, 2017). The port is part of two projects, which also include a trading estate, to develop a special economic zone in Rakhine (Bhaumik, 2017). China's ambitious Belt and Road development initiative⁴ is thus heavily dependent on good relations with Myanmar. A further factor is that China has been worried by Myanmar's shift towards the West in recent years – criticism of Myanmar by the West over its treatment of the Rohingyas is seen in Beijing as an opportunity to re-establish close ties with the country (Lintner, 2017). Beijing has therefore been a vocal supporter of the Myanmar government. In March this year it stopped the introduction of a UN Security Council resolution against Myanmar (Mitra, 2017). Lintner (2017) argues that the crisis could strengthen China's position in the region.

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³ Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.

⁴ Launched in 2013 this involves China underwriting billions of dollars of infrastructure investment in countries along the old Silk Road linking it to Europe. Described by the foreign minister in 2014 as Premier Xi's most important foreign policy, its ultimate aim is to make Eurasia (dominated by China) an economic and trading area to rival the transatlantic one (dominated by America). <https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2017/05/economist-explains-11>

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