CHINA AND INDIA'S RESPONSE TO THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS: A STRUCTURAL EXPLANATION

Robayt Khondoker[*]
Tanvir Habib[**]

Abstract

Since August 2017, the initiation of violent actions against the Rohingya community and subsequent outflow of 750,000 refugees created a major humanitarian crisis in the world. While condemnations have been forthcoming and Myanmar faced international isolation, none of that translated into unified actions by international community. In this context, this paper attempts to examine the following questions: what are the key driving factors that led to absence of any unified response to the Rohingya refugee crisis by the regional powers? Why did the intransigence of the Myanmar authorities in tackling the underlying causes, which invited severe international condemnation, eventually fail to muster any unified reactions? By unravelling the questions, this paper aims to offer an explanation to the underlying motivations behind the two regional powers - China and India's response to the Rohingya refugee crisis. While enduring rivalry shape the general contours of Sino-Indian relations in the broader context, pointing to positional differences between them in the regional issues, the Rohingya refugee crisis resulted in an intriguing policy congruence. Although there exists informed understanding of great power competition between these two countries, the responses made to the Rohingya refugee crisis render any such analytical lens inadequate in their explanatory capacity. Despite being puzzled at the policy congruence and resultant similarity of actions, the paper contends that, overall responses can be understood as emanating from the same strategic rivalry that inhibit cooperative behaviour otherwise.

INTRODUCTION

In August 2017, the armed forces of Myanmar launched a coordinated attack on the entire Rohingya community following a series of attack by the so called Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (henceforth ARSA). While

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* **Robayt Khondoker,** Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

** **Tanvir Habib,** Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

previously unheard of, the ARSA attacks allowed Myanmar to capitalize on the perfect opportunity to stage a full-scale attack which was coordinated with extremist Buddhist groups. This has prompted questions about the convenience of the attacks. The following months saw the influx of more than 750,000 Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar to the neighbouring Bangladesh. This emerged to be one of the most serious refugee crises in recent period in the world. The United Nations report found proof of actions by Myanmar that can be termed as "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing."[1] The incident drew sharp international criticism and Myanmar faced international isolation. However, the unanimity of global condemnation did not yield the necessary actions required to solve the underlying causes of the crisis. This was due to the reluctance of Myanmar's allies to allow international wrath to be faced fully by Myanmar. The actions of India and China along with Russia did much to stymie the international action against Myanmar.

Majority of the discussions relating to Rohingya refugee crisis referred to the underlying factors like identity, nationality, Buddhist nationalism and some separately on Indian and Chinese responses.[2] However, there exists a

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[1]   Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, "Darker and More Dangerous: High Commissioner Updates the Human Rights Council on Human Rights Issues in 40 Countries-Human Rights Council 36th Session Opening Statement" (Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017), https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/ Pages/DisplayNews.aspx? NewsID= 22041&LangID=E.

[2]   Harrison Akins, "The Two Faces of Democratization in Myanmar: A Case Study of the Rohingya and Burmese Nationalism," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 38, no. 2 (May 24, 2018): 229–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2018.1475619; "The Rohingya Crisis," *Strategic Comments* 23, no. 9 (October 21, 2017): viii–x, https://doi.org/ 10.1080/13567888.2017.1398536; International Crisis Group, "The Long Haul Ahead for Myanmar's Rohingya Refugee Crisis," *Asia Report No 296*, 2018, https://search.proquest.com/ docview/2052556700?accountid=17242%0A https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/ myanmar/296-long-haul-ahead-myanmars-rohingya-refugee-crisis; Jobair Alam, "The Current Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/ 13602004.2019.1575560; Nehginpao Kipgen, "The Rohingya Crisis: The Centrality of Identity and Citizenship," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 61–74 , https://doi.org/10.1080/ 13602004.2019.1575019; Shreya Upadhyay, "The Future of India's Do-Nothing Policy Toward the Rohingya," *The Diplomat* (Washington, DC, December 2017), https://thediplomat.com/ 2017/12/the-future-of-indias-do-nothing-policy-toward-the-rohingya/; Niranjan Sahoo, "India's Rohingya Realpolitik," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (Washington, DC, 2017), https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/10/31/india-s-rohingya-realpolitik-pub-74590;

dearth of literature that comprehensively analyses the underlying reasons which motivated Chinese and Indians to respond the way they did. There exists substantial academic research that deals with the Sino-Indian rivalry and contestation in the geopolitical arena spanning the entire South Asian subcontinent.[3] These encompass a competitive outlook and generally posit

Thant Myint-U., *Where China Meets India⬚: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012); San Wai Kyaw, "Myanmar's Religious Violence⬚: A Buddhist 'siege Mentality' at Work (RSIS Commentaries, No. 037)." (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2014), http://hdl.handle.net/10220/19906; "China's Ambitions in Myanmar," *Strategic Comments* 6, no. 6 (July 2000): 1–2, https://doi.org/10.1080/1356788000661; "Operation Insaniyat - Humanitarian Assistance to Bangladesh on Account of Influx of Refugees" (New Delhi, India: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017), https://mea.gov.in/press-releases. htm?dtl/28944/Operation_Insaniyat __Humanitarian_assistance _to _Bangladesh_ on_ account_of_influx_of_refugees; Gregory B. Poling, "Kyaukpyu: Connecting China To the Indian Ocean," *China's Maritime Silk Road: Strategic and Economic Implications for the Indo-Pacific Region.*, 2018, https://amti.csis.org/kyaukpyu-china-indian-ocean/; K Yhome, "Examining India's Stance on the Rohingya Crisis" (New Delhi, India: Observer Research Foundation, 2018), https://doi.org/ISBN 978-81-938214-5-9; Sreeparna Banerjee, "The Rohingya Crisis: A Health Situation Analysis of Refugee Camps in Bangladesh," 2019, https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-rohingya-crisis-a-health-situation-analysis-of-refugee-camps-in-bangladesh-53011/#_edn70; Kazi Fahmida Farzana, *Memories of Burmese Rohingya Refugees: Contested Identity and Belonging*, Palgrave Macmillan US, 1st ed. (New York, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58360-4; Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* (London, UK: HURST & COMPANY, 2016); Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy within⬚: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 2017).

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