

Sheikh Masud Ahmed

THE ROHINGYA CRISIS AND THE REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

Abstract

The Rohingya crisis is emerging as a security concern especially for the countries of South and Southeast Asian region. The ethnic conflicts in Myanmar and uncertainty of the estimated 1.1 million Rohingya exodus in Bangladesh may lead the region towards many transnational security threats. These include the rise of radicalization, arms and drug trafficking, and environmental threats, which may enhance tensions among the countries and generate challenges for cooperation and development activities within the region. This paper finds that the key regional actors are not concentrating enough to recognize the Rohingya crisis as a major security issue; rather, they are focusing more on the strategic competition in the region. The study proposes that recognizing the issue as a regional security concern, the regional countries need to adopt emergency measures as the securitization process suggests.

Keywords: Rohingya Crisis, Regional Security, Securitization, Myanmar, Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

The Rohingyas in Myanmar are one of the most vulnerable and persecuted ethnic people in the world. Their forced displacement from Myanmar causing a huge influx into Bangladesh which has created a dire situation for the country as well as for the entire South Asian region with serious repercussions. Several initiatives have been taken at different levels and in various ways over the last couple of years. However, the geopolitical interests seem to prevent a durable solution. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has been all along active and persuasive for the safe, sustainable and dignified solution of the Rohingya crisis including the immediate repatriation to their homeland Myanmar both bilaterally with Naypyidaw and multilaterally through different platforms. But the resolution of the crisis seems a far cry, which is creating a void amongst the frustrated Rohingya community sheltered in Bangladesh on humanitarian consideration. Already, some of the Rohingyas have been found involved in illegal and criminal activities in the South-eastern region of Bangladesh, which has the potential to transcend to other regional countries. It is thus,

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pertinent to recognize that the issue of regional security concern demands collective securitization and engagement of the relevant stakeholders. Against such backdrops, this paper uses the conceptual framework of collective securitization to recognize and assess the implications of the Rohingya crisis from regional security context and to scrutinize the dilemmas of recognition *vis-à-vis* the threats.

Myanmar's Rohingya exodus to Bangladesh, especially after the military crackdown in August 2017, has changed the security landscape of the region. In utter despair, the fate of the 1.1 million Rohingyas in Bangladesh is trending to be swallowed by the *coup d'état* in Myanmar in February 2021. The uncertain future of the destitute Rohingyas may thus, lead the region towards many transnational security threats including the rise of radicalization, arms and drug trafficking, and environmental concerns. Myanmar looks confidently unwilling to create the conditions conducive to the safe return of the Rohingyas to Rakhine State. It is argued that the international community including the solitary superpower- the United States of America (USA) lacks the leverage to bring Myanmar to the term of Rohingyas' return to the Rakhine State while compelling them to address the issues of citizenship, livelihood, housing and security. The roles of both Russia and Japan seem to revolve around securing their economic interests in Myanmar. China as a regional giant is reluctant to thwart the indifferent mood of Myanmar by throwing its full weight to negotiate with Naypyidaw and end the crisis sustainably. India's role looks favouring Myanmar's discourse on Rohingyas ostensibly due to the security concerns in the north-east and multi-modal mega projects in Myanmar.

The contemporary security situation provides sufficient evidence to perceive that there can be fearsome repercussions in the future by the frustrated Rohingyas who can resort to armed struggle through recruiting and training new members from its greater community.¹ There are already speculations that transnational religious extremist groups seem to have connections with homegrown militants in Bangladesh, which can be further extended to Rohingyas living in camps. The extraordinary influx of Rohingyas into Bangladesh may appear as a prospective source for conscription by transnational extremist groups.² For instance, it is reported that many Rohingyas have already moved to the regional conflict zones across Bangladesh borders either to receive armed training or to collaborate with the existing aggrieved group(s).³

¹ D. Mitra, "Exclusive: Public Anger Brews in Bangladesh Over India's Stance on Rohingya Crisis", *The Wire*, available at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/bangladesh-rohingya-crisis-myanmar-india>, accessed on 29 April 2021.

² Md Nurul Momen and Ekram Hossain, "Examining the Contemporary Conflict Regions in the World", No Poverty, 2020, pp. 1-9.; W. Leal Filho, A. Azul, L. Brandli, Salvia A. Lange, P. Özuyar and T. Wall (eds), *Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals*, Berlin: Springer, 2021.

³ M. Khan, "Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis: An Analysis of Security Threats for South Asia", *International Journal of Management and Social Science Research Review*, Vol. 1, No. 322, 2017, pp. 155–159.

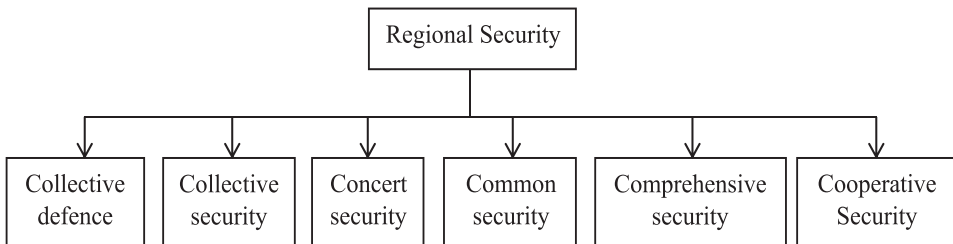
This paper examines why the regional actors fail to recognize the Rohingya crisis as a security concern. It has two major research questions: What challenges does the Rohingya crisis pose to regional security and what are the major dilemmas for securitization of the crisis? The study proposes that recognizing the issue as a regional security concern, the countries need to adopt emergency measures as the securitization process suggests. In the context of regional security, a collective securitization process is necessary by the relevant stakeholders. But why the state actors are not coming forward to securitize the issue demands substantial research. On the one hand, almost all countries are concerned about the rising security threats in the South Asian region. On the other hand, a regional framework to address the Rohingya crisis is not visible yet. In this respect, the present study will try to understand the dilemmas of securitization among the regional actors to accept the Rohingya crisis as an emergency security threat and to adopt necessary measures for countering the potential security challenges. There are six sections in this paper. After the introductory section, the second section chalks out the theoretical framework for analysis. Section three and four elaborate on the regional security concerns and identify the major security actors of the region. Section five discusses the dilemmas of securitization. The concluding section summarizes the key findings.

2. Theoretical Framework

A region can be defined as a cluster of states with geographical proximity, and regional security refers to various traditional and non-traditional security challenges. Addressing regional security threats needs collaborative security measures among the concerned stakeholders. Notably, Craig A. Snyder identified different forms of regional securitization in great detail: for instance, Collective Defence, Collective Security and Concert Security which are primarily “state centric approach to regional security”. Simultaneously Common Security, Comprehensive Security and Cooperative Security are “alternative approaches to regional security” covering both military and non-military threats to security.⁴

⁴ C. A. Snyder, “Regional Security Structures”, in *Contemporary Security and Strategy*, London: Palgrave, 1999, pp. 102-119.

Figure 1: Structure of Regional Securitizations⁵



Different schools of thought explain security threats from different perspectives. Realism, a dominant theory of International Relations, is a state-centric orthodox school of thought that narrowly defines the state interest as the prioritizing security agenda in securitizing issues and their policy persuasions. However, the regional security issues baffle twofold challenges to securitization - “the systemic and the actor-centred.”⁶ The actor-centred framework acknowledges the prominence on autonomy and “how actors respond to and shape the security environment”.⁷ On the other hand, the systemic model aggregates the actions of actors focusing on “normative and legal authority”.⁸ In international politics, security is highly concentrated on the state security perspective in terms of alternative levels of analysis.⁹ Sperling and Webber emphasize on bridging the gap between actors and the system through the approaches of collective securitization for following two reasons:

- a) Securitization depends on the perception and thereafter identification of threats recognizing that threats are progressively systemic in nature; and
- b) Threats to particular actors only assume urgency once enunciated and acted upon.¹⁰

Securitization refers to a process through which certain issues are constructed to be a security threat by senior government officials and their speech acts. The Copenhagen School made a substantial contribution to the field of securitization. The Copenhagen School’s securitization process has three components: existential threats, emergency action, and effects on inter-unit relations by breaking free rules. This

⁵ The figure is compiled based on the Craig A. Snyder, *ibid.*

⁶ J. Sperling and M. Webber, “The European Union security governance and collective securitization”, *West European Politics*, 2019, Vol. 42, No. 2, p. 231.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ J. Sperling and M. Webber, “Security Governance in Europe: A Return to System”, *European Security*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2014, pp. 126–144.

⁹ International Relations (IR) generally distinguishes between three levels of analysis: the system, the state, and the individual.

¹⁰ J. Sperling and M. Webber, *op. cit.*

process of securitization is analyzed by using three steps: “speech act”, “acceptance by credible audience” and “extra ordinary measures”. The study will try to understand how these three steps are effective in the case of the Rohingya crisis in the context of emerging regional security threats. The “speech act” will see how states project the Rohingya crisis as a regional security threat by analyzing contents. The “acceptance of the audience” would be measured by discourse analysis and consultation with non-state actors: Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and academia and lastly, “extra measures of the states” will be understood by analyzing regional integration and strategy on the issue of evolving nature of potential threats due to the statelessness of the Rohingyas. In this paper, “Collective Securitization” has been adopted as the theoretical framework to understand the dilemmas of securitization concerning the Rohingya crisis. The model is a recent add to the security discourse.

The failure to identify the Rohingya crisis as a potential threat to regional security may enhance tensions among the countries, which may also create challenges for cooperation and development activities in this region. Security scholarship posits that states perceive a threat to security enunciating the earnestness to take emergency actions. In this context, addressing the regional insecurity arising from the Rohingya crisis is also equally important. The Rohingya issue is emerging as a major security concern for the region, which has been by and large ignored by the regional security actors due to the dilemma of securitization. Conversely, the potential security concerns of the Rohingya crisis are so high that it needs an extraordinary approach for adopting collective securitization.

3. Regional Security Concerns of the Rohingya Crisis

In a protracted situation, the security concerns associated with the integration of the Rohingyas into the host community as well as to the region may be devastating, and thus, to some extent, it may become self-destructive. It is not to be ignored that the vulnerable Rohingya community is by far “incentivized” in extremism. Besides, other security concerns originating from the Rohingya crisis have already been visible that may render a serious blow for the regional security apparatuses. Rohingyas were already found in the airport with fake Bangladeshi passports, and even there were news of marital relationships to get Bangladeshi nationality.¹¹ Who will be held accountable if the Rohingyas cross the border and carry out terrorist activities elsewhere? Vulnerable communities are easily incentivized in extremism. Besides, other security concerns originating from the Rohingya crisis have been seen as a serious blow to the regional security apparatuses.

A Rohingya militant organization called Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) was allegedly involved in shooting down nearly twelve security forces’

¹¹ F. M. M. Rahaman, “Syndicate helps Rohingyas get NID, passports”, *The Daily Star*, 07 September 2019.

personnel in Rakhine State in 2017.¹² If it is so, it could also pose a significant threat to Bangladesh if ARSA is able to covertly organize in the Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar. It is worth noting that in 2017, ARSA expressed itself for the first time in the vicinity of the Bangladesh-Myanmar border in Northern Rakhine.¹³ Furthermore, many Rohingyas carry the "Yaba" pills (a kind of illegal drug) to make a living by selling these drugs. One estimate suggests that Rohingyas are responsible for the transportation of nearly 92 per cent of Yaba pills and over 96 per cent of them arrive in Bangladesh via the Teknaf route.¹⁴ Reportedly, around 200 caches (intermediate stores) for storing Yaba are functional at two large Rohingya camps namely Kutupalong and Balukhali in the district of Cox's Bazar.¹⁵ However, due to the strict surveillance and monitoring of the intelligence agencies and security forces, as of May 2018, the anti-smuggling operations remarkably curbed the drug smugglers' activities including those of the Rohingyas. As a result, about 50 million Yaba pills were seized and 400 Rohingyas and 72 smugglers had died in a gunfight with Bangladeshi security forces.¹⁶ The drug trafficking chain including the Rohingyas is very vulnerable to subversion and a potential threat to the regional peace and stability.

More recently, a large number of Rohingyas have tried to abscond from designated Rohingya camps for better opportunities and better life in many different countries, for example, Malaysia, the Middle East, Thailand, Indonesia and many more. Destitute and desperate Rohingyas use fishing boats to reach their destination countries with the help of international gangs and human traffickers. Not that all the attempts see success; some die *en route*, many are arrested by the security forces, and some fall in the hands of criminal gangs to serve their purpose. Another worrisome concern for Bangladesh lies in obtaining National Identification (NID) cards. However, the security agencies and the Bangladesh police have been able to trace the criminals' trail and could successfully arrest many of the collaborators and criminals.¹⁷ The motive of obtaining such Bangladeshi documents can be indicative of some corners' vested interest to undermine and defame Bangladesh while perpetrating criminality by indoctrinating the Rohingyas having Bangladeshi passports and NID cards. This, of course, poses a serious threat to Bangladesh as well to the whole of South and Southeast Asian region and beyond with ominous signs.

¹² UNHCR, "Operational Updates" on Bangladesh within the time frame from 27 December 2017–7 January 2018", available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/61561>, accessed on 24 April 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ L. Alsaafin, "I carry yaba to survive": Rohingya and Bangladesh's meth trade", *Al-Jazeera*, 19 August 2018, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/8/19/i-carry-yaba-to-survive-rohingya-and-bangladeshs-meth-trade>, accessed on 24 April 2021.

¹⁵ T. Mahmud, "The life of a Rohingya yaba courier", *Dhaka Tribune*, 21 August 2018.

¹⁶ "Rohingya man killed in alleged gunfight with BGB", *The Daily Prothom Alo*.

¹⁷ "Rohingya getting fake passports", *The Star*, 9 September 2019, available at <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/regional/2019/09/09/rohingya-getting-fake-passports>, accessed on 24 April 2021.

With the prolonged stay of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, there have been signs of Rohingyas' involvement in local criminal activities. There are some Rohingyas who are arrested by the Bangladesh security forces for attempting robbery using handmade guns.¹⁸ In the camps, the gangs especially the juveniles reportedly threaten other Rohingyas for money or valuable goods. It is not unlikely that some violent gangs become active inside the camp areas due to the protracted nature of their stay. It is also possible that young and able Rohingyas join hands with the already active militant group(s) inside Myanmar to launch militant attacks against the government forces.¹⁹ It may be noted that a good number of Rohingyas were found responsible for having internal clashes that also transcended to the local community; around 47 Rohingyas including some locals were killed in several incidents.²⁰ Moreover, the possibilities of connections of Rohingyas with the transnational criminal group(s) remain as a viable concern for Bangladesh and the region.²¹ Taken together, the threats of drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms trafficking, religious extremism and environmental concerns are all critical to Bangladesh and the regional security apparatuses.

Due to the unprecedented atrocities and systematic ethnic cleansing perpetrated by both Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) and radical Buddhists, both the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regions have witnessed unusual and unexpected human movements in many countries notably – Bangladesh. Under the shadow of a dire humanitarian catastrophe, the security implications of more than one million Rohingyas in Bangladesh seem to have been overlooked by both regional and international actors. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that there is a growing awareness among academia and security scholars to view the Rohingya crisis through both security and humanitarian prisms. Thus, it is expected that the regional and international communities will pay more attention to appropriately securitize the Rohingya crisis before the situation worsens beyond control. There is also growing conviction among the security and international analysts on the multifaceted security implications of the Rohingya crisis. With a burden of more than one million exterminated Rohingyas, Bangladesh has already started facing multidimensional human security and psycho-social challenges amidst appalling conditions of the local host community and the Rohingyas.

Whilst discussing the spectre of regional securitization, the top priorities revolve around the discourses on peace and stability as well as economic cooperation. Yet, making the situation worse in South Asia, the Rohingya crisis added a new

¹⁸ M. A. M. Molla, "Refugee Camps: Crime spikes while Rohingyas despair", *The Daily Star*, 25 April 2021,

¹⁹ "Rising criminality in refugee camps", *The Daily Star*, 9 July 2019.

²⁰ "Rohingya getting fake passports, op. cit.

²¹ M. S. Islam, "Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Security Concerns for Bangladesh", *South Asian Journal of Social Studies and Economics*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2020, pp. 24-34.

dimension to the security agenda. The rise of stratocracy in Myanmar and the unresolved Rohingya crisis pose tremendous pressure on building regional peace and stability. From a sceptic viewpoint, no doubt, the Rohingya crisis will create instability in the regional peace and stability in the near future.

4. Security Actors of the South Asian Region and Beyond

South Asian region being situated at the confluence of the natural resource-rich Western Asia that includes the greater Middle East and Central Asia is ominously significant in the world's geo-economic and geo-strategic competitions. The region is the home of approximately 1.836 billion people making it about a quarter of the population of the world.²² Among the SAARC members, the role of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan is pivotal as they are regarded as the most important security actors among others. Due to its terrestrial landscape and proximal connection to the resource-rich Middle East, West and Central Asia, and rising power China of the South Asian region has vital geopolitical and geo-economic importance in international affairs.²³

The tumultuous events, such as 9/11 and the rise of religious extremism, altered the security dimension of the world and particularly, for continental and mainland Asia²⁴. Following the “war on terror”, concerns over “faith-based extremism” (to be specific Islamist extremism) have been put on the top of the security agenda of the Western actors. In this scenario, it is apprehended by both academics and security experts that frustrated Rohingyas can indulge in extremism and criminal activities and also can turn out to be a potential threat for the entire region of South Asia²⁵, Southeast Asia²⁶ and beyond. Although China is not a part of the South Asian region, it has a significant role to play in the matters of regional security, primarily due to its military and economic potency and geographic proximity to South and South East Asia. Moreover, due to its geographical connectedness with more than half of the SAARC countries and as an observer state of SAARC, China has the ability to exert substantial influence over the concerns and dynamics of the regional security landscape. With the growing economic and political influence, China is progressively

²² “Data on South Asia”, *The World Bank Group*, available at <https://data.worldbank.org/region/south-asia?view=chart>, accessed on 9 July 2021.

²³ Sobia Jamil, Abdullahi Ayoade Ahmad, Syed Zohaib Abbas Rizvi and Nasa’I Muhammad Gwadabe, “An Analysis of Regional Security Dynamics of South Asia in Post 9/11 Period”, *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2020, p. 3733.

²⁴ Mainland Asia includes East Asia, the Korean Peninsula, mainland Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, as well as those large islands – Japan, Taiwan, and Sri Lanka – in close proximity to Asia’s coastlands.

²⁵ The countries which make up South Asia are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. They are linked by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

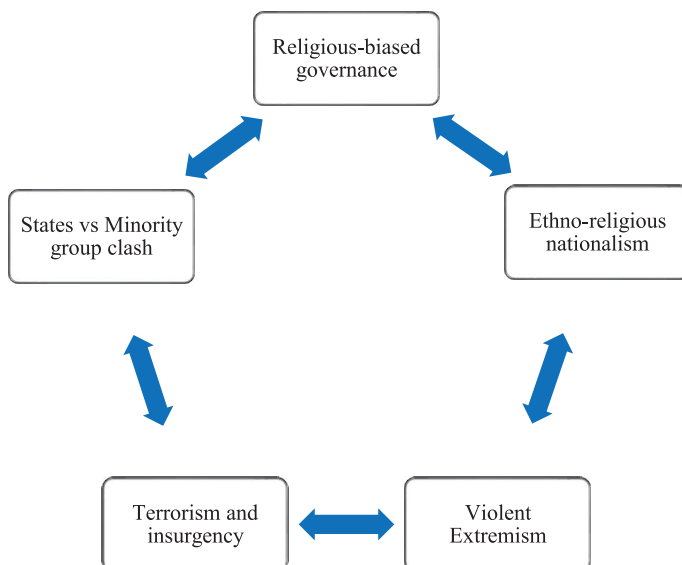
²⁶ Southeast Asia is composed of eleven countries having diversity in religion, culture and history: Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

consolidating its bilateral and economic relations with South Asian and Southeast Asian nations. Consequently, in the regional security complex environment, China preserves the power and potentials to play the most influential role to resolve the Rohingya pogrom viewing the transnational security concerns through securitization lens.

The main threats to regional security in mainland Asia are ethnic, ultra-nationalism, insurgency, and religious extremism. The ultra-nationalist, autocratic and non-secular governance pave the way for the rise of ethno-religious nationalism and ultra-nationalist racism, which tend to augment each other in a destructive cycle. For example, the Chinese atrocities and assaults on the Uyghurs combine a strong element of ethnic nationalism followed by Uyghurs' attacks on the ethnic Chinese population in Xinjiang between 2009 and 2016.²⁷ In other countries of Asia, minority repression is exponentially increasing. India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar are glaring examples where societal and community tensions are rising often leading to nation-wide unrest. Like authoritarianism, ethno-religious and ultra-nationalism depict the strong ominous signs that they are not going anywhere; instead, those ultra-nationalist or extremist thoughts are likely to continue to upsurge in regional politics. Hence, the vicious cycle is likely to grow stronger in the future with calamitous consequences for regional security (See Figure 2). It may be reckoned that faith-based governance leads to ultra-nationalism providing a fertile ground for ethno-religious racism, which is the primary reason to develop fundamentalist ideologies and violent extremism. To come out from the vicious cycle, no doubt, collective securitization is a long-cry for which the nation-states have no time to waste.

²⁷ "Five dead after terror attack explosion in China's Xinjiang", *Radio Free Asia*, available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/58f9ca3013.html>, accessed on 27 April 2021.

Figure 2: Vicious Circle of Transnational Security Concerns²⁸



Since the extermination of Myanmar’s Rohingyas from Rakhine State through the Myanmar Military’s brutal persecution augmented by radical Buddhists in 2017, there has always prevailed the fear of retaliation from the hardliner Muslim religious community of the region using lethal means. For instance, the online Muslim activists and bloggers from the countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Pakistan started using social media and internet-based communication means for sharing videos and pictures of the repression of Tatmadaw, showing the dire situation of the Rohingyas and uploading route maps to join the rebellious struggle.²⁹ The Bangladesh government already expressed its concern to China, India, and other regional and extra-regional actors regarding the evolving security risks emanating from the Rohingya crisis.

4.1 The USA: Champion of Rhetoric

Despite Donald Trump’s “Muslim Ban”, the US’s position seems consistent on the brutality upon the Rohingyas perpetrated by Myanmar in especially 2017. In its rhetoric, the US looks unswerving in supporting Bangladesh. It is worth noting that

²⁸ The figure is a compilation of thought based on the “Religious Freedom in the World Report 2021”, *Aid to the Church in Need International*, April 2021, available at <https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport>, accessed on 26 April 2021.

²⁹ J. Singh and M. Haziq, “The Rohingya Crisis: Regional Security Implications”, *RSIS Commentaries*, No. 293, 2016.

the then US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson termed the Rohingya pogrom as “ethnic cleansing” right in 2017.³⁰ Furthermore, the US’s permanent representative in the United Nations (UN) inexorably criticized Myanmar for its unprecedented atrocities against the Rohingyas and demanded for accountability and expeditious remedy.³¹

However, since the Burmese independence from colonial rule, the US has been courting Myanmar with a balancing approach with a view to countering Chinese dominance and expansion in the region including the Indian Ocean. Upon learning the atrocities by Myanmar against the Rohingyas, although one camp of critics opts for effective sanctions against Myanmar, the other camp advocates for more engagement and deepening ties with its military in terms of training among many others.³² The opposing camp for sanctioning argues that sanctions rather limit Myanmar from democratization let alone compelling Tatmadaw to hand over power to civilian government.³³ Amidst such debates, in 2017, the US took along European Union (EU) and Canada and imposed sanctions against 13 “serious human rights abusers and corrupt actors”, including General Maung Maung Soe – an eye witness in silence who was also a part of monstrous brutality and persecution against the downtrodden Rohingyas.³⁴ Myanmar took stunning smart actions by sacking the general from military but remained indifferent to redress primary concerns of Rohingyas’ plight.³⁵ The US also imposed sanctions on many other military

³⁰ “US Condemns ‘Ethnic Cleansing’ of Rohingya in Myanmar”, *Deutsche Welle*, 22 November 2017, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/us-condemns-ethnic-cleansing-of-rohingya-in-myanmar/a-41488262>, accessed on 13 March 2021.

³¹ “US Criticises China for Shielding Myanmar from UN Action over Rohingya Crisis”, *Reuters*, 15 May 2018, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-un/u-s-criticizes-china-for-shielding-myanmar-from-u-n-action-idUSKCN11G00E>, accessed on 13 March 2021.

³² A. Thiha, “How Should Washington Re-engage with Myanmar’s Security Agenda? Multi-track Diplomacy Holds the Key to Effective Engagement with the Tatmadaw”, *The Diplomat*, 24 August 2017, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/how-should-washington-re-engage-with-myanmars-security-agenda/>, accessed on 09 March 2021. W. Lohman, “Burma’s Brutal Campaign against the Rohingya: Reexamining US-Burma Military-to-Military Relations”, Testimony before the Foreign Affairs Committee, Asia and the Pacific Subcommittee United States House of Representatives, 27 September 2017, available at <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA05/20170927/106434/HHRG-115-FA05-Wstate-LohmanW-20170927.pdf>, accessed on 11 April 2021.

³³ J. Fisher, “Did Economic Sanctions Play a Role in Burma’s Reform?”, *BBC*, 23 April 2012, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-17781745>, accessed on 03 March 2021; A. E. Johansson, “A Silent Emergency Persists: The Limited Efficacy of US Investment Sanctions on Burma”, *Pacific Rim Law and Policy Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2000, pp. 317–351; T. M. Nyun, “Feeling Good or Doing Good: Inefficacy of the US Unilateral Sanctions against the Military Government of Burma/Myanmar”, *Washington University Global Studies Law Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2008, pp. 455–518.

³⁴ S. Heavey and A. Mohammed, “U.S. Sanctions Myanmar General, Others for Abuses, Corruption”, *Reuters*, 21 December 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/ususa-sanctions/u-s-sanctions-myanmar-general-others-for-abuses-corruptionidUSKBN1EF221>, accessed on 24 March 2021.

³⁵ J. Emont, “Myanmar Dismisses Rohingya-Crisis General Amid EU Sanctions”, *Wall Street Journal*, 25 June 2018, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/myanmar-dismisses-rohingyacrisis-general-amid-eu-sanctions-1529964635>, accessed on 08 March 2021.

commanders and units which ultimately made it difficult for the US military to engage effectively with Tatmadaw.³⁶

Under the circumstances, it is now difficult to foretell whether or not the US will put more sanctions on Myanmar. Having analyzed varied political critics about Myanmar across the US government including the China factor, it seems too much optimistic for the Rohingyas to seek tangible and effective actions from the US. It may be noted that sanctions alone can be counterproductive to the resolution of the Rohingya crisis which evolved due to politically motivated ethnic cleansing perpetrated by both Tatmadaw and the radical Rakhine Buddhists. It may not be untrue to deduce that the Rohingya crisis rather paved the way for China to establish its permanent foothold in Myanmar and the region.

4.2 *Russia: Economy and Influence*

Russia surprisingly shielded Myanmar from any gesticulation at the UN Security Council although its intent seems blushed at the first sight. Ironically, Russia also suffers from the same fear as China and Myanmar of Muslim minority and suppresses Muslim uprising adopting brutal methods.³⁷ Historically, Russia takes the opposite stance against the US as it does with present-day Pakistan, India, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. Former archrival China is now Russia's friend. However, the other factor for which Russia keenly supports Myanmar is the selling of arms to Tatmadaw. The primary source of military gadgets and weapon systems of Myanmar's military is China. Having experienced the low quality, the Tatmadaw has become sceptical about Chinese military hardware³⁸ as such opted not to over-rely on China for military appliances.

Myanmar is also apprehensive of Chinese support to Myanmar's ethnic insurgents like "United Wa State Army (UWSA)"³⁹ in the North-eastern region in terms of providing artillery guns, combat helicopters-equipped with missiles, anti-

³⁶ E. Wong, "U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Myanmar Military over Rohingya Atrocities", *New York Times*, 17 August 2018, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/17/us/politics/myanmar-sanctions-rohingya.html>, accessed on 27 March 2021.

³⁷ N. Schiffrin, "Why Are So Many from This Russian Republic Fighting for ISIS?", *PBS News Hour*, 12 July 2017, available at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/many-russian-republic-fighting-isis>, accessed on 22 March 2021; S. Shuster, "Underground Islam: Moscow's Intolerance Is Forcing Russian Muslims to Take Shelter. Is the City Breeding a More Radical Brand of Islam?", *Slate*, 2 August 2013, available at http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/roads/2013/08/moscow_s_underground_mosques_russia_s_intolerance_toward_muslims_may_be.html, accessed on 21 March 2021; S. Hunter, "Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security", London Routledge, 2016.

³⁸ A. Zaw, "Myanmar Seeks Advanced Weapons from Russia, but China Remains the Key Player", *The Irrawaddy*, 25 January 2018, available at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/myanmar-seeks-advanced-weapons-russia-china-remains-key-player.html>, accessed on 05 March 2021.

³⁹ A. Slodkowski and Y. Lee, "Through Reclusive Wa, China's Reach Extends into Suu Kyi's Myanmar", *Reuters*, 28 December 2016, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/usmyanmar-wa-china-idUSKBN14H1V8>, accessed on 08 March 2021.

tank missiles let alone small arms and munitions.⁴⁰ For quite some time now, Myanmar acquires both rotary and fixed-wing fighter aircraft from Russia to minimize over-reliance on the weapon system of China. Indeed, over a period from 2011 to 2017, Myanmar procured military hardware worth about US\$2 billion of which Russia counts for 33 per cent *vis-à-vis* China's 59 per cent.⁴¹ Russia considers Myanmar as its "Pivot to Asia" and aspires to establish a foothold to exert its influence over the Southeast Asian region.⁴² However, this diversification does no way mean that Myanmar does not recognize the need for Chinese investment, and also the Chinese wield of power in the region.

4.3 *Japan: Indo-Pacific Vision and Vigilant Indifference*

Japan's stake in Myanmar stems from the history of Sino-Japanese competition in the Southeast Asian frontier. Being the third-largest importer and the seventh-largest exporter from and to Myanmar, Japan has been constantly harbouring on economic investment in the country and showed overt support for investment opportunities in the Rakhine State.⁴³ The effort is not new and rather had been cemented through the diplomatic partnerships since the post-World War II era. It was Japan that embarked on its venture to be an economic patron of the Indo-Pacific and salvaged a strong strategic partnership with the Ne Win regime after 1962.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Myanmar became the first country in Asia to reorient the intricate relationship with Japan albeit not being a democratic country. Japan also cancelled a big part of Myanmar's debt in 2012 and provided the country with bridge loans to facilitate its engagement with international partners like the World Bank and ASEAN.⁴⁵ Japan fears Myanmar's dependence on China, which indeed was the main reason why the former had an active engagement in the political reforms of Myanmar which expanded its rapport with other countries. Nevertheless, Japan-Myanmar's important ally advocated for an independent investigation and suggested for resuming

⁴⁰ M. Maki Catama, "Wa Army Fielding New Chinese Artillery, ATGMs", *ASEAN Military Defense Review*, 23 July 2015, available at <http://www.aseanmildef.com/2015/07/wa-army-fieldingnew-chinese-artillery.html>, accessed on 09 April 2021; "China Provides Fighter Copters to Burma Armed Group: Report", *Radio Free Asia*, 3 April 2013, available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/wa-04302013201404.html>, accessed on 09 April 2021.

⁴¹ "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Importer/exporter TIV tables", 19 July 2018, available at <http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>, accessed on 23 April 2021.

⁴² "Myanmar-Russia Ties Reviewed", *Myanmar Times*, 27 March 2017, available at <https://www.mmmtimes.com/national-news/25467-myanmar-russia-ties-reviewed.html>, accessed on 11 April 2021; L. Lutz-Auras, "Russia and Myanmar – Friends in Need?", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2015, pp. 165–198.

⁴³ Yuzuki Nagakoshi, "Japan and Myanmar's Toxic Friendship", *The Diplomat*, 15 January 2020, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/japan-and-myanmars-toxic-friendship/>, accessed on 21 June 2021.

⁴⁴ "On Myanmar, Japan Must Lead by Example", *The Diplomat*, 26 May 2021, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/on-myanmar-japan-must-lead-by-example/>, accessed on 26 May 2021.

⁴⁵ Patrick Strefford, "Japan's response to the coup in Myanmar", *East Asia Forum*, February 2021.

relief operations by the UN.⁴⁶ It may be noted that Japan has allotted US\$3 million as grants for the improvement of living conditions, rebuilding the houses, provisioning of water and electricity, and other associated facilities including the pledge of monitoring the Rohingya repatriation actively.⁴⁷ The Foreign Minister of Japan while discussing with Aung San Suu Kyi, proposed for the free access of media especially concerning the ethnic Rohingya matters and also elsewhere as per Anan Commission recommendations. However, there have not been any concrete steps from the Japanese government towards securitizing the Rohingya crisis.

In 2019, Myanmar and Japan jointly organized the Rakhine State ‘Investment Fair’ which demonstrated Japan’s negligence towards the genocide being committed against the Rohingyas in the very region.⁴⁸ The Fair was looking forward to inviting local and foreign investors in “development” projects, particularly related to infrastructure and service-oriented sectors.⁴⁹ Tokyo was not even trying to hide its duplicitous polemics, mentioning that economic development would reduce the potential of conflict in the troubled zone. These words echoed by the Japanese Ambassador to Myanmar were highly appreciated by Aung San Suu Kyi who wanted to divert the attention of the international media from the strategic and human rights dynamics in the Rakhine State to the development-oriented “peace”.⁵⁰ Moreover, Japan has been cautiously using the term “Muslims in the Rakhine State” instead of “the Rohingyas” to make more neutral and subtle directives.

Interestingly, Japan is very proactive with its assessment of the recent military takeover. Not only Japan was one of the signatories of the G7 statement condemning the coup; its State Minister of Defence also directly mentioned that this takeover might un-democratize the political environment in the region and make Myanmar a part of the “League of China”.⁵¹ Therefore, it is clear why Japan’s rhetoric regarding the Rohingya genocide has been very ambiguous and purposefully sidelined by the geostrategic and geo-economics hindsight.

⁴⁶ Y. Nitta, “Myanmar taps Japan connections to overcome Rohingya crisis”, *Nikkei Asia*, 16 August 2018, available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Myanmar-taps-Japan-connections-to-overcome-Rohingya-crisis>, accessed on 25 April 2021.

⁴⁷ “Japan grants Myanmar \$3 million to repatriate Rohingya Muslims”, 01 December 2018, *DW News*, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/japan-grants-myanmar-3-million-to-repatriate-rohingya-muslims/a-42121365-0>, accessed on April 25, 2021.

⁴⁸ “Japan’s Cold-Blooded Approach to the Rohingya Crisis”, *Human Rights Watch*, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/20/japans-cold-blooded-approach-rohingya-crisis>, 20 June 2019, accessed on 21 June 2021.

⁴⁹ “Rakhine State Investment Fair”, available at <https://www.investrakhine.com/>, accessed on 21 June 2021.

⁵⁰ “Japan’s Cold-Blooded Approach to the Rohingya Crisis”, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ Patrick Strefford, *op. cit.*

4.4 China: Concerns and Counters

Both China and Myanmar encounter perceived existential threats posed by miniscule Muslim minorities in their respective countries. Surprisingly, both countries have applied similar contrivance of brutality to suppress the minority Muslims. They kept them in apartheid situation in concentration camps in extremely inhuman conditions depriving them of freedom of movement and basic human rights.⁵² Besides, China has its economic and strategic interests in Myanmar as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project, which faces local opposition for the land acquisition by China to build more infrastructures in Rakhine State. Already China has built a deep seaport at Kyaukphyu Island off the coastline of Rakhine State including special economic zone.⁵³ However, as China has stood for Myanmar in the UN Security Council, it now has the ground to expect concessions from Myanmar to advance its infrastructure building projects in Rakhine with the assurance of continuous support against international contempt. Significantly, a report in July 2018 reveals that China and Myanmar are very close to reach a deal for land acquisition in Rakhine State despite the opposition from the local inhabitants.⁵⁴

China has undertaken a project to build a “Special Economic Zone” centering “Kyaukphyu deep-sea port”, through which it seeks to construct a railway including oil and gas pipelines. It certainly opens up a new-fangled avenue for Chinese maritime trade across the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal. In addition to building a US\$7.3 billion deep water port, China has also planned to construct a nearby industrial park with the estimated cost of US\$3.2 billion. Beijing is also supporting the construction of the Myitsone Dam at a cost of US\$3.6 billion in northern Myanmar.⁵⁵ According to an estimate in January 2017, it was assessed that Chinese overall ventures in Myanmar amounted to US\$18.53 billion.⁵⁶ All these issues depict a vivid

⁵² S. Denyer, “Former Inmates of China’s Muslim ‘Reeducation’ Camps Tell of Brainwashing, Torture”, *Washington Post*, 17 May 2018, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/former-inmates-of-chinas-muslim-re-education-camps-tell-of-brainwashing-torture/2018/05/16/32b330e8-5850-11e8-8b92-45fdd7aaef3c_story.html?utm_term=.c2354fc53177, accessed on 17 May 2021.

⁵³ K. S. Wai, “Myanmar: Residents Object Planned Land Acquisition in Rakhine State for Chinese-funded Economic Zone”, *Myanmar Times*, 26 June 2018, available at <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/residents-oppose-acquisition-lands-ecozone.html>, accessed on 21 May 2021.

⁵⁴ J. Louppova, J. “China Finalises Talks on Kyaukphyu Port in Myanmar”, *Port.com*, 9 July 2018, available at <https://port.today/china-finalises-talks-kyaukphyu-port-myanmar/>, accessed on 23 May 2021; M. Nichols, “U.S. Criticizes China for Shielding Myanmar from U.N. Action”, *Reuters*, 14 May 2018, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-un/u-s-criticizes-china-for-shielding-myanmar-from-u-n-action-idUSKCN1IG00E>, accessed on 23 May 2021. “Myanmar Negotiating with Chinese Consortium on Deep-Sea Port Project in Rakhine State”, *Straits Times*, 8 July 2018, available at <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/myanmarnegotiating-with-chinese-consortium-on-deep-sea-port-project-in-rakhine-state>, accessed on 23 May 2021.

⁵⁵ S. Sassen, “The Assault On The Rohingya Is Not Only About Religion - It’s Also About Land”, *Huffpost*, 15 September 2017, available at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rohingya-land-grab-military_b_59b96400e4b02da0e13e79f4?section=us_theworldpost, accessed on 24 April 2021.

⁵⁶ K. Ahmed, op. cit.

portrayal of China's ever-growing interest and influence in Myanmar and therefore, it is no surprise that China's role is deemed to be favourable towards Myanmar.

4.5 *India: Northeast Disturbance and China's Assertiveness*

China remains as a pinching worry for India for the expansion and influence in its long stretched backyard. The legacy of un-demarcated borders including the Chinese decisive victory in the 1962 Sino-Indian War, and engagement in recent times border skirmishes with China drives India to forge a strategic partnership with Myanmar, especially to secure its North-eastern region.⁵⁷ On one hand, India is a big market for China, on the other, China does not want India to disturb its own markets and political influence in Asia proper and East Africa including the Indian Ocean shipping lanes. Another trouble spot for India lies in China's enduring support to archrival Pakistan in almost all spheres of military affairs including transfer of nuclear technology and its delivery system.⁵⁸ China also remains steadfast to shield Pakistan against sanctions (as it does so for Myanmar) in the UN for alleged terrorist attacks in India. Amidst many other such causes, India – one of the largest democracies of the world surprisingly made a shift to align with Myanmar in the early 1990s overriding the democracy factor of Myanmar.⁵⁹ India eyes its vested interest in carrying forward the connectivity projects through the Rakhine State of Myanmar to the North-eastern states of the country to take off the risks and vulnerability of Siliguri Corridor – the only land route that connects mainland India to its North-eastern states famously known as 'seven sisters'.⁶⁰

In apprehension of the vulnerability of the Siliguri Corridor against the Chinese advance as it was feared in 1962, India tacitly engaged with Myanmar and subsequently built the Sittwe sea-port in the capital of Rakhine State to open up a land supply route to its landlocked 'seven sisters'. India has a long porous border with Myanmar along its North-eastern region where insurgents' activities and separatists' attacks are pervasive to undermine Indian forces.⁶¹ On this ground, India needs to forge strong relations with Myanmar for supporting its counterinsurgency operations,

⁵⁷ J. W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001; B. Lintner, *China's India War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

⁵⁸ P. K. Kerr and M. B. Nikitin, "Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons", *Congressional Research Service Report*, 01 August 2016, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL34248.pdf>, accessed on 07 April 2021; S. A. Kan, "China and Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Missiles: Policy Issues", *Congressional Research Service Report*, 05 January 2015, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL31555.pdf>, accessed on 02 May 2021.

⁵⁹ B. P. Routray, "India-Myanmar Relations: Triumph of Pragmatism", *Jindal Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2011, pp. 299–321; M. Lall, "Indo-Myanmar Relations in the Era of Pipeline Diplomacy", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2006, pp. 424–446.

⁶⁰ B. Allen-Ebrahimian, "Will China and India Go to War Over This Tiny 12-Mile Strip of Land?", *Foreign Policy*, 9 August 2017, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/09/willchina-and-india-go-to-war-over-this-tiny-12-mile-strip-of-land-border-dispute-bhutan/>, accessed on 03 May 2021.

⁶¹ L. E. Cline, "The Insurgency Environment in Northeast India", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2006, pp. 126–147.

which India already orchestrated in June 2019 in the name of “Operation Sunrise”.⁶² India also previously conducted the same kind of operations within its boundary near Myanmar border in 2015 day after the killing of 18 Indian soldiers by the insurgents.⁶³ In the contemporary time, Bangladesh-India relations remain at its peak while on the issue of the Rohingya crisis, Myanmar seems to have precedence over Bangladesh. Although strategic balance endows India with a little advantage to pressurize Myanmar for safe and sustainable return of the Rohingyas to their homeland, Hindu chauvinism and Islamophobia tend to identify the brutally persecuted Rohingyas as criminals and terrorists.⁶⁴ It only appears that India would remain diffident from pursuing Myanmar to take back their Rohingya citizens from Bangladesh as it did so in 2017 during the condemnation of Myanmar by UN general assembly, which was sponsored by Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).⁶⁵

Amidst the rioting situations in a number of places in the Rakhine State of Myanmar in 2012, brutal conflicts broke out between ethnic Muslim minorities and radical Buddhists. Throughout this violence, India remained indifferent about the brutality against the Rakhine’s Muslim minority, rather sympathized with Myanmar providing US\$1 million as relief support.⁶⁶ Surprisingly, after the unprecedented pogrom against the ethnic Rohingyas in August 2017, India and Myanmar reached an agreement and signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on 20 December 2017 regarding a development programme of Rakhine State of Myanmar. It is worth noting that India promised US\$25 million as development assistance in the Rakhine State of Myanmar under the provision of the MoU, which would be implemented within a period of five years. India also provided more than US\$1.75 billion to Myanmar as credit and grants in 2017.⁶⁷ India, with its own finance built a power station at Sittwe

⁶² “India, Myanmar conduct joint operation to destroy militant camps in Northeast”, *The Hindu*, 16 June 2019, , available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-myanmar-conduct-joint-operation-to-destroy-militant-camps-in-northeast/article27956142.ece#>, accessed on 02 April 2021.

⁶³ “Myanmar Operation 70 Commandos Finish Task in 40 Minutes”, *The Hindu*, 10 June 2015, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/myanmar-operation-70-commandosfinish-task-in-40-minutes/article7302348.ece>, accessed on 22 March 2021; “Army Chief Spills Beans on India’s 2015 Myanmar Raid, Irks Centre”, *The Quint*, 12 April 2017, available at <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/army-chief-bipin-rawat-gaffe-indian-army-raid-in-myanmar-2015>, accessed on 03 March 2021.

⁶⁴ C. Mortimer, “India Trying to Deport 40,000 Rohingya Muslim over ‘Ties to Terrorism’: Around 400,000 Have Fled Burma Following a Fresh Upsurge in Ethnic Violence”, *The Independent*, 18 September 2017, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/india-rohingya-muslims-deport-burma-40000-supreme-court-terroristsbangladesh-myanmar-a7953851.html>, accessed on 06 April 2021.

⁶⁵ “UN Resolution on Myanmar: Abstention from Voting Doesn’t Mean Opposing Bangladesh, Japan Says”, *BDNews24.com*, 19 November 2017, available at <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/11/19/un-resolution-on-myanmar-abstention-from-voting-doesnt-meanopposing-bangladesh-japan-says>, accessed on 04 April 2021.

⁶⁶ M. Beauchamp, “Beyond bigotry: Unraveling ethnic violence in Rakhine”, *New Mandala*, 19 December 2013, available at <https://www.newmandala.org/beyond-bigotry-unravelling-ethnic-violence-in-rakhine/>, accessed on 25 April 2021.

⁶⁷ “India commits \$25 million to develop Myanmar’s Rakhine State”, *The Hindustan Times*, 21 December 2017, available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-commits25-million-to-developmyanmar-s-rakhine-state/storylpwndpPujIn1hCwBhJqAJ.html>, accessed on 25 April 2021.

of the Rakhine State. India undertook Kaladan Multimodal mega project worth US\$484 million and is planning to construct a road of 109 km in length that would link Zorinpui in Mizoram State of India from Paletwa river-terminal in Myanmar.⁶⁸

5. The Dilemmas of Securitization

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) in its 75th session acknowledged and endorsed the gross human rights violation in Myanmar which led to the adoption of a resolution on Myanmar's Rohingyas and other minority groups in Myanmar focusing on the human rights issues.⁶⁹ The UNGA plenary witnessed 130 record votes in favour, 9 voted against the resolution while 25 countries abstained from voting during the adoption of the resolution in December 2020. China, Russia, Belarus, Zimbabwe, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines opposed the resolution and voted against it⁷⁰, though 9 countries later changed their stances. Of course, a few countries like China, Russia and Japan who either voted against or abstained from voting could play the pivotal and historic role to mitigate adversaries in resolving the Rohingya crisis as these countries prevail as dominant regional security actors. Paradoxically, the neighbours of Bangladesh- near or distant, played 'dumb and deaf' against the "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" as remarked by the head of "UN Human Rights Council",⁷¹ which took place against the Rohingyas in 2017 in the Rakhine State of Myanmar.

A pertinent question arises, what is to be done about the gross violations of human rights of the Rohingya population. Related to this, another question arises, who is responsible for state-sponsored brutality? Powerful regional actors like China, India, and Japan are supporting Myanmar designating the issue as an internal matter of the garrison state. It seems that they are becoming indifferent to the state-sponsored gross human rights violation by the Tatmadaw due to their strategic interests. China is considered as an "all weather friend" and economic partner of Bangladesh, but to date, no particular progress has been seen from them except the consolation of diplomatic assurance. Another important friend since the independence of Bangladesh - India is also not showing any genuine willingness to resolve the issue. The behaviour of both giant neighbours is frustrating and upsetting for Bangladesh, which shares with them a regional bond with historical and cultural legacies. However, they are not accepting the realization that securitising the Rohingya crisis should be prioritized

⁶⁸ K. Ahmed, "The geo-politics of Rohingya crisis", *The Financial Express*, 6 June 2018.

⁶⁹ UNGA Resolution 75/238. "Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar", Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 31 December 2020, available at <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/238>, accessed on 12 March 2021.

⁷⁰ "Nine more countries back UN resolution to condemn Myanmar", *Dhaka Tribune*, 02 January 2021.

⁷¹ S. Nebehay, "U.N. sees 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing' in Myanmar", available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-un-idUSKCN1BM0SL>, accessed on 23 April 2021.

above all other stakes. To adequately pressurize Myanmar, China, India, Japan and the ASEAN countries need to play a more active role to address the Rohingya crisis as a threat to regional security. Yet, the narrowly defined interest is working as an obstacle to collective securitization.

5.1 *Geo-political and Geo-economic Interests*

Myanmar is becoming increasingly important for global powers from both strategic and economic contexts. From the geographical point of view, Myanmar is the ‘gateway’ from South Asia to Southeast Asia and vice versa. It is also considered to be the alternative ‘gateway’ of China to the Indian Ocean. With its 676,577 square kilometres land area including a long stretched coastal belt, the country is rich in forests, minerals, clean water, natural gasoline and maritime resources. According to a recent estimate by the US Department of Energy, Myanmar has 3.2 billion barrels of recoverable crude oil and 2.5 trillion cubic meters of the natural gas reserve, which makes it the 10th largest energy reserve in the world. The country is an important ASEAN member, and due to its unique geographical positioning, provides a land corridor linking ASEAN and SAARC regions including mainland China. Its long coastal area also provides maritime access to the Indian Ocean especially for China through the Bay of Bengal increasing its geostrategic importance. The natural resources of Myanmar are largely untapped which also attracts and encourages the regional and global giants to establish influence over the country and its regime. Hence, external powers are seen increasingly engaging them with Myanmar down toning the voice for democracy, human rights, and peoples’ emancipation. Within this critical juncture, the West is also perceived to diminish Chinese influence over Myanmar. The volatility within Myanmar added with external geostrategic competition has made the Myanmar factor more complex than ever especially with the economic and military empowerment of China. For China, Myanmar is crucially important as it provides the alternative to the Malacca Strait allowing the opening of an alternative shipping lane from the Indian Ocean to its mainland.

Within Myanmar, no place holds more significance than the Rakhine State, where the Rohingya persecution is pervasive. The strategic significance of the Rakhine State of Myanmar has made it more vulnerable due to the vested interests of regional powers, such as, China, Japan, and India. In such a scenario, it is not unlikely that the West remains connected through India and Japan to maintain continuity of engagement with Myanmar. It is important to note that ‘control’ on the Rakhine soil was necessary to facilitate the Chinese and Indian multinational mega-projects in Rakhine State such as “dams, special economic zones (SEZs) and some agro-industrial plants” and thus, the notion of land grabbing became one of the major drivers behind the crisis. Additionally, Myanmar is an important destination for future economic development as well as its vast untapped natural resources. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why the global powers are so much interested in Myanmar

despite its serious human rights violation including a pervasive regime of stratocracy. The absence of democracy, minority oppression, suppression of freedom of speech, and many more could not stop the development partners to invest in Myanmar. It has been seen that Japan and China including many of the European countries have gradually increased their Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Myanmar over the past decades. The global radar is fixed on Myanmar perceivably for two reasons; firstly, seeing Myanmar as a natural resource-based future Asian market, secondly, checking China for not allowing alternative maritime trade routes to the Indian Ocean. Moreover, Myanmar is important to both India and China for the implementation and advancement of two different strategies: India's "Act East policy" and BRI.⁷²

Historically, both China and Myanmar have maintained a strategic partnership and all-weathered friendship since the independence of Myanmar from the British colonial rule. In recent time, the two countries seem to have strengthened their ties in pursuance of economic and military development including political and bilateral engagement. Nevertheless, for the first time, China has proposed a "two-way" plan emphasizing and putting priority on economic development, which would be followed by an amicable diplomatic solution. For China both Bangladesh and Myanmar are important to advance the BRI, which aims to maintain the Chinese-European connection. China also wants to establish a link between the ports of Kyaukphyu and Kunming.⁷³ BRI is the flagship initiative of China and, without Myanmar, BRI will face a severe blow. At the same time, China seeks to boost up the economic growth especially of its western region, which is particularly landlocked and impoverished. Since Myanmar is a Chinese neighbour with long stretched coastal shore, which offers China an opening to the Indian Ocean, the China's strategy to keep Myanmar under grip appears to continue at any cost under any circumstances. Consequently, China is perceived to act as a "negative" catalyst in the security dilemma of the Rohingya crisis.

India, a next door neighbour of Bangladesh has always been wary of the internal problems of its neighbours. In the past, it has been seen that Delhi's response to the Rohingya quagmire has changed from time to time. Notable factors like economic collaborations and border security issues might have contributed to India's apparent inclination to Myanmar's position on the issue of persecuted Rohingyas and their plights. India is equally concerned about the country's businesses interests, for example, Indian company has invested in Rakhine State's coastal gas field i.e. Shwe Gas field. India is also planning to connect its landlocked North-eastern region with trance-border pipelines through Rakhine State.⁷⁴ India's approach might have been influenced by North-eastern region's security concern including shifting the

⁷² K. Ahmed, op. cit.

⁷³ F. Cookson, "The geo-politics of the Rohingya crisis", *Dhaka Tribune*, 21 November 2017.

⁷⁴ "Tri-nation pipeline envisaged", *The Telegraph*, available at <https://www.telegraphindia.com/business/tri-nation-pipeline-envisaged/cid/1472565>, accessed on 25 April 2021.

Bangladesh's attention from Bangladesh-India border to Bangladesh-Myanmar Border.

As noted by one of the Indian think tanks, Myanmar is the only Southeast Asian country with which India shares a land border. This explains its importance for the development of India's north-east region and also India's "Act East Policy". The China factor, the necessity for stability and balance in the Indian Ocean, and Myanmar's potential for near-term energy supply are all encompassing factors to consider while approaching the Rohingya crisis. Myanmar is also an appropriate forum for the exercise of India's soft power because of India's "democratic credentials" and "historical and cultural linkages". Myanmar, in other words, is obviously needed by India to secure its North-eastern region including materializing India's "Act East Policy".⁷⁵

Within the context of security and economic collaboration between India and Myanmar, it may be argued that India is not willing to give up and/or sacrifice its self-interest in exchange for supporting the causes of brutally persecuted ethnic community. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's position on the Rohingya debate has generated widespread criticism among the opposition party of Indian National Congress (INC) leaders who argue that, as a potential regional power, India can play a far more effective and efficient role in the crisis. The INC leaders criticize Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Rohingya policy and allege that India could play a constructive role in resolving the Rohingya crisis.⁷⁶ They also questioned the sincerity and goodwill of the BJP led Indian government.⁷⁷ India's neighbourhood policy is perceived to be revolving around its own interest, which at times becomes the cause of mistrust and breach of confidence. It is worth noting that Bangladesh, of course, maintains a friendly and positive approach towards India since the 1971 Liberation War.

Myanmar seems steadfast with its intent and actions when it comes to the matters of recognition of the ethnic Rohingyas. The country, of course, sometimes makes an endeavour to salvage the reputation with fake assurance and false narratives alleging against the Rohingyas for involving in violent acts. Myanmar also makes bilateral economic and development agreements with regional and global actors to blanket the crimes against ethnic Rohingyas. The US, Japan and Russia are also in mission to establish their sphere of influence in Myanmar to advance their geo-strategic interests. Russia and Israel are Myanmar's strategic defence partners, whilst

⁷⁵ "What is the importance of Myanmar for India?" available at <https://idsa.in/askanexpert/importanceofMyanmarforIndia>, accessed on 02 May 2021.

⁷⁶ "China's Role in Myanmar's Internal Conflicts", *United States Institute of Peace*, 14 September 2018, available at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/09/chinas-role-myanmar-myanmar-internal-conflicts>, accessed on April 25, 2021.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Japan, the United Kingdom (UK) and the US have massive investment and projects in Myanmar. Myanmar is strategically important for both the US' "Pivot to Asia" strategy and to expand the US-Japan's strong foothold in the Indian Ocean to counter Chinese influence in the region.

Therefore, it can be argued that Myanmar's geography, untapped natural resources, and potential markets along with the US-China competition attract regional and global actors to engage with despite democracy and human rights deficiency in Myanmar for decades. In both short and long term, it does not seem that external actors would give up Myanmar while pursuing the cause of the Rohingyas; rather would continue to do anything and everything to remain engaged with Myanmar either economically or politically or both. In such a scenario of competition among major powers and their unconditional engagements with Myanmar would ultimately allow the latter to maximize the country's strategic and economic interests and opportunities bypassing the Rohingya crisis.

5.2 *Inter-State Conflict and Mistrust*

The uneasy political and border disputes and economic competitions amongst the regional powers have been major barriers to regional economic integration and collective development of the South Asian region as a whole. The mistrust between the regional actors has affected the prospect of peace and stability. For instance, the tensions between India-Pakistan, and India-China have rendered 'South Asia' as one of the hotbeds of world politics. Moreover, security threats arising from non-traditional sources i.e. radicalism and violent extremism have rehabilitated the post 9/11 global scenario. For this reason, South Asia has not been able to emerge as an integrated partnership alliance like the European Union (EU). In the same context, due to the diversities, the notion of collective securitization is also absent in the security dynamics of the region. So, it is plausible to assume that the inter-state conflicts and mistrust among the security actors of the region work as some of the catalysts of the dilemma of securitization.

5.3 *Lack of Integration and Strategic Realignment*

Whilst discussing the spectre of regional securitization, the top priorities revolve around the discourses on peace and stability as well as economic cooperation. Yet, making the situation worse in South Asia, the Rohingya crisis added a new dimension in the security agenda. The ascension of stratocracy in Myanmar and the unresolved Rohingya pogrom pose tremendous pressure on regional peace and stability. From a sceptic viewpoint, the Rohingya crisis has the potentials to create instability in the regional peace and stability due to which the regional countries may have to pay a heavy price. Hence, the regional actors need to keep their fingers on the pulse of the Rohingya crisis and act accordingly to provide a road map for the crisis

resolution. It seems that the dilemma of securitization is barring the actors from perceiving the crisis dynamics as latent threats to national security while having the potential to transcend to impairing regional security.

Unfortunately, being one of the most prospective economies - South Asian Region has become the least integrated domain in terms of political, economic, trade and commerce, and security cooperation. As noted, China being an emerging global power and due to its geographical proximity to most of the South Asian countries, is expected to play a significant role in the security affairs of the region encompassing both SAARC and ASEAN regions. It may also be noted that China has the observer status in the SAARC. The ever-existing Indo-Pak conflict, the evolving Indo-China border issues, the rising trend of ultra-nationalism in India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar are a few of the multi-layered hurdles which are argued to be responsible for imposing hurdles for security cooperation, thus, manifesting securitization dilemmas of the Rohingya crisis.

Throughout the Cold War period, South Asian security was primarily concerned with the proliferation of nuclear weapons and warheads, Sino-India and Indo-Pak relations. During the post 9/11 period, the region witnessed the Pak-US strategic alliance over the Afghan war for a brief period of time. The US-China competition purported realignment of the regional order on the basis of Pak-US mistrust, Sino-Pak strategic partnership, and necessity and role of India in the US-China competition. Under the circumstances, Myanmar has positioned itself in strategic advantage amidst global and intra-regional security complex; Bangladesh has become the victim despite serving humanity and voluntarily hosting more than one million stateless, brutally persecuted Myanmar's Rohingyas.

In the context of realigned geo-strategic nexus between global actors and South Asian countries, India, of course, enjoys wide-ranging support from the US with a view to limiting China's growing influence over the region and beyond across the Indian ocean. Additionally, India has also forged an "Indo-Israel Strategic Partnership" for "water and agriculture", though Israel has increased its weapon exports to India in recent times⁷⁸ that the larger Muslim community has been sceptical about. In such a scenario, China has forged comprehensive strategic alliance with Pakistan in defence and economic domains in exchange for getting anxiety-free access to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port in Balochistan province. This helps China to connect its western region through Xinjiang province giving birth to serious Indian discontent. So far, the US maintained a posture and policy of balance in the South Asian region. But the formation of Indo-US strategic partnership and cooperation in

⁷⁸ O. Eran, "India and Israel: A Strategic Alliance?", *INSS Insight*, No. 951, 06 July 6, 2017, available at <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/india-israel-strategic-alliance/>, accessed on 02 May 2021.

military and defence spheres⁷⁹ seem to have created an imbalance in the security concerns of South Asian countries with its spill over impacts on the Rohingya crisis. Apart from this, due to China's growing influence in the South China Sea with increasing assertive posture, added with its venture to find out alternatives to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, the global actors like the US, the UK, and the EU have apparently put on earplug not to listen to Rohingyas' pogrom and plight fearing losing the grip over Myanmar. The realignment of US policy in South Asia including the China factor is also argued to impede the need for securitization of the Rohingya crisis. Such a complex security situation necessitates appropriate securitization of the Rohingya crisis which would help the formation of a "Regional Security Framework" connecting the extra-regional actors in overall regional security architecture.

6. Conclusion

The Rohingya influx has increased the threat to the security of Bangladesh and her neighbours in myriad ways. Currently, Bangladesh hosts more than 1.1 million Rohingyas, which has caused enormous financial, demographic and environmental stress. Bangladesh kept open all the avenues to resolve the crisis created by Myanmar, which ranges from bilateral settlement to regional and international arbitration and involvement. To resolve this crisis, Bangladesh raised the issue at various bilateral, regional, and international forums including at the UN. Bilaterally, Bangladesh tried to resolve the crisis directly with Myanmar following previous footsteps while also expected deeper Indian and Chinese mitigation support. In reality, both of the Asian neighbours have deliberately overlooked this matter. As stated in this paper, due to the geo-strategic importance of the Rakhine State and the strategic relations of Myanmar with the great powers, it became difficult for Bangladesh to have the backing from the international community and the key regional actors. The paper finds that the Rohingya crisis is entombed into international and regional power politics that has been added with geo-strategic and economic interests. However, the findings of the paper suggest that any failure to find out a lasting solution to the Rohingya quagmire may appear as a major blow to regional security, which may engulf the global peace and stability with ominous repercussions.

It is significant to ponder upon while securitizing the Rohingya issue that the Rohingyas are the victims of one of the worst brutalities in human history that was perpetrated by both the government's military forces and ultra-nationalist radical Buddhist community in Myanmar's Rakhine State. It would not be just and proper to consider the Rohingya crisis as a causal factor for the potential security concerns and

⁷⁹ A. Panda, "India, US Sign Logistics Exchange Agreement: What You Need to Know", available at <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/india-us-sign-logistics-exchange-agreement-what-you-need-to-know/>, accessed on 12 March 2021.

it must be borne in mind that the security disquiets should not be addressed at the cost of humanitarian compulsions. It will be naïve to steepen the response trajectory basing on humanitarian considerations alone rather than security implications, although may be unfounded. The approach would demand the political will of the regional and global actors with a view to achieving a comprehensive and coherent solution to long-standing Myanmar's Rohingya crisis.

The paper has argued that the Rohingya crisis poses potential threats to regional security that demand collective efforts to deal with this problem. Myanmar would like to continue the current status quo and pursue a "wait and see" policy. The Rohingya crisis is a classic manifestation of an "ethnic cleansing", which is grossly ignored by major players due to their "geopolitical interests" in Myanmar. If the regional powers do not come out of the rhetoric of promise-game and double standards, the Rohingya crisis may lead to a geo-strategic catastrophe in the future. It is high time that the South Asian and South-East Asian countries widely recognize the Rohingya quagmire as an emerging threat to regional peace and stability which requires collective efforts.