

Rohingya Crisis, Trans-boundary and Geopolitics: Prospects and Aspects of Bangladesh



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ABSTRACT: Geopolitical importance of both Bangladesh and Myanmar has increased due to the changing international order. These two countries are turning into an arena of middle power rivalry by the influence of the lone superpower in order to counter balance the adversary. Rohingya issue is one of the bilateral deterrents between both countries and still unsettled. This paper tends to focus on the current situation between Bangladesh-Myanmar and rest of the super powers. The global and regional power is now focusing on this geostrategic region because this issue has geopolitical significance. Natural resources and geographical location of the region is accelerating this dispute and attracting the superpowers to involve in the game of geopolitics. Both of the countries get benefit due to the geographical nearness but these two neighbours are hardly as close and interactive that they should have been. Since the independence of Bangladesh this relation is interrupted due to the geopolitical and geostrategic problem between them regarding the Rohingya issue. Though there is a geopolitical hindrance, there is a scope to prospect in the bilateral relations through solving the Rohingya issue where we may formulate conditions so that both side have a win-win situation.

KEYWORDS: Rohingya, bilateral relation, geopolitics, trans-boundary

INTRODUCTION

Since 1990s the relationships among the countries of Eastern South Asia have been strengthened by means of political and economic perspectives but the relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar have often been interrupted due to the Rohingya issue. The Ne Win government denied the citizenship of Rohingya officially in 1974 although they are the Muslim minority group living in the northwestern part of Arakan State of Myanmar (NEMOTO, 2017). Geopolitical importance gives this region a new momentum and the relations between two countries have been meandered day by day through several stages of cooperation and conflict. This conflict do not mean the confrontation but in the means of interests and diplomatic face-off due to the interests. At present the regime incompatibility between two countries come in limelight but due to mutual imperative of geopolitics it can hardly come into play.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This paper focuses on some specific topics regarding the Rohingya issue become a dispute between Bangladesh and Myanmar:

- Rohingya crisis and trans-boundary issues between Bangladesh and Myanmar
- Geopolitics behind the Rohingya issue
- Prospects and aspects of Bangladesh regarding the issue

METHODOLOGY

The ingredients that are collected to use in this paper are mainly from the scholar articles, websites of different regional and international unions and from the newspapers. Collected ingredients were analyzed with different geopolitical theories and political practices of this region.

BACKGROUND OF THE ROHINGYA ISSUE

The Rohingyas are probably one of the only ethnic groups in the world whose existence is denied despite their presence. Although Rohingyas are one of the 136 ethnic groups in Myanmar, they have been most widely used as a political pawn in the country. Rohingyas constitute 1 percent of the total population, and 4 percent of the Arakan state population of Myanmar. Although they have become pawns in the game of colonial and post-colonial politics, according to Ragland (1994), they are “an ethnic, linguistic, and religious minority both within Burma and within their own province.” The word 'Rohingya' is an ethno-religious term which

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means Muslim people whose ancestral home is in Arakan. However, Rohingyas were denied citizenship of Myanmar under the 1974 Emergency Immigration Act, and ultimately with the Citizen Act of 1982 (Rahman, 2016).

ROHINGYA ISSUE, TRANS-BOUNDARY AND GEO-POLITICS

The Arakan state of Myanmar situated in the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. This state is divided from Bangladesh by the Naf River. The Rohingya debate became more exposed due to the geographical location of two countries. Being a neighbouring state, the Arakan Rohingyas can easily enter into Bangladesh. In their evaluation of the outgoing year, analysts said Bangladesh outshined in firming bilateral ties by remaining active in various global forums, but did not make it in using its geopolitical and geostrategic importance to its lead in 2017. They added that the sheltering of Rohingya refugees would remain a major issue in 2018, and Bangladesh needed to conduct an objective reassessment of the past year to determine an accurate diplomatic approach in addressing the issue. Prof Ali Riaz of the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, USA, said Bangladesh had received applause in international forums for their compassionate response to Rohingya fleeing Myanmar, but the refugee crisis also revealed "how Bangladesh's interests were largely ignored by its friends such as India, China and Russia." "Overall, it appears that Bangladesh has not succeeded in using its geopolitical and geostrategic importance to its advantage," Prof Ali Riaz told UNB. Resonating Prof Riaz, former Bangladesh Ambassador to the US M Humayun Kabir said: "We had an expectation that we would get India to stand with Bangladesh in repatriating Rohingyas. We didn't get it from our close friend. They should have taken an ethical position on humanitarian grounds at least." He added that on the Rohingya crisis the position taken by India and China revealed that Bangladesh had few friends. "It remains a lesson for us. There'll be change in strategy and on the economic front. We'll face a tough time in terms of taking a decision. Bangladesh's position requires being reevaluated to achieve its goals," the former ambassador said (UNB, 2017).

International relations analysts have emphasized that for three reasons Bangladesh has been facing geopolitical and geo-strategic challenges. They are as follows: firstly, the shelter of Rohingyas fleeing from Myanmar's Rakhine state; secondly, their returning process; and thirdly the backwardness of deep seaport. According to them, the most important is the bilateral relations between Myanmar-Bangladesh, India-Bangladesh, China-Bangladesh and Russia-Bangladesh. Considering this situation, Bangladesh is currently in a sensitive position. Though the appearance of Bangladesh is optimistic in the global context, there is the fear of lagging behind in geopolitical, geo-strategic terms. The issue of Rohingyas fleeing from Myanmar to Bangladesh has been termed as 'internal crisis' of Myanmar since its beginning. One of the biggest development partners of Bangladesh is China, was in the same position. But China has assured that they will influence the Myanmar government's policy on the Rohingya issue. Neighbouring India changed their position due to the diplomatic efforts from Bangladesh though they initially stood for Myanmar. During the visit to Dhaka, Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj told the government of Myanmar that the Rohingyas who fled the country would be brought back and rehabilitated for long-term solutions. Meanwhile during the visit of Bangladesh's Home Affairs Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, Myanmar State Councillor Aung San Suu Kyi said that the Rohingya returning process has begun. The Rohingya issue is apparently a result of geo-political, geo-strategic and geo-economic reasons. A deep sea port is being planned to be constructed in Myanmar's Rakhine state as a part of this strategy. Bangladesh is lagging behind in the construction of a deep sea port, which could have a negative impact on the economy whether there are the deep seaports in India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

On the one hand, as with Myanmar's relations with Bangladesh, the humanitarian disasters of Rohingyas are also important. Bangladesh has been present for this reason in the world with attention in these two cases. Problems of Bangladesh and Rohingyas have become integrated. Diplomacy is a positive side behind Bangladesh's position. At present our relation with Myanmar has become a challenge. There is an opportunity for Bangladesh considering the global context to achieve a stronger position by solving the crisis. The position of India or China regarding Rohingya issue is criticized and the role of Bangladesh is highly praised internationally. The people of Bangladesh appreciate the position of government regarding the Rohingya issue with passion. They have emotions, but the state has to consider the geo-political, geo-strategic and geo-economic aspects of our own. Bangladesh is moving very carefully in this aspect and highlights the bilateral relationship with Myanmar. There are two aspects of this situation - good and bad. Our image globally has been very positive. The friendly attitude for humanitarian aids implies that there is a positive outlook among the people of the country for the solution of Rohingya crisis. Again, the bilateral relationship with India and China is also very important. If there is a deep-sea port in Rakhine state, it may distress the ports and national economy of Bangladesh. In order to save our economy Bangladesh should start planning for a deep seaport in Sonadia or Mongla. If China is unwilling to finance for a deep sea port in Bangladesh, we must find alternative sources to finance immediately. There will be competitive demands and markets when multiple ports will be constructed. Bangladesh should think of this context considering the importance from geo-strategic aspect.

The Rohingya issue has been a global issue and Bangladesh is making every effort to solve the problem, globally. It would be very difficult for Bangladesh to feed 700,000 or more Rohingya people for long time. It seems that Myanmar is considering of returning its Rohingya people who fled from the country to Bangladesh, by dint of international pressure as Aung San Suu Kyi said so. According to diplomatic sources, Bangladesh is not convinced by Myanmar's assurance. But from the past experiences of working with Myanmar, Bangladesh realizes that the solution for this crisis will not come bilaterally. For this reason Bangladesh is

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highlighting the importance of involving the international communities in this matter. Myanmar should solve the Rohingya issue for its peace, security and economic development. Bangladesh always wishes to establish a friendly bilateral relation with Myanmar, like other neighbouring countries in terms of geo-political, geo-strategic and geo-economic aspects (Rahman, 2017).

PROSPECTS AND ASPECTS OF BANGLADESH

All political leaders and the military of Myanmar should condemn incitement to racial hatred and violence. They should adopt measures to defuse tensions between communities and create an environment for safe and dignified return, including through interfaith initiatives. Bangladesh should also involve countries such as Pakistan, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia, already home of many displaced Rohingya.

Table 01. Strategic and geopolitical stands of different countries and unions regarding Rohingya issue representing prospect and aspects of Bangladesh

Countries/Unions	Comments on Rohingya Issue			
	Defining Rohingya	Rohingya Crisis	Their Say	Contribution on prospects
Bangladesh	Muslim Rohingya	Violence in Rakhine state	Sheikh Hasina urged Myanmar to view the situation with humanity, saying innocent people were suffering	The Bangladesh prime minister said her country would offer Rohingyas shelter until Myanmar took them back
Myanmar	Islamist terrorists	Says it is battling terrorists not ethnic cleansing	Myanmar does not recognise Rohingya as an ethnic group and insists that they are Bangladeshi migrants living illegally in the country	Myanmar is ready for the repatriation of Rohingya
India	A group of people	A group of people were driven out of their country	The Rohingya issue things are being discussed at diplomatic level with both Bangladesh and Myanmar	India has been fully supportive of the efforts being made to resolve the crisis, including early repatriation of the displaced people
China	Ethnic and religious community	Displaced people from Rakhine due to violence	Complicated historical, ethnic and religious factors	Supporting Myanmar but strategically calling for a cease-fire, cooperation between Bangladesh and Myanmar to repatriate the refugees, and poverty alleviation in Rakhine
USA	Ethno-religious community	Ethnic cleansing	Attacks by militants, a disproportionate military response to those attacks, violence perpetuated by local vigilantes, and fear of a lack of protection for local populations has created a renewed crisis in Burma's Rakhine State, and exacerbated challenges for minorities, including the Rohingya people, who lack most basic rights, including	All stakeholders must end the violence, respect the rule of law, cease displacement, pave a path for the Rohingyas' return to their homes, and hold accountable those responsible for violations and abuses

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			citizenship and even recognition of their identity.	
Russia	Ethnic community	Ethnic conflict	Both parties have their responsibility and have to find a peaceful solution to the crisis	Would prefer to remain neutral in this situation
UN	Muslim Rohingya community	Ethnic cleansing	The UN has urged Myanmar to end a military campaign against Muslim Rohingya	Called for the appointment of a UN special envoy
EU	Civilians of Rakhine State	Outbreaks of violence in Myanmar	Rohingya crisis is not Bangladesh's problem but Bangladesh is a victim of this crisis	Support the creation of all necessary conditions for the eventual voluntary, safe and dignified return of Rohingya refugees who have fled Myanmar to Bangladesh and adopted a new €5 million programme
UNHCR	Stateless Muslim minority	Exodus	Fastest-growing refugee emergency in the world today	We are working to equip the site with medical clinics, community centres, schools, proper sanitation facilities, as well as improve the roads for the quicker delivery of core relief items.
ASEAN	Muslim minority	N/A	Non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN Member States	Migrant workers and does not mention refugees or asylum seekers

Together they can seek out resettlement alternatives to Rohingya unwilling to return to Myanmar due to lack of safety, or for other reasons, or those barred by the Myanmar government's inflexible return process. The international community, including China, can help to damp down ethnic rigidities by urging Myanmar and Bangladesh to continue talks, with the goal of an end to violence and the peaceful repatriation of those displaced by violence. Global partners can also offer more humanitarian support to refugees in Bangladesh and support restoration in Rakhine State.

CONCLUSION

Recent progresses in Myanmar have created new opportunities for regional collaboration. So the outlook of both Bangladesh and Myanmar has changed with time. Bangladesh and Myanmar have agreed that they will try to complete the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslim refugees who fled from violence in Myanmar within two years. Rohingya people also want to return their country if only when they can guarantee the safety of lives. The five-point proposal by Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina can take into account for sustainable solution:

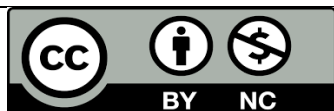
- Myanmar must unconditionally stop the violence and the practice of ethnic cleansing in the Rakhine State immediately and forever.
 - Secretary General of the United Nations should immediately send a Fact Finding Mission to Myanmar.
 - All civilians irrespective of religion and ethnicity must be protected in Myanmar. For that "safe zones" could be created inside Myanmar under UN observation.
 - Ensure sustainable return of all forcibly displaced Rohingyas in Bangladesh to their homes in Myanmar.
 - The recommendations of Kofi Annan Commission Report must be immediately implemented unconditionally and in its entirety.
- The Rohingya issue should not be considered as the weakness for the bilateral relation. Rather they should focus on the future prospects in their relation. This will help both of the countries get together and it will be more beneficial for both sides in the near future.

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