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# Geopolitical Economy of Myanmar and the Role of Great Powers in Rohingya Crisis

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**Abstract**-Recent Rohingya exodus from the Rakhine State of Myanmar is undoubtedly one of the biggest humanitarian crises ever. Despite the severity of this crisis, it could not draw much attention from the global powers for a possible solution. Historically, ethnic differences in the Rakhine State of Myanmar have been primarily held responsible for the emergence of oppression against the Rohingya people. This paper tries to portray the role of regional and global powers in the recent Rohingya crisis in Rakhine State of Myanmar. The geopolitical economy of the South East Asian region is also focused here to show how it influenced the crisis in different perspectives. As this paper explores external interest and reluctance as the factors of the recent Rohingya crisis along with Myanmar's internal ethnic diversities, the theoretical argument grows with neo-classical realist model which bridges between internal and external realities to evaluate any particular event in global politics. This paper also shows how and why the recent Rohingya crisis lacked attention from major global powers. The role of regional and global powers during the crisis and their appeasement towards Myanmar are elaborated and examined too here. While explaining the role of external powers, it is showed how Myanmar managed to eclipse one of the worst ever refugee crises because of lack of global pressure and response. Finally, the paper concludes with showing the obstacles in resolving the Rohingya crisis with a critical evaluation of the role of international community.

**Key Words:** Rohingya, Geopolitics, Ethnicity, Great Power, Refugee.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Rohingya crisis is one of the worst and most complex humanitarian crises of our living memory. Myanmar's persuasion of a 'scorched earth policy' of 'three all's policy'—kill all, burn all, loot all is backed by six decades of institutionalized and systematic killing and persecution. The recent surge of violence against the Rohingya minorities of Rakhine state forced almost a million Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh since late August of 2017, making it more urgent than ever. Geographically Myanmar possesses significant position among the Southeast Asian countries, and it is also considered as the corridor of connecting Southeast Asia and South Asia. Her access to the Bay of Bengal has also increased its geo-strategic importance in this region. Inside Myanmar, the Rakhine State, where the Rohingya crisis took place, has special strategic importance to international powers like India, China, and Japan. Moreover, to facilitate some megaprojects in Rakhine states like dams, special economic

zone (SEZ), and some agribusiness plantations, land grabbing was needed which is also considered as one of the major issues behind this crisis. In November 2018, China signed a deal with Myanmar to build a deep seaport in kyaukpyu, after the cancellation of the project of building a deep seaport in Sonadia Island, Bangladesh. Considering the political economy of Rakhine state, it was necessary to push the Rohingya people to another place which was not scholarly analyzed rather they focused mainly on the 'ethnic' term with 'religious color'. Suggesting the Rohingya crisis from a religious perspective is questionable in recent years because such ethnic and religious issues have shadowed the geopolitical economy of the Rohingya crisis where great powers are eager to invest in different economic projects of Myanmar Government in Rakhine state. Moreover, great powers of the world did not put pressure on the Myanmar government to accept Rohingya people or to stop genocide because of their own economic interest in that region in Myanmar. Even due to the engagement of great powers and their nonchalant behavior, the United Nations (UN) has also kept enough space from solving the crisis. Moreover, the UN didn't term the Rohingya crisis as 'genocide' but the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid al-Husseini, described it as a 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing.'

However, this devious approach and softer tone adopted by the UN have serious implications for an already deepened crisis as 'ethnic cleansing' has never been recognized as an independent crime under international law. If the UN declares the ongoing atrocities in Myanmar as genocide, the primary responsibility of preventing and stopping genocide will rest with Myanmar, the state in which crime is being committed. To protect the civilians from four types of mass atrocities--genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, the UN General Assembly adopted the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in 2005. Under this doctrine, it is the responsibility of the international community to intervene when necessary to protect the civilians throughout the world. But the international community is yet to perform that 'responsibility' in Myanmar to protect the Rohingya population.

## II. A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

The Rohingya, one of the ethnic minority groups in Myanmar, compelled to leave their homeland to seek refuge in a

bordering country, Bangladesh, following the discriminatory policies the late 1970s (Albert & Chatzky, 2018). Since 25 August 2017, following the campaign of ethnic cleansing by the Burmese Security Forces, however absolutely denied by the officials, forced to flee from Rakhine state numbering 671,000 to 911,113 Rohingyas up to 30 June 2019 (UNHCR, 2019). Most of them moved out from Myanmar to escape from the grave atrocities including mass killings, sexual violence, rape, widespread arson by the military. (Rohingya Crisis, n.d)

At the beginning of 1978, the Burmese Government launched 'The Operation Nagmin' mostly known as Dragon King which basically took actions against the citizens and foreigners, sensing the belief of many 'Bangalis' from Bangladesh were staying illegally the country starting from the Kachin state and Akyab district. Following that military-led clearance operation displaced 200,000 Muslim Rohingyas to Bangladesh seeking shelter to 11 camps (Abrar, n.d.). However, after the fruitful bilateral negotiation between Bangladesh and Myanmar, it ended up with the repatriation process numbering 187,250 refugees back to Arakan state.

Again, Bangladesh faced the exodus of Rohingya in 1991, following the discriminatory forms of 1982's Citizenship Act of Myanmar when about 250,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh border. Hoping to back their rights to prove as citizens, the Rohingyas took part in pro-democracy movement but unfortunately again faced extreme repression by the government resulting to cross Naf River to seek refuge in the Teknaf, Ramu, Ukha and Cox's Bazar area. Bangladesh government received much pressure due to the influx of the Rohingya in the border areas.

In 2016 the incident of killing nine police officers by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in the Rakhine state of Myanmar stripped the military crackdown and forced 87,000 Rohingyas to move Bangladesh. However, a coordinated series attack by ARSA killing 12 security officers and targeting at least 20 outposts and army bases triggered burning down villages of the Muslim Rohingyas. Therefore, the 'Clearance Operation' was undertaken by the Burmese Security Force; shattered down the villages, separation of families and killing members of the families, women and girls were gang-raped, traumatized, resulting to massive influx to Bangladesh border areas from Rakhine state since 25 August 2017 (Hunt, 2017).

Since August 2017 to March 2019 the stateless Rohingyas mostly took shelter in 34 extremely congested camps, the extended site of Kutupalong- Balukhali, under the Ukhiya and Taknaf Upazilas. Since the influx, the supply of the necessity of the life-saving assistance for easing the miserable conditions like protecting from disaster-prone areas, food and health safety for children and mothers became a major concern for the authority of the host country- Bangladesh. Addressing the vulnerable and miserable conditions of the Rohingyas in the camps, a new 'Joint Response Plan' was

proposed for 1.2 million people whose value was US\$920.5million (Rohingya Refugee Crisis, n.d.).

### III. IMPORTANCE OF MYANMAR IN SOUTH EAST ASIAN GEOPOLITICAL ECONOMY

Geographically Myanmar is located in Southeast Asia with a total 676,577 square kilometers of the land area having rich natural resources. Myanmar is rich in forests, minerals, freshwater, natural gas and marine resources that have increased its value of the state to other Southeast Asian countries as well as global powers. Having a border with India, Bangladesh, and China, Myanmar becomes an important gateway between South Asia and East Asia. On the other hand, due to its strategic location, Myanmar is the center of interest for both India and China to implement their two different strategy: India's 'Act East Policy' and China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (Ahmed, 2018). However, the geo-strategic location and interests of great powers have ultimately amplified the significance of Myanmar in this region.

On the other hand, Myanmar is one of the fastest growing economies in Southeast Asia having an average growth of 7.5% during 2012-2016. Myanmar is also significant for her growing population that has marked a good market for consumer goods. According to Su (2013), there are two key factors that influence Myanmar's economic potential: Myanmar's geographic location and its vast population. Rising middle-class people become a prospective field to expand its market and the world's largest investors countries are coming to Myanmar with both huge investment and finished products. Such growing economic and commercial facilities enhanced her role regionally and globally. Though Myanmar is far away from leading the region, she possesses important strategic and economic implications to other Southeast Asian countries.

To broaden the trade routes of Southeast Asian countries, particularly Thailand, Myanmar is the only option that can connect the big South Asian market in India and Bangladesh. In addition, it is considered that Myanmar is the place for future economic development as global power like India, China, USA and Japan has increased their engagement and provided FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) due to her vast natural resources. Southeast Asian countries are also planning to expand their market as Myanmar is seen as the major economic hub in the upcoming decades. As Myanmar is bordered with the Bay of Bengal, China is constructing a deep seaport in Rakhine state that will connect China's Kunming with Myanmar's southern part. However, all these economic progress in Myanmar have increased its value to other Southeast Asian countries in recent years.

### IV. MYANMAR'S RELATIONS WITH GREAT POWERS: IS 'APPEASEMENT' HINDERING EFFECTIVE ACTIONS TO SOLVE THE ROHINGYA CRISIS?

This part of the paper will focus on the relations of Myanmar with foreign powers and the recent developments there. The

implications of Myanmar's foreign relations on the Rohingya issue and the reactions of great powers to the Rohingya crisis will also be focused here with critical evaluation.

#### 4.1 China

China and Myanmar have enjoyed strategic partnership in the last few years. The partnership was strengthened with the development of economic and political relations between the two states. Since addressing the complexity of the Rohingya crisis, Beijing for the first time ever offered two-way plan where economic development comes first and then the diplomatic solution. Both the location of Bangladesh and Myanmar are strategically important for the implementation of 'Belt and Road Initiative' to uphold China's position connecting towards Europe. According to Cookson (2017), China wants to make a connection between Kyaukphyu deep seaports with Kunming. Considering the geostrategic location of Kyaukphyu deep-sea port, not far from Sittwe port (Ahmed, 2018), China is also building a Special Economic Zone which includes natural gas and oil pipelines with a railway which ultimately pave a new way for Chinese trade establishing a foothold from the Bay of Bengal to the Indian Ocean.

Besides building this deep-sea port worth at \$7.3billion, China is also planning to build a nearby industrial park which cost is \$3.2billion. It ultimately shows the rapidly increasing presence of Beijing in Myanmar. Adding these, Beijing is also giving support to build the Myitsone Dam project (Sassen, 2017) which cost \$3.6billion in northern Myanmar. It could be somehow said that the role of China would be always favorable towards Myanmar. However, western countries criticized the role of China since it has either opposed or weakened the UN resolutions aiming for punishment to the Tatmadaw for the violent oppression against Rohingyas (China's role..., 2018).

However, in November 2017, according to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang, that none of these countries are enough financially strong to deal with the refugee crisis while the Rakhine state is already poverty-stricken. That is the reason behind considering a comprehensive plan which includes three stages (Zhou, 2017) - firstly, there must be a ceasefire to restore peace and stability in the Rakhine state; secondly, on the basis of equality both countries must find a solution through consultation; and finally, the International Community must provide assistance to develop Rakhine state. Through these three phases plan, Wang also gave an opinion that until the assurance of the safe repatriation process of the Rohingyas at their own country, Bangladesh should not try to deport them.

In July 4, 2019 attending a meeting at Diaoyutai State Guest House, since then, two years passed away while no progress has seen in the repatriation process, Bangladesh Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina addressed the huge environmental degradation and security challenges along with trafficking problem to the vulnerable people of Rohingyas. In

the meeting, Chinese PM provided assurance to persuade Myanmar to hold bilateral discussions to resolve the crisis (Solving Rohingya crisis..., 2019). A Letter of Exchange (LoE) on Rohingya Refugee Rice Aid was also signed which would provide 2,500 tones of rice assistance.

#### 4.2 India

India has always remained cautious about the internal problems of her neighbors. Problems with Rohingya issue in Myanmar also drew effective attention from Delhi but their reactions varied from time to time. When violent conflicts took place between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists in 2012, Delhi considered it to be an internal affair of Myanmar but was Sympathetic to Myanmar with declaring \$1 million relief assistance during the visit of External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid in the Rakhine State of Myanmar (Beauchamp, 2013). The position of India changed after the change of government in 2014 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led coalition came to power. In 2017, India officially declared plans to deport the Rohingya People who were illegally living in different parts of India. According to reports, the number of Rohingyas were around 40,000 in 2017 (Who are Rohingyas....., 2017). On 20 December 2017, India and Myanmar signed a MoU on Rakhine State Development Programme. Under the MoU, India pledged US\$25 million for a five-year development project in Rakhine State (India commits \$25 million....., 2017). India joined the UNSC delegation that visited Myanmar in May 2018 with three other neighbors, China, Laos, and Thailand (UNSC, neighbors off to Rakhine....., 2018).

A number of factors worked behind shaping India's approach to the Rohingyas and their problems. It is thought that Delhi did not openly support Myanmar with concerns that it might push Myanmar towards China. India also considered their national interest issues like Indian companies holding stakes in Shwe Gas field off the coast of Rakhine State, plans to build cross-border pipelines and connectivity to link its landlocked northeastern region with the Bay of Bengal through Rakhine State (Tri-nation pipeline envisaged, 2017). India's approach was also affected by the growing security concerns and the need for diplomatic balancing between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

India's position in dealing with the Rohingya debate brought widespread views and most of them showed that India as a regional power could play a better and effective role in the crisis. India's main opposition party Indian National Congress (INC) claimed that India could play a constructive role for the resolution of the Rohingya refugee crisis and accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi government of "squandering" the goodwill generated in ties with Bangladesh by the previous INC led government's initiatives (India must play positive....., 2018). India must learn more about their neighbors and the priorities before dealing with an internal crisis in a neighboring country. Bangladesh has nurtured positive India approach since 2009 when the Awami League-led government

came to power. But the role of India in Rohingya crisis and their reluctance to create pressure on Myanmar brought negative feedbacks from Bangladesh and created scope for mistrust in bilateral relations.

#### 4.3 United States of America (USA)

After the end of the Cold war, the United States of America (USA) attained the status of such a power whose influence in global politics cannot be compared with any previous global powers. The USA has always remained aware and active in every region of the world to observe and influence local events there. USA played a vital role during 'Arab Spring' especially in Libya where it intervened with triggering the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine (R2P) for humanitarian reasons. It was expected that the USA would play a similar role in other humanitarian crises as well in different parts of the world. The recent aggression against the Rohingyas in Myanmar is undoubtedly one of the worst examples of crimes against humanity without any doubt. But it could not bring much attention from the USA which can be easily revealed through their role during the crisis period.

After the recent exodus of Rohingyas, The USA imposed sanctions on four Myanmar military and police commanders and two army units, accusing them of "ethnic cleansing" against Rohingya Muslims and widespread human rights abuses. But the USA did not target the highest levels of Myanmar's military and also refrained from calling the anti-Rohingya campaign as crimes against humanity or genocide (Spetalnick & Brunstrom, 2018). Moreover, USA praised the Role of Bangladesh for the humanitarian role she played during the crisis by giving shelter to the Rohingyas (US official appreciates Bangladesh's role..., 2018). The USA also provided humanitarian aid to Bangladesh Government to handle the crisis.

It is clear that the lack of effective actions from the USA during the crisis is a result of different factors. Since the beginning of Myanmar's democratic rule in 2011, the USA approach towards Myanmar significantly changed and the relations between the two states attained new dimensions too. The US investment in Myanmar is also increasing with the development of economic relations between the two nations. USA committed \$280 million investment to support inclusive private sector-led growth in Myanmar through the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (Letter: the USA is investing....., 2019). This showed increased US interest to develop an economic partnership with Myanmar even after the collapse of Myanmar's political image after the Rohingya crisis. The US investment also reached \$400 million on 20 Myanmar Companies in 2019 and the USA was also ranked as the 13<sup>th</sup> largest investor nation in Myanmar (Ko, 2019). The new economic plans in the Rakhine State of Myanmar also brought effective US interest after the exodus of Rohingyas from there. So, the growth of strategic intimacy between USA and Myanmar stopped the USA from taking effective actions against Myanmar.

#### 4.4 Japan

After the image crisis of Myanmar following the Rohingya crisis in front of the world, Myanmar is willing to back its reputation with the collaboration of Japan for handling the Rohingya issue. Henceforth, Japan suggested to set an independent investigative panel and resume the UN relief operations (Nitta, 2018). Not only allotting grant \$3million (Japan grants..., n.d.), which would be provided for rebuilding the living conditions, electricity generators, water purifiers, fuel, and plastic containers; but also providing active monitoring by Japan to Myanmar in the Rakhine state for the repatriation of Rohingya Muslims. During the discussion between the Japanese Foreign Minister and Aung San Suu Kyi, it was proposed that there should be the access to media, implementations of the recommendations by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Following the political and humanitarian crisis caused by Rohingya influx from August 2017, in her visit to Japan, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had a discussion with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to find a durable solution to settle down the displaced Rohingya people as early as possible upholding safe and dignified return to their homeland.

To address the challenging Rohingya crisis, Japanese ambassador to Bangladesh remarked that voluntary repatriation should be taken by 'peacefully, through negotiation' with the assistance of the United Nations (UN). Recently, considering the dire needs of the Rohingyas, JRP (Japan for safe..., 2019) was launched providing US\$920million by the UN aid agencies and NGO partners.

#### V. THEORIZING THE FACTORS OF AGGRESSION AGAINST THE ROHINGYA POPULATION: NEO-CLASSICAL REALIST PERSPECTIVE

International Relations (IR) theories tend to explain the behaviors of states in internal matters and external politics. There are different schools of theories in IR which evaluate any crisis event in their own ways. Violent conflicts and their factors are effectively explained by the realist school of theories. The realist school of IR has got different theoretical branches such as classical realism, neo or structural Realism and neo-classical Realism.

Neo-classical realism is a recent development in the realist school of IR which bridges between the classical and neo-realism. It is a relatively recent attempt to marry structural realism's (or neorealism's) emphasis on scientific rigor and the causal primacy of the international system to domestic level institutions, problems of perception, and concerns of leadership that concerned classical realists (Ripsman, 2011). So, it tells us that the behavior of a state in any event or crisis is determined by both external and internal realities.

In explaining the Rohingya crisis, most opinions showed how the ethnic conflict and the aggressive position of Myanmar Government against the Rohingyas caused the ethnic

cleansing and crimes against humanity in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. If we scrutinize the events in the eyes of neo-classical realism, It will be found that lack of external pressure on Myanmar and absence of foreign attention to the crimes against the Rohingyas have also significantly contributed to intensifying the aggression against the Rohingya people. It is true that the root of the crisis is the debate of ethnicity and nationality. But it is much clear that the ‘appeasement’ of foreign powers to Myanmar even after their aggressive actions against the Rohingyas also played a vital role in increasing the crimes against humanity in the Rakhine State of Myanmar.

#### VI. OBSTACLES TOWARDS SOLVING THE PROBLEM: RELUCTANCE OF GREAT POWERS

Bangladesh is an overpopulated country where the Rohingya influx added more vulnerable threat to its security. Currently, over 1.2 million Rohingyas are hosting by Bangladesh. This number became a huge burden to Bangladesh. To solve this crisis Bangladesh has raised the issue at several international seminars, forums and even in the UN. Bangladesh sought more Chinese and Indian assistance to solve the crisis. But due to the geo-strategic importance of Rakhine state and strategic relations of Myanmar with the great powers, it became difficult for Bangladesh to have the support of international community by her side.

It should not be forgotten that the Rohingya crisis is trapped into many strands of regional and international politics. The new foreign minister of Bangladesh, AK Abdul Momen, in his debut statement on the Rohingya crisis, stated that Rohingya issue will not be solved easily. The foreign minister referred to this international tangle and said that interest of everybody including regional powers of Asia will be hampered if the Rohingya crisis continues. The foreign minister further requested the international community to take logical solution to end this crisis (Zaman, 2019).

The major obstacles towards solving the Rohingya crisis is the reluctant attitude of great powers and their appeasement to Myanmar. Both China and India have huge investment in infrastructural development projects inside Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine State. Another great power in Asia, China, is also funding to build Kyaukphyu deep seaport which will connect oil and gas pipeline to Yunnan State. Even they (China) blamed the Rohingya rebels for the violence and blocked the UNSC attempts to pass a resolution against Myanmar (Ahmed, 2018). All these economic and strategic developments push these two government to support Myanmar in case of Rohingya crisis.

On the other hand, like India and China, the international community, particularly the UN did not take the necessary steps for the durable solutions of the Rohingya crisis. The former UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld said, “The United Nations was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell”. In the case of the Rohingya crisis, the role of UN marks the question of its willingness or to policy action regarding the solving of Rohingya crisis. The

UNHCR, whose global mandate covers the protection of the stateless person, could not provide a ground for solutions either. However, the UN needs to lead the effort to make everything normal again.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

Humanity has always suffered in a world where interest determines everything. More than a million Rohingya people have been displaced from Myanmar over the last few decades. They became victims of ethnic cleansing and other forms of crimes against humanity. But it is a sad truth that their sufferings could not bring widespread attention from global powers to save them from brutal aggression. In a world system where we encourage collective security and talk about the safety and security of all ‘citizens of the world’, it is a cruel joke to the Rohingya people of Myanmar. The protocols for the preservation of universal human rights maintained when a crisis event is associated with the interests of the great powers. If it is not, there is less hope for a better ending. In a world where the screams of millions of Rohingya people are unheard and their sufferings are unnoticed, the aggression against the Rohingyas should be thought as a shared responsibility of Myanmar Government and the inactive role of great powers. In this sense, the great powers of the world are sharing the crimes against humanity with the Myanmar Government.

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