

# Rakhine: Where China meets India

**SH SHAHIDUL ISLAM**  
 CHINA and India's steady economic growth after centuries of stagnation is changing the economic landscape of Asia—lifting millions out of poverty. As economic interdependence between the two nations increases, their geo-political rivalry is also on the rise. Beijing and New Delhi have competing visions to expand their geo-economic interests and, perhaps, supremacy in the region and beyond.

China has launched its grand vision under the aegis of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The ocean-based 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the overland Silk Road Economic Belt to increase trade and connectivity are backed by Beijing's deep pockets.

India's vision is to expand its economic and strategic interests in its immediate neighbourhood and forge comprehensive ties with ASEAN. New Delhi intends to access overland routes to Europe and Central Asia by bypassing Pakistan, reflected in its port development in Chabahar, Iran.

China is well ahead of India at this stage expanding its strategic vision with an expectation that all roads will lead to Beijing. New Delhi is opposing China's BRI—leading to geo-political rivalry in Asia. There are heightened tensions between China and India on the former's development of multibillion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

The recent standoff between the two giants at the high altitudes of the Himalayas is yet another example of New Delhi's policy to arrest Beijing's strategic interests in South Asia. It is China's port and other strategic infrastructure buildup in Sri Lanka that has triggered alarm bells.

Nevertheless, Myanmar is the place where both China and India's presence is visible more than anywhere else. To be more precise, it is the troubled Rakhine State of Myanmar, bordered by Chittagong to the northwest and the Bay of Bengal to the west, that sees a growing presence of both China and India with their investment and influence. Myanmar, which has been highly dependent on China for political and economic backing in the past, is now diversifying its portfolio partnering with India and other countries including Japan and Singapore.

China's interest is nevertheless not limited to the shores of Rakhine. It has been eyeing the development of similar maritime and other infrastructure in Chittagong, barely 150km from Rakhine, further expanding its interests in the world's largest bay. New Delhi

is visibly nervous as Chinese presence in Bangladesh rises. It has been successful in thwarting Beijing's multibillion dollar plan to develop a deep sea port in Chittagong.

Bangladesh's failure to utilise its favourable geography for economic benefits has given a huge advantage to Myanmar. Both China and India's importance to Rakhine State has increased many folds. It is hardly

explored. Earlier, these four nations agreed to work jointly forming a sub-regional cooperation under the aegis of BCIM Economic Corridor but its future seems uncertain given New Delhi and Beijing's growing rivalry. It is also important to understand Myanmar's internal developments, both in terms of politics and economics.

the seeds of centuries-long ethnic conflicts.

After independence, the military controlled the country, fighting communists and various ethnic groups. They include, among others, the Kachin Independence Army, Rohingya Muslims, Shan, Lahu, and Karen minority groups. It is not only the Rohingyas who have been forced to leave Myanmar; over the past two decades, about 100,000 Karen refugees

led by Aung San Suu Kyi won a landslide victory. The NLD leader was given the position of state councillor but analysts believe it's the military that pull the strings behind the scenes. In the current format of government, the military holds three key ministries, a quarter of seats in parliament, and control over the army and police—leaving a big question mark on Myanmar's "democratic transition".

**Economic transition of Myanmar**  
 Since its transition to democracy, the Myanmar economy witnessed steady GDP growth. It is fast becoming a transportation hub of Southeast Asia. The country has been upgrading 36 north-south roads and 45 east-west roads to union highways forming a national network of highways. There are at least three cross-border transport corridors being developed in the country linking Thailand, China, Cambodia, Vietnam and northeast India. There's a lot of interest among Asian and other countries to invest in the country. The government has also been developing three special economic zones along with three river and deep ports, namely, Thilawa (south of Yangon), Dawei (southeast Myanmar) and Kyaukpadaung (Rakhine).

Amidst this political and economic transition, one sees greater interests of both China and India in Myanmar. The country will remain vital for regional powers irrespective of regime type. Bangladesh also needs prudent strategies to deal with the country, given the rapid changes in Rakhine and Bay of Bengal.

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A Myanmar policeman stands guard near a military transport helicopter in northern Rakhine state.

PHOTO: AFP

surprising that Naypyidaw has begged the support of both Beijing and New Delhi, and even Tokyo, on the Rohingya refugee crisis.

Moreover, given the importance of Rakhine and Chittagong in the Bay of Bengal region it is also imperative to explore if the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis has any link to the strategic rivalry of regional powers. A lingering refugee crisis means there is little hope that Chittagong will have direct links with China and ASEAN through Myanmar.

Moreover, Beijing's plan to reduce its dependence on the Straits of Malacca by securing an alternative energy and trade route through Myanmar might have cost strategic interests of some big powers who may have something to gain from the region being volatile.

Against this backdrop, the geo-economic and strategic equations involving China, India, Myanmar and Bangladesh need to be

Myanmar: An anthropologist's paradise and a statesman's nightmare

Myanmar is a highly complex society given the presence of a large number of ethnic groups and the country's linguistic and cultural diversity. There are 11 major ethnic groups. The country has seven Bamar regions and seven ethnic states, and six self-administration areas. There are 110 armed organisations of different sizes, most of them ethnic-based.

Civil war and ethnic conflicts have been a constant feature of Myanmar's socio-political landscape since the country attained independence from the British in 1948. In fact, ever since the British landed in Burma in 1886 it adopted the infamous "divide and rule" policy empowering the ethnic minorities instead of the Bamar, who constitute majority of the population, sowing

have taken shelter along the Thailand-Myanmar border. There have been frequent armed conflicts between ethnic Chinese rebels and the military.

Having failed to crush the ethnic armed groups, the military adopted a reconciliatory approach in the 1990s, assimilating all ethnic minorities and faiths save the Rohingya Muslims into the Buddhist-majority Bamar community. During 2011-16, a national ceasefire agreement was reached involving armed ethnic groups, although half of them did not sign it. In addition, the military government initiated democratic reforms in mid-2000s. In this pursuit, a new constitution was adopted in 2008 and a national election was held in 2010 resulting in a quasi-democratic government dominated by the military.

However, in a free and fair election in 2015 the National League for Democracy (NLD)

## "We the people"



MILIA ALI

**O**f late, I have started avoiding social gatherings. The reason? Friends and acquaintances have become somewhat edgy and contentious, so that even civil discussions quickly rise to high decibel levels. Needless to say, the divisive issues mostly relate to world affairs and politics,

with conversations rotating in circles! Truth be told, I am surprised at my own snappy responses and overall sense of frustration. Has my threshold for tolerance gone down or is it something more serious? In an informal tea gathering with some close friends, I broached the subject and asked if they were feeling the same way. Interestingly, all of them complained of sporadic bouts of headaches, sleeplessness and petulance. Once we had diagnosed the malady, it was easier to analyse the reasons for the behavioural change. The consensus was that the upheaval in today's world induced by incompetent, insensitive and corrupt leaders was causing havoc with people's emotional and psychological state. A friend noted that psychiatrists in the United States are having to deal with an increased number of patients who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder! But it's not just Donald Trump—people are generally stressed out about the unfairness and injustices of the new world order. After two hours of sharing frustrations and complaints, we identified the following as the most egregious types of stress-related problems.

**Ordinary people are speaking out against injustices with the help of social media. They are rallying in the corridors of power, challenging inequity, racism and gender discrimination.**

**Donald Trump Hypertension:** There was unanimous agreement that President Trump's provocative and divisive comments and early morning tweets have a direct impact on blood pressure levels. Inflammatory threats to unleash "fire and fury" on North Korea; the refusal to denounce the white supremacists and neo Nazis after the violence in Charlottesville; and the racially coded tweets about hurricane-ravaged Puerto Ricans, all fall into the category of blood-pressure-aggravating Trumpian statements.

**Kim Jong-un Anxiety Disorder:** The North Korean dictator's provocative and incendiary statements about using nuclear missiles have alarmed most countries, especially neighbouring South Korea and Japan. We reached a consensus that our anxiety over the possibility of a nuclear war was causing insomnia and frequent breathing problems.

**Narendra Modi Depression:** My Indian friends in the group admitted that they were suffering from depression due to the rising tide of intolerance and bigotry in Modi's India. They are deeply perturbed by the threat to the country's secular institutions from right-wing Hindu nationalists.

**King Salman Disillusionment Disorder:** While the Saudi Kingdom claims to be the guardian of Islam, it is creating discord through a divisive campaign against Qatar, Iran and its forays into Yemen. Besides, King Salman's overtly appeasing



ILLUSTRATION: RENJIE L

attitude towards Trump, who labelled all Muslims as "terrorists", has triggered a feeling of isolation and disillusionment among many of my Muslim friends.

Some of you may shrug your shoulders and say: So, what is new about the duplicity and hypocrisy in politics? It's unrealistic, even naive, to expect a politician to be a "Mother Teresa"—political leaders should be crafty manipulators, even if not inherently dishonest. If that is true, who should

we look up to as our role model? Studies show that through a process known as vicarious reinforcement, children emulate the behaviour of individuals whose actions tend to be rewarded. I shudder to think what our politicians are teaching the youngsters who will hold the reins of our planet in the future.

Wish to end on a positive note. Despite the virtual bankruptcy of leadership in today's world, we have witnessed the rejection of right-wing extremist politics in Europe with the victory of Merkel and Macron. We celebrate the emergence of social activism as a bulwark against the excesses of the political elite. Ordinary people are speaking out against injustices with the help of social media. They are rallying in the corridors of power, challenging inequity, racism and gender discrimination. It is encouraging that the attempts to railroad Obamacare and deprive millions of healthcare, have been aborted by intense public reaction in the US. These examples demonstrate that ordinary people can be surprised when they rally together for a common cause—thus lending credence to President Obama's words: "Change only happens when ordinary people get involved, and they get engaged, and they come together to demand it... I am asking you to believe. Not in my ability to bring about change, but in yours."

We, the ordinary citizens, can withdraw into a shell to protect our sanity and hope that the situation will reverse since nature prefers stability and harmony to chaos and discord. Or, we can act as agents of change through protests and activism that could induce a snowball effect and make a difference in the long run. The choice is ours!

Milia Ali is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

### A WORD

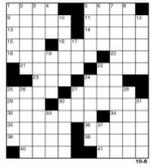


**DESUETUDE**  
 NOUN  
 A state of disuse

### A DAY

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- |                            |                     |                               |
|----------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>ACROSS</b>              | 27 Sure thing       | 6 Tears                       |
| 1 Hangs low                | 29 Burns legend     | 7 Environmental concern       |
| 5 Curving paths            | 30 Friend of Aramis | 8 Capital group               |
| 9 Bold poker bet           | 34 Verb for joy     | 10 New trend, e.g.            |
| 11 Floor worker            | 35 Like tumblers    | 12 Parents, as a subscription |
| 13 Shrek's love            | 36 High-strung      | 17 Baying beast               |
| 14 Conjecture              | 38 Dawn             | 19 Mires                      |
| 15 Subside                 | 39 Rocker Bob       | 22 Dispatched                 |
| 16 Masculine icon          | 40 Quiche base      | 24 Historic events            |
| 18 Cat with colourful paws | 41 Reduced amount   | 25 Fizzy drinks               |
| 20 Put away                | <b>DOWN</b>         | 26 Czech capital              |
| 21 Aspersions              | 1 Hotel fixtures    | 27 Take in                    |
| 22 Hearty dish             | 2 Suspects' stories | 28 Stable group               |
| 23 Diet. contents          | 3 Environmental     | 30 Tiny sounds                |
| 24 Phone bill addition     | 4 Naughtily act     | 31 Prophets                   |
| 25 Relaxing places         | 5 Make amends       | 33 Cord                       |
|                            |                     | 37 Snaky fish                 |



**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**  
 SHAD INANE  
 MAUDER TARIAN  
 ANNEX SORITIA  
 ENX TWISTER  
 LISTER ORE  
 ANYA RED  
 CENT SAND  
 NON SUPS  
 OLD SISTER  
 BILLI STAWA  
 LANGER INSET  
 EGGON NOTRE  
 RESTS METS

### BETLE BAILEY



### BY MORT WALKER



### BABY BLUES



### BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

