**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**THE ROHINGYA CRISIS IN MYANMAR AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIA’S NATIONAL SECURITY**

**INTRODUCTION**

The military crackdown on August 25, 2017, when an armed Rohingya group attacked military posts in Rakhine State of Myanmar, was unprecedented and sent more than 480,000 Rohingya to flee Myanmar into refugee camps in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar.[[1]](#footnote-1) The ethnic violence is not new and over the years Rohingyas mass migration from Myanmar has been primarily to Bangladesh, hosting 950,000 registered refugees as reported by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), besides other South East (SE) Asian countries. A report released by the United Nations on September 18, 2018 has given a damning report of the military government, known as the Tatmadaw, and reiterated calls for top military generals be tried for “genocide” against the Rohingya minority.[[2]](#footnote-2) The events of the Rohingya Muslims unfolding in Myanmar has ramifications on the national security of India, besides impacting religious faultlines and internal social fabric across the Indian subcontinent.

The simmering and emerging crisis of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and their exodus from the Rikhane province into South East and South Asia, as a fallout of ethnic faultlines coming apart, have set in motion a geopolitical disbalance for India which needs to be navigated with an almost ballerina like balance. The components of the multifaceted predicament are interlinked and cannot be compartmentalized, wherein geopolitical balancing to preserve national interests are an imperative alongwith containing exudations of extremism from the ethnic strife. The divergent imperatives of various facets represent a Rubix cube - achieving stability in one dimension may be disruptive in the other and necessitates a comprehensive response. Hence, the issue required delicate handling. It is shaped by various factors, including diplomatic, domestic political compulsions, humanitarian, security and geopolitical considerations.

**Geo-Strategic Implications: Tensions Between Liberal Idealistim and Realist Approach**

India’s geo-strategic security must be understood as three concentric circles. The first circle is the immediate South Asian “neighbourhood,” the second is the “extended neighbourhood,” and finally, the global stage. Indian grand strategy in the latter spheres is outlined as extending its sphere of influence through economic and trade integration, soft power projection, balancing multiple growing alliances and an increasing role in shaping the international system. In contrast the first circle or the immediate neighbourhood, is best described as a patchwork of various doctrines relating to military power, nuclear responsibility and tenuously managing relations and interests. This first circle embodies some of India’s greatest national security concerns and challenges and in large part is viewed as the key element that is holding the country back from attaining its rightful place as a major power. India is a nation which has a neighbourhood which can, at times, be extremely sensitive and is deeply impacted by the developments within the region. Socio political developments, intertwined with our own foreign policy, occurring in the region can have a domino effect impacting stability and needs careful balancing. India has a cultural inclination of a foreign policy which had long enshrined the principles of cooperation and non-expansion (Panscheel) and based on liberal values. The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence were expounded by Myanmar, Indian, and Chinese leaders in the mid-1950s and were subsequently adopted by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as the basis for international relations. They include: mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefits, peaceful co-existence and peaceful settlement of disputes. However, the hard realities and changing geopolitical environment has resulted in a tilt towards realism. Of particular interest are India’s relationship with Myanmar. Dealings with the Military Junta in a bid to further national interests are a clear reflection of the careful balancing which India needs to undertake.

India is seen as a Nation upholding moral values and proports to follow an ethical foreign policy. India’s stance on the Rohingya issue from a humanitarian perspective will also be under intense scrutiny, having implications on its moral position in the international arena. The ethical stand axiomatically works against the interests of the military establishment in Myanmar and has potential of creating a vacuum for China to exploit. A realist foreign policy impacts India’s relationship with Bangladesh as dalliance in measures to pressurise Myanmar to contain the Rohingya problem implies not supporting Bangladesh in her moment of crisis. The pro-India Sheikh Hasina establishment would suffer in domestic politics and pave the way for an anti-India political dispensation led by Begum Khalida Zia. The unfolding crisis, besides a humanitarian issue, seems to be creating a no-win situation for India and potential ramifications which adversely impact national security from a military-diplomatic and economic perspective.

The mass movement into Bangladesh and resultant pressures on internal and economic stability faced by Bangladesh are causing pulls in the opposing directions for India in its relations with Bangladesh and Myanmar. The refugee crisis has been a test of India’s neighbourhood diplomacy since it involved two of India’s close neighbours, Myanmar and Bangladesh. India has warm relationships with both the countries, and each desired India’s support. India was hesitant in taking any bold stance as it did not want to displease either neighbour. India also faced the difficult choice of safeguarding national interest’s vis-a-vis its neighbours’ expectations. India shares borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh and the two countries are critical for the peace and stability of India’s conflict-prone northeast. Maintaining a friendly relationship with both Myanmar and Bangladesh is imperative for India.

The growth of China, as a regional force and a global power are having deep impact on the national security of India, both directly and indirectly. India has to be mindful of Chinese efforts at gaining inroads into Myanmar, besides the security implications in the porous border it shares with Myanmar. India’s interests in Myanmar are ensconced in it’s Act East Policy, enunciated in 2014 and which replaced her over two decade-old Look East Policy, emphasizing a more proactive role for itself in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, making it an arena of conflicting interests with China for regional status. China, with its policy of string of pearls and Belt Road Initiative (BRI) has spread its influence and is slowly encircling India in a bid to seek a competitive edge. Development of ports and undertaking massive infrastructure development in India’s neighbourhood is shifting the balance of power in a region which India considered its own backyard. China has obtained strategic interests in Myanmar by developing the Kyukphu port to gain access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the Straits of Malacca, a strategic vulnerability capable of choking majority energy supplies. The Rohingya crisis saw unambiguous Chinese support for the ruling establishment, aligning itself in order to further its influence. India and China are in a contest to safeguard their economic and security interests and engaged in containing the influence of the other within Myanmar. Rakhine is important with its natural resources and coastal location and as China is not directly affected by the refugee crisis it has less to lose than others in standing by Aung San Suu Kyi and her government. India is nearing completion of the Bay of Bengal to North East India connectivity project and views Myanmar as an important market for its regional ambitions. Substantial inroads have been made by China, both in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Balancing of ties to ensure that Indian interests are not sacrificed or harmed in favour of China remains a critical challenge for foreign policy makers.

India has to be particularly wary in ensuring its interests are protected and needs to balance geo-strategic interests and domestic concerns in it’s foreign policy to prevent other players leveraging the situation for geopolitical gains, at the cost of India’s interests. An effective approach is needed to ensure helping prevent renewed conflicts in Rakhine, facilitate the safe return of the refugees to Myanmar, and mitigate any potential terror-related activities involving the Rohingya refugees. The moral and ethical dimension creates yet another level of tension in the conflicting narrative. The role that India plays in finding a solution to the crisis and explores ways to further deepen and expand its engagements needs balancing with its long tradition of dealing with refugees and maintaining a leadership role in the region.

Balancing of ties to ensure that Indian interests are not sacrificed or harmed in favour of China remains a critical challenge for foreign policy makers. India has to be particularly wary in ensuring its interests are protected and expanded if she has to sustain her status in the region. Balancing geo-strategic concerns vis-à-vis the neighbourhood is the primary concern of India’s foreign policy. Handling of the crisis will require very cautious balancing to ensure that India’s long-term interest in its immediate neighbourhood are not adversely harmed.

**Refugees and Impact on National Security**

The last humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh (then east Pakistan) had precipitated the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 and the resultant breakup, leading to the formulation of the State of Bangladesh. The magnitude of crisis and its fallout must not be underestimated and should be mitigated without exacerbating tensions. India has a long history of refugees including from the time of Partition and independence, Tibetan refugees including HH The Dalai Lama, from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and illegal Bangladeshi immigration into the North-eastern regions, which have had massive implications for national security and, thus, the current crisis necessitates deft handling. The European arena, facing a refugee crisis emanating from Syria and it’s fallout, can offer a comparative framework to offer measures to mitigate adverse consequences.

**Ethno-Religious Affinity and Instability – Extremism a Byproduct**

The crisis also has a domestic narrative with some Rohingya, already settled in the sensitive border regions of Jammu and Kashmir, likely having links to armed groups in Pakistan and are an internal security concern. Illegal crossing and rehabilitation of Rohingyas, in the border states of Jammu and Kashmir, creates yet another vulnerability to be managed. Reports of linkages of the Rohingyas with Pakistan based terrorist organisations have come to fore, and poses a serious security challenge to its stability and threats to the borders from within. The ethnic and religious interlinkages with the region, particularly the Muslim population in Bangladesh and India, have implications in domestic concerns with cross-regional dimensions. India is home to the largest Muslim population in a non-Muslim country in the world with almost 15 percent of India’s population. Though plurality and tolerance are fundamental principles of the foundation of the Indian State and have weathered numerous destabilising effects on religious harmony, it still remains a fragile relationship which can be ruptured due to numerous factors. The instability does not remain limited to the border regions itself. Being home to the largest Muslim population in the world, any religious tension has a domino effect in other parts of India and threatens to tear apart the social fabric.

**Holistic and Pragmatism – Balanced Approach an Imperative**

The various factors, including diplomatic, domestic political compulsions, humanitarian, security and geopolitical considerations need deft handling and balancing to ensure that national security interests are not compromised and adverse implications are mitigated to the extent feasible. The Rohingya crisis, essentially an ethno-religious conflict with socio-political and domestic concerns are intertwined with our foreign policy. It can have a domino effect, impacting internal stability and needs careful balancing. India needs to constantly review its national security strategy for relevance and effectiveness.

This paper will take a look at the history of the Rohingya crisis and underlying causes, national security implications for Bangladesh and Myanmar, analyse the national security implications for India including when seen through the prism of the Chinese dimension and chart out recommendations for dealing with the adverse fallout of the crisis from a geo-strategic perspective.

**AIM OF PAPER**

1. To analyze the impact of the unfolding Rohingya crisis in Myanmar on the National Security and National Interests of India.

2. To recommend measures to mitigate the conflicting implications.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What is nature of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar?

2. What are the implications of the crisis for Bangladesh and Myanmar?

3. What are the national security interests of India impacted by the ongoing crisis, including the dimension of China’s role in the region?

4. What are the risks of cross regional spread of extremism from the crisis? What lessons can be drawn from the Syrian experience?

5. What are the measures recommended to be adopted to mitigate adverse implications for India’s national security?

**RESEARCH CLAIMS**

1. The recent Rohingya crisis has created a conflict of interests in the relationship India shares with Bangladesh and Myanmar and it’s own ethno-religious fabric.

2. Chinese interests in Myanmar, as part of its Belt Road Initiative, and their stand complicate India’s response in ensuring that India’s interests are not harmed or sacrificed in China’s favor.

3. India is faced with the difficult choice of adopting a realist approach in safeguarding national interest’s vis-a-vis its neighbours’ expectations, complicated with China’s interest and involvement, and a liberal approach in balancing ethical and humanitarian dimensions.

**METHODOLOGY**

1. This paper will take a look at the history of the Rohingya crisis and underlying causes, implications for Bangladesh and Myanmar, analyse the national security implications for India factoring the Chinese dimension and chart out recommendations for dealing with the adverse fallout of the crisis from a geo-strategic perspective.

a. Introduction – Background and Research Outline.

b. Chapter I - Tracing the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar.

c. Chapter II - Understanding India’s National Security Interests.

d. Chapter III - Implication on Bangladesh & Myanmar – What’s At Stake.

e. Chapter IV – Internal Security Threats – Manifestations of Extremism and Fanning Communal Schism.

f. Chapter V – Growing Chinese Threat and Implications of the Rohingya Crisis.

g. Chapter VI – Crisis Response – Securing India’s National Interests.

h. Chapter VII – Recommendations and Policy Direction.

f. Conclusion.

**Chapter 1**

The first chapter provided the overall perspective of the Rohingyas, who are a Muslim ethnic minority group numbering approximately 1.1 million from Myanmar's Rakhine state (officially known as Arakan till 1989), just south of Bangladesh, but are officially not recognized as lawful citizens. The genesis of the conflict lies in government claims that they were brought to Rakhine from Bangladesh during the time when Myanmar was a British colony, and are living in Myanmar illegally.

The Rohingya historical narrative claims having lived in Rakhine for centuries since the arrival of Islam with Mohammad Hanif, son of Hazarat Ali. The Tibeto-Burman invasion of 957 AD resulted in the Indo-Mongoloid Rakhine Maghs, with Burmese civilisation and Buddhism taking roots in the 11th and 12th century AD. The region, separated from Burma by the mountain range, is considered a continuation of the Chittagong plains under Arakan control and thus, historically was seen as separate having Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims rulers at various times in history. The claims of historical Muslim roots in Arakan and majority status in the territory as a result of geographical contiguity, alongwith a distinct language and culture, spurs a quest for it’s unique identity. The conflicting narrative of the Rakhine and Bamar Peoples, the Buddhist ethnicity majority, contend that Islam had only a small presence in Rakhine and the Rohingya are not native to Rakhine but are Bengali migrants, or “Chittagonians,” who arrived in 1826 after the British conquest of Rakhine. The inhabitants, over different eras, are possibly mixed descendants of three groups – those already in Arakan before the region became culturally ‘Burmanized’ from the 10th to 14th centuries, slaves taken by Rakhine kings and Portuguese mercenaries from Bengal in the 16th and 17th centuries and workers who migrated from Bengal during the colonial period; and those who migrated from Bangladesh after independence. Both sides of the narrative can claim a high degree of authenticity, but it is evident that ethnic roots with territorial claims lies at the heart of the conflict.

The chapter then traces souring of memory in the modern era to the events of World War II, when both the Japanese and the British sought to exploit sectarianism, with the Japanese recruiting Buddhist Rakhine while the British recruited the Rohingya. The Rohingya contend that the British promised them an independent state after the war, which was not honoured. Violence after the end of the war resulted from attempts by the Muslims in Rakhine to carve their own state, and later to join East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The roots of exclusion, post-independence, are chronologically traced when the Union Citizenship Act of 1948, detailed the ethnicities “indigenous” to Myanmar and the Rohingya were not considered to be one of the country’s 135 official ethnic groups and which restricted citizenship to person having to prove residency of ancestors of two generation. Communal riots of 1942, led by ultra - conservative Rakhine Buddhists, resulted in forced migration of approximately 80,000 Rohingyas to East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) and Muslims took up arms and fought a separatist rebellion until the 1960s. In 1961, briefly, the new government recognised Rohingya as an indigenous race but reversed it following the 1962 military coup. The 1974 drive for national registration cards excluded the Rohingya, who were only allowed to obtain foreign registration cards. Myanmar’s citizenship criterion is based on the ‘taingyintha’, or “national races”, concept (those ethnic groups that were settled in Myanmar in 1823, a year before the first Anglo-Burmese war in which the British conquered Arakan). A criterion for full citizenship in the 1982 Citizenship Law was belonging to one of the national races, and thus became the inflection point of exclusion of the Rohingya.

The chapter then traces numerous alleged eviction campaigns, which include 250,000 Rohingyas fleeing into Bangladesh during April – July 1978 and approximately 2,68,000 during the 1991-92 campaign. 2012 witnessed displacement of almost 140,000 people following the rape of a Buddhist woman by Muslim men. An attack on the Myanmar border police in October 2016, led to 87,000 Rohingya moving to Bangladesh for refuge and the August 2017 crackdown, in retaliation to attacks on military camps, resulted in 480,000 Rohingya to flee Myanmar into Bangladesh, taking the registered refugees to almost a million.

The chapter sought to link the historical legacy to the prevailing Islamophobia and clashes over the Rohingya identity. It traces the mid-17th century Mughal military campaign under Aurangzeb to Arakan territories and the Rikhane Muslim efforts during World War II, and thereafter, to secede as having left an indelible mark on the psyche of the nation and being the driving force behind the strife. Entrenched Islamophobia in a predominantly Buddhist society and state exists and the Rohingya are viewed as a threat to Buddhist faith and culture, seeking Myanmar’s Islamization. The Rohingya identity has been contested as a political construct of the 1950s to carve an autonomous region in northern Rakhine or amalgamate within then East Pakistan. The government’s move to ban the term ‘Rohingya’, referring to them as “Bengalis” implying they belong in Bangladesh, during the 2014 census, treated them as illegal immigrants, justifying their disenfranchisement which resulted from revoking their right to vote in the 2015 election. The name Rohingya, and desire for recognition as an accepted ethnicity, backed by militant activity and calls for international intervention, is seen as a separatist agenda by other means. A wide chasm exists in the viewpoints of the western world and humanitarian groups seeing them as the world’s most persecuted minority, while Myanmar’s establishment and people perceiving them a foreign group with a separatist agenda, fuelled by Islam, and funded from overseas. Reconciling such a charged and polarised narrative will prove to be a challenge and it brings Bangladesh and Myanmar on opposing sides in conflict with each other.

**Chapter 2**

Having traced the genesis of the crisis, the next step was to identify various dimensions of India’s national security interests and concerns which can get impacted by the crisis, if unmitigated. This chapter gave the overall perspective of India’s national security dimensions. There is no documented National Security Strategy to be referred to and needs to rely on an understanding of various government articulations. The paper is not seeking to create a comprehensive national security strategy, which pervades the entire spectrum of politico-economic-social and environmental dimensions. Instead, the paper will focus on those dimensions of national security which are impacted by the emerging crisis. Of particular concern is the role of China, besides the interplay between India-Bangladesh-Myanmar, the main protagonists.

The threats to various dimensions of national interests and threats likely to be impacted by the ongoing Rohingya crisis, besides preserving territorial sovereignty, were summarised as guarding against exudations of terrorism, fundamentalism and illegal immigration emanating from across the borders, particularly Bangladesh and Myanmar. A mutually beneficial foreign policy is essential to maintain peaceful co-existence in order to achieve core national security objectives. The looming threat of Chinese domination and influence is a critical obstacle to our path of economic growth, which in turn is an imperative for social security and poverty alleviation. Internal stability and social cohesion are faced with an onslaught from regionalism and communal divisions. Resilience against these threats are essential to prevent domestic compulsions holding national interests hostage.

The chapter then traced the history of refugees in India, post-independence, and the impact they have had on national security. These have manifested in the trauma of partition, the ethical dimension of hosting HH The Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees facing the wrath of Chinese aggression, the 1971 war with Pakistan and the subsequent liberation of Bangladesh as a result of atrocities and large-scale migration of refugees from East Pakistan to India, intervention in Sri Lanka in solidarity with Tamils of South India. Domestic compulsions of ethnic solidarity have held foreign policy hostage at times and resulted in sacrificing national interests, at times to the determent of security considerations. Having traced the imperatives of refugee situations, it then goes on to bring out the conflicting nature of policy direction ie. reconciling the ethical and moralistic dimension, emanating from the Nehruvian tradition vis-à-vis hard realism.

The widening of faultlines, as a result of convergence of external and internal threats, preventing economic growth, needs to be mitigated. Core values of upholding morality and values of democracy conflicting with geo-political realities place an unenviable dilemma for preserving national interests. The impact on various facets including diplomatic, domestic political compulsions, humanitarian, security and geopolitical considerations will need to be balanced and preserved.

**Chapter 3**

The next chapter took a look at the nature of the relationship which India shares with both Myanmar and Bangladesh and the various dimensions of security and cooperation which need to be preserved from an adverse impact of the fallout of the Rohingya crisis. First, it explored the impact on Bangladesh itself and identified the areas of cooperation with India which would face ripple shocks, even if they are not disrupted. Thereafter, the nature of the relationship with Myanmar were highlighted focusing on the particular aspects which bear serious consequences in the event of disruption or deterioration of ties.

It brought out the scope of relationship with both Bangladesh and Myanmar in domains spanning security and border management, water sharing, bilateral trade and investment, economic assistance, cooperation in power and energy sectors and facilitating connectivity with North East India. The threats and opportunities emanating from both countries impacts the entire spectrum of national security interests ranging from border management, the need for military cooperation in combating insurgent groups operating along the porous borders, to the spillover of radicalisation, internal stresses generated from illegal immigration and the larger context of regional economic integration with South and South East Asia.

The mass movement of the Rohingyas into Bangladesh has caused a massive strain on Bangladesh’s already stressed economy. Besides managing the humanitarian crisis, it creates security implication as Muslim Rohingyas, in refugee camps, are extremely vulnerable and ripe for indoctrination and radicalisation efforts of numerous terrorist and jihadist groups. The fanning of religious fundamentalism can have serious repercussions for Bangladesh. India shares porous borders with Bangladesh and its spill over into India is a natural fallout, which will be discussed in the next chapter. The states of West Bengal and Assam, which share borders with Bangladesh have long faced illegal immigration from Bangladesh affecting internal security and threat to social harmony resulting from the demographic imbalances. Violent insurgencies and ethno-communal clashes have often erupted in these regions. Injection of a new source of instability, generated by a spillover of refugees, potentially poses a serious national security threat. Surgical strikes, in 2015, on the insurgent camps along the Indo-Myanmar border in retaliation to a deadly ambush, were as a result of close cooperation of the military regime in Myanmar. The security situation in North East India remains faced with numerous challenges, of which one is the insurgent’s ability to exploit the porous borders and extremely difficult terrain obtaining. Cooperation and support of Myanmar is critical to ensuring stability in the region and tackling terrorists operating in these areas. India has to be mindful of Chinese efforts at gaining inroads into Myanmar besides the security implications in the porous border it shares with Myanmar. Rising **Chinese influence**, **Islamic fundamentalism and insurgency** and the tenuous nature of the ceasefire agreements with insurgents pose **serious challenges**, which need to be tackled. A balanced and harmonious relationship with both neighbours is a *sine qua non*. The overarching umbrella of growing Chinese influence has tremendous potential of undermining Indian interests and needs to be zealously guarded against.

**Chapter 4**

This chapter has sought to chart the potential of extremism being fermented as a result of State action and conditions of poverty and deprivation of the Rohingyas making them extremely vulnerable and ripe for indoctrination and radicalisation efforts of numerous terrorist and jihadist group, as witnessed in Africa where poverty and deprivation, combined with state abuse of power drive youth towards Boko Haram, al Shabab and Islamic State. The findings have been derived from a UNDP Study ‘Journey To Extremism In Africa’. The underlying causes and historical context have been charted previously in Chapter##. It is evident that the situation arising from the anti-Muslim sentiment of a Buddhist majority establishment, serves to exacerbate the deep-rooted acrimonious relationship and a target of vitriolic attacks from ultra nationalist Buddhists. While the Tatmadaw and ruling establishment cannot be absolved of their responsibilities for extreme actions, nor can the destabilising role of the ARSA, which seeks to provoke harsh responses by indulging in militant attacks against the State, be condoned. The ARSA, if allowed to instigate events leading to mass migration and seeking to exploit them as weapons to exert political pressure, bear equal responsibility. Thus, a balanced approach to condemn and exert pressure, equally on both parties, is important. One-sided condemnation will only encourage the other party to continue deviant behaviour.

Having established the adverse potential of radicalisation and extremism manifesting, the chapter has gone on to draw the linkage of a fallout on the internal security of India, particularly in the North-eastern states. It points out how illegal migration, particularly from Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan till 1971) and the resultant demographic imbalance generates a fear of minoritisation, which has been the primary causal of numerous insurgencies. An anti-foreigner agitation against the large influx of illegal migrants and demands for their deportation have been at the heart of internal security instability. The concerns have been vindicated in various rulings and judgements of the Supreme Court and Delhi High Court, relating to deportation of illegal immigrants, eluded to in the chapter.

The chapter goes on to reflect on how a ripple effect of instability in Bangladesh and the economic stress generated from the Rohingya crisis, has the potential of triggering a fresh wave of illegal migration, leading to a deterioration of the security situation in North East India. The management of internal security gets further complicated as a result of various insurgent groups operating from Myanmar, making security cooperation an imperative in ensuring coordinating efforts in operating against such groups. Measures recommended to tackle the scourge of insurgency and prevent cross border infiltration needing consideration are amicable resolution of issues of insurgent groups bilaterally, developing infrastructure for socio-economic development to weaken the external support to insurgency by neighbouring countries, a strong intelligence network to check the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in India, fencing the borders/enhance border management posture and bilateral engagements with the neighbouring countries for controlling illegal immigration, drug trafficking and smuggling across the borders.

The influx of Rohingyas, and the resultant security concerns enumerated are not limited to the north-eastern states alone. The chapter brought out the consequences across India, including in the sensitive border state of J&K, where the Rohingyas have also settled. The direct linkage of Rohingyas and the ARSA with terrorist and radical organisations has been eluded to, even if not conclusively established. The security concerns and the stance of the Government of India, relating to national security concerns, withstood judicial scrutiny of law in the Supreme Court, with the October 05, 2018 judgement upholding deportation of Rohingyas.

At the heart of the government’s stand rest major security concerns. The chapter brought out how the stance of the deportation of Rohingyas seeks to create the grounds for future deportation of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants being identified under the NRC. This is a matter which necessitates tremendous political maturity to guard against national security concerns being hijacked by communal forces with vested political interests. The chapter has sought to address the politicisation and exploitation of the religious divide complicating the cauldron of instability. It discussed how the government’s stance being projected as having religious bias has the potential of the large Indian Muslim population being exploited by fanning religious discord based on religious affinity. The Indian government’s anti-Rohingya stance, on purely national security considerations, being manipulated by inimical elements in fanning communal faultlines, by giving it a purely anti-Muslim colour, will not bode well and needs to be guarded against.

In summary, the chapter in addition to the manifestation of extremism within the Rohingyas, has enumerated implications of direct threats emanating from the already settled and future Rohingya influx into India, a ripple effect triggering illegal immigration of Bangladeshis into the north-eastern states and the entire episode assuming religious overtones rather than security considerations. Tackling the manifestations are not merely limited in the military domain but requires a comprehensive socio-political-economic and military approach as an integrated strategy. The intent is not formulation of a comprehensive strategy, which would entail a separate study altogether, but to broadly understand the various measures necessary in countering the adverse implications in various domains.

It highlighted measures such as addressing deficiencies in education, employment, justice, poverty eradication and governance. Robust internal governance mitigates the breeding grounds of radicalisation, with grassroot politics and outreach providing the necessary tools of implementation. Speedy justice and promoting harmony amongst the communities make the grounds for addressing grievances. Measures to de-radicalise sections entails social empowerment. Preventing places of worship like mosques and madrassas being exploited to fan radicalisation by co-opting religious leaders and members of the community in shunning inimical activities. Developmental activities focussing on infrastructure development, employment generation, health care, education, and social development need to be accelerated to integrate the population and disgruntled elements politically, socially, economically and psychologically. Efforts on winning hearts and minds of the population and socio-economic development weakens external support to insurgency. The aim of the military component is to create a secure and stable environment for the political process to fructify with socio-economic measures being implemented. A multi-pronged comprehensive military strategy seeks to create a conducive environment for the political process to take shape. The multipronged approach, executed at the operational level, seeks minimizing cross border infiltration and effective counter terrorist operations within the hinterland, with minimum collateral damage, alongwith measures to win the hearts and mind of the population. Simultaneously, it must ensure adequate cooperation in border management and coordination of activities on both sides of the border with Bangladesh and Myanmar to not allow terror groups from operating with impunity and prevent cross border infiltration. A strong intelligence network needs encompassing superior technology, electronic surveillance and satellite-based capabilities in the cyber, communication and optico-electronic domain in conjunction with low-tech and human resources. A robust Anti-Infiltration Obstacle System (AIOS) along the borders for controlling illegal immigration, drug trafficking and smuggling across the borders should draw from the expediencies in J&K and Israeli expertise. Advanced computing for data analysis and integration of human, structural and technological capabilities to deter infiltration and freedom of movement to terrorists, are required for operations by Special Forces and specialised counter insurgency forces akin to Rashtriya Rifles and Assam Rifles. A suitable legal framework allows adequate operational freedom to security forces, while upholding human rights. A key element of tackling extremism and radicalisation is to stifle funding to such organisations, both within the country and from beyond the borders. A comprehensive campaign to tackle inimical propaganda to mobilise radicalisation and ensuring that the message is communicated in a receptive manner is an imperative. And finally, a synergised approach with command and control at the apex level, bringing together the civil-military machinery together under political direction should provide the overarching umbrella.

**Chapter 5**

Having evaluated the implications of the crisis for internal security and fermenting extremism, this chapter sought to assess the geopolitical dimension. The implication of the growing Chinese footprint and domination as part of the BRI framework, resulting in strategic encirclement of India and seeking global dominance has been amplified. The chapter brought out the contours of the BRI and the potential threat it poses in securing control of strategic bases, as witnessed in the case of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. Substantial inroads have been made by China into Myanmar. The chapter points to the concern of Myanmar falling prey to a debt trap and ceding control of strategic infrastructure to China, which could result in Indian interests being compromised and sacrificed in favour of China. The chapter, brings out the pitfalls of overt condemnation and the western sanctions regime potentially pushing Myanmar into China’s clutches. India and China, have both, supported Myanmar’s establishment in pursuit of their economic and strategic interests. Both are vying for influence in Myanmar, seeking to contain the other. There is no direct impact of the refugee crisis on China and hence it’s policy is lesser constrained in promoting it’s interests. A weakened economy unable to service Chinese debt and China acting as a buffer in shielding Myanmar from international scrutiny could inextricably push Myanmar into Chinese sphere of influence, leaving little space for India to manouver and safeguard it’s interests. It also brought out the need for India to guard against it’s own lethargy in pursuing initiatives to their logical conclusions, lest it cedes space and compromises regional power status.

The chapter brought out the imperatives for convergence of the Quadrilateral in securing it’s geo-political interests vis-à-vis China and highlighted the need to be cognisant of the perils of pushing Myanmar too far. Shared concerns of US, Japan and Australia in the region need to converge towards greater cooperation in countering Chinese initiatives such as the BRI and String of Pearls. Enhanced economic and trade cooperation would serve common interests in countering growing Chinese influence and belligerence. Economic cooperation entails creating arrangements which encourage manufacturing and services from India as alternatives to Chinese economic capabilities. Engaging with regional blocs like the ASEAN in weaning them away from Chinese influence and economic engagement, needs to be dovetailed. Military ties and cooperation in areas of counter-terrorism and non-proliferation, joint exercises, defence trade, joint R&D etc. would contribute substantially in countering the Chinese threat. The recently signed Communication Compatibility and Security Arrangement (COMCASA) in 2018 after the 2016 Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the US, are steps in creating the necessary framework of collaborating in jointly countering Chinese influence. Backing such cooperative arrangements with enhanced social and cultural exchanges and people-to-people contact, provides greater depth in making it a meaningful relationship. A long-term strategy to counter Chinese influence politically, socially, economically and militarily needs to be formulated and must engage with other like-minded nations sharing common threats.

**Chapter 6**

Having mapped the genesis of the crisis and it’s implications in the geo-political domain as well as the impact on potentially fermenting extremism across the region and particularly in India, this chapter has sought to review the response of the various players. It can be seen that the West, in particular, has been vocal in it’s condemnation of the actions of the ruling military establishment and Aung San Suu Kyi, the champion of democracy. The ICC has gone to the extent of declaring genocide and war crimes, seeking trial of the perpetrators by International Law. The US, while condemning and imposing international sanctions, has been measured in it’s response. Realizing the potential of the crisis for Bangladesh, but careful not to push Myanmar into the folds of China, the nature of the sanctions has been more symbolic than effective, indicative of future pressure that can be brought to bear.

India has much to lose from deteriorating relations with Myanmar – security cooperation in combating insurgency in NE India, disruption of it’s ‘Act East Policy’ along the gateway to SE Asia for regional and economic integration with ASEAN, slowing down of multi-modal connectivity of NE India with the Bay of Bengal. India is clearly seeking to preserve it’s interests, mindful of the potential loss of leverage with Myanmar in the event of overpressure and isolation, which would tilt the balance of influence, already in favour of China, further. This gains greater prominence since China has unambiguously thrown it’s weight behind the ruling establishment, making humanitarian considerations as peripheral. The driving motivation is that Indian interests should not be sacrificed on the altar in favour of China. Thus, pragmatism seems to trump ethical concerns. However, substantial assistance to Bangladesh in managing the humanitarian and resultant economic stress, restores a balance with commitment towards international obligations being upheld, in consonance with it’s position and aspirations in the comity of nations.

Deportation of Rohingya’s, upheld by the Supreme Court, following due process of law, opens up a new vista with respect to the approach of dealing with the vexed issue of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh into the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal and resolving a long standing national security threat. The government’s stance, in the face of harsh criticism, gives a clear indication of the direction it intends to follow when it comes to deporting illegal immigrants, identified by the NRC, to Bangladesh. The grounds for future policy are being prepared. A pragmatic approach, balancing humanitarian considerations and juggling various geopolitical considerations, has a distinct realist signature in seeking to preserve India’s national security interests. Of course, the government will have to ensure that it carefully manages the balancing act to ensure that nationals interests do not become hostage to domestic compulsions of religious affinity and communalism being exploited. The next chapter will proceed in summarising recommendations and policy direction.

**Chapter 7**

The final chapter has aimed at arriving at a policy framework considering the various dimensions of the crisis which is essentially an ethno-religious conflict with socio-political and domestic concerns intertwined with India’s foreign policy. The various factors, including diplomatic, domestic political compulsions, humanitarian, security and geopolitical considerations need deft handling and balancing to ensure that national security interests are not compromised and adverse implications are mitigated to the extent feasible. The policy measures to be undertaken have been covered under the broad headings of Orientation of Approach; Molarity, Humanism and Guarding Polarisation; Internal Security and Extremism; Geopolitical Balancing; and International Cooperation.

**Orientation of Approach**. The policy orientation provides a compass bearing for the approach to be adopted:

(a) The critical balance to be achieved is to ensure that the global community at large favours constructive engagement as against isolation, resulting from a sanctions regime and excessive criticism.

(b) A realist based foreign policy, over a principled stance around purely humanitarian considerations, appears to be in the best interest of India.

(c) Ensuring sustainable peace should be a primary consideration and India’s role should ensure preventing recurrence of ethnic strife, facilitate safe return of refugees and rehabilitation, long term integration within Myanmar’s society and ensure terror related manifestations are stymied early at source.

(d) India should aspire to play a proactive part to assume a leadership role in the region.

(e) Ensure actions are aligned, to the extent feasible, in consonance with adherence to principles of ethical and humanitarian considerations and balanced vis-à-vis preserving national interests.

**Molarity, Humanism and Guarding Polarisation**. Realism does not entail disregard for moral and humanitarian considerations. Thus, adequate resource mobilisation, commensurate to India’s stature, for ameliorating hardships of Rohingya in refugee camps is essential for:

(a) Consistency with traditional viewpoint of upholding human rights.

(b) Deny allegation of biases based on religion, when compared to assistance provided for refugees of other religious denominations (Hindus, Buddhists, Tamil, Bengalis etc.) during the past.

(c) Prevent conditions of hardship in refugee camps becoming fertile breeding grounds for radicalism, extremism and other inimical activities.

**Tangible Support**. The December 20, 2017 MoU on Rakhine State Development Programe between India and Myanmar, focussed on socio-economic development and livelihood initiatives for restoration of normalcy and enabling return of displaced persons, is a step in the right direction. The commitment of USD 25 million towards creation of infrastructure will serve in sustainable rehabilitation.

**Deportation – An Exercise in Rehabilitation**. The aspect of deportation of Rohingyas upheld by the Supreme Court of India, after following the due process of law, on October 05, 2018 ensure various facets with regard to rehabilitation. Continuation of the practice is recommended, in coordination with Myanmar as it generates momentum for future resolution in view of:

(a) Safety concerns of the deportees would have been addressed, given their own willingness to return.

(b) Issue of Certificate of Identity and travel documents by the Union of Myanmar, could be a first positive step towards rehabilitation and reconciliation.

(c) Reflects the scope of Indian intervention and international pressure.

**Internal Security and Extremism**. Security considerations being politicised and assuming a religious hue, exacerbating schisms, does not bode well for national security. Presence of Rohingya Muslims in border regions of Jammu, in the sensitive state of J&K, undermines security and merits being addressed as such. The government’s security concerns withstood the judicial scrutiny of law in the Supreme Court. The government’s prerogative to handle security matters must not be allowed to be hijacked and polarised by elements with vested interests exploiting a religious divide.

**Maintaining Communal Harmony**. There is a need to guard against the matter acquiring a communal tinge by being presented as an anti-Muslim bias of the ruling dispensation. Unrest and radicalisation generated within the region and renewed backlash against Rohingya Muslims with Myanmar could result in renewed conflagration, which is not in anybody’s interests.

**Security Cooperation with Myanmar**. Coordination with Myanmar is an imperative to check the inimical activities of insurgent groups operating along the Indo-Myanmar border, as was witnessed during the 2015 operations in retaliation of a deadly ambush. Security cooperation including intelligence sharing, checking arms and wildlife smuggling, border management including joint inspection and construction of border pillars are critical activities impacting security. The ability of the Chinese to support such groups destabilises the security situation and needs to be guarded against.

**Counter Measures for Tackling Extremism/ Insurgency**. Tackling the manifestations are not merely limited in the military domain but requires a comprehensive socio-political-economic and military approach as an integrated strategy. The intent is not formulation of a comprehensive strategy, which would entail a separate study altogether, but to broadly understand the various measures necessary in countering the adverse implications in various domains. Some of these are as enumerated below:

(a) **Tackling Radicalisation**. Religious extremism and communal radicalisation needs to be tackled by addressing deficiencies in education, employment, justice, poverty eradication and governance.

(b) **Internal Governance**. Robust internal governance mitigates the breeding grounds of radicalisation, with grassroot politics and outreach providing the necessary tools of implementation.

(c) **Socio-Political Measures**. Speedy justice and promoting harmony amongst the communities make the grounds for addressing grievances. Measures to de-radicalise sections entails social empowerment.

(i) Preventing places of worship like mosques and madrassas being exploited to fan radicalisation by co-opting religious leaders and members of the community in shunning inimical activities.

(ii) Developmental activities focussing on infrastructure development, employment generation, health care, education, and social development need to be accelerated to integrate the population and disgruntled elements politically, socially, economically and psychologically.

(iii) Efforts on winning hearts and minds of the population and socio-economic development weakens external support to insurgency.

(d) **Military Measures**. The aim of the military component is to create a secure and stable environment for the political process to fructify with socio-economic measures being implemented. A multi-pronged comprehensive military strategy seeks to create a conducive environment for the political process to take shape. The multipronged approach, executed at the operational level, seeks minimizing cross border infiltration and effective counter terrorist operations within the hinterland, with minimum collateral damage, alongwith measures to win the hearts and mind of the population. Simultaneously, it must

(i) **Trans-Border Operations**. Adequate cooperation in border management and coordination of activities on both sides of the border with Bangladesh and Myanmar to not allow terror groups from operating with impunity and prevent cross border infiltration.

(ii) A strong intelligence network needs encompassing superior technology, electronic surveillance and satellite-based capabilities in the cyber, communication and optico-electronic domain in conjunction with low-tech and human resources.

(iii) Adequacy of resources for operational missions and intelligence gathering like surveillance devices, UAVs, drones etc.

(iv) A robust Anti-Infiltration Obstacle System (AIOS) along the borders for controlling illegal immigration, drug trafficking and smuggling across the borders should draw from the expediencies in J&K and Israeli expertise.

(v) Advanced computing for data analysis.

(vi) Integration of human, structural and technological capabilities to deter infiltration and freedom of movement to terrorists.

(vii) Operations by Special Forces and specialised counter insurgency forces akin to Rashtriya Rifles and Assam Rifles.

(viii) Ensure a suitable legal framework to allow adequate operational freedom to security forces, while upholding human rights.

(e) **Counter Funding Operations**. A key element of tackling extremism and radicalisation is to stifle funding to such organisations, both within the country and from beyond the borders.

(f) **Information Campaign**. A comprehensive campaign to tackle inimical propaganda to mobilise radicalisation and ensuring that the message is communicated in a receptive manner is an imperative.

(g) **Synergised Approach**. Command and control at the apex level, bringing together the civil-military machinery together under political direction should provide the overarching umbrella.

**Geopolitical Balancing**

The test of India’s diplomacy will lie in ensuring a geopolitical balance with Bangladesh and Myanmar, both with conflicting concerns in the crisis. India needs to ensure:

(a) Bangladesh is supported to the fullest extent in managing refugees and mitigating internal stresses.

(b) Facilitate return and rehabilitation of Rohingyas to Myanmar.

(c) Prevent international isolation and overbearing criticism of Myanmar.

(d) Apply subtle pressure on Myanmar causing it to yield adequately in protecting rights of the Rohingya.

**Insulating Act East**. India’s Act East Policy, the vehicle for growth, rests on fruition of connectivity projects integrating NE India with ASEAN, which are dependent on peace and stability in the northeast. Renewed instability and it’s spillover from Bangladesh can disrupt realisation of the growth story and needs to be insulated.

**Bangladesh Myanmar Convergence**. There is need for India to play a crucial role in resolving divergent concerns of both it’s neighbours. Inherent in the solution lies the **need for convergence of intent and action between Bangladesh and Myanmar** in taking measures to mitigate concerns to the satisfaction of both parties. Neither side can afford to overlook concerns of the other if a long-lasting resolution is to be forged. Creating convergence on this complicated matter will certainly be a test for India’s diplomacy.

**International Cooperation**

**Countering Growing Chinese Influence.** Shared concerns of US, Japan and Australia (Quadrilateral) in the region need to converge towards greater cooperation in countering Chinese initiatives such as the BRI and String of Pearls. Enhanced economic and trade cooperation would serve common interests in countering growing Chinese influence and belligerence. A long-term strategy to counter Chinese influence politically, socially, economically and militarily needs to be formulated and must engage with other like-minded nations sharing common threats.

(a) Economic cooperation, creating arrangements encouraging manufacturing and services from India as alternatives to Chinese economic capabilities.

(b) Engaging with regional blocs like the ASEAN in weaning them away from Chinese influence and economic engagement.

(c) Military ties and cooperation in areas of counter-terrorism and non-proliferation, joint exercises, defence trade, joint R&D etc. would contribute substantially in countering the Chinese threat. The recently signed Communication Compatibility and Security Arrangement (COMCASA) in 2018 after the 2016 Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the US, are steps in creating the necessary framework of collaboration.

(d) Enhanced social and cultural exchanges and people-to-people contact, provides greater depth to a meaningful relationship.

**Constructive Engagement**. India needs to ensure that it plays a lead role in acting as a bridge for the international community and **bringing Myanmar within it’s folds rather than pushing it into isolation**. Greater access to the troubled region and coordination on repatriation will help foster confidence in working towards a long-term lasting solution. A **constructive approach seeking engagement** with the Myanmar authorities, despite it’s dubious democratic credentials, **as opposed to the isolationist approach emanating from a sanctions regime, needs to be carefully balanced**. There may be no evidence of the effectiveness of either, but the fact remains that participating in a **punitive sanction-based pressure strategy would result in loss of future leverage with Myanmar**. The fact that even Suu Kyi, the champion of democracy, has desisted from condemning the events is indicative of the domestic compass. A **behavioural change may be forced upon Myanmar**, but will be at the **determent of future influence**. India, therefore has to make **careful policy choices**.

**Multilateral Regional Fora**. States within the region are averse to an active role in deference of the principle of ‘non-intervention in the internal affairs of member states, refraining from a mediatory or leveraging role. At the regional level, multilateral fora can be explored to achieve cooperation:

(a) BIMSTEC, ASEAN or SAARC need to be explored in achieving close cooperation and assistance to all parties.

(b) ASEAN having far greater clout, particularly with Myanmar, could play a key ‘bridging role’.

(c) Improved coordination with the international community and the UN agencies.

(d) Humanitarian assistance and socio-economic development in Bangladesh and Myanmar.

(e) Burden sharing by way of financial and resource assistance for refugee management.

(f) Quota arrangement, akin to the European Union, in hosting refugees till final resolution of the crisis. This has inherent obstacles, given the stance adopted by Thailand and Indonesia.

(g) Speedy implementation of the recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission, an initiative by Suu Kyi and former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, with perceptible tangible outcomes.

(h) BIMSTEC-NSA mechanism for coordination of law enforcement, intelligence and capacity building to tackle the scourge of terrorism, extremism and radicalisation.

(i) A cross regional framework of information sharing and efforts for coordinating anti-terror related activities to manage the fallout of exudation of extremism emanating from ethnic strife.

(j) India will have to assume leadership role in seeking to resolve the matters.

(k) Individual efforts could be coordinated by India as the lead for a regional fora

**Leveraging Bilateral Influence**. In addition to multilateral for a, bilateral influence of some of the states within the region needs to be exploited:

(a) Thailand shares common borders, religious affinity of Buddhist majority, past experience in dealing with Rohingya refugees and concerns of a spillover.

(b) Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation in the world and in proximity could assist the ASEAN.

(c) Singapore, with a neutral viewpoint, can shape ASEAN involvement.

(d) India, therefore, needs to forge close coordination in resource mobilisation and political influence.

**Conclusion**

The Rohingya Muslims crisis in Myanmar and their exodus from the Rikhane province into South East and South Asia, as a fallout of ethnic faultlines coming apart, have set in motion a geopolitical disbalance for India which needs to be navigated with balance. The components of the multifaceted predicament are interlinked and cannot be compartmentalized, wherein geopolitical balancing to preserve national interests are an imperative alongwith containing exudations of extremism from the ethnic strife. The divergent imperatives of various facets represent a Rubix cube - achieving stability in one dimension may be disruptive in the other and necessitates a comprehensive response. Hence, the issue required delicate handling. It is shaped by various factors, including diplomatic, domestic political compulsions, humanitarian, security and geopolitical considerations.

India’s geo-strategic security is represented by three concentric circles of the immediate South Asian “neighbourhood,” the second “extended neighbourhood,” and finally, the global stage. The outer two spheres entail extending influence through economic and trade integration, soft power projection, balancing multiple growing alliances and an increasing role in shaping the international system. In contrast the first circle or the immediate neighbourhood, entails reliance on military power and tenuously managing relations and interests, embodying substantial national security concerns and challenges. India’s neighbourhood can, at times, be extremely sensitive and is deeply impacted by the developments within the region. Socio political developments, intertwined with her foreign policy, occurring in the region can have a domino effect impacting stability and needs careful balancing. India has a cultural inclination of a foreign policy which had long enshrined the principles of cooperation and non-expansion (Panscheel) and based on liberal values enshrined in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as the basis for international relations. These included mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefits, peaceful co-existence and peaceful settlement of disputes. However, the hard realities and changing geopolitical environment has resulted in a tilt towards realism and dealings with the Military Junta of Myanmar, in a bid to further national interests, are a clear reflection of the careful balancing which India needs to undertake.

India is seen as a Nation upholding moral values and proports to follow an ethical foreign policy. India’s stance on the Rohingya issue from a humanitarian perspective has been under intense scrutiny, having implications on its moral position in the international arena. The ethical stand axiomatically works against the interests of the military establishment in Myanmar and has potential of creating a vacuum for China to exploit. A realist foreign policy impacts India’s relationship with Bangladesh, as dalliance in measures to pressurise Myanmar to contain the Rohingya problem implies not supporting Bangladesh in her moment of crisis. The pro-India Sheikh Hasina establishment would suffer in domestic politics and pave the way for an anti-India political dispensation led by Begum Khalida Zia. The unfolding crisis, besides a humanitarian issue, seems to be creating a no-win situation for India and potential ramifications which adversely impact national security from a military-diplomatic and economic perspective. The mass movement into Bangladesh and resultant pressures on internal and economic stability faced by Bangladesh are causing pulls in the opposing directions for India in its relations with Bangladesh and Myanmar, putting diplomacy to test. India shares borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh and the two countries are critical for the peace and stability of India’s conflict-prone northeast. Maintaining a friendly relationship with both Myanmar and Bangladesh is imperative for India.

The growth of China, as a regional force and a global power are having deep impact on the national security of India, both directly and indirectly. India has to be mindful of Chinese efforts at gaining inroads into Myanmar, besides the security implications in the porous border it shares with Myanmar. India’s interests in Myanmar are ensconced in it’s Act East Policy, enunciated in 2014 and which replaced her over two decade-old Look East Policy, emphasizing a more proactive role for itself in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, making it an arena of conflicting interests with China for regional status. China, with its policy of string of pearls and Belt Road Initiative (BRI) has spread its influence and is slowly encircling India in a bid to seek a competitive edge. Development of ports and undertaking massive infrastructure development in India’s neighbourhood is shifting the balance of power in a region which India considered its own backyard. China has obtained strategic interests in Myanmar by developing the Sittwe### port to gain access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the Straits of Malacca, a strategic vulnerability capable of choking majority energy supplies. The Rohingya crisis saw unambiguous Chinese support for the ruling establishment, aligning itself in order to further its influence. India is nearing completion of the Bay of Bengal to North East India connectivity project and views Myanmar as an important market for its regional ambitions. Substantial inroads have been made by China, both in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Balancing of ties to ensure that Indian interests are not sacrificed or harmed in favour of China remains a critical challenge for foreign policy makers.

An effective approach is needed to ensure helping prevent renewed conflicts in Rakhine, facilitate the safe return of the refugees to Myanmar, and mitigate any potential terror-related activities involving the Rohingya refugees. The moral and ethical dimension creates yet another level of tension in the conflicting narrative. The role that India plays in finding a solution to the crisis and explores ways to further deepen and expand its engagements needs balancing with its long tradition of dealing with refugees and maintaining a leadership role in the region.

India has a long history of refugees including from the time of Partition and independence, Tibetan refugees including HH The Dalai Lama, from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and illegal Bangladeshi immigration into the North-eastern regions, which have had massive implications for national security and, thus, the current crisis necessitates deft handling.

The crisis also has a domestic narrative with some Rohingya, with illegal crossing and rehabilitation of Rohingyas, in the border states of Jammu and Kashmir, creating yet another vulnerability to be managed. Reports of linkages of the Rohingyas with Pakistan based terrorist organisations have come to fore, and poses a serious security challenge to its stability and threats to the borders from within. India is home to the largest Muslim population in a non-Muslim country in the world with almost 15 percent of India’s population. Though plurality and tolerance are fundamental principles of the foundation of the Indian State and have weathered numerous destabilising effects on religious harmony, it still remains a fragile relationship which can be ruptured due to numerous factors. The instability does not remain limited to the border regions itself. Being home to the largest Muslim population in the world, any religious tension has a domino effect in other parts of India and threatens to tear apart the social fabric.

**Holistic and Pragmatism – Balanced Approach an Imperative**. The various factors, including diplomatic, domestic political compulsions, humanitarian, security and geopolitical considerations need deft handling and balancing to ensure that national security interests are not compromised and adverse implications are mitigated to the extent feasible. The Rohingya crisis, essentially an ethno-religious conflict with socio-political and domestic concerns are intertwined with our foreign policy. It can have a domino effect, impacting internal stability and needs careful balancing. India needs to constantly review its national security strategy for relevance and effectiveness.

1. Shakeeb Asrar, Rohingya crisis explained in maps, October 28, 2017, 10:38 GMT, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/09/rohingya-crisis-explained-maps-170910140906580.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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