Myanmar is Moving Closer to China

In January 2020, Chinese leader Xi Jinping paid an official visit to Myanmar, where he met Aung San Suu Kyi, the State Counsellor of Myanmar (the de facto head of government of this country). Following negotiations, more than 30 agreements were signed by the two nations. The contracts were all on China’s infrastructure projects in Myanmar, which the PRC is expected to implement as part of the collaboration between the two countries on China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at improving connectivity and encouraging economic growth via cooperation. Aside from Myanmar, many other Eurasian nations are involved in the BRI, which nowadays is viewed as PRC’s signature foreign policy initiative.

China is interested in Myanmar due to the latter’s geographic location, as tankers carrying crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) travelling to the PRC from the Middle East and Africa can be unloaded in Myanmar’s ports. After that, these fossil fuels can reach mainland China via pipelines traversing Myanmar’s territories. As a result, such vessels do not have to sail through the Strait of Malacca, a narrow water channel between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which, in theory, could be blocked by China’s foes. Myanmar’s location is one of the key reasons why this nation can always count on attention and economic support from China, regardless of the state of Myanmar’s relationships with the rest of the global community, including the West.

And these relations are not in great shape at all. For a long time, Myanmar was ruled by a military junta and
remained partially isolated from the rest of the world due to international sanctions that had been imposed against it. In 2000s, Myanmar’s leadership took a number of steps towards democratization. This improved its ties with the international community and the West, and led to the lifting of some sanctions against it.

In November 2015, Myanmar held its general election which resulted in the National League for Democracy (NLD) party “winning a supermajority of seats in the combined national parliament”. And Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, the head of NLD, was very much respected in the West at the time. Myanmar was expected to quickly re-establish its ties with the rest of the world and emerge from decades of isolation. However, soon after, in October 2016, yet another crisis erupted in Myanmar to do with the Rohingya people, a mostly Muslim minority ethnic group that lives in the nation’s Rakhine State.

The Rohingya view themselves as natives of their land, while Myanmar’s government considers them to be natives from Bangladesh, who had moved to Burma during the period of British colonial rule. Many historians who have researched this issue agree with the latter version. As the predominantly Muslim population of the Rakhine State grew, their relations with their Buddhist compatriots in this region continued to worsen. In the end, armed clashes between the Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists began, which have resulted in thousands of deaths.

Once Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) gained its independence in 1948, many Rohingya people did not wish to be a part of this newly established nation. Eventually, armed clashes between groups of separatists and the government began. As a result, a state of emergency was declared in the Rakhine State, and this has had a profound effect on lives of the local population. Myanmar’s government refuses to recognize the Rohingya as an ethnic group forcing these people to identify themselves as “Bengali”. The Rohingya also do not enjoy the same basic rights as other citizens of this country. For instance, Rohingya Muslims are not allowed to have more than two children, to access higher education, to hold many government jobs, to move freely throughout the country, etc.

Armed clashes between the Rohingya and Myanmar’s Buddhists or government forces do still occur. The most recent conflict was in October 2016, less than a year after the NLD came to power. At the time, members of insurgent group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked a number of police outposts in Rakhine region and killed nine police officers. After that, Myanmar’s armed forces began a military operation in the Rakhine State, during which, according to media reports, numerous Rohingya civilians were either killed or became victims of violence. And hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees fled to Myanmar’s neighboring countries.

In August 2017, the ARSA struck again, as a result 12 members of security forces were killed. The government responded by launching a counter-terrorist operation. Estimates of the number of deaths among civilians vary. Some sources talk about dozens while others about thousands of innocent Rohingya who have either been killed or fell victim to violence at the hands of military personnel and policemen.

Myanmar’s government was subsequently severely criticized by the United Nations, Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, as well as the US Department of State, governments of other nations and members of Muslim communities. Myanmar was accused of committing genocide.

In August 2018, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights informed media outlets that the Human Rights Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar established that 10,000 Rohingya were victims of genocide, and that the Myanmar military, which had enjoyed a special status in the nation even after the 2015 election, had to be held responsible for the perpetrated crimes. And Aung San Suu Kyi was guilty of the fact that she had not used her power and authority to stop the bloodshed.

In September 2018, the Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar released its detailed report on the Rohingya crisis, which included its findings and recommendations. The mission’s experts opined that Myanmar’s entire military leadership had to be removed from power and put on trial; that sanctions had to be imposed against those guilty of perpetrating crimes against the Rohingya, and that Myanmar’s armed forces had to be restructured under civilian oversight. The report also stated that those accused of committing genocide needed be tried by the International Court of Justice, and that an embargo on weapon sales had to be imposed against Myanmar.

Undoubtedly, all the crimes against civilians need to stop while those responsible have to face justice. Still, some people believe that the Rohingya issue is more complex than its portrayal by the United Nations and the Western media. Even members of the Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar admit that their findings are largely based on statements of witnesses, mostly Rohingya, as well as analyses of photographs and videos because they were not allowed in conflict zones by Myanmar authorities. Media outlets that report on crimes committed against the Rohingya often do not focus extensively on violence perpetrated by extremists against Myanmar’s Buddhists or on
attacks on security forces, which occurred at the start of the conflict. In the author’s opinion, there is not much coverage on available data showing that ARSA leaders received military training in Pakistan, get funding from Saudi Arabia and may have ties to underground international terrorist networks, including groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh (both banned in Russia). It is common knowledge that the aim of Daesh (banned in Russia) is to create a global Islamic Caliphate that encompasses all the territories where Islam is the religion of choice. Hence, Myanmar’s Rakhine State may, in theory, be also viewed by Daesh (banned in Russia) leadership as part of its future Caliphate. In addition, after Daesh’s crushing defeat in Syria by Russian and Syrian forces, the terrorist group ended up with quite a large number of “unemployed” militants who could be sent to Myanmar among other places.

All of this gives one a lot of food for thought and even prompts one to fantasize, which could lead to the appearance of conspiracy theories.

Some people who tend to believe that the USA supports Islamist extremist groups, including Daesh, think that the Rohingya crisis was caused by the United States with the aim of weakening China. After all, pipelines that supply the PRC with crude oil and gas pass through the Rakhine State, and if a serious armed conflict were to start there, fossil fuel supplies to the former Celestial Empire would stop.

A diametrically opposed theory states that the crisis is beneficial to China because if Myanmar were to completely cut ties with the West, the PRC would remain practically its only partner. And if a large-scale armed conflict was to start there, China, under the pretext of protecting its pipelines, could send its troops to Myanmar and establish control over this strategically important for the PRC territory.

In any case, one thing is for certain, closer ties between Myanmar and the West will not be established any time soon, contrary to expectations in 2015. As before they are divided by issues that remain unresolved. And as in the past, Myanmar’s only option is to develop closer relations with China, which benefits from the former’s geographic location and a flow of resources through it. The PRC is not overly concerned about the plight of the Rohingya and chooses to view issues associated with this minority as Myanmar’s internal affair.

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