Since it began in August 2017, the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh has dragged on into a seemingly permanent state of affairs. A number of factors make it likely that the crisis is here to stay. First, the repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar has reached a stalemate. On November 23, 2017, the two governments signed a repatriation agreement, but two subsequent repatriation attempts in November 2018 and August 2019 failed due to Myanmar’s reluctance as well as the UNHCR’s (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) concerns for the safety of the refugees on returning to their homeland, the Rakhine State on the western coast of Myanmar. Indeed, the response of the refugees, who are demanding a permanent solution to the crisis with the recognition of full citizenship and other civil rights, was lukewarm at best, as the repatriation agreement was viewed as an imperfect and impermanent solution.¹

Second, the diplomatic initiatives Bangladesh has taken so far have fallen short of producing the momentum needed to pressure Myanmar to take back the refugees. Bangladesh has visibly failed to get India and China, its two giant neighbors—let alone other powerful members of the UN Security Council or regional bodies like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—on its side against Myanmar. Third, while an international legal challenge to Myanmar spearheaded by the Gambia through the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is a positive development, it is doubtful that even a verdict in

¹ Dr. Mohammed Nuruzzaman is Professor of Political Science at North South University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. He earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Alberta, Canada in 2003 and has served on the faculty of universities in Canada, Bangladesh and Kuwait. He can be reached at mohammed.nuruzzaman01@northsouth.edu.
favor of the Rohingya would be enough to change the seemingly entrenched state behavior of Myanmar or alter its inflexible approach toward the refugees, as the ICJ has no global security force to enforce its decision.

The drawn-out nature of the refugee crisis means that Bangladesh, a country of 160 million people beset with its own mounting social and developmental challenges, may ultimately be left with no option but to shoulder sole responsibility for the refugees. Avoiding this burden and repatriating the refugees to Myanmar through negotiations is a national priority for Dhaka—one that can only be realized through well-crafted collective national and global efforts. This paper sheds lights on possible options and strategies Bangladesh can pursue to resolve the crisis, aiming to put forth some fresh ideas for Bangladeshi decision-makers as well as concerned regional and international organizations.

The paper’s discussion and analysis proceed in two parts. The first part critically investigates the factors that have prevented Bangladesh, Myanmar and other concerned stakeholders from finding a negotiated settlement to the crisis. Relations among China, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar are important to attaining leverage and resolving the crisis, and therefore they are analyzed at some length. The second part presents an outline of a long-term strategy Bangladesh could implement to arrive at a fair solution to the crisis and amicably repatriate the refugees to Myanmar.

**Obstacles to a Negotiated Settlement**

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority group, have been one of the most persecuted groups in Myanmar. They have lived in Rakhine State for generations, but were deprived of the basic rights enjoyed by the Bamar, the majority group in Myanmar, who control the government, economy and military sectors. Viewed as “illegal” settlers from East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) by the Myanmar state, the Rohingya were subjected to institutionalized discrimination, which became particularly acute in the 1970s and resulted in the first Rohingya exodus to Bangladesh in 1978.

The 1982 Burma Citizenship Act subsequently stripped the Rohingya of citizenship. This act granted citizenship to members of the so-called “national races” based on an irrational historical baseline of 1824—that is, people who settled in Myanmar and could produce proper documents of settlement prior to this year were eligible for citizenship. A blatant violation of numerous international human rights laws and conventions (including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights that guarantees non-discrimination and the right to a nationality and the 1965 UN General Assembly Resolution on International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination), the 1982...
Citizenship Act made the Rohingya a stateless people on racial grounds, questioned their identity, and subjected them to discriminatory policies and practices including restrictions on their freedom of movement, access to health facilities, education, livelihood etc.\(^3\) The unresolved citizenship issue and associated discrimination and persecution culminated in the second influx of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh in 1991-1992, and the third mass exodus of over 700,000 Rohingya in 2017.\(^4\) Even six years after the start of the third wave of crisis, a negotiated settlement remains a diplomatic non-starter.

But why has Bangladesh faltered at finding a diplomatic solution to the Rohingya refugee crisis? A complex web of factors has halted effective negotiations. These factors can be divided into political, diplomatic and cross-regional geopolitical factors—the latter primarily US-China competition for power and influence in the Indian Ocean region and the Indo-Pacific.

**Political Factors in Myanmar and Bangladesh**

Strong political leadership is a prerequisite to successfully ending any national, regional or global crisis. Unfortunately, at present neither Bangladesh nor Myanmar has anything approaching it, representing a major obstacle.

The ruling Bangladesh Awami League (AL)-led government in Dhaka suffers from a crisis of legitimacy and ineffective leadership at the national level. The government is unable to unify the nation and speak in a single voice on national issues, including on the Rohingya refugee crisis. Popular support for the government is declining primarily due to its poor performance on jobs, inflation, and protection of citizens' political and civil rights.\(^5\) Popular perception has it that the AL government won the last two parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2018 through electoral malpractice such as voter intimidation, scaring polling agents of opposition parties away from voting centers/booths, ballot box staffing, fake voting, and other underhanded tactics.\(^6\)

The largest opposition political party—the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—boycotted the 2014 election, demanding that elections be held not under the ruling AL government but under a neutral caretaker government to ensure that they were fair and free.\(^7\) Despite huge rank and file opposition, the BNP participated in the 2018 elections, but won only a few seats in the national parliament. BNP senior leaders attributed their electoral defeat to corrupt practices by the Awami League party. Even Rashed Khan Menon, a former minister of the Awami League-led government and currently a Member of Parliament,
publicly accused the government of stealing people’s voting rights, saying: “Although I was elected, I am testifying that people couldn’t cast their votes in that election.”

The post-2018 election period has been one of national political instability and intense dissension in Bangladesh, with the BNP-led opposition branding the government “illegitimate.” Widespread violence and intense fighting between activists and supporters of the two mainstream political parties have become the new normal in Bangladesh’s political life. This issue has undercut the Awami League government’s acceptability to the outside world and undermined its capacity to muster a strong national response to the Rohingya crisis. The opposition parties have also not supported the efforts of the government to pursue an end to the crisis. The BNP has linked the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh to finding a solution to the Rohingya refugee crisis; its leaders reason that only an elected government with the people’s mandate can resolve this externally-oriented crisis.

Bangladesh’s political instability has undercut its ability to muster a response to the crisis

In Myanmar, Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NDL) party was in power when the latest influx of Rohingya, fleeing persecution and genocide, crossed the border into Bangladesh in August 2017. The NDL government directly or indirectly supported the actions and atrocities of the Myanmar military (locally called the “Tatmadaw”) against Rohingya men, women and children. Suu Kyi herself refused to condemn the military’s persecution of the Muslim minority group. In response to the Extraordinary Session of the OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) meeting in January 2017 in Kuala Lumpur, the Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs defended the military crackdown as an outcome of “well-planned and coordinated attacks on police outposts in the northern Rakhine State on October 9, 2016, by extremist elements both funded and inspired from abroad.” The Nobel laureate also personally defended military persecutions and allegations of genocide against the Rohingya people at the ICJ.

The post-Suu Kyi military regime that took power on February 1, 2021 has ignored Bangladesh’s repeated calls for repatriating the refugees, seemingly seeking to forget the Rohingya issue altogether. There are several domestic factors that apparently drove General Min Aung Hlaing, the military leader, to chart out such a course. General Hlaing is faced with violent domestic protest movements spearheaded by the NLD supporters, and as such he suffers from a serious legitimacy crisis both domestically and internationally. His government
survives on force—the brutal use of the armed forces against pro-democracy supporters, civilians and rebel groups across Myanmar. This development has already triggered widespread international condemnation and sanctions on the military regime and its leaders. The recent military successes of the Arakan Army—an anti-government armed group fighting for regional autonomy, if not outright independence, in Rakhine State—against regime forces have put extra pressure on General Hlaing.13 Such pressing issues have apparently diverted the military regime’s attention from the Rohingya refugee crisis, creating uncertainty about whom to even contact in Myanmar—the military regime or the NLD-led National Unity Government (NUG)—to begin conducting diplomatic negotiations to end the refugee crisis.

There are also big questions about the sincerity of the anti-military regime NUG’s promises to extend justice and rights to the Rohingya if it comes to power.14 It remains a fact that the 2017 Rohingya crisis originated when the NLD was in power; what is more, the NLD government, instead of finding a solution, abetted the crisis by throwing its weight behind the Tatmadaw’s genocidal actions against the Rohingya minority group. In this context, the NLD-led NUG’s position on the Rohingya crisis sounds more like a political ploy to mobilize the Rohingya and the international community in support of its fight against the military junta than a real call for restoring the refugees to their homeland.

### Diplomatic Factors in Bangladesh and Myanmar
Bangladesh’s diplomatic failure to repatriate the Rohingya refugees is a result of a complex set of factors. The first is the nature of representation of the Rohingya refugees at different forums. An unanswered question is: who represents the Rohingya refugees and their interests bilaterally, regionally and globally? Bangladesh is the local provider of shelter, food and security for the refugees; it is also the sole diplomatic representative of the refugees internationally. However, hardly any Rohingya voices are present in diplomatic dialogues and negotiations, as no Rohingya representative has been included in the ongoing diplomatic negotiation process or allowed to speak at diplomatic forums. In effect, the Rohingya voice remains muted or missing from issues that concern their existential interests and entire future.

The second serious factor is Bangladesh’s relations with its two giant neighbors—China and India. Dhaka maintains warm political and diplomatic relations with both neighbors but has yet to get New Delhi and Beijing on board to...
make a breakthrough on the refugee crisis. This failure to secure New Delhi and
Beijing’s support is largely due to Dhaka’s lack of diplomatic, strategic or geopo-
litical leverage over its two powerful neighbors. Bangladesh’s relations with India
are more characterized by political closeness and cultural connections, while
relations with China are dominated by business interests and transactional
benefits. China is Bangladesh’s principal partner in infrastructure development,
investments, and technical cooperation. Beijing has been Bangladesh’s top
trading partner since 2012, with bilateral trade transactions exceeding $25
billion in 2021.15 India, though a next-door historical neighbor, is less connected
to Bangladesh economically, as New Delhi is less capable of providing the public
goods (development aid, investments, loans, technology, etc.) that Bangladesh
needs to address its developmental challenges. India’s political and diplomatic
engagements with Bangladesh are driven largely by a strategic fear of losing Ban-
gladesh to China or letting China encroach into India’s traditional sphere of
influence in the southeastern part of South Asia (Pakistan in the southwest is
already in the Chinese orbit). Conversely, neither of these two huge neighbors
greatly depends on Bangladesh for economic support, meaning that Dhaka has
little political and economic leverage over them.

Compared to Bangladesh, Myanmar wields more economic and strategic lever-
age over both China and India. Historically isolated from the rest of the world
after its independence from the British in 1948, Myanmar has depended on
only a few regional allies, with China and Russia being its principal diplomatic,
military and economic partners today. Moscow, with support from Beijing, often
defends the military junta from Western actions at the UN Security Council.
China, driven by its global rivalry with the US, has in recent years sought to
make Myanmar a significant strategic ally. To reduce dependence on Indian
Ocean sea trade routes, especially to circumvent the US naval blockade of the
narrow Strait of Malacca located between the Malay Peninsula in the northeast
and the Indonesian island of Sumatra in the southwest, China is developing and
deepening economic linkages with Myanmar and Pakistan. While the China-
Pakistan Economic Corridor is the largest Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under-
taking so far, Beijing has already constructed oil and gas pipelines from Myan-
mar’s Rakhine State to the southern Chinese province of Yunnan to transport
imported oil and gas from the Middle East. As a part of its mega BRI project,
it is also connecting the Kyaukphyu port in Rakhine to mainland China by
roads and rails—forming the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.16

India-Myanmar relations are premised on significant political and economic
interests as well. Traditional rivalry with China has motivated New Delhi to
curtail, or at least neutralize, China’s influence across many regions. New
Delhi hopes that maintaining strong political, economic and diplomatic relations
with Myanmar will prevent China from having a free hand in the country, an
important neighbor of India. It is imperative for India to maintain close relations with Myanmar because otherwise it will be cut off from the Eurasian landmass by China’s close ally Pakistan and (now Taliban-controlled) Afghanistan. Myanmar provides India land access to Southeast Asian countries and also acts as a land route for India’s trade with China, since the Himalayas deprive China and India of direct land routes for trade.

India’s economic involvement in Myanmar is not as extensive as China’s, but nonetheless it warrants significant strategic attention. In the last few years, New Delhi has undertaken a number of mega economic and infrastructure development projects—the most notable being the strategic India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway project and the Kaladan multi-modal transit transport project. These two projects aim to secure India’s land access to Southeast Asian nations and economic influence in Myanmar. Another big project is the special economic zone India is setting up in Rakhine’s Sittwe seaport. Thus, the growing economic and strategic relationships between Myanmar and China, and between Myanmar and India, reveal why both regional giants strongly back Naypyidaw and choose to ignore the Rohingya refugee crisis. Bangladesh doesn’t share a border with China and has little leverage compared to Myanmar; Dhaka just cannot compete with Naypyidaw in terms of influence.

Meanwhile, the Western world—the US and EU in particular—has extended lukewarm (at best) support to Bangladesh’s diplomatic search for a negotiated settlement of the Rohingya crisis. Their actions to date have primarily been limited to donating money for the refugees on humanitarian grounds and imposing limited sanctions on Myanmar, more specifically on its military leaders. The EU’s overall policy approach is dominated by concern for general human rights conditions in Myanmar, with little in the way of action-oriented policy exclusively focused on the Rohingya crisis. Back in 2016, the EU introduced a resolution on democracy and human rights in Myanmar to the UN Human Rights Council, with special reference to the Rohingya crisis as it was unfolding at the time. In the wake of the military takeover, the EU seems to have grown increasingly frustrated that the sanctions it imposed on the Myanmar military junta were ineffective.

Similarly, US actions have been limited to humanitarian initiatives and sanctions. The US imposed sanctions on the Myanmar military over its crackdown on the Rohingya, accused senior military generals and police commanders of the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims, and finally declared the wanton killing of the Rohingya a genocide in March 2022. Yet, the declaration of genocide was not followed by any action to compel the military regime to end its violence,
take back the Rohingya refugees, and resettle them with safety measures and full rights of citizenship.

Cross-Regional Geopolitical Games
Global geopolitical competition—primarily between China and the US—for control over the Indian Ocean trade lanes and the Indo-Pacific have also overshadowed the Rohingya refugee crisis. Both powers are deeply engaged in fierce competition to out-influence each other in the Indo-Pacific region, a competition unfolding amidst their efforts to seek as many allies as possible to build strategic partnership and consolidate geopolitical ties. India is also heavily involved in this game of geopolitical competition for power and influence, mainly against China.

China’s meteoric economic rise in the last two to three decades has visibly expanded its role in global political and economic governance—a role the US had previously played almost single-handedly. China’s economic muscle has enabled it to be the lead member of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)—an exclusive, but expanding, economic club of developing economies from the Global South officially launched in June 2009 to curb US hegemony in the global order.

Still more alarming to the US were China’s initiatives to create and sustain institutions which rival the US-led post-war Bretton Woods institutions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Beijing launched the multilateral Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2016 to upgrade infrastructure and thus contribute to the improvement of social and economic conditions in the Asian countries. It had also previously created the New Development Bank (NDB) in 2014 under the BRICS group to finance development in the member states. That same year, China established the Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA) to look after the balance of payments difficulties of the BRICS member states. On top of that, China formally inaugurated the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in September 2013, aiming to promote inter-regional development and connectivity across the four continents of Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America. In practice, China-led infrastructure and development institutions are posing stiff challenges to America’s global power and influence.20

Alarmed by China’s growing economic power and influence, the US has crafted both hard and soft power strategies to contain China in the Indian Ocean region and in the Indo-Pacific. First, the US created the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue for the first time in 2007, then re-established it in 2017. Although a loose and informal group, the Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the US) aims at countering China and denying it naval bases as well as maritime
access to halt its seaborne trade through the Indian Ocean shipping lanes. Secondly, alongside the Quad, the US crafted its Indo-Pacific Strategy, first launched by the Trump administration and carried on by the Biden administration, to create an “open, connected and prosperous” Indo-Pacific region. In reality, the primary objective of the Indo-Pacific Strategy is to win over more countries in the Indo-Pacific and thereby weaken and contain China’s influence in the region.\(^{21}\) China has responded to the dangers posed by the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Strategy by developing closer ties with a plethora of states including Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and other members of ASEAN. The ASEAN states prefer to maintain foreign policy autonomy and a regional identity and avoid being dragged into the US’ geopolitical battle against China.\(^ {22}\)

US-China geopolitical competition colors the calculus of the major players over the Rohingya refugee crisis, as the state actors involved prioritize their competition for power and control over the Indian Ocean region and the Indo-Pacific. In other words, Beijing is unlikely to privilege Bangladesh over Myanmar to settle the Rohingya refugee crisis, as it stands to lose Myanmar, an anti-American ally. The US, meanwhile, has no effective leverage or the will-power (against China and Russia’s strong support) to force Myanmar to negotiate with Bangladesh and take back the refugees.

### Devising a Long-Term Strategy to Resolve the Rohingya Crisis

Dhaka successfully negotiated and repatriated Rohingya refugees to Myanmar following the 1978 and 1991-1992 mass exoduses into Bangladesh. However, Myanmar’s rulers at that time were more receptive to the cause of the Rohingya. Another factor that facilitated the resolution of the 1992 crisis was the rise of new global geopolitical realities, as the US had just emerged as the unipolar power following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Still, the root causes of the Rohingya issue (denial of citizenship rights and general repression) were never properly addressed by the Myanmar government. The 2017 Rohingya influx took place amidst a different regional and global political and strategic context, which unfortunately makes any sort of solution to the refugee crisis much more difficult. In view of the new realities, Bangladesh’s best option is to craft a long-term strategy premised on a series of both short-term and long-term actions to settle the refugee crisis.

### Short-Term Actions

First, Bangladesh needs to put its own house in order by smoothing out the corrosive domestic political differences which systematically fuel political protest movements and national disunity. Due to electoral malpractices, suppression of
opposition political forces, and the curbing and denial of basic constitutional rights and freedoms, Bangladesh’s national political landscape is in disarray. These practices must be tempered. A government elected through free and fair elections wins mass legitimacy and can mobilize the whole nation behind it to pursue national priorities. Bangladesh is in dire need of choosing a legitimate government to ensure strong diplomatic efforts with Myanmar and resolve other long-standing foreign policy issues.

Second, Myanmar is an immediate neighbor of Bangladesh, but psychologically and culturally, the two are very far apart. There are limited political, economic and cultural interactions between Dhaka and Naypyidaw. Historically, Bangladeshis have been more Western-oriented, choosing to consolidate ties with India, Europe, the Middle East and the US. Among the eastern countries, Bangladesh’s focus is on a select few economically advanced countries like Australia, China, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea. As such, Myanmar is not especially strategically or culturally important to Bangladesh, with very little engagement or interaction between the two, even at the person-to-person level. To fix this, there ought to be well-planned bilateral cultural programs, political interactions, and opportunities to foster people-to-people relations. Close political, cultural and economic relations between Dhaka and Naypyidaw hold the potential to gradually smooth out existing differences and promote productive relations.

Third, Bangladesh needs to ensure that the Rohingya refugees currently living within its borders shun violence and remain peaceful. Due to restrictions by the Bangladeshi government, the Rohingya refugees do not openly subscribe to any political or ideological orientations. However, some extremist or terrorist groups have emerged among them in the past few years. The most well-known of them is the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a group that has tainted the image of the whole refugee community. Citing the Bangladesh Ministry of Defense, Human Rights Watch reports that there are at least eleven other militant groups and criminal gangs (such as Rohingya Solidarity Organization, Islami Mahaz, Munna Gangs etc.) vying for control of the refugee camps located in Cox’s Bazar, a southeastern administrative district of Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi government, already reeling from major terrorist attacks including the worst ever Holy Artisan terrorist attack in Dhaka in July 2016, has no option but to get rid of ARSA and other militant groups by rounding them up and deporting their supporters and sympathizers. Both domestically and internationally, Dhaka needs to emphasize that Bangladesh is no place for terrorists. Strict dealings with the terrorist and militant groups might make the military and civilian leaders of Myanmar more receptive to Dhaka’s demand to repatriate the Rohingya with guaranteed rights and security.
Long-Term Actions

Long-term plans to end the Rohingya crisis successfully are contingent on realistic assessments of Bangladesh’s capabilities, diplomatic maneuverability, and dependable sources of support. There is no quick fix to this problem. At nearly a million, the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are the fifth largest refugee population in the world. Syrian refugees top the list at 6.7 million, followed by those from Ukraine (4.8 million), Afghanistan (2.6 million) and South Sudan (2.6 million). Currently, the world is grappling with an estimated 26.6 million refugees, and it may be too much to expect the global community to come to Bangladesh’s aid to quickly resolve the Rohingya refugee crisis. Therefore, Bangladesh must pursue patient diplomacy to reach a fair solution on a long-term basis. It is equally important for Bangladesh to rely less on China and India for the resolution of the refugee crisis. Because of their deeply entrenched economic, political and strategic interests, neither China nor India is likely to abandon Myanmar to side with Bangladesh, as elaborated above.

Bangladesh’s current Rohingya repatriation strategy is informed by a multilateral approach centered round the UN. Since it has not yielded positive results so far, Bangladesh needs to rethink this strategy and modify it to incorporate regional and global approaches that supplement current efforts at the global level. Three principal elements of this strategy could include: (1) the UN General Assembly (UNGA); (2) the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC); and (3) extra-regional organizations—particularly the EU and ASEAN.

The UNGA is no alternative to the UN Security Council (UNSC), but in recent years it has emerged as the focal point of the global moral conscience. The UNGA has successfully voted to adopt a number of resolutions on Russia’s military operations against Ukraine, even as the UNSC remained in a deadlock over the issue. The outcome would likely be similar if the Rohingya refugee crisis is debated and voted on in the UNSC. This is usually the case if the issue at hand directly involves a permanent member of the Security Council and its interests. China and Russia would likely block any UNSC resolution against their ally Myanmar. The majority decisions at the UNGA, in contrast, better reflect the world community’s positions on peace and security issues. The UNGA resolutions may have no binding effect, but they could be helpful since they hold the moral high ground, openly putting pressure on violators of human rights.
The UNGA’s adoption of a resolution on the Rohingya crisis by consensus in November 2022 is a positive start. The resolution calls for actions by Myanmar to resolve the root causes of the Rohingya crisis and facilitate their safe and dignified return to their homeland in Rakhine.24 Previously, China and Russia opposed the 2017 UNGA resolution on the Rohingya that demanded access for aid workers, the safe return of all refugees, and full citizenship rights for the Rohingya. They adopted the same stance on another UNGA resolution on the Rohingya on December 31, 2020. The adoption of the 2022 resolution, however, reveals that through determined diplomatic actions, Bangladesh can get the world body on the side of the Rohingya. Myanmar’s relations with its major diplomatic allies can, in turn, be gradually weakened, potentially eventually compelling Myanmar to allow the refugees to return with security guarantees—a major demand of both the refugees and the UNCHR. Bangladesh can and should keep mobilizing diplomatic efforts and capitalizing on Myanmar’s weaknesses at the UNGA to win over the world body, ensure justice for the Rohingya, and foreclose pathways (such as the use of domestic violence as an excuse) through which Myanmar’s rulers might force the Rohingya to flee yet again to Bangladesh in the future. In that vein, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s address on the sidelines of the 77th UNGA Session in September 2022 emphasized the need for tangible global actions toward sustainable repatriation of the refugees, and the UNGA appears to be the right global forum for global action against Myanmar.25

Second, the OIC, as an organization of Muslim states, has an undeniable responsibility to protect the Rohingya Muslims. A number of non-Muslim states with significant Muslim minorities—including China, India, Russia and the US—have representatives to the OIC, which makes this organization the right body to pursue effective policies while coordinating action with the UNGA. Indeed, OIC has the capacity and the willingness to impose economic sanctions on countries that violate OIC’s core principles (Islamic Faith) and the interests of the Muslim countries, though it has yet to execute policies to safeguard Muslim interests. OIC’s actions to date, however, remain restricted to condemnation and the use of UN bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council to pressure Myanmar, without producing any positive results. One way to make the organization more useful may be through its political and diplomatic power. The OIC does not have the capacity to impose punitive economic measures because Myanmar has no strong trade dependence on any Muslim country (its five major trading partners are China, Thailand, Japan, India and the US). But it can impose political and diplomatic sanctions on Myanmar so as to progressively weaken and isolate it from both the global community and the Muslim world. Such losses might make Myanmar’s rulers more sensitive to Muslim issues, including that of the Rohingya. Bangladesh can launch diplomatic actions to win effective OIC backing to achieve this goal.
Lastly, among many possible regional organizations, the EU and ASEAN hold the most potential to aid Bangladesh’s UNGA-centric Rohingya strategy. Currently, the EU is half-heartedly involved in the search for a solution to the Rohingya crisis, solely emphasizing humanitarian aid and human rights issues. The EU’s agenda needs to be redesigned to move beyond this narrow range of actions to include targeted sanctions on Myanmar that will isolate it globally and regionally, as has been done with Russia in the wake of its military actions in Ukraine. Key EU member states like France, Germany, Italy and Spain, with support from other EU members, the US and the UK, could serve as Bangladesh’s principal contacts at the UNGA to promote and sustain the Rohingya cause. Regular consultations with European powers and the OIC states, combined with rallying the African and Latin American states to strongly support the Rohingya cause, could create an anti-Myanmar atmosphere in the UNGA to the point of posing an unacceptably high cost for its rulers, thereby prodding them to rethink their stance.

Similarly, despite its limitations, ASEAN should be a strong pillar of Bangladesh’s Rohingya strategy. ASEAN is currently handicapped by its self-made rules of consensus decision and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. Its preferred way to deal with internal or external issues is known as “the ASEAN Way”—the creation of trust-based understanding and cooperation through informal discussions and dialogues to build consensus and reach loose agreements, rather than bargaining and negotiating across the table. Frustratingly, the “ASEAN five-point consensus on Myanmar,” signed in April 2021 following the military coup, has failed to press the military junta. However, Indonesia and Malaysia, two powerful members of ASEAN, have been vocal opponents of the violence against the Rohingya. The governments of these two Muslim-majority countries have urged Myanmar’s military regime to resolve the refugee crisis to help them stem the flow of fleeing Rohingya to their countries.26

Through ASEAN, Bangladesh can make use of the Indonesian and Malaysian positions on the Rohingya crisis to mobilize the support of other Southeast and East Asian states. Ideally, Dhaka should connect ASEAN and non-ASEAN states in the Southeast and East Asian region to the UNGA-centric Rohingya strategy to further box in Myanmar. Given Indonesia and Malaysia’s pro-Rohingya stance, driven by their own domestic interests to stem the tide of Rohingya migration (which Thailand shares as well), anti-Myanmar diplomatic mobilization has a great chance of success. Bangladesh must convince the ASEAN
members to do their utmost for the Rohingya, on both humanitarian grounds and to further their own domestic interests.

To conclude, the Rohingya crisis is much more complicated than it appears. A negotiated settlement is currently obstructed by a wide array of political, diplomatic and strategic factors. Some of the factors are amenable to solutions, while many are not. Bluntly put, there is no immediate solution to the Rohingya crisis, but a well-crafted long-term strategy may produce results. This article has proposed a possible strategy fashioned on actions in the UNGA, the OIC, and two significant regional organizations—the EU and the ASEAN. This strategy aims at weakening Myanmar’s regional and international positions, making the costs of political and economic isolation unacceptable to its rulers, and eventually compelling them to come to the negotiating table to recognize the Rohingya as citizens of Myanmar and take them back with guaranteed provisions of security and safety.

Notes


