



***BANGLADESH SHOULD SHIFT ITS
MYANMAR POLICY AND WORK WITH
THE US***

BY KHANDAKAR TAHMID REJWAN

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Bangladesh is undergoing a significant transition, with previous Prime Minister Hasina [overthrown](#) in a popular uprising and a new [interim government](#) led by Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus taking control of the country. As internal and external policies enacted under Hasina's tenure are reviewed, it is time for Dhaka to reassess its outdated Myanmar policy. This will include opening formal and informal communication channels with rebels in Western Myanmar, increasing border security measures, and strengthening bilateral cooperation with the United States rather than relying solely on other traditional partners and regional mechanisms for diplomatic and strategic collaboration on Myanmar-related issues.

Changing territorial control in Western Myanmar

Bangladesh has felt the impact of having a vulnerable neighbor in several ways. First, it has experienced four significant Rohingya refugee incursions [since 1978](#). The most recent and most extensive incursion took place in [2017](#) when more than 700,000 Rohingyas crossed the border into Bangladesh in the face of Myanmar's Sit-tat, committing heinous crimes against humanity. Dhaka was caught off guard but allowed the refugees to enter the country on humanitarian grounds. Dhaka [rejected the refugee status](#) of these Rohingyas and termed them Forcefully

Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs). It is done to prevent any demand or hope for local integration by these FDMNs under the Convention on the Status of Refugees, revised in 1967, to which Dhaka is not a signatory. Since 2017, efforts to repatriate FDMNs have been ongoing with Naypyidaw and, in reality, have yet to materialize in any fruitful result.

Since 2017, the number of FDMNs has crossed a million. Besides significant foreign donations, the government of Bangladesh (GoB) accounts for more than two-thirds of the [FDMN expenditure](#) annually. This adversely impacts the developing country, which already faces several economic constraints. Moreover, there is a proliferation of several Rohingya [criminal and armed outfits](#) like Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, Rohingya Solidarity Organization, Nabi Group, Munna Group, Islamic Mahas, etc., which operate in the camps. These groups are rivaled to establish their sphere of influence in the FDMN camps. They target to [assassinate the community leaders](#) of the camps to terrorize the dwellers and engage in gunfights between themselves on inter-party disputes. They are also involved in [cross-border crimes](#) like channeling illegal arms, smuggling narcotics, and human trafficking. Besides these, GoB had also found the existence of unlawful Bangladeshi national [identity cards and fake passports](#) belonging to FDMNs by bribing corrupt officials. For Dhaka, these are grave security threats and concerns.

Again, the territorial control of Rakhine and Chin has been shifting in favor of the anti-Junta rebels, especially after [Operation 1027](#) took place in October of last year. State Administration Council (SAC), the official name of the Junta-led government, had failed to keep its control on Rakhine and Chin. Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) like the Arakan Army (AA) and Chin National Army, which are based primarily in Rakhine and Chin states, respectively, are on the verge of eradicating the SAC troops from Western Myanmar. This is also a concern for Dhaka. The Arakan Army's control of Rakhine implies that any [voluntary repatriation of FDMNs](#) rests on their goodwill. Paradoxically, the recent allegations of AA of [committing atrocities](#) against the Rohingyas and their strong ethnic-nationalist views based on Buddhist dominance in Rakhine can also create a

ground for [new ethnic tensions](#) between Rohingyas and the AA. Already, Rohingya militant groups like ARSA and RSO are accused of joining forces with Sit-tat to prevent AA from gaining control over Rakhine. These shifting tides of EAO control over Western Myanmar are creating new areas of concern for Bangladesh's security and stability.

A new policy for Bangladesh

The existing GoB's foreign policy on Myanmar is outdated, given the significant changes in Myanmar. Dhaka preferred to be involved [primarily with the SAC](#), disregarding any involvement with AA in solving the FDMN issue. It firmly believes that engaging with AA means interfering in the internal matters of Myanmar. It is also cautious not to displeasure ASEAN, which regards the Rohingya Crisis as a [domestic issue](#) of Myanmar. Dhaka has stakes in achieving the [Sectoral Dialogue Partner](#) status in ASEAN, which will help the South Asian country establish a bridge with Southeast Asia.

There are critical flaws in Dhaka's policies. First, SAC is now a [defeating and weakening](#) force in Myanmar. Its indiscriminate bombing of civilians and [atrocities](#) against minorities have already termed the SAC regime no less than an international pariah. Therefore, Dhaka mustn't hesitate to initiate dialogues with the AA, given the discredited image of SAC. GoB must [communicate with AA](#) to create a mutual understanding of the Rohingya-related issue. These include ensuring a safe environment in Rakhine for voluntary repatriation, stopping communal and ethnic violence, and stopping any illegal activities in the porous Bangladesh-Myanmar border. As AA's leader Twat [expressed his views](#) to facilitate Rohingya repatriation, the GoB must utilize it.

Bangladesh also seeks the help of its neighbor [India](#) and its largest trading partner, [China](#), to cooperate and facilitate the voluntary repatriation of the FDMNs. These states share a strong alignment with the SAC for their [geopolitical interest](#) in Myanmar. Again, Beijing and New Delhi also maintain formal and informal ties with AA and other EAOs. In such a scenario, relying extensively on India or China for diplomatic support is a miscalculated outlook.

Expanding cooperation with Washington

It's now time for Dhaka to develop closer bilateral ties with the US related to Myanmar issues. Washington was one of the first to congratulate the accession of Yunus and acclaimed the victory of Bangladeshi people over Hasina's tyranny. Meeting Yunus during the UN session, President Biden offered him [full US cooperation and support](#). The recent visit of the [high-level delegation](#) of US diplomats to Dhaka also signals a positive change in bilateral relations between the two countries. Washington recently announced [a new fund](#) for the FDMNs and is already the most significant single foreign donor to the FDMN aid delivered to Dhaka. Md Jashim Uddin, Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary, also recently visited the USA and met with key diplomats like Urza Zeya and Richard Verma in Washington. The diplomats expressed their fruitful dialogue with Jashim as productive and regarded Dhaka as a [partner in the Indo-Pacific](#) region.

This relationship must be widened to several sectors. Dhaka can pursue other Western allies via Washington to expand the support for FDMN repatriation in the [United Nations Security Council](#) and highlight the much-needed international attention on the conflict in Rakhine. Dhaka can also pursue Washington to convince ASEAN allies like the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam to raise a strong voice on FDMN repatriation in the regional forum. Dhaka can also acquire sufficient camp monitoring and surveillance technologies to keep track of infiltration and exfiltration in the FDMN camps. This will help Dhaka in monitoring any criminal and militant activities as it already [lacks sufficient numbers](#) of armed police to deal with the law enforcement of the camps. Bangladesh can also opt for acquiring sophisticated border fencing and surveillance systems to guard its border with Myanmar to prevent any [illegal trespassing](#), human trafficking, arms, and narcotics smuggling. With Washington's support, the border system could be digitalized, and an alert system for any significant Rohingya incursion could be introduced. Washington can also provide Dhaka with much-needed geospatial intelligence to analyze Rakhine's situation.

The way forward

Despite months of interim government formation, adequate measures have yet to be seen. At least [18,000 Rohingyas](#) have crossed the borders in the last two months, and more await a chance to enter Bangladesh. Previously, clashes between the SAC Navy and AA near the [strategic Saint Martin's](#) Island of Bangladesh also isolated the island from mainland supplies. Apart from diplomatic engagements, the Bangladeshi response to these events had been unacceptably slow and mild. Given the high stakes of the ongoing conflict in Western Myanmar, Bangladesh must reform its policies on its southeastern neighbor. Dhaka must start a dialogue of understanding with AA and utilize the recently developed prospect of closer strategic ties with the US concerning Myanmar issues.

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