



# Rohingya Crisis: Will China's Mediation Succeed?

by Sudha Ramachandran

Republished in collaboration with the Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, Vol. 17, Issue 15, dated 22 November 2017, Edited for OE Watch. For the full article, see: <https://jamestown.org/program/rohingya-crisis-will-chinas-mediation-succeed/>

**OE Watch Commentary:** During his visits to Dhaka, Bangladesh and Naypyitaw, Myanmar on 18 and 19 November, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi put forward a three-phase plan to resolve the Rohingya crisis. China's plan has reportedly found acceptance in Naypyitaw and Dhaka, and marks the start of a new phase in Beijing's involvement in the Rohingya conflict. China's role has hitherto been limited to providing humanitarian aid to the Rohingya refugees and protecting Myanmar from international censure. Why is China now adopting a mediatory role in the conflict? And can it bringing peace to a restive region?

As the accompanying passage discusses, China's plan entails a ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine state, which is at the center of the crisis. Aimed at restoring order and stability in the Rakhine state, the ceasefire is expected to halt the flow of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh. China envisages that this will pave the way for the second stage: negotiations between Myanmar and Bangladesh to address the refugee problem. The third and final stage will involve the economic development of the Rakhine state to address the underlying causes of the violence.

China's interest in the Rakhine state stems from its strategic location and rich resources. The Rakhine state plays a significant role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The state is located on the Bay of Bengal, which opens into the Indian Ocean. Like Pakistan's Gwadar port, which enables Beijing to transport West Asian oil, gas and other commodities through a shorter route via Pakistan to underdeveloped western China, the long Rakhine coastline provides southern China with access to the sea and eastern China with a shorter route to the Indian Ocean. Ports and pipelines in Rakhine significantly free China's trade with Africa and West Asia, especially its oil imports, from dependence on the congested Straits of Malacca. As a result, the stability of Rakhine is regarded as important to the success of the BRI.

Additionally, Rakhine is rich in natural resources. Large gas reserves were discovered in the waters off its coast in 2004. Beginning in 2008, China has bought gas from the area and transported it from Kyaukphyu on Rakhine's coast to China's Yunnan Province through the Myanmar-China Gas Pipeline since 2013. This gas meets the needs of China's Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces as well as that of other counties and cities. Since April this year, oil from Rakhine is being transported to China through a pipeline running parallel to the gas pipeline.

In the past, China avoided playing mediator in conflicts beyond its borders, arguing that this went against its principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign countries. However, in recent years it has shown increasing willingness to mediate an end to conflicts. It has, for instance, been involved in efforts to bring the Afghan government and the Taliban to the negotiation table; and undertook shuttle diplomacy between Afghanistan and Pakistan to arrest spiraling tensions between the two neighbors. China appears to be taking on a mediatory role in regions where it has strong economic and other interests, and this appears to be the primary motivation behind Beijing's mediation in the Rohingya crisis as well.

However, China's promotion of a military-economic development approach to the Rohingya crisis can be expected to worsen the conflict. Development of a violent region by external actors rarely benefits locals, as seen in Pakistan's Baluchistan province. China's development of Gwadar port in the region prompted militants to target outsiders. Projects in Rakhine are likely to benefit foreign investors, Rakhine Buddhists and the Barmar majority, not the marginalized Rohingya. Development that does not result in economic inclusion of the Rohingya will deepen existing grievances and generate new conflicts.

China may have significant political and economic influence in Bangladesh and Myanmar but it lacks other qualities that a mediator would need to succeed in settling the Rohingya conflict. Notably, Bangladesh believes that China is biased towards Myanmar, and Beijing's substantial economic and other interests in Rakhine can be expected to fuel Myanmar's suspicions of China's intentions and actions. Thus, Chinese mediation is unlikely to resolve the Rohingya conflict. At best, its intervention could keep a lid on the violence being unleashed by the Myanmar military in the Rakhine state. This could usher in a measure of stability but not peace in Rakhine. In the future, China can be expected to offer to mediate in conflicts within and between countries where it has significant interests, especially involving countries that are part of BRI. **End OE Watch Commentary (Ramachandran)**

*“China proposed a three-phase solution to help settle the issue in Myanmar's Rakhine state.”*

**Source:** “China proposes three-phase solution to Rakhine issue in Myanmar: FM,” *Global Times (China)*, 20 November 2017. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1076114.shtml>

*Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Sunday that China proposed a three-phase solution to help settle the issue in Myanmar's Rakhine state.*

...

*The first phase is to achieve a ceasefire so that local residents can no longer be displaced. Through joint efforts, the ceasefire has been in place, Wang said.*

*Second, the international community should encourage Myanmar and Bangladesh to keep communication in a bid to find a feasible solution to the issue, he said. The two countries have reached an initial agreement on repatriation of refugees fleeing to Bangladesh from Myanmar.*

*The third phase is to find a long-term solution. Stressing that poverty is the root cause of turbulence and conflict, the Chinese foreign minister called on the international community to support poverty alleviation efforts in Rakhine state.*