

Rohingya diplomacy

If India and China are two rivals jostling for power and influence in Asia, China's Rohingya diplomacy in Myanmar this week underlines how India may be blowing its chance. At the very least, the Chinese announcement that "as a friend of both Myanmar and Bangladesh, Beijing is willing to keep playing a constructive role for the appropriate handling of the Rakhine State issue" is an attempt to show itself in a new, more positive light in the region. So far, it has had a reputation, whether in Sri Lanka or Pakistan, of turning a blind eye to human rights, humanitarian crises and conflict in its single-minded pursuit of economic and strategic interests. The "three-stage plan" described by China's foreign minister Wang Yi is not rocket science: A ceasefire on the ground; once this is seen as working and people are no longer fleeing, talks between Myanmar and Bangladesh to work out the modalities of return of the Rohingya from their camps in Bangladesh to their homes in Rakhine; and third, poverty alleviation as a long-term solution.

While Dhaka has made no comment yet, Myanmar State Counsellor [Aung San Suu Kyi](#)'s response was careful but warm. She said the plan was in line with Myanmar's own views, but that her country wanted to sort it out with Bangladesh bilaterally. She thanked China for its "assistance as a friend in need" and prayed for "eternal friendship between the eternal neighbors". Wang, who held talks with Suu Kyi and President Htin Kyaw ahead of an Asia-Europe Meeting of foreign ministers in Naypitaw, also announced plans for a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.

It is surprising that despite its old ties with Myanmar, India struggles to find the right tone in its relations with that country. Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s visit to Myanmar in September was the right moment to take leadership in a regional crisis. But limited by the NDA government's views on the Rohingya, and the eagerness to pander to communal anxieties, plus the misguided notion that even a bare mention of the humanitarian problem then unfolding in the Rakhine would anger Myanmar and send it rushing to China, India lost the opportunity. Instead, there was an angry protest from Bangladesh, and the ungainly episode of Delhi having to issue an additional statement expressing concern over the events in the Rakhine state. Quad or not, India has a long way to go, and a lot to learn from China.

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