

## The China plan — On Myanmar-Bangladesh deal on Rohingya

The [agreement reached between Myanmar and Bangladesh to repatriate Rohingya](#) refugees suggests that the Chinese proposal has found some traction as a solution to the crisis. It has been sealed after a three-month military operation by Myanmar in Rakhine, which resulted in around 600,000 Rohingya fleeing the province to Bangladesh, leading to a humanitarian crisis and a war of words between Dhaka and Naypyidaw. It is against this background that China stepped in with its three-point plan. Earlier this month, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi travelled to Bangladesh and Myanmar with the proposal; Beijing later claimed both countries had accepted it. Under the plan, Myanmar and Bangladesh were to hold bilateral talks and reach a repatriation agreement – which has been achieved. However, the first step in Beijing's approach – which involved a declaration of ceasefire in Rakhine to halt further displacement and bringing immediate relief to the state's devastated Rohingya – has not taken effect. If this were to happen, the third part of the proposal will presumably take effect, with China providing economic assistance for the development of the Rakhine region as part of a long-term solution.

China, which has historically been wary of stepping into domestic conflicts in other countries, is being proactive in this case. Its own interest is at stake. Beijing enjoys good relations with both Bangladesh and Myanmar; also, Rakhine is an important link in its Belt and Road Initiative. China is building a \$7.3 billion deep-water port in the province and has invested \$2.45 billion to build an oil and gas pipeline connecting coastal Rakhine to Yunnan. China has put pressure on Myanmar because a protracted conflict in Rakhine will be decidedly against Beijing's economic interests. The signing of a repatriation deal suggests this pressure tactic is working. But details of the agreement, including the number of Rohingya who will be sent back, and the timeline, have not been revealed. It is also not clear whether the refugees themselves want to go back to a place they had fled in such perilous circumstances. Or in the event they do, where they will be resettled. From the details of the plan it is clear that China sees the Rohingya crisis as an economic problem, given that its solution is centred on development. While economic assistance is essential, the real problem is arguably deeply political, and there needs to be an accompanying political solution. Any proposal can only make limited headway unless Myanmar is willing to roll back the institutional barriers that render Rohingya second-class people. Unless they are accepted as equal citizens, there is unlikely to be a long-term solution to the Rakhine unrest.

Revving up infrastructure spending is necessary, but not sufficient

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