

## Rohingya refugee crisis will test India's influence in the region

The decision to airlift 50 tonnes of relief supplies to Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, coupled with the earlier announcement of a large aid project for the Rohingya's home province in Myanmar, is the latest example of India's use of humanitarian assistance as an instrument of foreign policy.

The Rohingya crisis, however, also points to the obvious limitations of the application of such a "soft power". This may ameliorate the conditions of some Rohingyas and help reduce the extreme poverty of the Rakhine province. However, it cannot address the fundamental cause of the crisis: Myanmar's deep-seated hatred for the Rohingyas, a hatred driven by a poisonous combination of racism and religious intolerance.

The Indian government can take pride in the increased range and capacity it has shown in handling an ever-increasing list of humanitarian crises. In recent years, New Delhi has orchestrated the evacuation of Indian and foreign nationals from various failed states in the Arab world — Syria, Libya, Somalia and Yemen. It took the lead in responding to Nepal's massive earthquake, the Maldivian drinking water crisis and landslides in Sri Lanka. There have also been smaller efforts further afield, including providing assistance to a typhoon-hit Philippines. All of this reflects in part a greater capacity thanks to India's augmented military airlift ability. But it also reflects New Delhi's recognition that it has to grow India's influence and project a positive image in the larger region. The subtext of this is the declining US military presence in the Indian Ocean region but also concerns at China's growing footprint in the same area. In addition is New Delhi's greater commitment to helping out overseas Indians in distress.

Myanmar and the plight of the Rohingyas is a reminder the severe limitations India continues to have in terms of influencing the policies of even middle-sized countries. It is an important lesson as New Delhi must be wary of imperial overstretch even before it has developed the reach of a great power.

However its attempts to balance between Bangladesh and Myanmar, use its aid to address immediate humanitarian problems, and influence Naypyidaw's genocidal way in private have been badly muddled by the government's abrupt decision to tighten the screws on Rohingya refugees coming into India. One can be sympathetic to the problem of handling a Myanmar given the realpolitik constraints that arise from China's presence, but not to a poorly-timed decision to review the status of Rohingyas inside India.

The benefits accruing from India's generosity across borders are being negated by its parsimoniousness within its own.

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