

# Geopolitical Dynamics and Dilemmas: United States, China, and Japan's Views on the Rohingya Crisis\*

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The study examines the geopolitical, economic, and social backgrounds that shaped the respective responses of China, the United States, and Japan to the Rohingya crisis. By analyzing these factors, the study explores how their geopolitical dynamics and national identities have influenced their strategic stances. The findings indicate that the United States leveraged its role as a global defender of human rights and democracy not only to uphold international norms but also to counter China's influence in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, China supports Myanmar primarily to safeguard its sovereignty, reinforce its non-interference policy, and secure its economic interests under the Belt and Road Initiative. In contrast, Japan adopts a neutral, non-interventionist stance aimed at maintaining friendly international relations through economic diplomacy. Ultimately, these identity-driven dynamics underscore the divergent policy approaches and the pressing need for coordinated international efforts to address the humanitarian crisis.

**Keywords** Rohingya Crisis, Myanmar, International Relations

## I. Introduction

Geopolitical conflicts and great power rivalries continue to intensify (Choi et al., 2019). Amidst these circumstances, the Rohingya crisis, Myanmar's 2020 general elections held during the pandemic, and the subsequent military coup have gradually faded from global attention. Nevertheless, key global powers, particularly the United States (hereafter U.S.), China, and Japan, were

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rapidly maneuvering to assert their influence over Myanmar (Aung, 2020). As a result of this shift in international politics, global powers seem to be reevaluating their strategic priorities in Southeast Asia, leading to a decline in international attention to the Rohingya crisis. Despite this, Myanmar's geopolitical importance remains a key component of U.S., Chinese, and Japanese diplomatic strategies (Vogel, 2010; Aung, 2020; Zahed, 2023; Ross and Sun, 2024).

In this context, the Rohingya crisis still stands as a pivotal issue in international relations, reflecting the intersection of political, security, and humanitarian challenges between Myanmar, the U.S., China, and Japan. That is, the divergent approaches from the U.S., China, and Japan underscore the complex geopolitical dynamics and dilemmas influencing their strategic interests and diplomatic approaches. While the repression of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar has historical roots dating back to the colonial era, the 2017 violent crackdown by the Myanmar government against Rohingya militants brought the issue to the forefront of international condemnation. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) characterized the 2017 military actions as a textbook example of 'ethnic cleansing' (Safi, 2017). Despite most of the international criticism, the U.S., China, and Japan adopted significantly divergent approaches, reflecting their distinct foreign policy strategies and geopolitical interests.

For the U.S. government, it strongly condemned the Myanmar military's handling of the Rohingya crisis. This approach marked a significant shift from its earlier support for Aung San Suu Kyi, who was previously praised as a symbol of democracy. This shift underscores the U.S.'s strategic stance on human rights advocacy, contrasting sharply with its previous diplomatic support for Myanmar's leadership.

In contrast, China adopted a markedly different approach, swiftly moving

to strengthen its diplomatic ties with Myanmar. China emerged as one of the first countries to support Myanmar during the crisis, emphasizing non-interference in domestic affairs and strategically reinforcing its geopolitical influence in Southeast Asia (Reed, 2017). This approach was evident when key Myanmar officials, including Aung San Suu Kyi, visited China shortly after the onset of the Rohingya crisis. Behind the visit, it is analyzed as there are that China's strategic support reflects its economic interests in Myanmar's infrastructure and energy sectors, aligning with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) objectives (Sun, 2019).

Japan, on the other hand, pursued political neutrality, emphasizing economic cooperation. Unlike the U.S. and China, Japan refrained from openly criticizing Myanmar or supporting international sanctions. Instead, it maintained a neutral stance, focusing on economic development and humanitarian assistance (Gaens, 2018). Notably, Japan co-organized the Rakhine State Investment Fair with Myanmar, emphasizing economic opportunities in Rakhine state while sidestepping human rights issues (Ibid.).<sup>1</sup>

Given these different responses, this study focuses on the U.S., China, and Japan, three nations that wield unparalleled influence in East Asia through their economic, military, and geopolitical power. These countries form the core axis shaping the region's security and prosperity, creating a complex triangular relationship that represents the most critical dynamic in East Asia (Vogel, 2010; Amin and Tourangbam, 2021). Moreover, these three powers also possess the economic leverage, political influence, and diplomatic

<sup>1</sup> As compared to other countries, the European Union (EU) has been more reactive in its approach to Myanmar since 1988 (Dosch and Sidhu, 2015), and the economic leverage over Myanmar is much smaller than that of China, Japan, and even India's principles (Amin and Tourangbam, 2021). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has also engaged with Myanmar, but their influence remains relatively limited due to economic constraints and non-interference (Ibid.). Due to this reason, the study focuses on the relationship between these three countries and Myanmar.

tools necessary to significantly impact Myanmar's political stability and humanitarian situation (Koga, 2023).

Therefore, this study already examines the political, diplomatic, economic, and social backgrounds that led China, the U.S., and Japan to their respective responses to the Rohingya crisis. Based on the analysis, this research explores how their geopolitical dynamics and national identities shape their strategic stances on the Rohingya crisis.

Interestingly, some studies examine the Rohingya crisis in the context of international relations (Ullah, 2011; Prasse-Freeman, 2017; Ismail and Notoharjo, 2018; Jang, 2019; Aung, 2020), but few studies have examined the political, diplomatic, economic, and social dynamics of these countries from an external perspective with Myanmar. Consequently, instead of focusing on the root causes of the Rohingya crisis, or why Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner, is silent, or why is not she sympathizes with the Rohingya, it could be the direction of the perspective raising critical questions as follows: How have the geopolitical dynamics and national identities of the U.S., China, and Japan affected their stances on the Rohingya crisis? What political, economic, and social dynamics have shaped each country's stance on the crisis?

Based on the questions, this study aims to deepen the understanding of how domestic and international dynamics influenced each country's response to the Rohingya crisis. By analyzing the geopolitical, economic, and strategic motivations behind each nation's stance, the study seeks to uncover the underlying factors shaping their diplomatic decisions. By conducting this comparative analysis, this study explores the geopolitical dynamics and dilemmas shaping the international community's response to the Rohingya crisis.

This study employs a literature review methodology to analyze the underlying reasons behind the diplomatic stances of the U.S., China, and

Japan concerning the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, focusing on multiple factors. The analysis draws on a comprehensive range of sources, including academic journals, books, news reports, and publications from research institutions, covering topics such as Myanmar's history, the Rohingya crisis, and the strategic policies of the U.S., China, and Japan. Through this literature review, the study designs an overall research framework and conducts a focused examination of political, economic, and social factors relevant to the subject matter.

In the end, this study expects to contribute to existing research by highlighting the strategic and pragmatic dimensions of international responses to the Rohingya crisis, moving beyond a normative critique of human rights abuses. It provides a comprehensive understanding of geopolitical status and offers insights into East Asia's power dynamics and the international community's role in addressing humanitarian crises.

## II. Geopolitical, Economic and Social Status

### 1. Myanmar's Foreign Policy and the Rohingya Crisis

Myanmar's foreign policy is well illustrated in Prime Minister U Nu's speech in 1951: 'We must share common interests with certain countries and cooperate with them in whatever matters we are involved in. However, we do not wish to align ourselves with any power bloc' (Hongwei, 2012). This reflects that Myanmar's foreign policy is characterized by a neutral stance influenced by its historical background and religious philosophy (Jang, 2012).

Based on Myanmar's national foreign policy, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar is deeply rooted in historical, political, and ethnic complexity (Prasse-Freeman, 2017). Myanmar, a multi-ethnic nation with 135 officially

recognized groups, has a Buddhist majority, with the Muslim Rohingya making up about 4% of the population (Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). The roots of the crisis trace back to British colonial rule, where the divide-and-rule policy exacerbated ethnic tensions (Ibid.). The British employed the Rohingya as collaborators, deepening the divide with the Buddhist majority, which set the stage for ongoing ethnic conflict in Rakhine State.

Under General Ne Win's military dictatorship established in 1962, the Rohingya were further marginalized, particularly through the 1982 Citizenship Act, which labeled them illegal immigrants from Bengal (UNHCR, 2021). After Myanmar's partial democratization in 2011, tensions between the Buddhist Rakhine and Rohingya communities intensified, leading to violent clashes in 2012. The most severe crackdown occurred in 2017, following attacks on Rohingya, leading to mass killings, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to neighboring and other countries. As of 2019, over 700,000 Rohingya had fled to neighboring countries, with more than 960,000 refugees residing in camps in Bangladesh (Inter-Sector Coordination Group, 2019).

Despite international criticism and allegations of genocide in the Rohingya crisis, Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto leader at the time, defended the military's actions before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2019. This has shifted global attention to the political and strategic dimensions of the crisis, highlighting the complex interplay between historical grievances, ethnic identity, and state sovereignty (Beyrer and Kamarulzaman, 2017; Prasse-Freeman, 2017; Kim InA, 2018; Simpson and Farrelly, 2020).

Building on this historical and political context in Myanmar, the next section will analyze how the political, economic, and social dynamics of the U.S., China, and Japan have shaped their respective approaches to the Rohingya crisis.

## 2. United States

### 1) From Non-Alignment to Strategic Engagement

Historically, after Myanmar's independence in 1947, its non-alignment and leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement positioned it outside the Western bloc, preventing close diplomatic ties with the U.S. during the Cold War (Jang, 2009). This strategic non-alignment distanced Myanmar from U.S. allies focused on anti-communism, as the U.S. prioritized partnerships with countries that aligned with its ideological stance (Sun, 2014). Following this period, during Ne Win's military dictatorship (1962–1988), Myanmar's policy of 'Burmese-style socialism' and diplomatic isolation further widened this gap, as the U.S. focused on Cold War conflicts such as the Vietnam War and security issues on the Korean Peninsula (Kim, 2014). This historical disconnect laid the foundation for future diplomatic recalibrations, especially as the geopolitical landscape changed with the end of the Cold War and China's emergence as a regional power (Pedersen, 2011).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly through infrastructure projects, significantly increased its influence, prompting the U.S. to strategically re-engage with Myanmar to counterbalance China's geopolitical expansion (Bharti and Kumari, 2024). Consequently, in 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Myanmar, the first by a high-ranking U.S. official in 56 years, marked a significant turning point in U.S.-Myanmar relations. This was followed by President Obama's historic visit in 2012, making him the first sitting U.S. president to visit Myanmar. These diplomatic gestures were designed to support Myanmar's transition from a military dictatorship to a nascent democracy, reinforcing the U.S. commitment to democratic values and human rights (Sun, 2014).

However, this diplomatic engagement was not only about promoting democracy. It was also part of the broader U.S. strategy to preserve a liberal

international order. The goal was to prevent the spread of authoritarian influence in Southeast Asia (Ikenberry, 2011). In particular, the U.S. approach to Myanmar under the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy demonstrates a broader geopolitical objective of maintaining regional stability and safeguarding U.S. strategic interests in East Asia. That is, by supporting Myanmar's political transition and offering economic incentives, the U.S. aimed to integrate Myanmar into the liberal international order, thereby reducing its dependency on China. This balancing act highlighted the complexity of U.S. foreign policy, where democratic values were promoted in tandem with strategic interests aimed at countering China's regional dominance (Pedersen, 2011).

In addition, at the end of 2018, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), a bill outlining the long-term strategy for the Indo-Pacific region, was passed by the U.S. Senate. This effort was a continuation of the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy introduced by the Obama administration, which was later expanded under the Trump administration through the enactment of ARIA. The ARIA stipulates agreements aimed at enhancing U.S. security and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific. By strengthening bilateral and multilateral agreements with its allies, the U.S. seeks to reinforce its influence in the region. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Defense has committed investments to regional security initiatives, such as the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (SAMSI) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), to strengthen security cooperation in Southeast Asia (Erickson, 2019). This may be interpreted that while China pursued its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to maximize its interests through an expansionist foreign policy, the U.S. countered by reinforcing its military cooperation with allies to maintain regional hegemony and contain China's influence.

Based on the above context, the U.S.' engagement with Myanmar reflects a strategic balance between promoting democratic values and countering

China's regional influence, highlighting a pragmatic yet value-driven foreign policy approach (Pedersen, 2011).

## 2) Economic Isolation, Engagement, and Sanctions

During the Cold War, economic interactions between the U.S. and Myanmar were minimal. Statistically, in 1987, Myanmar's imports from the U.S. were valued at only USD 16 million, accounting for a mere 6% of its total imports (IMF, 2025). Exports to the U.S. amounted to just USD 1.65 million, representing approximately 0.7% of Myanmar's total exports (Ibid.).

At that time, U.S. strategic focus was heavily oriented towards other regional conflicts, particularly the Vietnam War and security issues on the Korean Peninsula. Consequently, Myanmar was largely overlooked in U.S. economic and diplomatic considerations. This minimal trade volume was not only a reflection of political disinterest but also a result of Myanmar's self-imposed economic isolation under Ne Win's 'Burmese-style socialism' and its alignment with the Non-Aligned Movement, which further distanced it from the U.S. (Kim, 2014).

This historical economic disengagement laid the groundwork for a strategic economic recalibration under the Obama administration, as the U.S. began to perceive Myanmar's location and economic opportunities as crucial for competing against China (Pedersen, 2011). Following this strategy, the Obama administration strategically used economic incentives to facilitate Myanmar's political reform (Lim and Moon, 2016). These incentives included the reinstatement of Myanmar as a beneficiary of the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), reflecting U.S. confidence in the new government led by Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi. This economic strategy also aimed to diversify Myanmar's economic partnerships, reducing its overreliance on China and promoting a more balanced regional power dynamic (Sun, 2017; Jones and Zeng, 2019).

However, after the 2017 Rohingya crisis, the U.S. imposed economic sanctions on Myanmar's military officials under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (GMHRAA)<sup>2</sup> (KBS News, 2017). While these sanctions were intended to uphold human rights, critics argue that they may have inadvertently pushed Myanmar closer to China economically, demonstrating the complex balance between normative commitments and strategic interests in U.S. foreign policy (Hameiri et al., 2018). Therefore, despite historically limited direct economic interests in Myanmar, U.S. economic policies towards Myanmar were primarily aimed at maintaining its normative stance in the region rather than pursuing immediate economic gains (Helsingen et al., 2018; Jones and Zeng, 2019). This strategic approach was also part of a broader effort to contain China's strategic expansion through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Sun, 2017; Jones and Zeng, 2019).

Ultimately, this approach illustrates the strategic use of economic engagement to shape regional power dynamics while promoting a rules-based international order that aligns with American values and geopolitical interests (Beeson, 2018; Flint and Zhu, 2019).

### 3) Human Rights Strategy and Its Outreach to the Islamic World

The Rohingya crisis was deeply rooted in longstanding social and ethnic tensions within Myanmar, particularly between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim Rohingya minority. This crisis was not merely a humanitarian catastrophe but also a significant challenge to the liberal international order, as it highlighted issues of ethnic persecution and religious discrimination (Holliday, 2014). The U.S. viewed the crisis through a normative

<sup>2</sup> This sanction is the first case where the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (GMHRAA) was applied since its enactment in December 2016. It expanded the authority of the previous Magnitsky Act, which had been exclusively applied to Russia, to target officials worldwide.

lens, positioning itself as a global defender of human rights (Sun, 2014).

By framing the Rohingya crisis as an issue of ethnic and religious persecution, the U.S. leveraged its influence in international forums, such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), to maintain its leadership in setting global human rights norms (Sun, 2019). Additionally, this approach allowed the U.S. to mobilize international support for humanitarian assistance and Rohingya refugees, reinforcing its moral authority in the global arena.

Beyond its commitment to human rights, the U.S.'s criticism of Myanmar's handling of the Rohingya crisis also aligns with its broader efforts to engage with the global Islamic community. According to Aung (2020), even setting aside the historical conflicts between the Rohingya and Myanmar, the 2017 Rohingya crisis, when framed as a conflict between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority, had implications beyond Myanmar. The U.S. call for resolving the crisis not only supported human rights but also appealed to Islamic forces globally.

In fact, the U.S. had previously supported Aung San Suu Kyi in her transition to a civilian government in 2015, hoping to foster democracy in Myanmar. However, following the Rohingya crisis, the U.S. became one of her most vocal critics, citing human rights concerns. At the same time, this criticism can be seen as a strategic move to strengthen ties with the Islamic world, which holds significant global influence, including in the U.S. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), consisting of 57 Islamic countries, had shown great interest in the Rohingya crisis. Among its member states, Gambia took the initiative to bring the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), effectively placing Aung San Suu Kyi in the defendant's seat.

Eventually, by aligning with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in advocating for the Rohingya, the U.S. strengthened its diplomatic

leverage in international negotiations, particularly within the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (Kamel, 2018). This approach also served to counter narratives of anti-Muslim sentiment in U.S. foreign policy, enhancing America's soft power in the Muslim world (Aung, 2020).

Consequently, by framing the Rohingya crisis as an issue of ethnic and religious persecution, the U.S. could reinforce its role as a moral leader in the international system. This not only solidified U.S. influence in Southeast Asia but also shaped the geopolitical and ideological balance in the Indo-Pacific region, where China's influence continues to grow (Shambaugh, 2018).

### 3. China

#### 1) Sovereignty and Geopolitical Interests

China's approach to the Rohingya crisis starkly contrasts with that of the U.S. and other Western nations. While the U.S. and much of the international community condemn Myanmar's actions, China stands as one of the few neighbors to openly support the Myanmar government. In September 2017, Hong Liang, the Chinese ambassador to Myanmar, publicly endorsed the Myanmar government's counterattack against what he termed 'Rohingya extremists', emphasizing that China viewed this as an internal matter (The Global New Light of Myanmar, 2017). China reiterated its firm backing of Myanmar, pledging to provide any necessary support to maintain the country's stability and development. Furthermore, China opposed the United Nations (hereafter UN) resolutions condemning the Myanmar government's actions, demonstrating its consistent defense of Myanmar at international forums.

China's approach to the crisis is deeply rooted in its long-standing foreign policy principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty, which serves as a cornerstone of its international relations strategy (Jones and Zeng,

2019). This would be principled stance on sovereignty not only protects Myanmar from external interference but also advances China's strategic interests. Additionally, this policy helps shield China's own domestic policies regarding ethnic minorities from international scrutiny, making its support for Myanmar a strategic necessity (Kamel, 2018).

Historically, China-Myanmar relations have fluctuated, but normalized significantly after Myanmar supported China's accession to the UN in 1971. Since then, China has encouraged Myanmar to maintain a non-aligned position, ensuring it did not align with global powers such as the U.S. or the Soviet Union (Jang, 2012). By the 1980s, China emerged as a key military and economic partner for Myanmar, further solidifying their bilateral relationship. As a result, the relationship between China and Myanmar, often described as 'Pauk Phaw' (Zhu and Meyer, 2020), or a fraternal relationship, reflects a deep political connection that transcends the immediate crisis. This strategic partnership serves as a buffer against Western political influence in Southeast Asia, reinforcing China's regional dominance (Liu, 2018).

## 2) Infrastructure, Security, and Strategic Influence

The economic relationship between China and Myanmar plays a critical role in understanding China's stance on the Rohingya crisis.

Aligned with the strategic partnership between China and Myanmar, China secures its energy supply lines and enhances its naval presence in the Indian Ocean through the 'String of Pearls' strategy, a geopolitical and military approach aimed at expanding Chinese influence in the region (Hameiri et al., 2018). China's expansion in the Indian Ocean further accelerated in October 2013, when President Xi Jinping announced the construction of the Maritime Silk Road, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In this initiative, Myanmar provides China with a crucial route to the

Indian Ocean, bypassing the heavily monitored Strait of Malacca, which is controlled by U.S. and allied forces. At this point, the Kyaukpyu region of Myanmar serves as a key starting point for China's geopolitical expansion strategy, allowing it direct access to the Indian Ocean without passing through the U.S. influenced Malacca Strait. Notably, this region is also near the area where the Rohingya crisis unfolded, making stability in Myanmar even more vital to China's strategic interests.

Under these circumstances, China's backing of Myanmar ensures the security and stability of this critical energy corridor, which has significant implications for China's energy security and its broader geopolitical ambitions against U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific region (Kubo, 2016; Lwin, 2019).

As noted earlier, China views Myanmar as a strategic hub within its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), serving as a key conduit to the Indian Ocean and providing an alternative bypass to the Straits of Malacca. By investing heavily in Myanmar's infrastructure, China ensures long-term strategic control over key maritime routes and secures its energy supply chain (Jones and Zheng, 2019).

A pivotal development in this economic partnership occurred in 2008, when PetroChina, China's state-owned oil company, signed an agreement with the Myanmar government to construct an oil and gas pipeline between the two countries. In 2015, this 771 km pipeline was completed, allowing the transportation of oil and gas from Kyaukpyu Port in Myanmar to Yunnan Province in China, passing through Mandalay, Lashio, and Muse in Myanmar. As of 2015, the pipeline had the capacity to transport 200,000 barrels of crude oil per day, with a maximum capacity of 440,000 barrels per day, amounting to 22 million tons annually, which accounted for 8% of China's total annual crude oil imports (Jung, 2015). Additionally, the natural gas pipeline, which became operational in June 2015, had already transported a cumulative 5.6 billion cubic meters of natural gas, with 5.3 billion cubic

meters delivered to China for industrial and residential use (ibid.).

This strategic infrastructure project significantly reduced China's reliance on the Malacca Strait, a major maritime chokepoint under U.S. influence. By importing oil and gas overland through Myanmar, China shortened transport distances by approximately 1,200 kilometers, leading to substantial reductions in transportation costs. This diversification of energy transport routes not only enhanced China's energy security but also bolstered its geopolitical influence in the region.

Consequently, China's economic interests in Myanmar are deeply intertwined with its national identity as a rising global power and its long-term goal of reshaping the international order through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By supporting Myanmar, China positions itself as a leader in South-South cooperation and a protector of sovereignty against Western interference. Furthermore, this economic strategy counters Western sanctions imposed on Myanmar due to the Rohingya crisis, allowing China to strengthen its influence in Myanmar while undermining Western economic pressure (Lim, 2018).

### 3) Reinforcing Sovereignty and Human Rights Discourse

China's support for Myanmar is deeply rooted in shared concerns over international scrutiny of ethnic policies, which could set a precedent for global interference in China's own minority issues (International Crisis Group, 2022). China's internal policies toward ethnic minorities, particularly its treatment of Uyghurs and Tibetans, provide an essential context for understanding its stance on the Rohingya crisis. The One China policy, which frames ethnic minority issues as matters of national sovereignty and security, mirrors Myanmar's refusal to recognize the Rohingya as citizens, instead designating them as 'foreign migrants' (Amnesty International, 2020).

By supporting Myanmar, China defends not only its own policies but also

reinforces the broader principle that ethnic minority issues should remain internal matters, free from external interference. This strategy aligns with China's self-constructed identity as a sovereign state that prioritizes stability and security over Western human rights norms. In both China and Myanmar, ethnic minority issues, whether involving the Uyghurs or the Rohingya, are framed through the lens of state security and territorial integrity. As a result, China's defense of Myanmar's actions during the Rohingya crisis serves as a proactive effort to shape international norms around state sovereignty and non-interference (Pedersen, 2011).

By reinforcing a normative structure that prioritizes sovereignty over human rights, China not only legitimizes its own ethnic policies but also supports a key regional ally. This alignment acts as a counter-narrative to Western human rights discourse, enhancing China's diplomatic influence while maintaining its internal policies (Kim, 2023). Furthermore, China's alignment with Myanmar strengthens its domestic narratives of national unity and resistance to external criticism. This approach bolsters the Chinese government's legitimacy by framing its foreign policy as a defense of sovereignty, a stance that resonates with domestic audiences (Sun, 2014). By positioning itself as a protector of state sovereignty, China consolidates political authority and minimizes domestic dissent regarding its ethnic policies (Yang, 2020). Additionally, this strategy helps deflect international attention from China's own human rights concerns, while maintaining political stability (Hoshino, 2019).

Thus, China's response to the Rohingya crisis is shaped by its broader strategy of integrating domestic and foreign policy narratives. By aligning its foreign policy with its internal ethnic minority policies, China strengthens its position as a defender of sovereignty while countering Western human rights discourse. This approach reflects China's ambition to reshape international norms on sovereignty, human rights, and state security (Pan and

Clarke, 2022).

## 4. Japan

### 1) Reconciliation and Strategic Balancing

Japan's historical relationship with Myanmar dates back to the colonial era and is deeply embedded in the region's modern history. After gaining independence from Britain, Myanmar fell under Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945. Although this period was shorter than British colonial rule, it left a lasting impact on Myanmar's perception of Japan. Many Burmese people suffered under Japanese occupation, leading to a legacy of distrust of Japan (Jeon, 2015). Nevertheless, post-war Japan quickly moved to repair its relationship with Myanmar. In 1954, Japan signed a reconciliation agreement with Myanmar and began providing both grant and loan aid. Japan became a leading donor, offering significant Official Development Assistance (ODA), which played a crucial role in supporting Myanmar's regime, particularly during economic crises in the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1978 and 1988, Myanmar received USD 712.3 million in aid from Japan, equivalent to 15.1% of Myanmar's total imports during the same period (Aye, 2015). This historical context has influenced Japan's diplomatic approach, leading to its emphasis on non-confrontational diplomacy to avoid reviving negative memories of its wartime actions (Shoji, 2019).

Japan's political relationship with Myanmar, particularly since the 1988 military coup, reflects a pragmatic approach. When Myanmar's military government seized power, Japan, like most Western nations, froze all aid. However, unlike other countries that imposed harsh economic sanctions, Japan adopted a softer stance, maintaining diplomatic engagement while subtly aligning with the West's calls for democratization and human

rights. That is, Japan employed a ‘carrot’ strategy, in contrast to the ‘stick’ approach of Western nations, positioning itself as a key external financial supporter of Myanmar while refraining from overt political pressure (Strefford, 2016). In addition, Japan’s diplomatic stance on the Rohingya crisis also reflects its cautious political approach. While many Western nations strongly criticized Myanmar’s handling of the crisis, Japan abstained from UN resolutions on the Rohingya and avoided using the term ‘Rohingya’, instead opting for the more neutral term ‘Rakhine Muslims’ (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Japan’s decision not to condemn the Myanmar military in the 2018 United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) vote reflects its diplomatic strategy of maintaining stable foreign relations while avoiding open confrontation with Myanmar. Therefore, Japan’s political approach is shaped by its national identity as a peaceful, non-interventionist nation, emphasizing development over direct political confrontation (Soeya, 2020). Furthermore, by positioning itself as a neutral mediator, Japan maintains its diplomatic credibility and influence in Southeast Asia, thereby enhancing its strategic position in the region.

## 2) Infrastructure Investment and Strategic Counterbalance

Japan’s engagement with Myanmar has been heavily driven by economic diplomacy and strategic investment, particularly in infrastructure development.

In 1954, Japan signed a reconciliation agreement with Myanmar and has since provided various forms of financial assistance, including both grants and loans. From the 1960s to 1987, Japan extended over 400 billion yen in loans to Myanmar (Cho, 2013). By 1991, this aid accounted for 70–80% of Japan’s total assistance to Myanmar (Ibid.).

However, after the military seized control of the Myanmar government in 1988, Japan froze all aid. During the 1990s, as economic sanctions were imposed on Myanmar, the Japanese government aligned its policies with

the Western stance, calling for democratization and respect for human rights while adjusting its aid strategy accordingly (Cho, 2013). Following the inauguration of Thein Sein's civilian government in 2011, high-level visits between Japanese and Myanmar officials, including the Myanmar president's visit to Japan in 2012, created momentum for Japan to restore its influence in Myanmar. That same year, Japan resumed yen loans to Myanmar for the first time in 25 years and launched infrastructure development projects in the Mekong region, covering Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Additionally, Japan relieved Myanmar of 500 billion yen (approximately USD 3.3 billion as of February 2025) in debt and refinanced another 50 billion yen (USD 570 million) in 2013, reflecting its commitment to Myanmar's economic development (Gaens, 2018).

As Myanmar pursued political liberalization, economic reform, and improved foreign relations, its geostrategic position in the Bay of Bengal and rich natural resources intensified economic competition among global powers, including the U.S., China, Japan, and India. Recognizing Myanmar's growing importance, various Japanese government ministries established an intergovernmental-private sector framework in 2012 to support Japanese businesses' entry into the Myanmar market. This economic assistance not only promoted development but also strategically positioned Japan as a critical economic partner, reducing Myanmar's dependence on China (Yoo, 2021).

Japan's economic involvement in Myanmar is also aligned with its broader 'Tokyo Strategy 2018', which focuses on developing East-West and Southern Economic Corridors that connect Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018). These corridors are designed to enhance Japan's influence in Southeast Asia while counterbalancing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Koga, 2023). Therefore, Japan's strategy in Myanmar, particularly its focus on infrastructure development and

economic corridors, aligns with its broader goal of building economic partnerships that foster long-term stability.

### 3) Soft Power and Diplomatic Caution

Japan's approach to the Rohingya crisis could be closely related to social factors shaped by its historical and diplomatic relationship with Myanmar. Like most Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar's modern history began under British colonial rule. During the 1930s, Myanmar's independence movement gained momentum, particularly among young nationalists. General Aung San, the father of Aung San Suu Kyi, collaborated with Japan in an effort to liberate Myanmar from British rule. However, after gaining independence from Britain, Myanmar fell under Japanese occupation. Although Japan's colonial rule lasted only about four years, significantly shorter than British rule, many Myanmar citizens still harbor negative sentiments toward Japan as described above.

Additionally, Japan's foreign aid policy, particularly through Official Development Assistance (ODA), has played a significant role in shaping its relationship with Myanmar. This soft power strategy helps Japan establish long-term cultural and economic ties with Myanmar (Koga, 2023). This humanitarian assistance enables Japan to maintain its image as a benevolent actor while also safeguarding its strategic interests (Yamamoto, 2019).

Thus, Japan's stance on the Rohingya crisis reflects a delicate balancing act between maintaining its strategic interests, upholding its non-interventionist identity, and preserving its economic and diplomatic ties with Myanmar.

So far, these differing national priorities, along with geopolitical, economic, and social contexts, have led to divergent responses to the Rohingya crisis. The following section will explore why these three nations have reacted differently to the crisis and how their respective geopolitical interests have

influenced their stances.

### III. Why Do Three Countries Respond Differently to Rohingya Crisis

The responses of the U.S., China, and Japan to the Rohingya crisis reflect distinct foreign policy objectives, geopolitical considerations, and national identities. Each country's stance is shaped by a combination of historical relationships with Myanmar, strategic interests in the region, and broader diplomatic principles.

This section focuses on analyzing the key reasons why these three countries have shown differing responses to the Rohingya crisis. Thus, this section examines the strategic objectives and foreign policy calculations underpinning their respective responses to the Rohingya crisis.

#### 1. United States: Upholding Global Norms and Geopolitical Strategies

The U.S. has strongly condemned Myanmar's handling of the Rohingya crisis, positioning itself at the forefront of protecting human rights and safeguarding democracy within the international community. This stance is not merely rooted in humanitarian concerns but is the result of a complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors. This enduring commitment is rooted in seminal policies—most notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—which laid the foundation for America's role as a global champion of democratic values and human rights (Ismail and Notoharjo, 2018; Congressional Research Service, 2025). Notably, U.S. national identity and foreign policy principles play a significant role in shaping its condemnation of Myanmar.

This section examines the primary reasons behind U.S. condemnation of Myanmar's Rohingya crisis.

First, the U.S. seeks to maintain its identity as a global advocate for human rights and democracy, thereby reinforcing international norms and expanding democratic values. The U.S. condemns the Rohingya crisis to maintain its identity as a global advocate for human rights and a defender of democracy. This approach reinforces its moral leadership in the international community and consolidates its role as a protector of global norms. According to the Congressional Research Service, the U.S. foreign policy objective is to promote and protect democracy, human rights, and fundamental freedoms, thereby sustaining its moral leadership in international society (Congressional Research Service, 2025). This identity is a crucial reason for the U.S.'s condemnation of the Myanmar government, as it seeks to strengthen its role as a global human rights defender (Aung, 2020). This strategy allows the U.S. to maintain its normative power in international society while solidifying its leadership in human rights governance (Liu and Wang, 2013).

Moreover, the U.S. perceives Myanmar's democratic transition as an opportunity to implement its democracy expansion strategy, differentiating itself from China's authoritarian model (Ismail and Notoharjo, 2018). By supporting Myanmar's transition to democracy, the U.S. not only strengthens democratic values in the Asian region but also reinforces its strategic positioning against China. The U.S. seeks to maintain its moral leadership by taking the lead in strengthening human rights norms within international organizations such as the UN (Liu and Wang, 2013). By condemning Myanmar's actions, the U.S. demonstrates its commitment to global justice and human rights protection, thereby reinforcing its reputation as a moral leader. Through these actions, the U.S. enhances its global influence and soft power, which are critical for sustaining its hegemon status in international

politics.

Second, the U.S. strategically condemns Myanmar to counter China's influence and preserve its hegemonic power in the Asia-Pacific region through economic sanctions and aid diplomacy. The U.S. criticizes Myanmar's handling of the Rohingya crisis to counter China's authoritarian influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Myanmar is strategically located in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), making it a critical node for China's economic and geopolitical ambitions (Amin and Tourangbam, 2021). By condemning Myanmar, the U.S. seeks to weaken China's influence while promoting democratic values in the region. This strategic approach aligns with the U.S.'s broader Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at counterbalancing China's expansionist policies.

The U.S. could strategically utilize economic sanctions to weaken China's economic influence in Myanmar. For instance, through the application of the Global Magnitsky Act, the U.S. imposes asset freezes and visa restrictions on Myanmar's military officials involved in human rights violations. These sanctions could affect not only exerting political pressure on Myanmar but also undermining China's economic interests, as Myanmar is a crucial link in China's BRI (Amin and Tourangbam, 2021). Under the circumstance, the U.S. has strategies to reduce Myanmar's economic dependency on China and disrupt China's strategic initiatives in the region. This aligns with the U.S.'s grand strategy of maintaining its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region while preventing China from gaining a strategic advantage.

The U.S. also employs economic aid as a tool to promote democratic values in Myanmar while countering China's economic influence. By supporting Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other economic assistance programs, the U.S. leverages economic aid as a political instrument to strengthen democratic governance in Myanmar (Ismail

and Notoharjo, 2018).

This approach not only encourages democratic consolidation but also reduces Myanmar's dependence on China's economic assistance, effectively countering China's economic hegemony in the region. The U.S. thus reinforces its strategic position in Southeast Asia while promoting a rules-based international order.

Third, the U.S. aims to preserve its global image as a defender of human rights, actively shaping international public opinion and enhancing its moral leadership. By taking a strong stance on the Rohingya crisis, the U.S. reinforces its identity as the 'guardian of freedom and justice' (Congressional Research Service, 2025). This approach solidifies its moral authority and leadership role within the international community, while also serving its broader strategic and geopolitical interests.

By framing the Rohingya crisis as an issue of ethnic and religious persecution, the U.S. leveraged its influence in international forums such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to maintain its leadership in setting global human rights norms (Sun, 2019). The crisis was deeply rooted in longstanding social and ethnic tensions within Myanmar, particularly between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim Rohingya minority. As a result, the crisis was not only a humanitarian catastrophe but also a substantial challenge to the liberal international order, highlighting issues of ethnic persecution and religious discrimination, which the U.S. perceived through a normative lens, reinforcing its role as a global defender of human rights.

This approach also allowed the U.S. to mobilize international support for humanitarian assistance and Rohingya refugees, reinforcing its moral authority in the global arena. By actively condemning Myanmar and advocating for the Rohingya, the U.S. projected its leadership in global human rights governance, enhancing its soft power and international

credibility. Beyond its commitment to human rights, the U.S.'s criticism of Myanmar's handling of the Rohingya crisis was also aligned with its broader effort to engage with the global Islamic community. The 2017 Rohingya crisis, when framed as a conflict between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority, had implications beyond Myanmar, particularly in the Muslim world (Aung, 2020). By condemning Myanmar, the U.S. not only reinforced its human rights agenda but also strategically positioned itself as an ally to Muslim-majority nations.

This strategic engagement was particularly relevant to diplomatic relations with key Muslim-majority nations and the broader Islamic world. Initially, the U.S. had supported Aung San Suu Kyi, particularly in her transition to a civilian government in 2015, viewing her as a symbol of democracy. However, following the Rohingya crisis, the U.S. became one of her strongest critics, citing human rights violations and ethnic persecution. While this criticism was primarily rooted in human rights concerns, it can also be interpreted as a strategic move to strengthen U.S. relations with the Islamic world, which holds significant influence in global politics, including in the UN and within U.S. domestic politics. Thus, the U.S. enhanced its diplomatic leverage in international negotiations by aligning with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in its advocacy for the Rohingya (Kamel, 2018). This strategy not only reinforced the U.S.'s leadership in global human rights governance but also helped counter narratives of anti-Muslim sentiment in U.S. foreign policy, thereby enhancing America's soft power in the Muslim world (Aung, 2020).

Therefore, the U.S.'s condemnation of the Rohingya crisis could be not only a human rights-based policy but also a calculated foreign policy strategy aimed at achieving long-term strategic objectives, including countering China's rise, promoting global democratization, and strengthening a rules-based international order. This approach reflects the U.S.'s commitment to

maintaining its global leadership role while promoting universal values of democracy and human rights.

## 2. China: Sovereignty, Geopolitical Leverage, and the BRI

China's stance on the Rohingya crisis starkly contrasts with that of the U.S. and other Western nations, which have strongly condemned Myanmar's actions. Instead, China has consistently supported the Myanmar government, framing the issue as an internal matter and opposing international interventions. This support is not merely driven by political opportunism or economic gains but is deeply rooted in China's national identity, foreign policy principles, and strategic interests. Specifically, China's defense of Myanmar is influenced by its commitment to sovereignty, economic dominance, international norm restructuring, and the reinforcement of its national identity. This is deeply rooted in the legacy of the 1950s 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence',<sup>3</sup> which have long guided China's commitment to upholding state sovereignty and maintaining a strict policy of non-interference.

First, China seeks to prevent international human rights intervention by upholding sovereignty and non-interference.

China defines its national identity as a defender of sovereignty and a champion of the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs. It is strategically aimed at preventing external intervention in its internal ethnic issues, particularly concerning the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and Tibetans in

<sup>3</sup> Central to its foreign policy is the foundational principle of 'non-interference.' This principle was enshrined in official government foreign policy through the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in 1954. This policy calls for mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence (Lanteigne, 2013: 1).

Tibet. By framing the Rohingya crisis as an internal issue for Myanmar, China actively opposes its portrayal as an international human rights crisis (Zhao, 2014). This reflects China's strategic decision to maintain domestic political stability by preventing international human rights norms from infringing on state sovereignty. China's approach to Myanmar also serves as a protective measure to shield itself from international criticism of its ethnic minority policies (Yang, 2020). By supporting Myanmar, China seeks to prevent the internationalization of ethnic conflicts, which could set a precedent for external interference in its domestic issues. Through this strategic support, China reinforces its identity as a defender of sovereignty while simultaneously working to restructure international norms around non-interference and state sovereignty (Mariani, 2024).

This approach aligns with China's broader ideological stance against Western interventionism, thereby safeguarding its strategic interests in authoritarian stability. By consistently supporting Myanmar in international forums, China aims to establish a global order where state sovereignty is prioritized over international human rights interventions. This not only reinforces China's political legitimacy domestically but also strengthens its international influence as a leader advocating non-interference.

Second, China recognizes Myanmar's strategic importance as a geopolitical buffer and ensures regional stability (Shen and Chan, 2018). Myanmar's geographical location provides China with direct access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the Malacca Strait, which is heavily monitored by U.S. and allied naval forces. Myanmar's strategic location serves as a critical gateway for China's maritime ambitions, enabling secure energy transportation routes and enhancing its naval presence in the Indian Ocean. By supporting Myanmar's political stability and military regime, China ensures the security of this strategic corridor and strengthens its geopolitical influence in Southeast Asia (Aung, 2020). Furthermore, China

maintains close ties with Myanmar as a geopolitical counterbalance to U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific (Swaine, 2015). For this, China effectively undermines U.S.-led security alliances and maintains regional stability on its own terms by consolidating its relationship with Myanmar. This strategic partnership allows China to secure its geopolitical interests while maintaining regional stability and preventing Western intervention.

In addition, China utilizes Myanmar as a strategic buffer to secure its southwestern border and counter potential threats from U.S.-India collaboration. This positioning is related not only to enhancing China's strategic depth but also to ensuring regional stability by preventing external influences from destabilizing its neighboring regions.

Third, China seeks to maintain economic dominance and secure energy security through a strategic economic partnership with Myanmar. China views Myanmar as a key strategic hub for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), enabling China to expand its trade networks and secure energy supply routes. Through the development of the Kyaukpyu-Kunming oil and gas pipelines, China ensures a direct and secure energy transportation route that bypasses the U.S.-controlled Malacca Strait, thereby reducing its vulnerability to potential maritime conflicts (Rolland, 2017). Myanmar's strategic location provides China with crucial access to the Indian Ocean, facilitating its maritime Silk Road and strengthening its economic dominance in the region. By investing heavily in Myanmar's infrastructure, China not only secures its energy supply lines but also enhances its economic leverage in Southeast Asia, reinforcing its role as a regional economic powerhouse (Bharti and Kumari, 2024). Moreover, China's economic support for Myanmar strategically counters Western sanctions and strengthens its geopolitical influence by ensuring Myanmar's economic dependence on China. This dependency limits Myanmar's diplomatic flexibility and political alignment, thus consolidating China's political and economic influence in Southeast

Asia (Yoo, 2021). China's strategic investment in Myanmar will also serve to enhance its economic dominance by creating a network of economic corridors that integrate Myanmar's economy with China's southwestern region.

Fourth, China aims to reshape international norms and challenge western human rights discourses.

China strategically supports Myanmar to challenge Western human rights discourses and reshape international norms centered around state sovereignty and non-interference. By framing the Rohingya crisis as an internal issue, China challenges the legitimacy of international human rights interventions and prevents Western countries from using human rights as a political tool to justify interference (Foot, 2024). China seeks to redefine international norms to prioritize state sovereignty over international human rights enforcement. Therefore, China opposes Western-led humanitarian interventions and asserts itself as a normative power defending non-interference and state sovereignty by supporting Myanmar (Mariani, 2024). Furthermore, China strategically positions itself as a champion of developing countries by advocating sovereignty and non-interference principles. This approach resonates with post-colonial states that historically opposed Western interventions, thus strengthening China's leadership in the Global South (Garlick and Qin, 2023). That is, by supporting Myanmar, China consolidates a coalition of nations that prioritize state sovereignty, effectively counterbalancing Western influence in international organizations and reshaping global norms on human rights and state sovereignty.

Through this normative power, China challenges the West's moral authority in international human rights discourse while reinforcing its own political legitimacy domestically and internationally. By supporting Myanmar, China not only safeguards its strategic interests but also promotes

its ideological stance against Western human rights interventionism, thus reshaping international norms to align with its national interests.

China's support for Myanmar in the Rohingya crisis is driven by a complex interplay of strategic calculations and national identity. It is not merely an act of political opportunism or economic pragmatism but a strategic maneuver to uphold sovereignty, maintain economic dominance, reshape international norms, and reinforce its national identity. By supporting Myanmar, China safeguards its strategic interests in Southeast Asia, secures energy security through strategic economic partnerships, and prevents international human rights interventions that could threaten its domestic stability. Additionally, China reinforces its national identity as a defender of sovereignty and a leader in the Global South by challenging Western human rights discourses and promoting non-interference principles.

Ultimately, China's support for Myanmar reflects a sophisticated geopolitical strategy aimed at maintaining regional stability, counterbalancing U.S. influence, and consolidating its leadership in the evolving international order.

### 3. Japan: Strategic Counterbalance and Economic Diplomacy

In contrast to the more vocal stances taken by the U.S. and China on Myanmar's persecution of the Rohingya, Japan has maintained a cautious and measured diplomatic approach. This silence is not merely due to political passiveness or economic pragmatism. Rather, it would be deeply rooted in historical experiences, strategic calculations, and Japan's national identity. Specifically, Japan's response is shaped by a complex interplay of non-confrontational diplomatic tradition, strategic balancing against China, economic interests, and a peaceful, development-oriented national identity.

First, Japan's silence is linked with the fact that due to historical

sensitivities shaped during the colonial period and non-confrontational diplomacy aimed at preserving diplomatic relations with Myanmar.

To avoid rekindling negative historical memories and to maintain positive bilateral relations, Japan has adopted a non-confrontational diplomatic approach (Shoji, 2019). This cautious diplomatic stance is rooted in Japan's national identity as a peaceful and non-interventionist state that prioritizes stability and economic growth over political confrontation. Japan has maintained friendly relations with countries around the world through its 'Three Principles of Japanese Diplomacy', first articulated in 1957 (Iokibe, 2001). Therefore, by avoiding direct criticism of Myanmar over the Rohingya crisis, Japan preserves its image as a neutral mediator in Southeast Asia while maintaining diplomatic relations (Shoji, 2019).

Additionally, Japan's diplomatic pragmatism is grounded in its post-war experience of rebuilding international trust through economic cooperation rather than political intervention. This historical context has influenced Japan's quiet diplomacy and development aid-focused approach, allowing Japan to establish itself as a development partner rather than a political critic (Iokibe, 2001).

Japan's strategic language choices also reflect its historical and political sensitivity. By using the neutral term 'Rakhine Muslims' instead of the politically charged term 'Rohingya' described above, Japan demonstrates its effort to avoid damaging diplomatic relations with Myanmar (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Therefore, Japan's silence is a result of historical sensitivities, and a non-confrontational diplomatic strategy aimed at maintaining diplomatic relations with Myanmar.

Second, Japan's silence reflects its strategic balance against China's influence in Myanmar and Southeast Asia.

That is, Japan's silence on the Rohingya crisis would be closely linked to its strategic calculations regarding China's expanding influence in Southeast

Asia. China has significantly increased its economic and political influence in Myanmar through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), establishing itself as a key regional power. For the reason, Japan fears that criticizing Myanmar would push the country further into China's sphere of influence, thus weakening Japan's strategic position in the region (Yoo, 2021). Thus, to counter China's growing economic and geopolitical influence, Japan seeks to maintain close ties with Myanmar through cautious diplomatic engagement.

By avoiding direct criticism, Japan preserves its economic leverage and political influence in Myanmar, strategically balancing China's dominance in the region (Kasai, 2021). Japan actively counters China's economic influence by investing in Myanmar's economic development and infrastructure projects. Under the 'Tokyo Strategy 2018,' Japan is developing the East-West and Southern Economic Corridors to enhance its economic influence in Southeast Asia, thereby securing long-term economic and strategic interests while countering China's BRI (Kim, 2018). By emphasizing economic diplomacy rather than political confrontation, Japan maintains its influence without provoking direct competition from China (Reyes and Glass, 2019). This strategic ambiguity allows Japan to preserve its strategic interests while subtly balancing China's geopolitical ambitions. Therefore, Japan's silence on the Rohingya crisis is a strategic decision to counter China's growing influence and secure its strategic foothold in Myanmar and Southeast Asia. This approach aligns with Japan's long-term strategy of maintaining economic leverage and political influence while avoiding direct confrontation with China.

Third, Japan's silence is driven by economic interests and the desire to maintain economic dominance in Southeast Asia.

Japan's economic engagement with Myanmar is strategically motivated by its desire to maintain its economic dominance and regional stability.

Since Myanmar's political reforms in 2011, Japan has positioned itself as an important economic player by resuming economic aid and investments (Gaens, 2018). This economic re-engagement not only promotes Myanmar's economic development but also reduces its dependence on China, thereby enhancing Japan's economic leverage. Japan's economic strategy focuses on building economic corridors and enhancing regional connectivity to balance China's BRI. By investing in infrastructure and economic corridors, Japan strengthens its economic influence in Southeast Asia and secures long-term economic and strategic interests. Thus, by avoiding sanctions and instead providing development aid and investments, Japan secures its long-term strategic control while maintaining political neutrality (Reyes and Glass, 2019). This approach allows Japan to protect its economic interests while preserving its diplomatic relationships with Myanmar.

Additionally, Japan protects its economic interests by maintaining political neutrality through humanitarian aid to Rohingya refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2019). This strategic humanitarian assistance enables Japan to sustain its image as a benevolent actor while safeguarding its strategic interests and economic leverage. Therefore, Japan's silence is a strategic choice to protect its economic interests and maintain economic dominance in Southeast Asia. This pragmatic approach aligns with Japan's long-term economic strategy of maximizing economic benefits while minimizing political conflicts. Japan's silence on the Rohingya crisis is not merely passive but is the result of a complex interplay of historical sensitivities, strategic balancing against China, economic interests, and a peaceful, non-interventionist national identity. By maintaining diplomatic neutrality, Japan protects its economic and political influence in Myanmar while strategically countering China's growing influence in Southeast Asia.

## IV. Conclusion

The Rohingya crisis, triggered by discriminatory policies of Myanmar's government since the late 1970s, has led to the mass displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims. Most have sought refuge in neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The situation escalated in 2017, leading to a humanitarian catastrophe that exposed stark differences in the international responses of major global powers, particularly the U.S., China, and Japan. This study examined the political, economic, and social factors influencing each country's stance, revealing how deeply their responses are shaped by national identities, strategic calculations, and multifaceted factors.

The U.S. has maintained a critical position regarding Myanmar's handling of the Rohingya crisis, a stance that is largely underpinned by its commitment to human rights and democratic principles, its economic strategy aimed at countering China's growing influence in the region, and its broader social imperative to uphold its global image as a defender of justice. From a geopolitical perspective, U.S. condemnation of Myanmar aligns with its national identity as a global advocate for democracy and human rights. By openly criticizing Myanmar's actions, the U.S. seeks to reinforce its moral authority on the international stage while simultaneously advancing its strategic objective of countering China's growing influence in Southeast Asia. Economically, the U.S. has sought to weaken China's foothold in Myanmar by leveraging economic sanctions and providing financial assistance to support democratic institutions. In addition, the U.S. has framed the Rohingya crisis as a case of ethnic and religious persecution, strategically positioning itself as an ally to Muslim-majority nations. This approach not only bolsters U.S. soft power in the Islamic world but also enhances its geopolitical alliances in regions where religious

identity plays a significant role in international diplomacy.

In contrast, China has adopted a markedly different approach by consistently supporting the Myanmar government and framing the Rohingya crisis as an internal matter. This stance is not solely dictated by political expediency or economic interests but is instead rooted in China's broader commitment to sovereignty, economic expansion, international norm restructuring, and the reinforcement of its national identity. Politically speaking, China considers Myanmar a crucial partner in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and a key geopolitical asset that enables direct access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the Malacca Strait, which is controlled by U.S. and allied forces. Furthermore, from an economic perspective, Myanmar plays an essential role in China's energy security and regional trade expansion through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-related infrastructure projects, particularly the development of the Kyaukpyu-Kunming oil and gas pipelines. Socially, China's support for Myanmar is influenced by its domestic concerns regarding ethnic minorities, particularly the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and Tibetans in Tibet. Since both China and Myanmar have faced scrutiny for their treatment of ethnic minorities, China's defense of Myanmar's sovereignty serves as a broader effort to shield its own policies from international criticism. Consequently, by reinforcing the principle of non-interference, China seeks to delegitimize international human rights interventions, maintain regional stability under its own terms, and prevent foreign influence from challenging its domestic governance model.

Japan's cautious and neutral stance on the Rohingya crisis is shaped by historical sensitivities, strategic calculations to balance China's influence, economic interests, and a non-confrontational national identity. Politically, Japan's non-interventionist approach is influenced by its historical relationship with Myanmar and a desire to avoid reviving negative memories of its wartime actions. Strategically, Japan aims to counterbalance

China's growing influence in Myanmar by maintaining diplomatic ties and economic leverage. Economically, Japan uses development aid and infrastructure investments to strengthen its economic presence while avoiding political confrontations. Socially, Japan adopts a neutral stance and focuses on humanitarian aid, maintaining its image as a benevolent and peaceful actor in international diplomacy. By doing so, Japan preserves its strategic interests while reinforcing its identity as a neutral mediator in Southeast Asia.

In conclusion, the divergent responses of the U.S., China, and Japan to the Rohingya crisis reflect their distinct political identities, strategic interests, and diplomatic principles. The U.S. adopts a value-driven approach grounded in human rights and democracy, strategically countering China's influence in Southeast Asia. China, in contrast, pursues a strategically motivated response that prioritizes geopolitical stability, economic interests, and domestic political legitimacy. Japan maintains a pragmatic and neutral stance, balancing its strategic interests with historical sensitivities and economic engagement. These varying approaches illustrate how national identity and strategic interests shape foreign policy decisions, influencing each country's stance on international human rights issues.

However, despite their differences, the strategic calculations and political maneuvering carried out by these global powers have not alleviated the suffering of the Rohingya people. The prolonged displacement of Rohingya communities has exacerbated humanitarian challenges and impacted regional stability, particularly in Bangladesh, which has borne the socioeconomic consequences of hosting large numbers of refugees. Therefore, it is essential for the international community, including the U.S., China, Japan, Bangladesh, the UN, and donor organizations, to collaborate in finding a sustainable solution that ensures the safety, and dignity of the Rohingya.

Submitted: October 15, 2024 | Revised: March 3, 2025 | Accepted: April 2, 2025

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