

The US signals tougher stance against Burma on Rohingya crisis

John Roberts
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For months, Washington and its allies have ignored or downplayed the Burmese military's brutal operations in the Rakhine state against the Muslim Rohingya minority, which have been underway since last August.

According to UN figures, 688,000 people have fled Burma [Myanmar] and are crowded into unsafe and unhealthy camps in the Cox's Bazar region of Bangladesh, where they face new hardships if the monsoon season from June to October hits as hard as expected.

The US attitude to the humanitarian disaster is not determined by concern for the suffering of the Rohingya, but by geo-political interests, particularly its efforts to undercut and isolate China in the Indo-Pacific region.

Once again, Washington is exploiting the bogus banner of "human rights" to put pressure on the Burmese military and the National League for Democracy (NLD) government of Aung San Suu Kyi government to distance itself from Beijing.

In a speech last week, the US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, adopted a harsher stance, calling on the Security Council to appoint a special envoy to investigate what she said was the military's "cruel and barbaric" campaign against the Rohingya.

While Haley tried to distinguish between Suu Kyi and the military, she delivered an implicit warning: "This council must hold the military accountable for their actions and pressure Aung San Suu Kyi to acknowledge these horrific acts are taking place in her country." Haley added: "No more excuses."

Haley said it was time for the government to act and allow the international media, a UN fact-finding mission and a special rapporteur into the country. In other words, time is running out for Suu Kyi and, if she

does not do Washington's bidding, the "icon of democracy" will find herself the target of US condemnations.

For decades, the US and its allies denounced the Burmese junta as a rogue state and imposed harsh economic sanctions. In 2011, however, as part of its "pivot to Asia" against China, the Obama administration embraced the regime after it signalled its willingness to loosen its longstanding ties with Beijing.

Amid a media fanfare, Burma suddenly became "a developing democracy." Sanctions were eased and Suu Kyi was elevated as a roving ambassador for the military to encourage foreign investment. Having won the 2016 election, the NLD formed government but the military continues to hold key ministries and a bloc of unelected parliamentary seats.

The US and its allies largely ignored the Burmese military operations against the Rohingya, defended by Suu Kyi and the NLD government, as long as the regime kept its distance from Beijing. However, the growing international outrage over the humanitarian crisis, along with the country's economic problems, has compelled Burma to turn to China for assistance.

Without a doubt, as reflected in Haley's remarks, the Trump administration has become increasingly concerned at the high-level exchanges between Burma and China, including:

* Last April, Suu Kyi's handpicked President U Htin Kyaw visited Beijing for talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping and other senior officials that resulted in the signing of the Kyaukphyu-Kunming oil pipeline agreement.

* In the same month, Suu Kyi met with Chinese state investment officials to discuss the \$US7.3 billion Kyaukphyu deep water seaport project in Burma.

* In May, Suu Kyi travelled to Beijing for the Belt

and Road Forum to discuss Burma's part in Xi's grand plan to link the Eurasian landmass. She held meetings with Xi and Premier Li Keqiang and signed five Memoranda of Understanding.

* In June, Suu Kyi received in Burma General Fang Fenghui of China's Central Military Commission to discuss bilateral military ties.

* In November, Burmese military chief Min Aung Hlaing visited China and met Xi. He Hlaing expressed thanks for China's support at the UN in pressing for non-interference over the Rohingya humanitarian crisis. Xi offered assistance in resolving the issue and other ethnic conflicts.

Haley's remarks at the UN followed public comments by Yohei Sasakawa, Japan's special envoy for Burma. Speaking in New Delhi, Sasakawa told the Indian media that India and Japan had to cooperate more fully to help Burma resist Beijing's attempts to exploit the Rohingya crisis to reinforce its influence in Burma. He warned that any attempt to reimpose sanctions on Burma over its brutal treatment of the Rohingya would leave the Suu Kyi government with no choice but to reforge close relations with Beijing.

"The Trump administration is unclear what their approach to Myanmar should be," the Japanese envoy said. "The Japanese government is supporting the Myanmar government. We would like India to do more. Because of the US attitude, India must step up." He added that India and Japan had to keep the door open for Burma, given its geopolitical importance in relation to the Indian Ocean.

Japan's concern is that a tougher line by the US will cut across growing economic interests in Burma. Tokyo has ambitions to become the largest investor in Burma and plans to establish special economic zones to exploit the country's large, young cheap labour force and its natural resources. Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono visited Rakhine state last month.

India also has plans for Burma, including completing a major highway that will connect India to South East Asia via Burma and Thailand. The highway is part of New Delhi's "Act East" strategy designed to boost India's economic, diplomatic and military ties in East Asia at the expense of China.

Burma is being drawn into the geo-political cauldron that is setting the stage for trade war and war between the US and China. The last concern of any of the

countries involved is the plight of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees.



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