

Opinion – Bangladesh at the Centre of Australia's Focus on the South

Written by Mia Mahmudur Rahim

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MIA MAHMUDUR RAHIM, JAN 23 2025

Expanding its influence in the Indo-Pacific region will not be easy for Australia, particularly with Bangladesh as a focal point. Bangladesh prioritizes the Rohingya crisis in its foreign relations these days. Australia has yet to take a firm stance on resolving this crisis for Bangladesh. Compared with the recent past, Australia seems more interested in supporting the nations in the Indo-Pacific for their territorial integrity, democratic values, human rights, freedom of navigation and overflight, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Australia is keen on raising these countries' capacities to deal with maritime security threats, climate change, and cybercrimes, as well as countering trafficking in persons.

The Bangladesh-Australia Ministerial Dialogue in May 2024 demonstrates Australia's interest in growing its relationship with Bangladesh. During this dialogue, the ministers reflected on the productive discussions at the Indian Ocean Conferences held in Perth in 2024 and Dhaka in 2023. They also noted their ongoing collaboration within regional forums, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association's Indo-Pacific Outlook and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Australia is taking real-world steps to strengthen this relationship. Bilateral trade between these two countries has increased by 600% over the past decade, reaching A\$2.8 billion by 2023. Bangladesh is the 25th largest export market for Australia. During the recent ministerial meeting, ministers also emphasized the significance of skills development and training for promoting inclusive economic growth. Australia announced A\$3 million in funding to support technical and vocational training for Bangladeshi youth. The ministers reaffirmed Australia's commitment to building capacity in Bangladesh; in collaboration with the UNDP, Australia has provided technical assistance and policy support to develop a strategy for an inclusive social security system. To further enhance this bilateral relationship, the National Security College at ANU has suggested that Australia establish military education opportunities in Bangladesh, including placing a Defence Advisor on the ground.

Australia's increasing focus on the Indo-Pacific region, particularly Bangladesh, is largely driven by the rapidly expanding Chinese influence in this region. China's control over the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, its access to the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar, and its indirect control over the Karachi seaport are already evident. In recent years, China has been keen to have a strong foothold in the Bay of Bengal, and for this, it is desperate to lay its effective presence in Bangladesh's coastline, particularly in the outer ocean area adjacent to the Chittagong port in Bangladesh. The Quad, which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, is determined to prevent this. India particularly opposes any significant military presence in the Bay of Bengal.

It's important to note that, like the United States, China seeks to control major global trade routes and is steadily moving towards that goal. Against this Chinese ambition in the Pacific Ocean region, Australia is allocating its resources to support India's interests, as it has few alternatives. Additionally, Australia aims to keep Bangladesh out of China's reach to safeguard its interest and control over this region. China's effective presence in this sea area will diminish Australia's choices to maintain its trade through this sea and loosen its grip over the Oceanian countries like Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands.

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Australia has recognized the generosity of the Bangladeshi government and its people in hosting the forcibly displaced Rohingyas from Myanmar. The Albanese Government has committed \$235 million from 2023 to 2025 to help meet the needs of these refugees in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Bangladesh expects more than this support from Australia.

Bangladesh badly needs for the Rohingyas to return to Myanmar. Managing the Rohingya camps, which are currently the largest refugee camps in the world, poses a significant burden. As of September 2023, around 965467 registered Rohingyas reside in two main camps in Cox's Bazar district, an area particularly vulnerable to natural disasters. Approximately one million individuals are trapped in these overcrowded camps with no access to livelihoods and limited access to health care and education. Doctors Without Borders, who have experience working in these camps for over a decade, describe containment policies as 'detrimental to hope and perpetuating harm'.

Despite pressure from the UN and other organizations, the Bangladeshi government has recently resettled more than 20000 Rohingya refugees on the remote island of Bhashan Char. This decision has placed the government in an increasingly tense situation, as many international organizations are unwilling to operate on the island. Additionally, the desperate attempts of the refugees on the island to escape by sea increase the potential for regional insecurity.

Bangladesh cannot simply repatriate more than one million Rohingyas to their country. The non-refoulement principle, widely regarded as part of customary international law, prohibits states from returning refugees to a territory where they may face persecution. Instead, Bangladesh can try to leverage its allies to pressure the current military regime in Myanmar to facilitate the return of their citizens. Bangladesh would greatly appreciate Australia's assistance in this matter, particularly since China, with Russian support, has blocked meaningful efforts to address Myanmar's mistreatment of the Rohingyas at the UN Security Council by using its veto power. Australia can play a pivotal role in forming a coalition against China's support for the current regime in Myanmar. By utilizing the influence and capacities of the Quad countries, Australia could effectively hold the Myanmar government accountable and create a safe environment for the Rohingyas to begin returning to their homes. Australia can openly lobby for stricter sanctions from the USA and insist its neighboring country, Indonesia – the largest Muslim-majority country in the world – stand firm with the ASEAN countries to denounce the actions of the Tatmadaw.

Australia has the opportunity to alleviate the suffering of Rohingyas in Bangladesh by reducing the pressure on the Bangladeshi government through proactive assistance for Rohingya asylum seekers. Recently, Australia has prioritized humanitarian visa processing for Myanmar nationals, which acknowledges the ongoing crisis in Myanmar. However, this does not specifically highlight the needs of the Rohingyas who have already been displaced from their homes. Between 2009 and 2022, around 500 visas have been granted under the Humanitarian Program to people identifying as Rohingya. Australia could explicitly include the Rohingya in its refugee intake policies as part of the Myanmar national category. Such a step would not only exert pressure on the Myanmar government but also encourage neighboring countries to contribute to effective solutions for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. As such, Amnesty International in Australia also calls 'for the Australian Government to increase the intake of Rohingya refugees through Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program so people can rebuild their lives in safety.'

Strengthening Bangladesh's relationship with Australia hinges on Australia's commitment to facilitating a new Indo-Pacific resettlement deal for Rohingya refugees. Rohingyas are the most persecuted minority in the world. By taking this vital step, Australia can enhance its role in the region and establish itself as a beacon of moral leadership.

About the author:

Dr Mia Mahmudur Rahim is an associate professor of law at the University of New England and a professor of residence at the National Law University Meghalaya. He is the author of *Legal Regulation of Corporate Social Responsibility*, *CSR in Private Enterprises*, *Regulating Foreign Direct Investment for Development*, and the editor of *Social Audit Regulation* and *Code of Conduct on TNCs*. His next book is *Corporate Criminal Liability in*

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