



‘Filling the Vacuum’: An Aspect of China’s Foreign Policy

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Video testimony from two Myanmar soldiers has supported claims that the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) carried out a genocidal campaign against the Rohingya’s in the Southeast Asian nation.¹ In early September, the two soldiers were taken to The Hague. This has led to a case being opened by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to examine whether the Tatmadaw was complicit in these crimes against humanity. The United States (U.S.) has already applied sanctions on Myanmar’s military chiefs under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and the ICC proceedings could lead to further international sanctions on the Myanmar government and officials.² For Myanmar, a developing country that requires support and is looking to diversify from China’s assistance, international sanctions could result in a vacuum where there is no option for the elite in Naypyidaw other than to draw closer to Beijing. Previously, in 2003, trade between China and Myanmar flourished after the U.S. imposed sanctions and banned imports and investments.

This could not only result in a deeper Chinese presence in Myanmar and an increasing reliance on Chinese investments but would also have national security concerns for India which shares a 1,643 km long border with Myanmar. There have already been reports of China supplying insurgent groups such as the Arakan Army with weapons to create unrest and target Indian backed projects in Myanmar.³ Furthermore, an alleged China-Pakistan nexus delivering arms to insurgent groups has also been uncovered by Myanmar authorities.⁴ Therefore, for Myanmar, which is already entrenched with Chinese investments, and is seeking to reduce dependence on China, this has serious implications. Sanctions, albeit necessary for a regime whose actions led to 700,000 Rohingya’s fleeing Myanmar and the destruction of entire villages, would result in pushing Naypyidaw closer to Beijing and the Chinese filling the vacuum as an indispensable partner.

In pursuit of Beijing’s foreign policy goals, China’s bilateral engagement with countries is

not affected by the nature of government and human rights violations track records. This article will further examine two cases in Sri Lanka and Iran where China has been successful in filling the vacuum created.

For Sri Lanka, during its almost three-decade-long civil war that ended in 2009, China was successful in filling the vacuum created by Western sanctions and embargos. The Western countries along with India abstained from supplying arms and ammunition to the Sri Lankans fighting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) separatist militant group. This arose out of the alleged widespread human rights abuses and war crimes that were reported on both sides of the conflict by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.⁵ It was during this period that China filled the void and its engagement with Sri Lanka expanded and deepened. China was not only instrumental in supplying arms to the Sri Lankan Army but also shielded the Mahinda Rajapaksa government against scrutiny on human rights violations in international forums. A Chinese veto in the United Nations Security Council even prevented the issue from being debated. China's aid to Sri Lanka increased to nearly \$1 billion during this period along with gifting six F7 fighter aircraft to the Sri Lankan Air Force.⁶ China's overtures during this period, when Sri Lanka was internationally isolated, laid the groundwork for future engagements. The announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) resulted in the

Rajapaksa government eagerly signing up to the initiative, resulting in Sri Lanka becoming an important part of the maritime route. The BRI has led to an increasing Chinese presence in the island nation and its projects and an increasing Sri Lankan dependence on the Chinese has the potential to become a national security concern for India. With the strategically located Hambantota Port being controlled by the Chinese for 99-years and Chinese submarines already having visited Colombo Port, concerns have risen in New Delhi. Therefore, by capitalising on the vacuum left by the West in Sri Lanka, China's engagement during Sri Lanka's civil war has since led to increasing influence in the island nation.

A more recent example of China capitalising on a country being ostracized by the international community and furthering its foreign policy aspirations is with Iran. When the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was adopted in October 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Iran a few months later in 2016 and established ties with Tehran based on a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership."⁷ Details of the report, revealed by the *New York Times* stated the agreement would lead to \$400 billion worth of Chinese investments over 25 years, and result in infrastructure and developmental projects.⁸ This would no doubt also lead to closer military cooperation. Furthermore, with American President Donald Trump abandoning the JCPOA in 2018 and reimposing sanctions on

Iran during a period when the U.S. is withdrawing from Afghanistan and West Asia, these developments could result in Tehran forging closer ties with Beijing. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Iran also signals an increasing Chinese presence, and Beijing's willingness to play a larger role in the region. Additionally, American sanctions have also affected the 5G network race in Iran. Swedish network provider Ericsson, which in 2017 successfully conducted 5G trials in Tehran, has been forced to withdraw from the country.⁹ This will most likely lead to Iran embracing China's Huawei and its 5G network which has come under global scrutiny and pushback for its ties to the Chinese government that could aid in espionage and give them access to critical data.

Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Iran, therefore, are examples where China has overlooked violations of human rights and international law to further Beijing's geopolitical aims. In instances where the Western world has ostracized countries on human rights violations and breaking international law, China has successfully filled the vacuum created by other nations through sanctions and other restrictive measures and forged closer ties with them. On one hand, this pushes countries such as Sri Lanka and Iran towards China. On the other, it also emboldens the regimes in their actions, and renders the prevailing sanctions ineffective. Furthermore, by linking their debatable policy of not interfering in the internal matters of other

countries to this, Beijing also circumvents having to consider human rights violations. Finally, China's own opaque human rights record with the Uyghurs in Xinjiang makes it easier for Beijing to disregard these violations when engaging with countries.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Hannah Beech, Saw Nang, Marlise Simons, "Kill All You See': In a First, Myanmar Soldiers Tell of Rohingya Slaughter," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/08/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-genocide.html>. Accessed 27 October, 2020.

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³ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "China's arms smuggling racket along Bangladesh-Myanmar border unearthed," *The Economic Times*, September 16, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/chinas-arms-smuggling-racket-along-bangladesh-myanmar-border-unearthed/articleshow/78138743.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed 27 October, 2020.

⁴ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Myanmar uncovers Sino-Pak nexus to two rebel groups in Rakhine," *The Economic Times*, July 18, 2020, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/myanmar-uncovers-sino-pak-nexus-in-arms-supply-to-two-rebel-groups-in-rakhine/articleshow/77029461.cms?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=defencenewsletter&type=defencenewsletter&ncode=27cf9aad9dfa232c62f1f9b2f10aa5cc. Accessed 27 October, 2020.

⁵ Jayshree Bajoria, "The Sri Lankan Conflict," *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 18, 2009, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/sri-lankan-conflict>. Accessed 27 October, 2020.

⁶ Peter Popham, "How Beijing won Sri Lanka's civil war," *Independent*, May 23, 2010, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/how->

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⁸ Farnaz Fassihi, Steven Lee Myers, “Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership,” *The New York Times*, July 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/world/asia/china-iran-trade-military-deal.html?action=click&module=News&pgtype=Homepage>. Accessed 28 October, 2020.

⁹ Reza Khaasteh, “How US Sanctions Drove Iran Into Huawei’s Arms,” *The Diplomat*, October 22, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/how-us-sanctions-drove-iran-into-huaweis-arms/>. Accessed 28 October, 2020.

