

Myanmar goes ringside at China-India bout



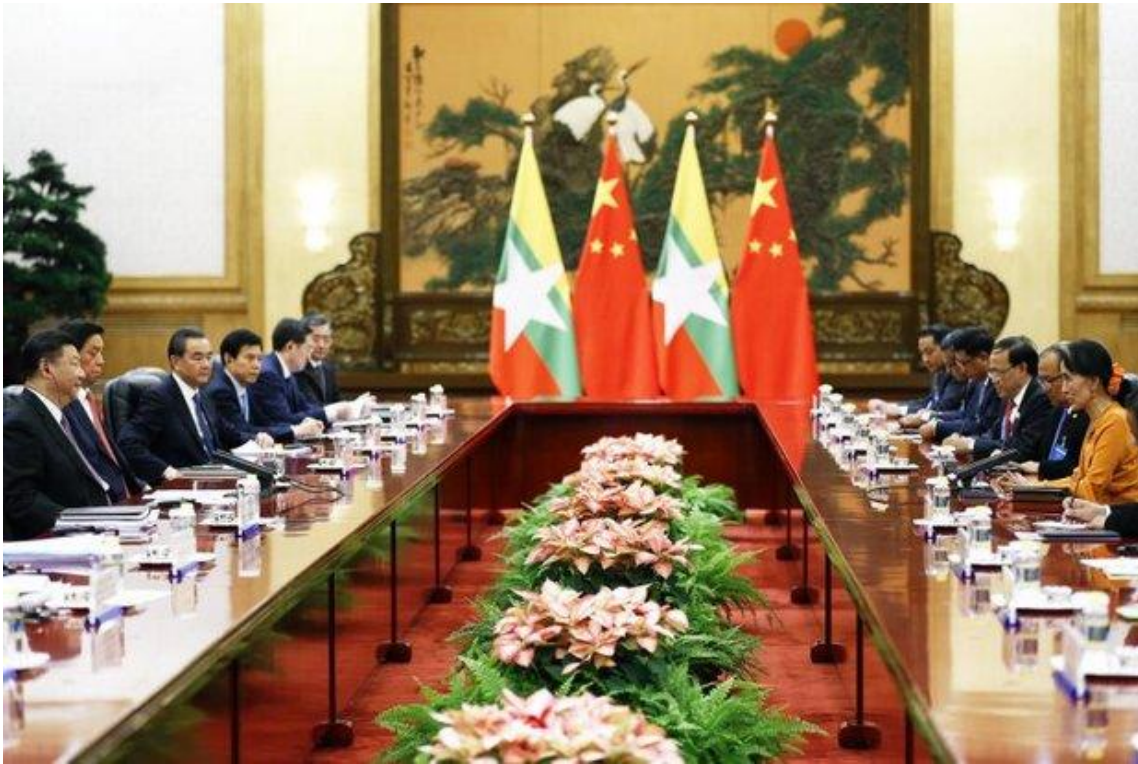
**KAVI
CHONGKITTAVORN**
A VETERAN JOURNALIST
ON REGIONAL AFFAIRS

28 Nov 2017 at 04:30

NEWSPAPER SECTION: **NEWS**

2,515 viewed

4 comments



Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, right, talks to Chinese President Xi Jinping, left, as they meet at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in May. (EPA file photo)

'China will go all out to help Myanmar in time of crisis. India will also help Myanmar, but it does not go all out,' was the light-hearted comment made by a seasoned Asean diplomat based in Yangon recently.

He was referring to the behaviour of Myanmar's two powerful neighbours these past months, which is providing a window into the leadership and diplomatic vision and power of the two Asian giants.

China and India have both been forthcoming in assisting Myanmar's coping with the crisis in Rakhine state. Their leaders have expressed full support and understanding of the dilemma confronted by the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

Judging from the reactions from Nay Pyi Taw, China's diplomatic overtures toward the northeastern region have been received warmly by civilian and military leaders. The best indicator has been a memorandum of understanding signed on Nov 23 between



Myanmar and Bangladesh, which was not dissimilar to the comments made by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who visited Myanmar and Bangladesh recently to help ease the tension.

Kavi Chongkittavorn is a veteran journalist on regional affairs.

Mr Wang, an old Asian hand, said the crisis in Rakhine must be worked out bilaterally first before inviting international assistance. His trips displayed Beijing's diplomatic finesse and sensitivity in generating the much-needed impetus and synergy that were required to conclude the MoU last week. Since the Aug 25 attack and the exodus of an estimated 620,000 people across the border, both countries have been trying to resolve their differences but with little progress. The bilateral talks last month failed to agree on a timeframe and the level of commitment to future repatriation efforts.

Furthermore, Mr Wang also proposed a three-phase plan to help with the ongoing crisis -- a ceasefire as the most urgent task followed by a bilateral dialogue. The third stage would involve a long-term and sustainable solution tackling root causes. Even though China's proposal was not earth-shattering, it did provide the assurance that Myanmar and Bangladesh needed that their bilateral endeavour would receive broader support from their neighbours, the international community and UN agencies.

Doubtless, Mr Wang's confidence and plans derived from President Xi Jinping's recently forged diplomatic strategies. To show that Mr Xi's new-era foreign policy means business, the Rakhine crisis may be a blessing in disguise, by providing a pilot project for the new diplomatic pathway. It should not surprise anyone if, in the coming days, Beijing provides extra assistance both in cash and kind to help alleviate the hardships faced by the refugees and share the burden shouldered by Bangladesh and Myanmar. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi is scheduled to visit Beijing on Thursday for a conference on international parties. More cooperation could be announced between the two countries.

In a similar vein, India has been defending Myanmar in the current Rakhine crisis despite domestic constraints posed by the Muslim and Rohingya communities and its global profile as the world's largest democracy. India has been extremely careful not to be seen as pushing its eastern neighbours too much. Like China, India has to tread a fine line as New Delhi has close ties with both Dhaka and Nay Pyi Taw.

Last week, a huge cargo shipment of aid from India to displaced people in Rakhine state received widespread coverage by the state-run media. New Delhi also sent aid to Bangladesh over the past several weeks. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India wants to go beyond the current state of bilateral ties. India wants stronger defence and security ties and hopes for purchases of bigger and more sophisticated military hardware by Myanmar, which for the time being has imported limited items related to ammunition, rockets launchers and communications.

More than officials would like to admit, India is now trying to increase its economic clout as part of its Act East policy, knowing full well that the bread and butter factor will eventually win the hearts and minds of the people of Myanmar. In the past, India has not been forthcoming when it comes to bilateral trade. The recent hiccup over imports of beans and pulses was a case study of the delicate nature of their economic relations. From now on, India cannot afford to allow a repeat of such incidents.

For decades, China and India have been wooing Myanmar due its rich natural resources and unique geopolitical location. With the growth of connectivity projects, Myanmar is transforming itself into a powerful hub linking South Asia, southern China and mainland Southeast Asia.

Myanmar is also the intersection of both China's Belt and Road Initiative and the newly established Japan-India project, known as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC).

Now, with talk of the Indo-Pacific region in vogue following President Donald Trump's visit to Asia recently, Myanmar's strategic assets are highly valued and its production value chains are now spreading to the Middle East and Africa. The AAGC is now taking shape after it was launched last October.

Since timing is of the essence, both China and India are taking up the Rakhine crisis as a launching pad to engage Myanmar and increase their diplomatic and moral influence.

It remains to be seen how policy-makers in Nay Pyi Taw will juggle the region's two most powerful players as they have the power to twist and turn the fragile regional environment in one of the world's most contested strategic spots.