

**Energy Geopolitics and Humanitarian Crises:
China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Rohingya Crisis**

by Alexa Asadorian

s4560353



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Leiden**

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Advisor: Dr. Esra Nartok-van der Kist

Second Reader: Dr. Karolina Pomorska

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Abstract

This thesis examines how energy geopolitics have shaped the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar by focusing on the case of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). The Rohingya crisis is a humanitarian issue and genocide driven by ethnic citizenship denial, violence, and forced migration. CMEC's energy infrastructure strategy, which includes oil and gas fields and pipelines located in areas where the crisis is concentrated, provides China with strategic energy routes while strengthening its influence in Myanmar. This overlap raises questions about how China's interests may have impacted the Rohingya crisis by harming the population or preventing responsiveness. Using dependency theory, this study conducts qualitative content analysis of government, IO, and NGO documents, statements, and independent reports, from 2000 to 2025, to examine how CMEC impacts the Rohingya crisis across three dimensions: 1) material conditions of the Rohingya population, 2) policy-making, and 3) responsiveness of international organizations (IOs). The thesis finds that energy geopolitics have shaped the Rohingya crisis by worsening material conditions for the Rohingya and reducing international pressure on Myanmar. Although it finds no direct policy change, the combined findings point to a broader implication that CMEC strengthens dependency structures that enable the crisis to persist.

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Introduction

The “Rohingya crisis” represents one of the biggest humanitarian crises of the 21st century, characterized by the ongoing genocide and forced migration of the Rohingya ethnic group from Rakhine State, Myanmar. Since August 2017, Myanmar’s military has carried out a campaign of mass violence against them, resulting in widespread village destruction, an estimated 7,803 Rohingya killings, and 700,000 forcible evacuations into neighboring countries (primarily Bangladesh) in just a few months (Parmar et al., 2019, p. 144). Despite this severity, there has been little international recognition of the conflict and no effective regional or global response or solution to mitigate the crisis.

The 2017 violence did not emerge in isolation; the Rohingya have been consistently ostracized throughout history. The term Rohingya signifies a connection to the ethnic group’s geographic origin, literally translating to “of Rakhine,” though the group’s ties to the region have often been denied (Fair, 2015, p. 150). Claims that their ancestors migrated from Bengal to Rakhine during British and Japanese colonial rule were used to justify their exclusion. Following Burmese independence in 1948, political unrest and failed attempts by the Rohingya to align with East Pakistan intensified anti-Muslim sentiment. The Buddhist majority increasingly questioned the Rohingya’s belonging, portraying them as foreigners, while Bangladesh also rejected the idea that they were fellow Bengalis, leaving the population effectively landless (Fair, 2015, p. 152).

Post-independence actions furthered marginalization and violence. In 1978, the military junta led the “Dragon King” operation targeting immigrants and refugees, resulting in widespread killings, sexual assaults, destruction of mosques, and the displacement of an estimated 200,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh (Zawacki, 2013, p.18). The 1982 Citizenship Law further restricted Rohingya rights by creating three distinct categories of citizenship. Full citizenship required proof that ancestors had settled in Myanmar before 1823 or membership in one of 130 recognized ethnic groups (this excludes the Rohingya), associate citizenship applied only to those who had already applied under the previous 1948 law, while naturalized citizenship required government approval, which was rarely granted. As a result, the Rohingya were left without legal recognition or protection from any state (Zawacki, 2013, p.18).

Violence escalated significantly in August 2017, when attacks on police and army posts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) triggered a military crackdown. The government’s response, framed as counterterrorism, became a genocidal campaign against the Rohingya. Despite extensive documentation of murder, forced migration, and persecution, international accountability mechanisms in response to the crisis have remained weak.

Simultaneously, Myanmar has become a central player in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly through the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). CMEC’s energy infrastructure in Rakhine State centers on an integrated energy corridor consisting of the Shwe Gas Project, an offshore gas

field, the Kyaukphyu Deep-Sea Port and Special Economic Zone (SEZ), where oil and gas come ashore, and the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas pipelines that transport these resources to Yunnan, China. These projects are vital to China's long-term energy security because they provide an alternative route for importing oil and gas from the Indian Ocean to China, while avoiding the narrow, overcrowded Strait of Malacca (Mosyakov, 2024, p. 442). These energy projects are located in Rakhine State, where the Rohingya crisis is concentrated. This overlap between energy strategy and ethnic conflict raises important questions about how China's interests may shape the crisis by displacing Rohingya people or silencing international responses.

Although there has been previous scholarship on the nexus of energy geopolitics and humanitarian crises, few connect China's BRI energy strategy with the Rohingya crisis. This study reveals how major infrastructure projects influence humanitarian crises through material and political factors at the local, domestic, and international levels. This has implications beyond Myanmar, as China's Belt and Road Initiative extends across multiple regions where energy needs intersect with political instability.

The central research question of the thesis is therefore:

How have energy geopolitics surrounding the BRI impacted the Rohingya crisis?

The thesis approaches the question by examining the issue across three dimensions: 1) material conditions of the Rohingya population, 2) domestic policy-making, and 3) responsiveness of international organizations (IOs).

In the following sections of the thesis, I will review the relevant literature on the nexus of energy geopolitics and humanitarian crises and on the Rohingya Crisis, present the theoretical framework, hypotheses, research method, and the results of the analysis across three dimensions, concluding with a synthesis of findings and implications.

Literature Review

Energy Geopolitics and Humanitarian Crises

Significant literature on the nexus between energy geopolitics and humanitarian crises draws primarily from realist frameworks and Marxist political economy frameworks. Structural realists argue that in an anarchic international system, states compete to secure their power and resources (Waltz, 2000, p. 18). Shaffer (2011) explains that energy and politics are inherently linked because a country's access to energy supplies is a key aspect of its national and foreign security policies (p. 1). Furthermore, she explains that the global competition to control oil and gas resources can cause "intrastate conflict" in resource-rich countries, particularly by exacerbating existing political corruptions or civil disputes (p. 74). While not strictly realist, Klare (2011) explains from a security studies perspective that this energy competition causes human rights violations by "uprooting people" and "forcing them to migrate to other countries or to become internally displaced persons within their own countries" (p. 1615). Nanlohy (2024) links geopolitics and humanitarian crises using realpolitik, arguing that "patron states" support "client states," in crises, economically and politically, allowing them to be more powerful than the international community's support towards the client state (p. 5). Nanlohy discusses the patron states' desire for control over oil sources in motivating their strategies in client states through her case study of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, highlighting how Russia supported Armenia to maintain leverage over energy routes and oil pipelines running through the South Caucasus (p. 10).

Political economy approaches, particularly Marxist frameworks, shift attention away from state competition and instead highlight how profit-driven global capitalism overlooks human rights, enabling resource exploitation and displacement. The "political economy model" of ethnic conflict views it as shaped by economic factors such as development and other economic and socio-political changes (Nafziger & Auvinen, 1997, p. 5). For example, Kurt (2016) explains how such economic factors facilitated the Armenian genocide (p. 37). Crook and Short (2014) develop the genocide-ecocide nexus, explaining that ecological destruction is a method of genocide since it can threaten a group's life conditions and ultimately their existence (p. 298). Wise (2021) extends the genocide-ecocide nexus to genocide in Darfur, addressing its limitations by suggesting that structural power and race are equally influential (p. 194).

However, both realist and Marxist approaches leave gaps. Realism overlooks how the control over resources creates long-term economic dependencies, and Marxism focuses on broad structural inequality without explaining why some states become trapped in cycles of dependence that limit their autonomy and expose their populations to harm.

The Rohingya Crisis

The literature examining the Rohingya crisis focuses on identities, regional security, Great Power competition, and geopolitical narratives. Wendt's (1999) social constructivism explains identities as socially constructed through interactions with other actors, shaping their behavior (p. 2). Afework (2023) draws from this, showing how citizenship laws and ethnonationalist narratives construct the Rohingya as non-citizens or outsiders, enabling discrimination and ethnic cleansing (p. 85).

Buzan and Wæver's (2003) Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), a blend of securitization theory and neorealism, explains that countries in the same region share security concerns that are connected and shaped by their relationships with each other (p. 185). Gunnarsson (2020) applies RSCT to argue that ASEAN's lack of response to the Rohingya crisis is due to its emphasis on regional stability and non-interference, showing how shared security norms can perpetuate inaction (p. 45).

Rahman and Akon (2019) use neoclassical realism approach to link Myanmar's geopolitical economy and the meddling of Great Powers, such as China, India, Japan, and the USA, through their investments in Myanmar, implying that the Rohingya crisis is driven by both external factors, such as the competing interests of Great Powers for resources, and internal factors, such as ethnic tensions, nationalism, and military power (p. 388). Mahmood et al. (2022) combine neoclassical realism with Foreign Policy Analysis to examine multilevel decision-making driving China's Rakhine interests and subsequent shielding of Myanmar from United Nations (UN) accountability mechanisms (p. 4)

Tuathail's (1989) contemporary political geography explains geopolitics as a product of both material power and fabrication, emphasizing how states use framing to maintain their global status (p. 73). Houssain (2022) expands upon this using critical geopolitics, the idea that geopolitics are constructed through discourse, such as "political discussions, announcements, and performances," to examine China's influence on the Rohingya (p. 169). Hossain asserts that China's interest in control over Rakhine State is based on its geographical narrative and spatial power, created through framing, rather than the region's geography itself.

These theories leave many gaps in explaining the Rohingya crisis. Constructivists ignore the economic factors that make Myanmar vulnerable, while neorealists and RSCT often treat economic projects as short-term strategies rather than long-term dependencies. These theories' focus on power competition overlooks CMEC's material impacts on Rohingya conditions. Critical geopolitics explains how China's narratives shape its actions, but it underestimates how these narratives translate into lasting economic and political control through infrastructure. All miss important aspects of economic and infrastructural dependency, demonstrating the need for an approach that connects state strategy and regional power with the structural economic and political dependencies created by energy and infrastructure projects. Unlike these earlier works, my thesis aims to explain the causal link between energy projects and the Rohingya

crisis, offering a more detailed perspective on how energy geopolitics influences the crisis locally, domestically, and internationally.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis's approach is grounded in contemporary structural dependency theory to analyze how energy-driven asymmetric economic relationships shape humanitarian crises. One of the most prominent definitions of dependency is Dos Santos': situations in which "the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected" (Dos Santos, 1970, p. 231). In this framework, the global political economy is divided into the dominant "core" and the dependent "periphery" countries, with some occupying an intermediary position, "semi-periphery," which has characteristics of both (Prebisch, 1950, p. 1; Wallerstein, 1974, p. 401). The dominant countries can expand and be self-sustaining, while the dependent ones can only do so as a reflection of that expansion (Dos Santos, 1970, p. 231). This is particularly relevant for energy geopolitics, as core countries sustain their expansion by using peripheral regions for resource and energy supply, positioning them as sites of extraction and infrastructure that bear the costs of production.

China complicates classical dependency theory, which focused on European and North American countries as the core regions. With its rapid economic growth, China today embodies both core and periphery positions, functioning as a dominant center regionally, while remaining structurally constrained in the global economy (Yankittikul, 2024, p. 11). This dual position allows China to operate as a core-like actor in regional energy corridors, reproducing dependency dynamics traditionally associated with Western powers.

Dos Santos claims postwar modern international commodity markets created a "new type of dependence" driven by multinational corporations, rather than European colonial powers, but maintains traditional export structures that preserve political and economic dominance by stronger states (Dos Santos, 1970, p. 232). Multinational corporations' exploitation of extractive peripheral regions causes many adverse developmental consequences for "rural populations in the Global South," such as dispossession and land degradation (Kuran, 2024, p. 339). In dependent economies, external production and investment serve the needs of stronger states while causing underdevelopment issues in local communities, which Frank (1967) describes as the "contradiction" of development (p. 3). Katz (2022) discusses China's asymmetric relationship with Latin America, stating that China "expands its investments at a frenzied pace without any consideration in the opposite direction" (p. 225). He claims that by investing in the oil extraction and transportation sector without strengthening local industries, China reinforces dependencies and ultimately develops a relationship with Latin America that is "comparable with the old European metropolises or with the United States" (p. 225).

In the context of the BRI, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and their international corporate partners secure energy supplies for China, while the investment profits from Myanmar's energy sector flow back to China without benefits for the local communities. Projects such as the Kyaukphyu SEZ and

Myanmar-China pipelines cause local communities to give up their land, jobs, and environmental security. Since infrastructure developments are externally oriented, local communities absorb the physical costs of said developments, showing how dependency on foreign investment can therefore make living conditions worse for local vulnerable groups.

Dependency theory explains how economic ties with stronger countries can limit a government's independence. Armstrong (1981) discusses dependency theory in relation to policy-making, examining "the ability of one nation to induce other nations to follow lines of policy which they might otherwise not pursue, as a result of their economic dependence on the former" (p. 401). Cardoso and Faletto (1979) explain that local elites maintain such external ties because they depend on foreign capital for their own stability (p. 22).

In Myanmar, this means the government's reliance on Chinese loans, trade, and diplomatic protection makes it difficult to act against China's interests. As a result, leaders may avoid policies that could upset China, even when those policies would help protect the Rohingya. This shows how dependency reduces political freedom and makes it harder for the government to act against human rights abuses. Htwe (2020) explains that China's BRI creates economic dependencies in Myanmar, enabling Beijing to gain significant influence over the country's political affairs by using debt as leverage to pressure government decisions (p. 6). Malik (2017) argues that these economic dependencies can "constrain others from making policy choices that run counter to China's interests" (p. 371). I aim to extend these implications of the BRI to the Rohingya crisis, examining how Myanmar's political dependence on China has impacted the Rohingya crisis.

Clark (2008) extends dependency theory into the international political arena in his discussion of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), showing that just as trade flows with the same set of partners causes economic dependency, memberships with the same set of INGOs cause greater social dependency on core actors (p. 644). In dependency relationships, peripheral states rely on core powers to mediate their position in international institutions, trading political alignment for protection.

Myanmar's position as a peripheral state limits its ability to engage with IOs independently, but instead it relies on China, with its core-like international power, to shield them from scrutiny for their crimes against the Rohingya. This reflects how, in the international system, Myanmar is a dependent state, subjected to core countries' actions. Together, these dynamics show how energy dependency translates into material harm, constrained peripheral political autonomy, and international outcomes favoring core states.

From this theoretical framework, the following hypotheses emerge:

H1: CMEC energy projects worsen the material conditions of the Rohingya through displacement and land reduction.

H2: China's leverage over Myanmar via CMEC energy projects leads to policies that harm the Rohingya.

H3: China's BRI weakens IOs' ability to respond effectively to the Rohingya crisis.

Research Method

This thesis uses a single-case study design with qualitative content analysis to examine how energy geopolitics have shaped (*IV*) the Rohingya crisis (*DV*). The case is the energy strategy associated with BRI, and more specifically CMEC, in Myanmar, which includes the Shwe Gas Project, the Kyaukphyu Deep-Sea Port and SEZ, and the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipelines. This case is selected for its strategic importance, capturing how a core-aspiring state's energy security goals are pursued through arrangements with a weaker subordinate state that is home to one of the most pressing genocides. This intersection makes it an ideal case to investigate how energy geopolitics influence humanitarian. This thesis examines how Myanmar's integration into China's BRI energy strategy positions the country within a dependent economic and political relationship, and how this structure had shaped the conditions under which the Rohingya Crisis persists. This impact is measured across three dimensions: 1) material conditions, 2) policy-making, and 3) international responsiveness. The three hypotheses complement each other by capturing the various mechanisms through which dependency structures operate: material harms to peripheral communities (*H1*), political dependency at the domestic level (*H2*), and political dependency at the international level, with IOs shaped by core interests (*H3*).

Data Collection

Data collection draws on a corpus of publicly available documents selected to capture evidence relevant to China's engagement in Myanmar, Myanmar's domestic positioning towards the Rohingya, and international responses to the crisis. The time frame of data collected spans from 2000, when Daewoo International signed with Myanmar to market its oil and gas resources, to 2025, when IO responses to the Rohingya crisis occurred (Debnath et al., 2022, p. 194). 2013 is a key turning point, marking the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative and the start of Xi Jinping's presidency, when Chinese infrastructure projects in Myanmar began. Additionally, 2017 is a critical point for *H3*, marking the escalation of the Rohingya crisis, allowing assessment of international responses.

The corpus consists of 66 documents grouped into five source categories:

- 1) Chinese government sources, including bilateral agreements, Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), and official statements released through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Ministry of Commerce, Belt and Road Portal, National Development and Reform Commission, and China International Development Cooperation Agency
- 2) Myanmar government sources, including official statements and publications released through the MFA, Ministry of National Planning, Myanmar National Portal, as well as population censuses published by the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population

3) IO sources, including United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, voting records, meeting transcripts, and formal correspondence

4) IO and NGO observational sources, including UN Satellite Center (UNOSAT) images and damage assessments, as well as reports with interviews published by Amnesty International, EarthRights, and other NGOs

5) Independent and archival analytical sources, including think-tank reports, legal assessments, academic analyses, and archived corporate and project-level materials used to verify, cross-check, and contextualize findings

Data Analysis

The thesis employs qualitative content analysis to empirically examine how China's CMEC-linked energy strategy intersects with the Rohingya Crisis across the three analytical dimensions: material conditions ($H1$), policy-making ($H2$), and international responsiveness ($H3$). Each hypothesis is operationalized through indicators observable in the corpus of documents. The analysis uses an inductive and manual coding process in which the codes emerged from the material, guided by the hypotheses. Table 1 presents a representation of the analytical framework utilized, illustrating how concepts are linked to empirical evidence. The full codebook is provided in the Appendix. The analysis evaluates correlations and plausible mechanisms, assessing whether patterns shift alongside the expansion and political salience of CMEC, particularly after the launch of BRI in 2013 and the escalation of the crisis in 2017.

Table 1. Analytical framework

Category	Concept	Example
Material Conditions	Forced relocation of residents for construction of CMEC infrastructure	“a letter MOGE sent to local villagers in Arakan State, dated March 16, 2010, informing villagers they must vacate their land in just five days” (EarthRights, 2011, p. 8)
Policy-Making	Policies that restrict the administrative rights or movement of the Rohingya	“Regional Order No. 1/2009 requires that Rohingya inform authorities within seven days of all movements ‘from one place to another’” (Fortify Rights, 2014, p. 33)
International Responsiveness	Chinese obstruction and dilution of international accountability mechanisms	“‘Situation of human rights in Myanmar’... Against: Belarus, Burundi, Cambodia, China, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Philippines, Russian Federation, Viet Nam, Zimbabwe” (UNGA, 2018)

For *H1*, I assess if Rohingya living conditions worsen and if the worsening aligns with CMEC activity by interpreting temporal and geographic patterns and examining whether land reduction and displacement occur in CMEC-linked areas that overlap with Rohingya-concentrated regions. The *IV* is Chinese influence through CMEC energy projects, operationalized as its material impact on the Rohingya crisis. This dimension of impact can be observed through indicators such as displacement, land loss, resource loss, environmental damage, and labor practices; however, this thesis specifically measures 1) the displacement of people and 2) the reduction of land area. These indicators assess whether peripheral communities bear the physical costs of core projects, such as CMEC. Increases in these indicators aligned with project activity would test *H1*. Evidence for *H1* is coded using *infrastructure* for CMEC project planning or construction, *Rohingya population* for evidence of their living areas, *displacement* for forced relocation, and *land reduction* for land confiscation and degradation.

For *H2*, I assess whether Myanmar's official language converges with Chinese framing as a result of increased CMEC activity and track Myanmar's policy towards the Rohingya to see if it becomes more harmful after 2013. The *IV* is Chinese influence in Myanmar, operationalized as its policy impact on the Rohingya crisis. This dimension is measured through harmful policies toward the Rohingya, such as citizenship or mobility restrictions. These indicators assess whether economic dependency translates into leverage over Myanmar's policy-making. Increases in these indicators aligned with increased Chinese leverage would test *H2*. Evidence for *H2* is coded using *economic leverage* to label Myanmar's financial dependence on Chinese investment, *political alignment* for Myanmar adopting Chinese-favored positions, *language convergence* for Myanmar's use of Chinese language and rhetoric, *citizenship restrictions* for policies restricting Rohingya administrative rights, and *mobility restrictions* for policies restricting Rohingya movement.

For *H3*, I compare IOs' level of action and framing towards the crisis, before and after CMEC development in Myanmar, to assess Chinese influence. The *IV* is China's influence via the BRI, operationalized as its impact on international responsiveness to the Rohingya crisis. This dimension is measured through voting against, abstaining from, or criticizing international resolutions and using softened language in statements. These indicators assess whether international responses are shaped by power asymmetries that favor core interests, like China's BRI expansion. Increases in these indicators aligned with increased BRI development would test *H3*. Evidence for *H3* is coded using *obstruction of international action* for China blocking or voting against IO action, *delegitimizing international action* for China calling IO reports on the Rohingya crisis false, *bilateral framing* for China only focusing on bilateral action with Myanmar and Bangladesh, *development framing* for China supporting economic development as a solution to the crisis, and *softened language* for the avoidance of terms implying severity, such as "genocide" and acknowledging the Rohingya as an ethnic group.

Limitations

The data is collected solely from publicly available material, rendering some internal decision-making processes in China and Myanmar inaccessible. Given this limitation, I requested project planning data, loan agreements, and MoUs related to the Shwe Gas Project, Kyaukphyu Deep-Sea Port and SEZ, and Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipelines by emailing the Myanmar National Portal, the Ministries of Planning and Finance, Foreign Affairs, Investment and Foreign Economic Relations, Electric Power, Energy, Commerce, Transport and Communications, the Amyotha Hluttaw, Rakhine State Hluttaw Office, Advocate General's Office of Rakhine State, and Rakhine State High Court. No responses were received.

Humanitarian access restrictions in Rakhine State further limit independent verification of conditions on the ground. Additionally, this study does not analyze the investigation by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on the Bangladesh/Myanmar situation because, despite its 2024 issuance of an arrest warrant on grounds of crimes against humanity, China's non-membership status limits its relevance to the mechanisms studied in this thesis (ICC, n.d.).

In terms of source bias, government publications may reflect strategic political narratives that underreport or obscure sensitive information, while IO or NGO reports emphasize a rights-based perspective. Specifically, the Myanmar government's lack of transparency and the political sensitivity around ethnicity may lead to underrepresentation of the true size and distribution of undocumented residents (used as a proxy for Rohingya because it is not legally recognized as an ethnic category). Additionally, because Myanmar does not publish detailed documentation of its own restrictive policies toward the Rohingya, the analysis relies on NGO and UN reporting to identify policy patterns.

Furthermore, this study relies on qualitative content analysis rather than a causal identification method. Therefore, the analysis relies on patterns of correlation and plausible mechanisms between CMEC activity and specific outcomes for the Rohingya.

Nevertheless, the wide range of official government documents and statements, combined with satellite analyses and independent reports, provides a strong evidentiary base for evaluating the three hypotheses.

Analysis

This chapter presents the main findings of the qualitative content analysis. It is organized into three sections corresponding to each of the three hypotheses. For each hypothesis, I discuss specific coded evidence, linking it to the proposed causal mechanisms, followed by an assessment of whether or not the hypothesis is supported. Overall, the analysis shows that CMEC's impact on the Rohingya crisis has been significant but uneven across the three dimensions. Broader integration of these findings is discussed in the synthesis section.

Material Conditions

Chinese and Myanmar plans and agreements, coded as infrastructure, outline the legal commitments underpinning CMEC projects, even before the development of the BRI in 2013. The 2009 Cooperation Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Union of Myanmar on the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipelines formalized the joint governance structure and territorial rights over the infrastructure, giving the SOE China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) a majority share (and Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) a minority share) in the gas pipeline and control over its design, construction, operation, management, and potential expansion (National Energy Administration, China & Ministry of Energy, Myanmar, 2009). The 2010 MoU on the Planning of China-Myanmar Economic Cooperation establishes the development of the “Kyaukphyu Industrial New City project” (Ministry of Commerce, China & Ministry of National Planning, Myanmar, 2010). According to China's official Belt and Road Portal, the project, consisting of deep-sea port and industrial park (or SEZ), is led by the SOE China International Trust Investment Corporation (CITIC), developed under the 2014 Myanmar Special Economic Zone Law and will be built on 6,000 acres of land (Belt and Road Portal, 2018a; Belt and Road Portal, 2019). These infrastructure coded sources show that CMEC's energy projects are concentrated in Rakhine State, particularly around Kyaukphyu and the coastal area off Sittwe.

Demographic data from the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, coded as Rohingya population, contextualizes these locations. Because Myanmar does not recognize “Rohingya” as an ethnic category in the census, the analysis uses census data on residents lacking any identity card as a proxy for Rohingya presence (UNFPA, 2014). Kyaukphyu Township reports 51,051 undocumented residents (38.2% of the population), with 92% located in rural areas, where energy infrastructure is concentrated, and Sittwe Township reports 39,211 undocumented residents (31.5% of the population) (Ministry of Labour, Immigration & Population, 2017a, p. 24; Ministry of Labour, Immigration & Population, 2017b, p. 23). These high rates of undocumented residents align with areas historically inhabited by Rohingya and other Muslim communities. This geographic alignment suggests CMEC's core energy infrastructure is embedded

directly where communities are facing rights and movement restrictions, positioning them as a periphery whose land and security are harmed at the cost of China's energy needs.

Satellite data, coded as displacement and land reduction, indicate that the physical costs of CMEC's expansion are absorbed by communities such as the Rohingya. UNOSAT documents that between August 2017 and March 2018, approximately 392 out of 993 settlements in Buthidaung, Maungdaw, and Rathedaung were damaged or almost completely destroyed (over 90%), including 19 out of 223 in Rathedaung, which is located in Sittwe (UNOSAT, 2018a). Additional imagery shows the rapid displacement of an internally displaced persons' settlement on the beach in Maungdaw, a primarily Muslim township only slightly up the coast from Sittwe, with the shelter count decreasing from 457 to 307 within five days, indicating sudden forced movement and land clearance in areas adjacent to the CMEC-linked corridor (UNOSAT, 2017c). An Amnesty International report corroborates these findings, with excerpts and satellite images coded as Rohingya population and land reduction, showing that in late 2017, Myanmar authorities deployed heavy machinery to burn and bulldoze Rohingya villages, remove surrounding vegetation, and clear entire settlements, especially in Maungdaw, where 55 villages were bulldozed (Amnesty International, 2018, p. 121).

Project-level investigations, coded as land reduction and displacement, further demonstrate localized harms. EarthRights International interviews from Kyaukphyu and Maday Island, off the coast of Kyaukphyu, where the deep-sea port is located, show that pipeline construction caused the loss of 60 acres of farmland for 56 villagers on Maday Island, flooded paddy fields, destroyed crops, and displaced at least 20 households, with little to no compensation, despite MOGE claiming to "take as little arable land as possible" (EarthRights, 2011, p. 8; CNPC, 2013). A letter from MOGE, obtained by EarthRights, demanded that villagers vacate their land within five days (p. 8). Although the report does not specify Rohingya ethnicity, the geographic proximity to Rohingya communities suggests that similar vulnerabilities likely extend to Rohingya populations. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) documentation on the Kyaukphyu SEZ noted that in 2014, the Myanmar government displaced 26 families from farmland in 2014, promising replacement land that was never delivered, and in 2016, the Ministry of Home Affairs planned to demarcate 741 hectares of land, which directly affected 77 farmers (ICJ, 2017, p. 51). The report also explains that SEZ-related infrastructure and demographic changes may also affect the nearby Muslim displacement camps, yet the status of these communities has not been considered in SEZ planning, and no return plans exist despite most residents being legally recognized Muslims, unlike the Rohingya population (ICJ, 2017, p. 68). This exclusion reflects a broader pattern in Rakhine where China's development proceeds without accounting for vulnerable Muslim populations, suggesting similar impacts on the Rohingya. It reinforces a dependency structure in which peripheral communities bear the material costs of CMEC expansion.

The findings support *H1*. CMEC energy infrastructure is concentrated in Rohingya-populated areas, positioning them within the zones of construction that serve China's energy needs while exposing the Rohingya to intensified displacement and land clearance. Major clearance only appears after CMEC planning accelerates post-2013 and peaks after 2017. While the evidence does not show CMEC projects directly causing these harmful effects, the spatial and temporal alignment demonstrates that CMEC operates within and benefits from patterns of local communities suffering negative material effects, such as state-led land clearance. Evidence coded as infrastructure, displacement, and land reduction shows a consistent pattern in which large-scale energy and infrastructure development locks pre-existing dynamics of dispossession and forced movement into a structure of dependence in which peripheral communities absorb costs while core actors capture benefits.

Policy-Making

Investment agreements and patterns, coded as economic leverage, embed Myanmar within a relationship of structural reliance on Chinese capital in the energy sector. The Agreement Between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Union of Myanmar on the Encouragement, Promotion, and Protection of Investment commits Myanmar to safeguarding Chinese projects and providing desirable conditions for investors in strategic sectors such as energy (China & Myanmar, 2001). This and the aforementioned 2009 Cooperation Agreement on the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipelines show Myanmar binding itself to long-term infrastructure obligations without social safeguards, enabling Chinese SOEs to operate with broad discretion and little oversight (National Energy Administration, China & Ministry of Energy, Myanmar, 2009). Civil society BRI Monitor reports SOEs, generating nearly half of Myanmar's revenue and controlling much of the economy, operate in a system where ministries act as both industry regulators and project owners or implementers, creating conflicts of interest (Sandhi Governance Institute, 2021, p. 16). The Oil and Gas Planning Department (OGPD) is responsible for energy policy formulation, but at the same time, along with MOGE, tenders oil and gas blocks, manages contracts, and sells products. This allows Myanmar's oil sector to operate without independent oversight, with Chinese SOEs as key leaders. Asian Development Bank (ADB) notes that the energy sector accounts for a dominant share of Myanmar's foreign exchange, with natural gas described as Myanmar's most important source of export earnings (ADB, 2012, p. 9). The 7 billion USD Kyaukphyu Deep-Sea Port and 1.3 billion USD SEZ, which, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, could amount to around 5% of Myanmar's GDP, raising "well-founded fears" that dependence on Chinese finance would give China a "dangerous level of economic leverage over Myanmar" (Belt and Road Portal, 2018a; Poling, 2018, p. 1). These long term-financial commitments trap Myanmar in debt and create dependency on Chinese investment, repeating patterns occurring in other BRI countries (Htwe, 2020, p. 6).

Official government rhetoric, by each and both governments, deepens this signal. In a meeting with China, coded as political alignment, Myanmar Union Minister for Foreign Affairs U Than Swe, emphasized the government's commitment to deepening collaboration with China in institutions such as the UN and ASEAN (Myanmar National Portal, 2023, p. 9). The code language convergence was found in numerous Myanmar National Portal news releases, through terms such as "win-win partnership" and "development," which echo China's description of CMEC projects (Myanmar National Portal 2019, p. 1; Myanmar National Portal 2020, p. 1). This reliance is also evident through non-state actors, such Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) Arakan Army, one of the most powerful groups in Rakhine State, publishing an official statement in Chinese language on its website, indicating alignment with Chinese interests (Arakan Army, 2025). While not directly related to Rohingya policymaking, this shows that Chinese influence permeates multiple political layers in Rakhine State.

Independent publications, coded as political leverage, further corroborate this. The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) suggests China ultimately benefits from Myanmar existing in a state of neither war nor complete peace, stating "genuine peace risks China's strategic position in the country," since friction between central authorities and border populations gives China major "leverage" (USIP, 2018, p. 7). The report states that the Rohingya crisis strengthened China's position. As Myanmar's relations with Western states deteriorated, China stepped in to shield it from international criticism and punitive actions, using its "pro-government position on the Rohingya issue" gather support from Myanmar, deepen political influence, and pursue projects such as the Kyaukphyu Deep-Sea Port and SEZ (USIP, 2018, p. 8). Fortify Rights documentation, coded as mobility restrictions, provides detailed evidence of laws from 2005 and 2008 that require Rohingya couples to obtain multiple layers of permission to move within their township, to another township, or outside Rakhine State. (Fortify Rights, 2014, p. 33). Regional Order No. 1/2009 requires Rohingya to report all movements within seven days (p. 33). A 1997 Immigration Office order in Sittwe specifies documentation required for temporary travel permits (p 33). These policies make ordinary movement effectively impossible and confine Rohingya to their villages or to IDP camps created after the 2012-2013 violence, where access to livelihoods, healthcare, and education is severely restricted. A UN Population Fund (UNFP) 2014 statement, coded as citizenship restrictions, documents Myanmar's reversal of a census agreement with the UN, forbidding enumerators from recording "Rohingya" as an identity, despite earlier commitments to allow self-identification (UNFP, 2014).

H2 is not directly supported. The evidence does not allow me to conclude that China's leverage via CMEC "leads to" Myanmar's harmful policies; however, it demonstrates that dependence on Chinese investment constrains Myanmar's political autonomy, sustaining a political environment in which the harmful policies persist. Restrictive policies originate before 2013 and remain unchanged through the post-2013 CMEC period and after 2017. China has strong incentives to maintain Myanmar's cooperation as a

peripheral partner. It needs secure access to Rakhine's coast, access to Myanmar's natural resources, uninterrupted CMEC construction, and a reliable political ally. These incentives lead China to shield Myanmar politically from accountability for human-rights abuses. In turn, Myanmar's ruling elite benefit from this protection, continuing restrictive and exclusionary policies against the Rohingya. Therefore, Chinese leverage indirectly sustains policies that harm the Rohingya by lowering the political costs of discrimination for Myanmar's leadership. Evidence coded as economic leverage, political alignment, language convergence, citizenship restrictions, and mobility restrictions demonstrates a consistent pattern in which deepening Chinese-Myanmar economic linkages allow for a dependent alliance between Myanmar local elites and Chinese investors, within which discriminatory state practices persist.

International Responsiveness

A chronological reading of UN votes, coded as obstruction of international action, reveals how China's international position is mobilized to shield a dependent partner from accountability for crimes. China has consistently used its international position to oppose every major UNHRC and UNGA resolution addressing the Rohingya crisis. Across several key votes between 2017 and 2019, China was part of a small opposing minority of only 2 to 5 states, most commonly including Burundi, the Philippines, and Russia (UNHRC, 2017, p. 6; UNHRC, 2018, p. 8; UNHRC, 2019a, p. 51; UNHRC, 2019b, p. 6; UNGA, 2018, p. 14; UN Digital Library, 2019). Abstentions, most commonly including India and Japan, are also revealing because both countries maintain major strategic and oil infrastructure investments in Myanmar, with OCEBV and GAIL from India being shareholders in the Myanmar-China pipelines (Taufiq, 2021, p. 88; Rahman & Akon, 2019, p. 386; CNPC, 2013). In October 2018, China submitted a written letter, coded as obstruction of action, objecting to a planned UN Security Council briefing on the fact-finding mission. After the briefing occurred, China publicly criticized the mission's report, arguing it lacked credibility because investigators had not visited Myanmar, and claimed that "progress is being made toward resolving the complex problems in Rakhine" through China-facilitated meetings between Myanmar and Bangladesh, which was coded as delegitimizing international action (UN, 2018).

While this study emphasizes UN mechanisms due to robust data availability, similar patterns of obstruction extend to other international organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). China, along with Russia, dissociated itself from OIC draft resolutions condemning Myanmar, where Myanmar also rejected these resolutions as politically motivated and refused to recognize the Rohingya ethnic identity, according to a Myanmar statement coded as obstruction of international action (MFA, Myanmar, 2021). This demonstrates China's diplomatic power in shielding its dependent partner from accountability pressures in other IOs besides the UN.

Chinese foreign ministry communications, coded as bilateral framing, development framing, and softened language, reveal a sustained effort to minimize the crisis and restrict action to controlled diplomatic channels rather than the international sphere. In November 2017, Foreign Minister Wang Yi advanced a “three-phase solution” centered on ceasefire, bilateral repatriation between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and long-term development in Rakhine, framed as poverty alleviation (MFA, China, 2017a). China repeats this framing, insisting the issue should not be “internationalized” and avoiding mention of “Rohingya,” “genocide, or “atrocities” (MFA, China, 2021). China’s Position Paper for the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly repeatedly emphasizes “true multilateralism,” defined as strict respect for state sovereignty, non-interference, and consensus-based decision-making under the UN Charter rather than rights-based intervention (MFA, China, 2022). The document criticizes “politicization” of human rights as an excuse to “interfere in other countries’ internal affairs” and frames development as the basis for human rights and international cooperation.

USIP reports however, that despite increasing reliance on China, Myanmar’s then-leaders remained cautious of China’s intentions and have tried to counterbalance Chinese influence by engaging with UN mechanisms, including welcoming a UNSC delegation to Rakhine in 2018 and signing an MoU with UN agencies on Rohingya repatriation, moves that signaled limited willingness to acknowledge international scrutiny even as core policies toward the Rohingya remained unchanged (USIP, 2018, p. 33).

Overall, *H3* is supported. China’s opposition in UN forums, delegitimization of UN mechanisms, bilateral diplomacy, and development-first rhetoric demonstrate China as a core country using its power to mitigate pressure on a dependent periphery, weakening international pressure on Myanmar over the Rohingya crisis. The international responses are constrained by Myanmar’s political dependence on China and China’s influence within global institutions. Over time, China’s blocking of UN action becomes systematic only after 2017, when BRI ties with Myanmar are most politically visible. Patterns indicate that stronger BRI ties reduce the capacity of IOs to respond effectively to the Rohingya crisis. Evidence coded as obstruction of international action, delegitimizing international action, bilateral framing, development framing, and softened language shows a consistent pattern in which China uses its diplomatic position to shield its dependent partner, Myanmar, from multilateral pressure, especially after 2017, when both the Rohingya crisis escalated and CMEC negotiations intensified.

Synthesis

Accepting all three hypotheses would suggest CMEC energy projects harm Rohingya living conditions, China’s leverage creates harmful policies, and China’s influence via the BRI weakens international responses, showing how energy geopolitics reproduce dependency structures that condition the crisis; however, only *H1* and *H3* are directly supported. The analysis regarding *H1* implies that large-

scale energy infrastructure associated with CMEC worsens the Rohingya's living conditions through displacement and land clearance. *H2*'s analysis implies that the economic dependence created by China's energy investments can protect and preserve Myanmar's policies that harm the Rohingya and violate human rights norms. Lastly, *H3*'s analysis implies the BRI causes China, as a core power, to shield Myanmar from international accountability for its crimes against the Rohingya, weakening responsiveness to the crisis.

Taken together, these findings suggest deep risks may emerge when core-centered energy infrastructure initiatives, such as those tied to CMEC and the BRI, are introduced to peripheral regions with fragile political environments. Beyond the material issues associated with the construction of energy infrastructure itself, the BRI deepens Myanmar's political dependence on China and embeds Myanmar more firmly within the peripheral world economy status. This reduces Myanmar's political autonomy and limits the ability of domestic or international actors to challenge harmful policies supported by core powers. This demonstrates how in Myanmar, external energy investment places the negative material costs of construction onto already vulnerable groups, entrenches political dependency, and weakens international responsiveness to humanitarian crises.

Conclusion

The research finds that the BRI and CMEC's impact on the Rohingya crisis is significant, but uneven across the three dimensions. CMEC energy projects align with Rohingya areas and align temporally with displacement and land reduction (supporting *H1*), Chinese leverage sustains but does not create discriminatory policies (not supporting *H2*), and China systematically weakens multilateral responses coinciding with BRI progression (supporting *H3*). Economic dependence created through CMEC allows harmful policies to persist, and China's role in international forums makes accountability harder to achieve. Together, these patterns suggest that large energy projects tied to powerful external actors can reinforce, rather than reduce, the conditions that allow the Rohingya crisis to continue.

Future research should address current data limitations, such as access to decision-making documents and restricted humanitarian access, by combining document analysis with interviews or fieldwork to verify how CMEC-related land use affects Rohingya material conditions, security, and mobility, and by using longitudinal satellite studies to clarify whether displacement continues alongside CMEC expansion. It can also focus more on other aspects of material impacts, such as resource loss, environmental damage, and labor practices. Access to internal Chinese-language planning records, if available in the future, would also deepen understanding of how China assesses risks when operating in ethnically contested regions. Future studies should determine if similar patterns recur across other regions where BRI overlaps with political instability and in other comparable situations involving other energy investors and vulnerable communities. Additionally, they should examine the impacts of how geopolitics and Great Power influence more broadly, shape international accountability mechanisms, like the UN and ICC.

The Myanmar case shows that when major infrastructure projects like CMEC expand in conflict areas, they can strengthen governments while leaving vulnerable groups with fewer protections. Because Myanmar relies on China for investment and diplomatic cover, discriminatory policies toward the Rohingya are more likely to persist, and international pressure becomes less effective. This means that accountability and protection mechanisms must directly address the political leverage created by energy partnerships such as the BRI.

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Appendix

Table 2. Codebook

Category	Code	Definition	Example
Material Conditions	Infrastructure	CMEC-related planning and construction	the project, consisting of an industrial park (or SEZ) and deep-sea port, is led by the SOE China International Trust Investment Corporation (CITIC), developed under the 2014 Myanmar Special Economic Zone Law and will be built on 6,000 acres of land (Belt and Road Portal, 2018a; Belt and Road Portal, 2019)
	Rohingya population	Rohingya living area	“the majority of residents in Maungdaw are Muslims” (Fortify Rights, 2014)
	Displacement	Forced relocation of residents	“a letter MOGE sent to local villagers in Arakan State, dated March 16, 2010, informing villagers they must vacate their land in just five days” (EarthRights, 2011, p. 8)
	Land reduction	Confiscation and degradation of land	“Villagers on Maday Island received no compensation when construction work flooded their paddy fields” (EarthRights, 2011)
Policy-Making	Economic Leverage	Myanmar’s dependence on Chinese investment	“the 7.3 billion USD Kyaukphyu deep-sea port and 2.7 billion USD SEZ, could amount to around 5% of Myanmar’s GDP” (Poling, 2018, p. 1)
	Political Alignment	Myanmar adopting Chinese-favored positions	“closer collaboration between the two countries in regional and international arenas especially in the frameworks of ASEAN, SCO and the United Nations as well as on regional and international matters of mutual interests” (Myanmar National Portal, 2023)
	Language Convergence	Myanmar’s use of Chinese language and rhetoric	Arakan Army, one of the most powerful groups in Rakhine State, publishing an official statement in Chinese language on its website, indicating alignment with Chinese interests (Arakan Army, 2025).
	Citizenship Restrictions	Restrictions on the administrative rights of the Rohingya	“the Myanmar Government’s decision not to allow census respondents who wish to self-identify their ethnicity as Rohingya to do so” (UNFPA, 2014).
	Mobility Restrictions	Restrictions on the movement of the Rohingya	“Regional Order No. 1/2009 requires that Rohingya inform authorities within seven days of all movements ‘from one place to another’” (Fortify Rights, 2014, p. 33)
International Responsiveness	Obstruction of International Action	China blocking or voting against IO action	“‘Situation of human rights in Myanmar’... Against: Belarus, Burundi, Cambodia, China, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Philippines, Russian Federation, Viet Nam, Zimbabwe” (UNGA, 2018)
	Delegitimizing International Action	China calling IO reports false	“In criticizing the credibility of the Mission’s report, they [China and Russia] noted that its members were not able to visit Myanmar itself” (UN, 2018)
	Bilateral Framing	China restricting action to Myanmar-Bangladesh talks, which it facilitates	“Wang Yi noted that China believed that the best approach to solve the issue of the Rakhine State remained is to find an acceptable solution for both Myanmar and Bangladesh through bilateral consultations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, 2017a)
	Development Framing	China supporting development as a solution to the crisis	“Poverty is a major source of instability and conflict. The international community should pay more attention to and support local poverty reduction and development” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, 2017b)
	Softened Language	Avoidance of critical terms like “Rohingya” or “genocide,” using terms such as “displaced persons” or “situation” instead	He hoped that under the leadership of the Myanmar government and with the support from all walks of life in the country and good neighbors, the displaced people will live a good life soon” (Belt and Road Portal, 2017c)