

## **Development Cooperation, Militarism and Conflict in the Contiguous Areas of Bangladesh, North East India and Myanmar**

Jiten Yumnam, Center for Research and Advocacy Manipur

### **Geopolitics and Legacy of Conflict**

The history of the contiguous areas of North East India (NE India), Bangladesh (South Asia) and Myanmar (South East Asia) has been afflicted with conflict that has often been induced by colonial powers and emerging powers. Until 1947, countries in these regions were colonies of the British Empire. Touching the Bay of Bengal and at the crossroads of South, South East and East Asia, their strategic nature and abundance of natural resources has continued to evoke much interest from powerful countries seeking economic and political dominance.

Another shared characteristic of Myanmar, NE India and Bangladesh is the persistence of armed conflict and their related social implications. These conflicts, which are multi-dimensional and multi-layered in nature, have been intensified by the move for economic and political domination by powerful countries. Two main factors account for the major forms of conflict in these regions: 1) the competition amongst powerful countries for dominance and 2) the conflict between governments and indigenous peoples (specifically in Manipur and Assam in NE India, Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh and Rakhine and Kachin State in Myanmar)..

The indigenous populations in these regions are comprised of ongoing movements and struggles for self-determination. Many of these conflicts have been based on the state's military efforts to subdue indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination over their lands and resources.

The persisting conflicts are fueled by the increasing efforts of powerful countries to control lands and resources. The strategies of the three regions - India's Act East Policy, China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) and Japan's Free and Open Asia Pacific strategy - are balanced against the Asia Pacific strategies of the United States (US), European Union (EU), Russia, etc. China is expanding its OBOR initiative in South and South East Asia with initiatives in roads, railways, oil pipelines and other infrastructure financing. India and Japan are increasingly combining their strategies to counter China's OBOR with strategies to control land, resources and important locations with similar initiatives.

Development cooperation and the tacit involvement of International Financial Institutions (IFIs) in financing development processes to control land and natural resources in situations of armed conflict have spurred greater conflict and fragility in all three regions. Multilateral and bilateral development financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank (WB) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), as well as financing from emerging economies, such as India and China, are actively financing connectivity projects to tap the natural resources from these regions. Multinational companies and IFIs are aggressively pursuing oil and gas exploration in these regions.

The ADB's Country Partnership Strategy for Myanmar, 2017–2021, aims to support the government in laying the foundations for sustainable and inclusive economic development for poverty reduction. The ADB focus for connectivity in Myanmar will complement its connectivity financing in India's North East and Bangladesh, under the South Asia Sub Economic Cooperation (SASEC).<sup>1</sup> Myanmar is also part of ADB's Greater Mekong Sub Economic Cooperation (GMS), under which ADB financed a portion of the Greater Mekong Sub Region East-West Economic Corridor Highway Development Project in Myanmar.

ADB pursued financing of road building through the South Asia Sub Economic Cooperation (SASEC) under the North East India Strategic Plan (NEISP) to promote a business friendly environment and to tap the natural resources in India's North East. In April 2017, the JICA signed an agreement with the Union government in New Delhi to provide over 67 billion yen (US\$610 million) for Phase I of the North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project. Phase 1 will see the enhancement of National Highway 54 and National Highway 51 in Mizoram and Meghalaya.<sup>2</sup>

The DEG of Germany co-financed the mining operation in Meghalaya by the French mining company, Lafarge. The German development bank KfW financed the Pare Hydroelectric project in Arunachal Pradesh. On 12 June 2014 the World Bank approved a US\$107-million credit for the Mizoram State Roads II – Regional Transport Connectivity Project to improve transport connectivity to enhance Mizoram and other northeastern states' road links with Bangladesh, as well as with Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> JICA is preparing to fund the Kaladan multi-modal transportation mode in Mizoram State of India. The World Bank is funding the high voltage transmission and distribution lines across India's NE region.

Meanwhile, the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is investing in the adjoining areas of South and South East Asia Region. In 2016, the AIIB approved loans amounting to US\$500 million for power, housing and transportation projects in four countries in the region. In a meeting in September 2016, the AIIB approved US\$300 million for the Myanmar's Mingyan project, among others.<sup>4</sup> In Bangladesh, the World Bank, ADB and JICA are working together to finance infrastructures geared to control strategic resources like natural gas as well as strategic locations.

This process of defining the priorities and areas of development cooperation is being pursued in an environment that excludes indigenous peoples and denies their rights. Official Development Assistance (ODA) is increasingly being utilized to advance the strategic economic and political interests of donors in the region. India is cementing a strong relationship with Japan for strategic reasons whereby Japanese ODA is utilized for strategic purposes while also deepening military cooperation.<sup>5</sup> The efforts of IFIs and dominant countries for their economic and political influence also involves close coordination with concerned governments to suppress indigenous peoples' rights and limit their democratic space to seek effective development cooperation and genuine development process.

## Development Cooperation & Militarism in India's North East

India's North East region, which comprises eight states bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh, is projected as the corridor for connecting South East Asia under India's Act East Policy. Development cooperation and militarism in India's North East needs to be understood in the context of indigenous peoples' movements for self-determination. Two examples are the movements for greater autonomy in Tripura and for full self-determination in Manipur both of which have been subjected to military responses from the Government of India. The Revolutionary Peoples Front, the United National Liberation Front, and related groups are battling the Indian Armed forces in Manipur in a low intensity conflict, while the United Liberation Front of Assam has led the armed struggle for self-determination in Assam.

The Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA, 1958), was introduced to counter the armed liberation movements' in Manipur and across India's North East region. The AFSPA 1958 derogates fundamental rights, specifically their right to life, justice and remedy while legitimizing the intense militarization. The militarization has led to extra judicial executions, arbitrary killings, enforced disappearances, sexual harassment, and other abuses with complete impunity being conferred to the relevant Indian Army officials under AFSPA, 1958. The Supreme Court of India continues to hear a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) seeking an investigation into 1,528 cases of extra judicial executions from 2000 to 2012 committed by the Indian security forces and Manipur police.<sup>6</sup>

Militarization has intensified because of the aggressive push for large infrastructure projects. This has included extractive industries (mining, oil exploration, etc.) under the Act East Policy as well as key infrastructure projects financed with development cooperation from multilateral and bilateral financial institutions. The Indian armed forces deployed counter insurgency operations in NE India, which are involved in protecting hydroelectric projects, mining sites, and other key infrastructure projects financed by the ADB, World Bank, JICA, etc.

The Indian armed forces have launched numerous military operations. In Manipur this included Operation Summer Storm (2009), Operation Khengjoi (2006), Operation Somtal (2007), and Operation Tornado (2005). The objective of these missions has been to not only clear armed liberation groups but also to control indigenous areas already designated for Tipaimukh including dam construction, oil exploration and the mining of chromium and limestone. More than 50,000 Indian armed forces units have been deployed to military camps in Manipur. As well, over 1,500 security forces from different paramilitary units are also confirmed to be deployed for the protection of the Trans Asian Railway works under construction in Manipur.<sup>7</sup>

Military equipment purchased externally is being used in these counter insurgency operations. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), hovercraft and other arms purchased from Israel, US, and Russia have been used during counter insurgency operations to subdue the indigenous resistance movement in Manipur.<sup>8</sup> Sukhoi Jet fighters purchased from Russia have been deployed to the Tezpur Air force base in Assam, close to the Chinese and Myanmar borders.<sup>9</sup> India's effort to militarily suppress self-determination movements has also involved military cooperation between Burma and Bangladesh in

joint military operations against the insurgents or liberation groups operating in their respective territories. Work in economic cooperation at the regional level has emphasized the suppression of voices of resistance, using the pretext of counter terrorism. For instance, the India and ASEAN Free Trade Agreement included explicit references and a focus on efforts to jointly fight terrorism.

The extensive road building across India's North East, with financing from the ADB, WB and JICA, serves both economic and military purposes. The road building under various connectivity projects is envisaged to support the construction of over two hundred (200) mega dams across the Brahmaputra – Barak River system. These dams will facilitate the exploration and drilling of oil and gas and the mining of minerals in the NE region. JICA and KfW are directly involved in this work. In 2016 the World Bank approved a US\$470-million loan to support six states in the NE India to augment their 400 KV high voltage transmission and distribution networks. This will also support the exploitation of energy potentials of rivers in the NE region through the construction of mega dams.<sup>10</sup>

NE India's massive road construction plans are also designed to help the Indian Armed Forces to confront its internal and external security challenges. For instance, the roads will ease the movement of Indian armed forces and intensify its counter insurgency offensives in Manipur, Assam and other parts of North East. Additionally, the road building in Arunachal Pradesh will assist the movement of Indian armed forces closer to the borders with China, where there have been long-standing tensions over territorial disputes between India and China.

Development cooperation for infrastructure financing, primarily road projects in India's North East, could stir up another dimension of conflict. The potential for intense conflict in NE India is a real issue with the JICA supported infrastructure projects, primarily road projects in Arunachal Pradesh. This has met with stern objections from China as it claims Arunachal Pradesh is part of South Tibet. There has been an on-going conflict between India and China over the control of Arunachal Pradesh. Indeed, a war between India and China broke out in 1962 over China's claim to this state. In 2009, China protested the inclusion of a water management project in Arunachal Pradesh, which was part of a \$2.9 billion loan ADB had promised India.<sup>11</sup> More currently, China has denounced the September 2017 statement by Japan and India, which outlines their plans to cooperate on infrastructure projects such as road connectivity and electricity in India's NE States.<sup>12</sup> With an eye on China's OBOR initiative, in October 2017, the US Government called for increasing connectivity in the South Asia region.<sup>13</sup> The tensions and conflict are likely to escalate in NE India with the continued efforts by India in oil and gas exploration as well as their plans to build hydropower projects and road infrastructure projects.

Efforts to exploit NE India's natural resources have been another source of tension in the region. The Government's plan to mine uranium in Meghalaya has been met with strong resistance from indigenous communities. There are concerns that India's agreement with Australia, Japan and Germany for peaceful nuclear cooperation will also facilitate the mining and exploitation of natural resources in Meghalaya. At the North East Business Summit in November 2017 agreements between the Government of Manipur and corporate bodies were signed to commence mining and oil exploration in Manipur, much to the objection of indigenous groups.

Transnational companies such as Jubilant Energy Private Limited and big Indian companies like the Oil India Limited, and Oil and Natural Gas Corporation are advocating for comprehensive exploitation of oil and gas in NE India. The ADB, European Investment Bank (EIB), the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC), and other bilateral finance institutions (eg. Germany's DEG) have co-financed limestone mining operations in Meghalaya with the *Lafarge* Group of France and Cementos Molins of Spain. The Lafarge Surma Cement (LSC) Project, which is run by Lafarge, received a loan of US\$45 million from the IFC in 2003. The Lafarge mining is in violation of the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 and the Forest Rights Act, 2006.<sup>14</sup> In January 2014, the indigenous Khasi people who are affected by the IFC- and ADB-funded limestone mine, filed a complaint with the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO), the IFC's accountability mechanism. The Khasis maintain that Lafarge has illegally infringed on their land without their consent or recognition of their rights.

Community leaders striving for the defense of their lands and natural resources are rejecting the current exploitative and unsustainable development models that include dam building, oil exploration and mining. They are often branded as anti-development, anti-national or insurgents and have been subjected to human rights violations. Community leaders in Burma, NE India and in Bangladesh's CHT have been killed, jailed and tortured.

Development cooperation involving military cooperation is an emerging phenomenon in NE India. The underlying objective seems to be to counter Chinese influence in both South Asia and South East Asia. In the Annual India – Japan Ministerial Defense Dialogue (September 2017), India and Japan agreed to step up their defense cooperation, including anti-submarine exercises and counter terrorism measures.<sup>15</sup> In July 2017, the US, India and Japan conducted joint naval exercises demonstrating increased defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. This has included the deployment of front-line warships, submarines and aircraft as part of the tri-nation Malabar exercises in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>16</sup>

In early May 2018, military cooperation between India and the US was enhanced with the Trump administration's agreement to supply long endurance high-altitude surveillance armed UAVs to India. India has supported Japan's position, which is opposed to China's claims in the South China Sea. In a joint statement in July 2016 on the South China Sea, India and Japan asked parties involved in the territorial disputes to "show utmost respect" for the *UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)*.<sup>17</sup> India also joined the quadrilateral alliance with Japan, Australia and US to counter China.

### **Conflict in Rakhine and Kachin State in Myanmar**

Myanmar is afflicted with multiple layers of conflict, which are intensifying in scale and geographic scope. One major factor is that external countries are increasingly eager to control its land and resources, economy and polity. Myanmar is at the confluence of South, East and South East Asia and hence extremely strategic for economic and political reasons. Indeed, the country has experienced intense efforts by powerful countries to exert their influence. Myanmar has become a last Asian frontier for current modes of development – plantation agriculture, mining, and water extraction. Myanmar lies

between China and India, both of whom are hungry for its natural resources and to gain influence over the country.

As a major provider of financial and military aid, China has aggressively pursued road building and the laying of oil and gas pipelines. It is also heavily involved in mining and attempts to build mega dams in Myanmar. China is establishing a foothold in the Rakhine State with its promise to develop a deep-water port at Kyaukphyu at the staggering cost of US\$7.3 billion. Oil and gas exploration by Chinese companies in Rakhine is still progressing, along with investments by Indian and Korean companies. With its access to the Indian Ocean, Myanmar remains a critical pillar in China's regional plans and energy security, as it would allow China to circumvent the Straits of Malacca by importing oil from the Middle East on a quicker route.<sup>18</sup> The effort of countries such as India, Japan, US and the EU to challenge China's dominance is a key factor in Myanmar's evolving and multilayered conflict.

The conflict between the ethnic Rohingyas and Kachin with the Myanmar State is interpreted as fallout from ongoing efforts to control the rich natural resources and geographically strategic locations of the two States, one of which has access to the Bay of Bengal (Rakhine) and the other access to the mighty China (Kachin). Myanmar's best potential hydro-power, oil exploration and drilling sites are primarily in conflict prone areas such as Rakhine and Kachin.

The conflict in Rakhine State has ethno - religious dimensions rooted in historical political realities of conflict between the Myanmar Buddhist and Muslims, the latter being perceived as 'Bengali' migrants from Bangladesh by majority populace of Myanmar. The ethnic conflict also is a continuation of the tensions that appeared during the Second World War, where each sided were situated against each other, one with the British forces and the other with the Japanese imperial forces during their occupation of Myanmar.<sup>19</sup>

The ongoing tensions caused by the forced displacement of indigenous people in Rakhine State is also perceived as an attempt to regain control of areas which are strategic for extractive industries. This includes oil and gas exploration as well as the establishment of trading points, such as in the Sittwe Port. There is an interest in opening up lands to foreign corporations. Since major foreign investors have entered the country under the new legal regime, demand for land has become a major factor in the conflict.

The persecution and expulsion of the Rohingya from their land is a strategy of the Myanmar Government to free up land and water for future use by corporations from outside countries.<sup>20</sup> An estimated 655,000 Rohingya Muslims are believed to have crossed into Bangladesh since the Myanmar army launched a crackdown in August 2017 on suspected Muslim insurgents who were blamed for attacks on security outposts in the Rakhine State. There have been many reports that civilians have been tortured, women raped and homes burnt by the military.<sup>21</sup> The State repression in Rakhine led to the formation of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in January 2018. The establishment of this armed ethnic group has deepened the crisis and armed conflict in Myanmar. The displacement caused by the

conflict in Rakhine has also led to the exodus of refugees in Mizoram and Manipur in NE India, which may become another source of tension.

Kachin State is one of the most conflict-afflicted areas of Myanmar. The Kachin Independence Army, which has been demanding self-determination from Burma since the early 1960s, clashed with the Burmese military in June 2011, ending a 17-year ceasefire agreement.<sup>22</sup> The construction of Myitsone Dam, which was to be financed by China, contributed to the anger and resistance of the Kachin people. In the end the Government was forced to cancel the dam. The controversial Myitsone dam project was first signed between Myanmar's previous military government and the state-backed China Power Investment in 2005. Construction formally commenced in 2007 but was formally suspended in September 2011.<sup>23</sup>

In recent years the Myanmar military has increased airstrikes and attacks in the Kachin State, forcing about 3,000 civilians to evacuate to churches in the Kachin capital of Myitkyina. Approximately 2,000 people have fled to the jungle. This means that there is an estimated 5,000 newly displaced people in the Kachin State. As noted by the UN Special rapporteur on Myanmar, "Innocent civilians are being killed and injured, and hundreds of families are now fleeing for their lives."<sup>24</sup> The escalating battle between the Myanmar military and the Kachin Independence Army has driven thousands of residents in northern Kachin State from their homes, creating new refugees for a country already under criticism for the Rohingya crisis.

The conflict in Kachin State is predominantly based on a fight for control of its geography (wedged between South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia) and rich natural resources.<sup>25</sup> Fighting erupted again in early 2018 in amber-rich Tanai region in Kachin state and near the jade mines of Hpakant, with both sides jostling for control of these strategic areas. Jade sales primarily line the pockets of businesses, military elites, drug lords, armed groups, and Chinese business groups.<sup>26</sup>

The conflicts in Rakhine and Kachin State have led to the exodus of refugees to several parts of Bangladesh and NE India, unleashing other forms of human rights violations. The provincial governments and various civil society groups have voiced their concerns and objections to the increased presence of refugees in places such as Manipur and Mizoram. The provincial governments have criminalized and jailed several refugees attempting to enter Manipur, which has further complicated the situation.

Several powerful countries have a strong interest in influencing the conflict in Myanmar, partly through the provision of military aid. According to 2011 figures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfers Database, China has been the major supplier of military hardware to Myanmar since 1988. It has supplied over 90% of Myanmar's military transport and has also provided warplanes and ships. In early 2018 China announced its plan to increase military aid and cooperation with Myanmar. India is also trying to influence Myanmar through the supply of artillery guns, radars and night vision devices to Myanmar's army. India seeks Burmese military support for its counter-insurgency

operations against armed liberation groups in NE India, which are operating along the borders with Myanmar.<sup>27</sup>

China, Japan and India are competing for influence in the peace process between the Myanmar Government and the ethnic rebel groups. In November 2016, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe held talks with Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi and pledged 40 billion yen (US\$390 million) in aid to back Myanmar Government's peace process with ethnic minorities amid growing international concern about human rights violations in Rakhine State.<sup>28</sup> The Japanese support is also an attempt to compete with China's growing political and economic influence. But at this point China remains the most influential player in Myanmar's peace process. Beijing has its own peace envoy, Sun Guoxiang, the Special Envoy for Asian Affairs, who regularly visits Myanmar for talks with all the peace actors. China has pledged \$3 million in financial support for the peace process.<sup>29</sup>

Development aid has been used by powerful countries to supposedly facilitate conflict resolution but is in fact meant to influence recipients and create a favorable political environment to serve their commercial interests. The human rights dimension of conflict situations is completely sidelined in such processes. For instance, in November 2016 Japan announced nearly US\$8 billion in aid, loans and investment to promote development and reconciliation in Myanmar after talks with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in Tokyo. The announcement failed to denounce the military violence in Rakhine State.<sup>30</sup>

There are major concerns that the substantial aid and increased loans by Japan and China to Myanmar are primarily to strengthen business interests and to give them a distinct economic and political advantage at the regional level. In March 2018, JICA signed loan agreements with the Government of Myanmar for four projects in Nay Pyi Taw. This included a commitment to provide Japanese ODA loans of up to 117.04 billion yen (approximately US\$1.04 billion). The loan agreements envisaged comprehensive socio-economic development in Myanmar including: 1) an 30.469 billion-yen (US\$271 million) agriculture income improvement project; (2) a 14.949 billion-yen (US\$133 million) project for the development of finance for small and medium-sized enterprises (Phase 2); (3) a 15 billion-yen (approximately US\$133 million) housing finance development project; and (4) a 56.622 billion-yen (US\$504 million) Yangon-Mandalay railway improvement project (Phase 2).<sup>31</sup>

China is providing humanitarian assistance to the refugee crisis in Rakhine, while also giving aid for education, infrastructure and agriculture projects in this state as well as other parts of Myanmar. In February 2018, a "model project" for rural poverty reduction with financial and technical assistance from China was launched in Lewe and Tatkon townships in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar. China provided 33.33 million yuan (US\$5.31 million) for the project, which includes social infra-structure development, vocational training and income-generation assistance for residents. In March 2018, China provided aid to Myanmar for the new Kunlong bridge project in the northern Shan State. China is working with the Myanmar government to support the China-Myanmar economic corridor, which extends from Yunnan in China to Mandalay, Yangon and the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone in Myanmar. The initiative is considered one of the flagship projects of China's [Belt and Road](#) Initiative.<sup>32</sup>

## Development cooperation and Conflict in Bangladesh

Connecting South and South East Asia, Bangladesh is center stage of disputes between economically and politically dominant countries for control of the Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh's strategic and economic importance. This has been marked by increased competition between China on the one hand and India, Japan and the US on the other hand. Bangladesh is also affected by internal political contradictions between the indigenous nationalities in the Chittagong Hills Tract (CHT) and adjoining areas, and the Bangladesh Government over the control of land, resources and polity.

The CHT is one of the most heavily militarized zones in the world. According to the CHT Commission. CHT has been under a de facto Bangladeshi military rule codenamed "Operation Uttoran" (Operation Uplifting) since the early 1980s. The Bangladeshi military is responsible for gross human rights violations against the indigenous people of the region, including 13 major genocides and crimes against humanity.<sup>33</sup> Though a peace accord was signed in 1997, it has been marred by violations and continued human rights abuses by the Bangladeshi Army.

China and Bangladesh cooperated to connect East and South East Asia with South Asia under the aegis of the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) Economic Corridor. In making strategic investments in Bangladesh, China has faced competition in the Bay of Bengal from regional and global powers, particularly the US, Japan and India. Japan has increasingly tried to leverage ADB and JICA to finance key infrastructure that would deter Chinese investments and interests while consolidating its own interests in Bangladesh. In CHT, the ADB, World Bank and JICA are also financing infrastructure projects. Indigenous people's lands and their traditional decision-making processes have been undermined by the World Bank funded Bangladesh Regional Connectivity Project, which is meant to connect CHT with Mizoram in NE India.

Financing of extractive industries and the exploitation of natural resources are another source of conflict. Japan has already approved US\$1.18 billion in loans to build the coal-fired Matarbari power plant.<sup>34</sup> The Phulbari Coal mine, funded by the World Bank and ADB, has met with wide objections in Bangladesh.<sup>35</sup> Several activists were killed and tortured for addressing the impact of the project. JICA is proposing to build a port, a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal, four 600-MW coal-fed power plants, as well as rail lines, roadways, and electrical systems. This is part of an infrastructure package deal, under which JICA will provide a loan of \$3.7 billion to Coal Power Generation Company Bangladesh Ltd. This project, as well as others from Japan is likely to restrict the influence of China in Bangladesh as it has increasingly opted for financial assistance from Japan, rather than China. The ADB, JICA and WB financing of infra-structure and coal-fired power plants will facilitate the exploitation of natural resources in Bangladesh such as natural gas and coals as well as the use of port facilities to trade with other countries. The Chakma people of CHT are concerned with the impact of extractive industries being developed in their lands.

China's efforts to control strategic locations in the Bay of Bengal as well as its plans to build sea ports have caused considerable tension in Bangladesh. A proposed Chinese-backed seaport construction project in Bangladesh has been abandoned in favor of Japan after India, the US and Japan pressured the Bangladesh Government to turn down the Chinese financing plan. Earlier, Bangladesh approved Japan's proposal to finance and build a seaport in Matarbari, located some 25 kilometers from Sonadia, where Beijing had offered to construct the country's first deep water port. JICA also offered 80% financing on easy terms to build four coal-fired power plants of 600 MW each and a port complex in Matarbari.

In 2010, China was publicly invited by the Government of Bangladesh to participate in the expansion and modernizing of Chittagong port, and the country pledged US\$9 billion for the endeavor. This plan paves the way for China's broader ambitions to build an overland corridor from Yunnan province to a port on the Bay of Bengal, bypassing Southeast Asia. In February 2016, the China Harbour Engineering Company project was scrapped by the Dhaka government to modernize Chittagong Port, following intense political pressure from India and the United States, both concerned over China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region, including Bangladesh, with its Belt and Road Initiatives.<sup>36</sup> JICA offered a loan to cover US\$3.7 billion of the total US\$4.6-billion price tag for this project.<sup>37</sup> Since 2014 there are indications that Bangladesh and Japan are committed to deepen their bilateral relationship through the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt, something that is key to Japan's strategy for South Asia.<sup>38</sup>

Military aid from China is a source of tension in Bangladesh as it undercuts the efforts of India and Japan to deter Chinese influence in the country. China has been the biggest military aid provider to Bangladesh.<sup>39</sup> When Bangladesh's military purchased two Ming-class type 035B submarines from China, costing around \$203 million, India and Myanmar were alarmed. While Myanmar had no official reaction, it started to speed up its own submarine purchasing program. India, on the other hand, openly showed its displeasure by sending a high-profile government representative to Bangladesh.<sup>40</sup> India also operationalized a US\$4.5 billion line of credit, its third and largest ever, to Bangladesh in October 2017 as part of its strategic efforts to wean Dhaka away from China.<sup>41</sup>

Development cooperation in indigenous territories, which does not respect their rights over their land and resources, is another major source of conflict. With funding support from the World Bank, the Bangladesh Government commenced work on the "Chittagong Hill Tracts Connectivity Project" in early 2016.<sup>42</sup> The main objective of this road construction project, which is to be built by the Engineering Core of the Bangladesh army, is to expand trade with the Mizoram State of India.<sup>43</sup> The CHT Regional Council has not given any level of consent for the Thega Mukh land port, which is part of the World Bank project, because of its possible adverse impact. Nonetheless the government has begun to implement the project, ignoring the opinion of the CHT Regional Council.<sup>44</sup> The road building plan of the World Bank would further facilitate the control and suppression of indigenous people's right to and movement for self-determination in the CHT.

Japan has been using its ODA to leverage its influence in Bangladesh, including in the conflict in Rakhine. In May 2018 Japan announced that it would provide around US\$1.8 billion in loans to finance infrastructure and other development projects in Bangladesh to repatriate the Rohingyas refugees in the

country.<sup>45</sup> On 29 June 2017, JICA and the Government of Bangladesh signed a loan agreement to provide ODA loans of up to 178.225 billion yen (approximately US\$2.05 billion) to fund six major infra-structure projects. The ADB has commenced a financing plan for development of the Chittagong Port to improve the inter-modal transport systems and to expand regional trade. The Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction is providing technical assistance for this ADB project.<sup>46</sup>

Human rights violations, threats on the survival of indigenous communities, the continued impunity of the military and the unaccountability of corporate bodies are deliberately ignored in the pursuit of political and economic dominion of Bangladesh by powerful countries.

## **Conclusions**

The contiguous South Asian region of North East India, Bangladesh and Myanmar in South East Asia presents a continuing legacy of efforts by colonial powers and newly emerging powerful countries to pursue their economic and political interests. The process has led to considerable conflict that has been triggered by competition for the control of resources, for key/strategic locations. Corporations from foreign countries have been eager to expand into this region.

The China's influence, through its One Belt One Road Initiatives and also through the financing from the AIIB, has caused many tensions. India, along with Japan, the US, and Australia, has tried to keep China at bay and limit its influence in South Asia, particularly in terms of controlling strategic geographical locations. By cooperating with India and Bangladesh, and also with Myanmar, to develop connectivity projects in South and Southeast Asia, Japan has an opportunity to accomplish its objective of countering Chinese economic and strategic expansion in the region. Japan's use of ODA as a tool of economic statecraft seems to be directed toward reinforcing its dominance as an aid donor while counterbalancing China's expansion.

The pursuit of these policies and alliances has been developed with a recognition of the strategic nature of the land, geography, and resources. At the same time, the indigenous peoples in these contiguous areas are perceived as threats and obstacles to these ambitions. Increased militarization, suppression of community rights and voices and the restriction of civil society space while insisting on economic and counter-terrorism cooperation figure large throughout the region.

The human rights implications for indigenous peoples include displacement, extra judicial executions, and sexual harassment, to name just some of the consequences. All are the direct consequence of military operations by these three states against their indigenous peoples. Another factor is the rising tension created by the military build-up and cooperation amongst powerful countries in pursuit of their political and economic agendas for NE India, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The pursuit of unsustainable and destructive development processes has pushed indigenous peoples to the periphery of survival, compelling them to consolidate and deepen their struggle for their self-

determination, for defense of their land and livelihood, and for their rights and dignity as a people. Their resolve is fueled by the increased militarism unleashed on their lives and land.

The massive loss of land and livelihood by indigenous communities and the destruction of their environment and culture due to militarization is likely to intensify the resistance of indigenous peoples and exacerbate existing armed conflicts. The opposition to dam building in Kachin State along with increased conflict situation and the cancellation of Myitsone Dam in Myanmar illustrates this point.

Development cooperation should be founded on a response to the development concerns and needs of affected communities. It should assist in the advancement of democratic development processes, and encourage the meaningful participation of indigenous communities in defining and implementing projects affecting their rights, land and resources, and their future as a people.

Development cooperation, including the provision of aid, should insist on strong compliance to standards of indigenous people's rights, environmental protection, sustainable development and corporate accountability to uphold human rights' principles and practices. Donors' involvement in and financing of peace building processes should not be manipulated to advance their political objectives or the interests of their multi-national companies at the expense of the recipient countries and their people.

Governments should stop all forms of militarization and human rights' violations of indigenous communities. All emergency and security laws employed to repress indigenous peoples such as the AFSPA, 1958, or the National Security Act, 1980, should be repealed. Indigenous peoples' right to self determination over their lands and resources as outlined in the *UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) should be fully recognized and implemented.

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<sup>1</sup> Myanmar: Country Partnership Strategy (2017-2021), Asian Development Bank, March 2017  
<https://www.adb.org/documents/myanmar-country-partnership-strategy-2017-2021>

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