In the summer of 2015 tens of thousands of Rohingya people from Myanmar and Bangladesh boarded under-supplied and barely sea worthy vessels to escape systematic repression that was tantamount to genocide according to the International State Crime Initiative at Queen Mary University of London. The treacherous sea voyages left the Rohingya refugees at the mercy of the elements and human traffickers, as the international community prevaricated over how to respond. Gradually states from around the region and beyond agreed to take Rohingya refugees and the crisis abated. The Japanese government was noticeably quiet during the crisis and did not appear to take on the responsibilities expected of a regional power or to live up to its own human security rhetoric.

The tendency of the Japanese government to stand aside during a refugee crisis is nothing new; Japan has frequently been criticized for its strategy towards refugees. Explaining why the Japanese government was so reticent to act in the case of the Rohingya refugee crisis requires an examination of how historical factors have influenced Japan’s policy towards Myanmar. In particular, Japan’s conquest of Burma during WWII has left ineradicable constraints on Japanese-Myanmar relations. At the same time, Japanese foreign policymakers have repeatedly referenced Japan’s post-war history as a democratic and developed country that acts as a bridge between Myanmar and international society by teaching Myanmar how to become a prosperous and liberal state. This study adopts a poststructural framework to illustrate how Japan’s failure to respond to the 2015 Rohingya crisis demonstrates the inherent instability of its foreign policy discourse, as the values Japan proclaims are not ones it has been prepared to live up to in practice.

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