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INTERNATIONAL CONSENSUS ON R2P: CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OF MYANMAR'S ROHINGYA CRISIS AMID GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES

Abstract

The principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has become a normative cornerstone in international discourse on atrocity prevention. Yet, its application remains contested and uneven, particularly in protracted crises such as the Rohingya persecution in Myanmar. This paper investigates the theoretical underpinnings of how and when international consensus forms around the invocation of R2P, using the Rohingya crisis as a focal point. Through a theoretical lens drawing from the theory of norm entrepreneurship, this paper explores the conditions under which international actors might agree to apply R2P provisions, even in the face of geopolitical complexity and sovereignty concerns. Current regional shifts has been taken into consideration, such as Myanmar's post-coup instability and the Arakan Army's (AA) expanding control in Rakhine. This paper's findings are supported by preliminary geopolitical assessments and expert interviews with diplomats, policymakers, and regional security analysts. It argues that despite historical inaction, the evolving situation in Myanmar offers a narrow but critical window for norm-based advocacy, particularly for affected neighbouring states like Bangladesh. The findings aim to provide both a theoretical contribution to R2P scholarship and policy-relevant insights for strategic engagement in multilateral settings.

Keywords: Responsibility to Protect (R2P); Rohingya crisis; international consensus; Arakan Army; humanitarian intervention.

1. Introduction

The persecution and forced displacement of the Rohingya population in Myanmar have emerged as one of the most protracted and pressing humanitarian crises in South and Southeast Asia. Since the escalation of military operations in Rakhine State in August 2017, over 700,000 Rohingyas have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh,[1] adding to earlier waves of displacement and creating the largest stateless refugee population in the world. This particular influx often serves as a starting point for any discussion on this issue in Bangladesh's context. Despite international condemnation and a United Nations (UN) fact-finding mission[2] that found evidence of crimes against

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[1] Md Touhidul Islam, Bayes Ahmed, Peter Sammonds, Anurug Chakma, Obayedul Hoque Patwary, Fahima Durrat and Mohammad Shaheenur Alam, "The 2017 Rohingya Influx into Bangladesh and its implications for the host communities," *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2022): 487–512.

humanity and possible acts of genocide, a meaningful international consensus for action under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has remained elusive.[3] The principle of R2P, a set of international norms formally endorsed at the 2005 World Summit,[4] affirms that states have the primary responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. It further asserts that when states manifest failure to uphold this responsibility, the international community has a duty to act through diplomatic, humanitarian, or, in extreme cases, military means, provided the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) approves these measures.[5] This means that a consensus is needed in the international community to invoke any R2P measures. However, its operationalisation has been marked by selectivity, normative ambiguity and geopolitical disputes. In the case of Myanmar, R2P's preventive and responsive mechanisms have largely failed to be invoked. Despite proceedings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and targeted sanctions from a few Western states, there has been no unified multilateral strategy to pressure Myanmar's military leadership or to meaningfully facilitate the repatriation of the Rohingyas.[6] Even in recent times (since October 2023), the Rohingyas in Myanmar have faced escalating atrocities by the military junta and the Arakan Army (AA), amounting to crimes against humanity. Around 630,000 Rohingya remain in Rakhine State under conditions of apartheid, with 150,000 confined to open-air detention camps. Since November 2023, renewed conflict has led to indiscriminate military attacks on Rohingya civilians, including airstrikes and ground assaults, while the AA has looted and burned Rohingya villages, such as in Buthidaung in May 2024. The junta has also forcibly recruited thousands of Rohingya men and boys, with support from pro-junta Rohingya armed groups, further exacerbating tensions. These abuses are compounded by movement restrictions, aid blockades and mass displacement.[7] This notion of ongoing human rights violations raises broader questions about when and how international consensus forms around the application of R2P principles and what role regional actors, especially Bangladesh, can play in shaping that consensus.

While much of the existing literature on R2P has focused on its legal status, implementation challenges and case-based analyses, there remains a critical

[2] Gert Rosenthal, *A Brief and Independent Inquiry into the Involvement of the United Nations in Myanmar from 2010 to 2018*, (Genève, Switzerland: United Nations, 2019).

[3] Martin Mennecke and Ellen E. Stensrud, "The failure of the international community to apply R2P and atrocity prevention in Myanmar," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 13, no. 2–3 (2021): 111–130.

[4] Alex Bellamy, "The Responsibility to Protect after the 2005 World Summit," *Policy Brief* 1 (2006): 15.

[5] Bellamy, "The Responsibility to Protect"; Dele Jemirade, "Humanitarian intervention (HI) and the responsibility to protect (R2P): The United Nations and international security," *African Security Review* 30, no. 1 (2021): 48–65.

[6] This outcome has been focused in detail in Iqthyer Uddin Md Zahed, "Responsibility to protect? The international community's failure to protect the Rohingya," *Asian Affairs* 52, no. 4 (2021): 934–957.

[7] Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar: Events of 2024," *World Report 2025*, September 6, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/myanmar.

need to explore the theoretical conditions under which international consensus for R2P materialises or fails to materialise in specific contexts. This need stems from how the Rohingya crisis represents not just a case of humanitarian concern but a normative test of the global community's commitment to atrocity prevention and accountability. However, some papers do explore this,[8] and that is where the absence of the present geopolitical realities is felt in existing literature. This paper is motivated by two converging dynamics. The changing geopolitical realities inside Myanmar, particularly following the 2021 military coup and how the rise of ethnic armed organisations such as the AA, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), among others, have altered the balance of power in Myanmar.[9] These shifts may open potential new avenues for humanitarian access, international engagement and possibly even repatriation efforts under a revised agreed upon implementation of R2P. Next, the evolving discourse within international forums and regional institutions suggests a growing, although cautious, recognition of the crisis as a threat to regional stability and international norms.[10]

Against this backdrop, an updated, theoretically informed investigation of R2P's application to the issue of Rohingya persecution in Myanmar is both timely and necessary. By examining how normative consensus forms or is obstructed in deeply polarised international environments, this paper seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of R2P's strategic potential, especially for frontline states like Bangladesh. It also seeks to bridge the gap between normative theory and practical diplomacy by integrating key informant perspectives from diplomats, policymakers, and regional experts. In this regard, sampling has been purposive, only involving academics and diplomats/practitioners with either academic works on R2P, or hands-on experience in involvement with UN activities concerning human rights. Their views supplement the theoretical applicability of R2P in the present geopolitical context with updated information on how feasible R2P is on Myanmar post-2021

[8] Applicability of R2P in the Rohingya persecution issue in Myanmar has been explores in: Tin Ma Ma Oo, *Potential R2P in Myanmar: Regional and Global Options: A Comparative Analysis of ASEAN's and the UN's Approach to Responsibility to Protect (R2P)* (Master's thesis, University of Auckland, 2022); Jenna B. Russo, "R2p in Syria and Myanmar: Norm violation and advancement," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 12, no. 2 (2020): 211–233; Vildan Taştemel Kapucu, "The Rohingya of Myanmar: R2P, international justice and accountability," *The responsibility to protect twenty years on: Rhetoric and implementation* (2022): 221–243; Jürgen, Haacke, "Myanmar, the responsibility to protect, and the need for practical assistance," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 1, no. 2 (2009): 156–184.

[9] Biplab Debnath, "Ethnic Divide and Armed Insurgent Groups in Myanmar," In *Handbook of Terrorist and Insurgent Groupsi,* eds. Scott N. Romaniuk et al. (CRC Press, 2024), 719–728.

[10] Md Shariful Islam, "Understanding the Rohingya crisis and the failure of human rights norm in Myanmar: Possible policy responses," *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 2 (2019): 158–178; Nicholas Idris Erameh and Victor Ojakorotu, "The Myanmar-Rohingya crisis, civilian protection, and the dilemma of the responsibility to protect norm institutionalization," *Ethnic Studies Review* 44, no. 1 (2021): 50–74; Zahed, "Responsibility to protect?"

coup. Literature involving topics such as R2P, setting international norms in practice and whether transitory periods of regimes provide any window for international community to act, have been explored to make sense of R2P in Myanmar's context. This introduction has already touched upon the basis of R2P and the backdrop of this paper. The following sections proceed with the geopolitical realities of Myanmar post-2021 coup, and how feasible R2P has been in application thus far. Afterwards, the theoretical feasibility of R2P's application amid Myanmar's ongoing human rights violations against the Rohingya are explored, supplemented by insights from key informants. The discussion ends with exploring what policy directives are open for Bangladesh (if any at all) to pursue any leverage upon Myanmar to ensure human rights of its Rohingya population within its territory.

2. Current Geopolitical Realities in Myanmar

Myanmar is undergoing profound internal transformation, marked by a collapsing military regime and the growing strength of ethnic armed organisations, most notably the AA in Rakhine State. Since the February 2021 military coup, the country has spiralled into civil conflict, with the junta (i.e., the State Administration Council) losing both territorial control and political legitimacy across vast regions.[11] In Rakhine specifically, the AA has made significant territorial gains, capitalising on the Tatmadaw's overstretched resources and the broader anti-junta resistance. As of early 2025, the AA exercises de facto administrative control in key parts of northern Rakhine, including near the Bangladesh border. This is an area that was previously the site of extensive military-led atrocities against the Rohingya.[12]

This evolving power landscape offers new geopolitical dynamics that merit attention. To start with, the erosion of centralised authority in Naypyidaw undermines the notion that the Myanmar state remains a viable or willing actor for protecting their Rohingya population, or even proceeding with their repatriation measures in any meaningful capacity. Additionally, the increasing prominence of the AA, which has shown some openness to international humanitarian norms and local governance, introduces the possibility of engaging alternative actors within Myanmar's fragmented political landscape.[13] Lastly, Myanmar's international isolation and dependency on

[11] Kim Jolliffe, "Contested Political Authority in Post-Coup Myanmar," in *Myanmar in Crisis: Living with the Pandemic and the Coup*, ed. Justine Chambers and Michael R. Dunford (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023), 125–158.

[12] Paul Vrieze, "A Broadening Resistance Coalition Challenges Myanmar's Junta," *Current History* 124, no. 861 (2025): 129–135.

[13] This has been explored in Rifat Rupok, "Recent Developments in India-Bangladesh Relations: A Comprehensive Analysis," (April 25, 2025).

limited external allies, primarily China[14] and Russia[15], suggest potential leverage points for coalition-building among regional and normative stakeholders.

For Bangladesh, these developments pose both challenges and opportunities. While instability across the border raises security concerns, the weakening of the junta and the rise of subnational actors could provide an entry point for international dialogue on repatriation, protection and potential accountability mechanisms. At the very least, the present moment represents a significant departure from the status quo of the past eight years, warranting renewed strategic and theoretical consideration of the international community's role and obligations under R2P.

This paper seeks to question the theoretical underpinnings of international consensus formation in the context of R2P, using the Rohingya crisis as a critical case. Specifically, it asks: *What theoretical conditions enable the formation of international consensus for the application of R2P provisions, and how do these conditions apply to the evolving geopolitical context of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar?* In pursuing this question, the paper aims to identify the structural, normative, and political variables that shape whether and how the international community coalesces around atrocity prevention. It will assess the degree to which current transformations within Myanmar and shifts in regional dynamics could catalyse or obstruct such consensus. Through this lens, this paper attempts to contribute not only to the scholarly understanding of R2P but also to its practical implications for states like Bangladesh that are directly affected by its selective application.

3. The Responsibility to Protect: An Evolving Norm

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) originated in the 2001 report by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) and was later endorsed by the international community at the 2005 UN World Summit as a normative framework to address mass atrocity crimes, including genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.[16] R2P rests on three foundational pillars: the state's responsibility to protect its populations; the international community's responsibility to assist states in fulfilling this duty; and

[14] Clara Mang Sui Tang, "Evaluating Interdependence: The Impacts of the February 2021 Coup on Myanmar-China Relations," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* (2025): 18681034251328012;

[15] Aung Myo Htun, "Political Economy of Myanmar and Russia Friendship Before and After the Military Coup in 2021," In *Decoding the Chessboard of Asian Geopolitics: Asian Powerplay in East and Southeast Asia, The Global North, and Other Emerging Issues*, eds. Debasish Nandy and Monojit Das (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2025), 165–187.

[16] Bellamy, "The Responsibility to Protect"; Dele Jemirade, "Humanitarian intervention (HI) and the responsibility to protect (R2P): The United Nations and international security," *African Security Review* 30, no. 1 (2021): 48–65.

the international community's responsibility to take timely and decisive action when a state manifestly fails to protect its population.[17] While conceptually grounded in human security and preventive diplomacy, R2P has faced considerable tension between its aspirational commitments and its operationalisation. The application of R2P in Libya (2011) is often cited as a rare example of international consensus, although the NATO-led intervention's aftermath generated sharp criticism, leading to what scholars have termed a "post-Libya backlash".[18] In contrast, the failure to implement R2P in Syria despite widespread atrocities exposed the framework's vulnerability to geopolitical fragmentation and veto politics.[19] These contradictions highlight the contested legitimacy of R2P in practice, and its selective application has weakened its normative traction globally.

The findings indicate that for countries like Bangladesh, the invocation of R2P today must prioritise diplomatic preferences over militarised intervention. One foreign policy expert from a Bangladeshi think tank noted that military measures are not only politically untenable but practically infeasible in the context of Myanmar. Instead, soft diplomatic engagement and strategic negotiation remain the most viable channels. This sentiment is echoed in the view that R2P's strength now lies more in its symbolic and political pressure than in coercive measures.[20] It was further highlighted that geopolitical inertia, especially from China, India and the US, along with the failure of both the Rohingya diaspora and the Bangladeshi state to sufficiently internationalise the crisis, has hindered the formation of consensus on Myanmar. Suggestions also involved a path forward for reimagining R2P as a flexible, soft-power-oriented mechanism. By framing the Rohingya crisis as a distinct humanitarian emergency that can be decoupled from Myanmar's broader civil war, would allow Bangladesh to present it as a regional security issue warranting international attention[21] This reframing, supported by R2P's second pillar of preventive assistance, offers a compelling reason for scholars and policymakers to revisit R2P in the current geopolitical moment.

Understanding the formation, or breakdown of international consensus for invoking R2P requires engagement with the evolving literature on how norms are constructed, internalised and mobilised in global politics. While existing frameworks such as realism and regime legitimacy offer important insights, this paper argues that

[17] Bellamy, "The Responsibility to Protect".
[18] Justin Morris, "Libya and Syria: R2P and the spectre of the swinging pendulum," *International Affairs* 89, no. 5 (2013): 1265–1283; Andrew Garwood-Gowers, "China and the "Responsibility to Protect": The implications of the Libyan intervention," *Asian Journal of International Law* 2, no. 2 (2012): 375–393.
[19] As discussed in Fatih Cüre, "Adapting Responsibility to Protect (R2P) for a Multipolar World: Sovereignty, Intervention, and Veto Power," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 1 (2025): 1–25.
[20] Interview of Research Director, foreign policy expert, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on May 21, 2025.
[21] Interview of Research Director, foreign policy expert, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on May 21, 2025.

the norm entrepreneurship theory within the broader constructivist tradition offers a more productive and focused lens for explaining the Rohingya case. Constructivist theories broadly posit that international norms are not static legal instruments, but dynamic social constructs shaped by state and non-state identities, discursive practices, and institutional processes.[22] Within this tradition, norm entrepreneurship theory, most notably articulated by Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink,[23] emphasises how certain actors (usually global/regional norm leaders or affected states) play a pivotal role in framing, diffusing and institutionalising emerging norms at critical junctures or global developments.

In the context of the Rohingya crisis, the persistent lack of international consensus around R2P suggests that norm internalisation has remained weak, particularly among states whose strategic priorities override humanitarian obligations. Bangladesh, as the principal host of nearly a million forcibly displaced Rohingyas, holds a distinctive normative position from which to act as a norm entrepreneur. This role entails not only advocacy but also agenda-setting, discourse framing, and institutional engagement aimed at mobilising the international community. However, as findings highlight, this potential has yet to be fully realised. Data collection revealed that Bangladesh has not yet effectively internationalised the Rohingya narrative to highlight both the urgency and geopolitical stakes of the crisis.[24] This concerns has been echoed through the data collection process, citing Dhaka's limited institutional capacity, its preference for non-confrontational diplomacy, and its geopolitical caution in engaging powerful neighbours like China and India.[25]

Despite these constraints, the norm entrepreneurship lens can show how Bangladesh can still play a catalytic role. This role does not involve military intervention, which is neither viable nor desirable. Instead, Bangladesh can mobilise soft R2P measures, including humanitarian channels, targeted sanctions, and diplomatic isolation, or other similar strategies. The argument advanced here is that rather than relying on the unlikely alignment of great-power interests or waiting for regime legitimacy to collapse, norm-building and strategic framing by regional actors like Bangladesh can reopen space for R2P-based engagement. This re-conceptualisation shifts the analytical focus from structural impediments to agency-based opportunity. This allows for a more time-sensitive understanding of how normative consensus might be forged under current conditions. To consolidate

[22] Jason Ralph, "What should be done? Pragmatic constructivist ethics and the responsibility to protect," *International Organization* 72, no. 1 (2018): 173–203.
[23] Their seminal work on the topic: Martha Finnemore, and Kathryn Sikkink. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change." *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 887–917. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2601361.
[24] Interview of Bangladeshi Diplomat, foreign policy expert, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on April 20, 2025.
[25] Interview of Professor of International Relations, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on April 20, 2025.

this discussion, the pyramid figure below visually distils the multi-layered dynamics that influence the applicability of R2P in the Rohingya context.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework.

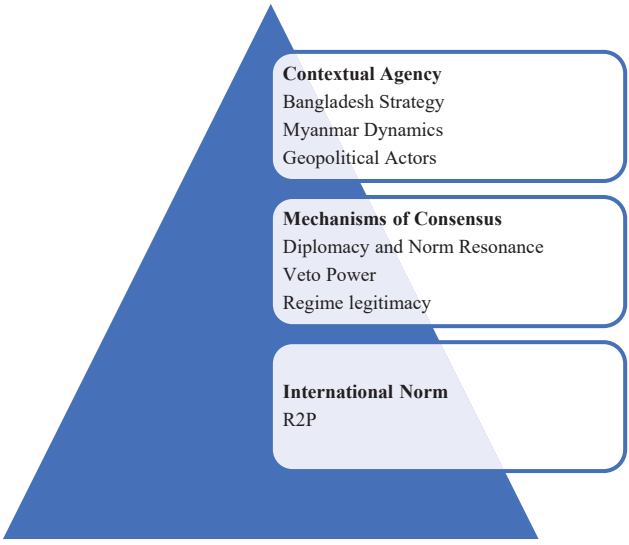

Figure1: Theoretical framework.

At the foundation of the proposed analytical framework lies the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a normative principle rooted in the prevention of mass atrocities. This constitutes the moral and legal bedrock upon which subsequent layers operate. Building on this base is the second layer, termed the "Mechanisms of Consensus," which function as the operational channels through which the R2P norm is interpreted, contested, or advanced in practice. These mechanisms include diplomatic engagement (e.g., bilateral and multilateral negotiations), norm resonance (the degree to which R2P aligns with prevailing state identities and regional values), veto dynamics at the UN Security Council (which often impede collective action), and regime legitimacy (how the domestic and international legitimacy of a regime shapes responses to intervention). These elements interact dialectically; for example, norm resonance may heighten diplomatic momentum, while veto dynamics can undermine it. Together, these mechanisms constitute the middle tier by filtering and shaping how normative consensus is enabled, constrained, or reframed in concrete geopolitical contexts. This layered interaction underscores the complex terrain through which R2P must navigate to be actionable, especially in politically fraught environments like Myanmar.

At the apex of the framework is "Contextual Agency," which captures the strategic behaviour of specific actors: states, institutions, and norm entrepreneurs

who influence norm diffusion and reinterpretation in light of shifting political realities. This aligns with the theory of norm entrepreneurship within constructivist international relations, where agents actively construct, promote, and legitimise new normative ideas. In this context, actors such as Bangladesh can be viewed as potential norm entrepreneurs, leveraging their geopolitical position, humanitarian stakes, and diplomatic networks to frame the R2P narrative in ways that resonate both regionally and internationally. For instance, the rise of the Arakan Army in Myanmar or China[26], India's[27] and the US's[28] strategic recalculations can alter the opportunity structure within which such agency is exercised. Constructivism provides the theoretical underpinning by foregrounding how norms evolve through ideational contestation, identity-driven behaviour, and the strategic agency of actors embedded within social structures. Thus, this framework not only reflects the processual nature of norm evolution but also operationalises norm entrepreneurship by showing how consensus around R2P can be generated or revitalised through situated diplomatic practices. The subsequent section will ground this theoretical model in empirical analysis, demonstrating how current instability in Myanmar may create windows of opportunity for Bangladesh and others to assert normative leadership.

4. Theoretical Aspects against International Consensus: Historic Inaction and Normative Failure

The international response to the Rohingya crisis has historically illustrated the normative limitations and structural inertia embedded within the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework. Despite the existence of a UN-mandated Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) in 2018, which found "genocidal intent" in the actions of the Myanmar military, and the subsequent provisional measures issued by the ICJ in 2020, global political consensus on pursuing any form of collective coercive or diplomatic action has remained elusive.[29] These authoritative findings generated momentary diplomatic activity but ultimately failed to catalyse sustained pressure or institutional momentum towards a protective international response. This failure is not due to lack of evidence but rather due to what scholars call the "selective implementation" of R2P, where norm application depends more on geopolitical alignment than on humanitarian severity.[30]

[26] Tang, "Evaluating Interdependence".
[27] Pamreihor Khashimwo, "India's response to the Myanmar crisis: A reluctant neighbor," *World Affairs* 187, no. 4 (2024): 496–505.
[28] Moe Thuzar, "Burma/Myanmar and the United States: The Dilemma of a Delicate Balance," *Asia Policy* 16, no. 4 (2021): 134–142.
[29] Katherine E. Munyan, "Assessing genocidal intent in the context of Myanmar's Rohingya," In *Political Violence in Southeast Asia since 1945* (Routledge, 2021), 189–208.
[30] Cüre, "Adapting Responsibility to Protect".

A core obstacle lies in the strategic calculus of veto-wielding powers. Both China[31] and Russia[32] have consistently shielded Myanmar from UN Security Council scrutiny, framing intervention as an infringement on sovereignty and a threat to regional stability. India, while less overtly obstructionist, has refrained from supporting any multilateral action that could alienate its neighbour and partner in regional balancing strategies.[33] This constellation of geopolitical resistance has rendered norm activation infeasible, even when the moral and legal grounds were overwhelming. One expert on humanitarian affairs explained that influential states increasingly prioritise other, more profitable or strategic concerns in different regions, leaving the Rohingyas' plight marginalised in international politics. This pragmatic observation underscores a deeper theoretical crisis: without strategic alignment among powerful actors, normative principles such as R2P remain aspirational rather than operational.[34]

This has been echoed by an expert on humanitarian affairs, who elaborated how existing global powers are now shying away from the Rohingyas' plight in favour of other, more profitable issues in other regions of the world.[35] This pragmatic observation underscores a deeper theoretical crisis: without strategic alignment, normative principles like R2P remain aspirational rather than operational. Additional key informant interviews have shed light on past missed diplomatic opportunities, such as Bangladesh's failure to effectively leverage the findings of the FFM or ICJ ruling in a sustained multilateral campaign. One expert pointed to a "window of normative opportunity" in 2020 that was lost due to shifting global attention during the COVID-19 pandemic.[36] Another expert on regional affairs criticised the lack of coordination among Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) countries, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries, and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states, allowing Myanmar's junta to weather brief periods of censure without meaningful diplomatic isolation.[37]

These perspectives help ground the normative failures of R2P not only in international apathy but also in missed chances to strategically frame and globalise the Rohingya issue. Now, the geopolitical realities need to be considered to assess whether R2P is feasible in the present geopolitical reality.

[31] Tang, "Evaluating Interdependence."
[32] Htun, "Political Economy of Myanmar and Russia Friendship."
[33] Khashimwo, "India's response to the Myanmar crisis".
[34] Interview of Research Director, foreign policy expert, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on May 21, 2025.
[35] Interview of Professor, Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on May 20, 2025.
[36] Interview of Professor, Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on May 19, 2025.
[37] Interview of Professor of International Relations, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on April 20, 2025.

5. Empirical Aspects against International Consensus: Shifting Geopolitical Realities (2023–2025)

Since 2023, the political landscape in Myanmar has entered a phase of accelerated fragmentation, presenting both new challenges and tentative openings for international engagement. The central authority of the Myanmar junta has collapsed in several regions, particularly in Rakhine State, where the AA has seized de facto control of key districts and administrative zones.[38] Unlike the junta, the AA has shown a degree of openness to international humanitarian norms and local governance reforms, although its long-term intentions remain unclear.[39] This collapse of military control has created an empirical vacuum: an ungoverned space that theoretically enables new humanitarian actors or diplomatic strategies to access Rakhine without engaging directly with Naypyidaw. The implications for R2P, while still remote, are significant. If the de facto authorities in Rakhine are willing to negotiate on refugee return or rights guarantees, this could constitute a limited but critical third-party opening for repatriation under international supervision.

Moreover, the geopolitical consensus within ASEAN has also begun to unravel. Malaysia and Indonesia have adopted more critical positions toward Myanmar, diverging from Thailand and Vietnam's cautious engagement approach.[40] Donor fatigue, however, has become more pronounced among Western countries, especially in the wake of prolonged conflict in Ukraine and rising global economic instability.[41] Humanitarian aid for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh has sharply declined, forcing agencies to cut rations and services. This reflects a growing mismatch between humanitarian need and political will, exacerbated by the Rohingyas' prolonged statelessness and perceived lack of political agency. Informants stressed the paradox that, just as conditions inside Myanmar open a sliver of possibility for renewed engagement, the outside world appears to be disengaging, leaving a dangerous gap between opportunity and support.[42]

Despite this discouraging trend, the empirical cracks in Myanmar's territorial cohesion and ASEAN's diplomatic unity create a liminal space (i.e., a

[38] Vrieze, "A Broadening Resistance Coalition Challenges Myanmar's Junta".
[39] Monalisa Adhikari, Jennifer Hodge, Christine Bell and Zabra Siwa. "Disaggregated mediation: the localisation of peace processes amid global and domestic fragmentation," *European Journal of International Relations* (2025): 13540661251331519.
[40] Md Mahbubul Haque, "Protracted Conflict in Myanmar and the Role of International Actors," *SINERGI: Journal of Strategic Studies & International Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2024): 117–126.
[41] Nicole Ann Hubka, "The Unprecedented Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Ukraine: Speed and Funding Allocations," Master's thesis, Fordham University, 2023; Viktor Jakupec, "Financing the war and rebuilding Ukraine," In *Dynamics of the Ukraine war: Diplomatic challenges and geopolitical uncertainties* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 99–111.
[42] Interview of Professor of International Relations, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh on April 20, 2025.

brief period that allows for transformative change) where innovative strategies could be pursued. However, key informants have cautioned against legitimising the AA in any capacity, since the Junta government is still the only current legitimate actor in Myanmar recognised globally. Therefore, key public diplomatic channel should only be with the Junta government for any meaningful progress through those channels.[43] Findings have also highlighted how these shifts can be leveraged by middle powers like Bangladesh to reframe the Rohingya issue as a matter of regional stability rather than bilateral tension. For instance, if international actors can be persuaded that failing to address the crisis will enable transnational militancy or illicit trafficking networks to take root, R2P might find renewed relevance under a need for preventive measures. However, sensationalising such matters in bilateral and multilateral settings is difficult since it can greatly jeopardise any progress made in diplomacy.[44] Third parties in the form of international humanitarian agencies have consistently been the focal point for spreading information on such state failures.[45] Now, considering the theoretical and empirical contexts, Bangladesh's role in utilising R2P can be explored.

6. Bangladesh's Normative Leverage and Strategic Role

Bangladesh's pivotal role in the Rohingya crisis is reinforced by both empirical and normative evidence. Hosting more than one million Rohingya since 2017, the country has absorbed substantial economic, social, and environmental costs, including an estimated Tk 2,204.67 crore in ecological degradation in Cox's Bazar and Tk 8,000–10,000 crore annually for food and clothing provisions alone.[46] Local communities that once displayed largely positive attitudes towards refugee hosting have shifted towards greater resentment, driven by wage competition, inflation, and pressure on essential services such as health, education, and birth registration.[47] Despite not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Dhaka has framed its response within international humanitarian and human rights norms, emphasising moral responsibility while persistently calling on the international community for burden-sharing.[48] This principled approach has enhanced Bangladesh's normative

[43] Interview of Bangladeshi Diplomat, foreign policy expert, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on April 20, 2025.
[44] Interview of Professor, Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Dhaka, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on May 19, 2025.
[45] Such as Amnesty International (AI), and Human Rights Watch (HRW).
[46] S. M. Saifee Islam, *Political Economy of the Rohingya Crisis: Understanding the Economic Challenge for Bangladesh* (Dhaka: CBGA, 2023), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/391347149_Political_Economy_of_the_Rohingya_Crisis_Understanding_the_Economic_Challenge_for_Bangladesh
[47] S. M. Asik Ullah, Kazuo Asahiro, Masao Moriyama, and Masakazu Tani, "Socioeconomic Status Changes of the Host Communities after the Rohingya Refugee Influx in the Southern Coastal Area of Bangladesh," *Sustainability* 13, no. 8 (2021): 4240, https://doi.org/10.3390/su13084240.
[48] Zaidi Sattar, *Rohingya Crisis and the Host Community: The Economics of Policy Options* (Dhaka: PRI,

capital, positioning it as more than a passive victim of regional instability. Rather, as demonstrated in its recent leadership in regional diplomatic initiatives and repeated calls for sustainable global solutions,[49] Bangladesh has emerged as a credible moral agent and potential norm entrepreneur in shaping discourse on statelessness, refugee protection, and repatriation.[50] Yet, in contrast to many historical refugee host states, Dhaka has continuously sought to manage this crisis within the framework of international humanitarian norms and legal responsibility, even without being a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. This principled stance alone provides Bangladesh with a degree of normative capital rarely accessible to a Global South country. It positions the state not simply as a victim of regional instability, but as a credible moral agent capable of shaping international discourse on statelessness, preventing human rights violations, and possible repatriation measures.

This leverage, however, remains underutilised in broader strategic terms. Informants emphasised that Bangladesh, perhaps more than any other actor, possesses unique legitimacy to speak on the Rohingya issue. This is not only because of the sheer number of refugees it hosts, but also due to the restraint and responsibility it has demonstrated over the years. Yet this moral high ground has not been effectively converted into geopolitical influence, leaving Bangladesh's normative potential underexploited in international forums.[51] In this light, Bangladesh's potential as a *norm entrepreneur* becomes analytically significant. As a norm entrepreneur, Bangladesh can act as a catalytic agent in global fora by framing the Rohingya crisis not solely as a bilateral or humanitarian concern, but as a failure of the international community to uphold R2P in Asia. This reframing could allow Bangladesh to link its moral credibility with strategic objectives, thereby mobilising coalitions in the UN General Assembly (UNGA), leading efforts within the OIC, or engaging civil society networks to amplify pressure on reluctant powers. Informants acknowledged that reliance on the UN Security Council is unrealistic, given its structural paralysis, and stressed the need for broader coalition-building strategies through the UNGA, the OIC, and humanitarian actors, with the aim of redefining what protection and responsibility can mean in the Myanmar context.[52]

2019), https://www.pri-bd.org/economy/rohingya-crisis-and-the-host-community/.

[49] Ruma Paul, "Bangladesh Exhausts Resources on Rohingya Refugees, Chief Adviser Yunus Warns," *Reuters*, August 25, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/bangladesh-exhausts-resources-rohingya-refugees-chief-adviser-yunus-warns-2025-08-25/.

[50] "Malaysia, Bangladesh among Regional Partners Sending Peace Mission to Myanmar," *Reuters*, August 12, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysia-bangladesh-among-regional-partners-sending-peace-mission-myanmar-2025-08-12.

[51] Interview of Research Director, foreign policy expert, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on May 21, 2025.

[52] Interview of Bangladeshi Diplomat, foreign policy expert, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on April 20, 2025.

Several plausible multilateral pathways remain open. Bangladesh could lead a revitalised campaign in the UNGA, pushing for non-binding but high-visibility resolutions that raise normative costs[53] for Myanmar and its enablers. Within the OIC, Dhaka could seek to build a diplomatic bloc that elevates Rohingya repatriation into a pan-Islamic agenda, turning rhetorical solidarity into material mobilisation. At the humanitarian level, Bangladesh may also coordinate with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and ASEAN to propose cross-border assistance mechanisms targeting the Rakhine region, particularly now that the AA controls significant parts of that territory. These efforts, while not invoking the full coercive power of R2P, would reflect its second and third pillars: the international community's responsibility to assist and to take collective action when states fail to protect their people.

Key informant opinions diverge on how far Bangladesh is willing, or able to go in pursuing these options. Several experts pointed to a cautious pragmatism in Dhaka's approach: while there is ambition to elevate the Rohingya issue globally, it is tempered by the recognition that Bangladesh is surrounded by more powerful actors with divergent interests. At the same time, informants stressed that in the long run Bangladesh will be judged not only by its generosity in sheltering the Rohingyas, but also by the degree to which it shaped the international community's response to their plight.[54] Such insights captures the delicate balance between Bangladesh's normative authority and strategic restraint. The state's leverage is real, but its activation depends on creative, multidimensional diplomacy, through combining normative leadership with network mobilisation across state and non-state actors.

7. Feasibility of R2P and International Consensus

The R2P doctrine, at its core, is built upon a moral and legal aspiration that the international community should not stand idle in the face of mass atrocities. However, the Rohingya crisis exemplifies the persistent disconnect between the theoretical conditions under which international consensus is expected to emerge and the real-world geopolitical considerations that prevent such consensus from materialising. As highlighted in both the literature and from key informant testimonies, the structural impediments to consensus around invoking R2P in Myanmar include entrenched great-power interests, the paralysis of the UNSC, and the absence of a unified normative vision within regional bodies such as ASEAN. Although the ICJ's provisional measures and UN-mandated fact-finding missions have already verified patterns of persecution and potential genocide, the Rohingya

[53] I.e., measures that reduce the positive reputation of a state in global affairs.
[54] Interview of Bangladeshi Diplomat, foreign policy expert, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on April 20, 2025.

case remains emblematic of normative failure–a situation where the empirical preconditions for R2P activation are present, but international response mechanisms remain effectively inactive.

This failure, however, is not entirely theoretical. Constructivist perspectives would predict norm activation through processes of identity, persuasion, and moral pressure. Yet, as a senior policy analyst remarked, the West has moved on to other crises, and in Asia, there's no one willing to lead.[55] This divergence reflects what may be termed as R2P fatigue: a growing weariness or disillusionment with the norm's effectiveness, particularly following its controversial application in Libya and paralysis in Syria. Experts repeatedly noted that the global political climate is no longer conducive to forceful humanitarian action, even in cases with overwhelming evidence. The result is that a principle like R2P still exists in discourse but lacks the institutional or political muscle to trigger meaningful response.

Yet, the picture is not wholly bleak. Informants pointed to "windows for renewed momentum" in the current geopolitical flux inside Myanmar, by decoupling the Rohingya issue with Myanmar's domestic instability. The collapse of central authority, the growing autonomy of the AA in Rakhine, and the weakening of junta legitimacy have reshaped the internal map in ways that, arguably, open new diplomatic and humanitarian channels. Some experts have suggested that these shifts allow the Rohingya issue to be decoupled from broader struggles within Myanmar, thereby keeping R2P relevant as a framework. This approach, however, requires the international community to deliberately prioritise the Rohingya crisis and recognise that its prolongation risks destabilising the wider region, a point repeatedly emphasised by informants concerned with regional security.[56]

This is where the notion of a "soft application" of R2P becomes crucial. Instead of pursuing full-scale international military intervention (which, as both literature and informants confirm, is politically unfeasible), states and multilateral institutions may pursue intermediate measures that align with R2P's second and third pillars. Such measures include: (1) targeted sanctions against individuals and military units implicated in atrocity crimes; (2) the establishment of humanitarian channels in the Rakhine region, coordinated with INGOs; (3) diplomatic isolation of the military units implicated in atrocity crimes, including restrictions on their representation in international fora; and, (4) Elevating the Rohingya crisis within broader regional frameworks such as BIMSTEC and ASEAN. It should be mentioned that adopting measures such as humanitarian channels in practice should correspond

[55] Referencing earlier footnote 36, Interview of Research Director, foreign policy expert, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on May 21, 2025.
[56] Interview of Research Director, foreign policy expert, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on May 21, 2025.

to existing political and diplomatic sensitivities to prevent possible deterioration bilateral relations.

These soft measures may not resolve the crisis, but they can signal the reactivation of international normative concern, offering a middle path between abandonment and coercion. They also reflect a more realist-inflected reinterpretation of R2P, where action is shaped not by idealism alone but by political feasibility and regional influence structures. Bangladesh's role in this is central. As both the host and a stakeholder with diplomatic credentials, it can convene and lead discussions about repurposing R2P for non-coercive interventions. The idea of a multi-track diplomacy effort combining OIC mobilisation, quiet engagement with ASEAN members, and civil society advocacy, has emerged repeatedly from informant interviews. Analysts highlighted that Bangladesh's restrained and non-confrontational reputation is a strategic asset for the country, giving Dhaka room to push for soft interventions without provoking alarm among major regional powers such as China or India. This positioning strengthens the case for Bangladesh to lead norm-based initiatives that link humanitarian protection with pragmatic diplomacy.[57]

Thus, while theoretical models of international consensus remain distant from the realities of the Rohingya case, they still offer analytical tools to identify where incremental progress may be made. The present situation, defined by state fragmentation in Myanmar, donor fatigue, and regional recalibration, provides an opening to reframe R2P as a set of non-military responsibilities rather than a binary of action versus inaction. It also provides Bangladesh the opportunity to reassert its normative agency in shaping the global response–not by invoking Chapter VII of the UN Charter,[58] but by gradually realigning humanitarian and geopolitical interests through diplomacy.

8. Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the prospects for reactivating the R2P norm in addressing the protracted Rohingya crisis in the context of Myanmar's evolving political and territorial fragmentation. It explored both theoretical and empirical dimensions of international consensus formation around R2P, assessing how structural, normative, and geopolitical constraints have historically hindered collective action. Drawing from norm entrepreneurship perspectives, and integrating early findings from key informant interviews, the paper traced the challenges and

[57] Interview of Professor, Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Dhaka, taken at Dhaka, Bangladesh on May 20, 2025.

[58] I.e., it allows the Security Council to take enforcement action, including non-military and military measures, to address threats to peace, breaches of peace, or acts of aggression.

latent possibilities for operationalising R2P in a post-coup Myanmar where the state's internal cohesion is increasingly undermined. The analysis revealed that while the full-fledged invocation of R2P through coercive or military means is neither feasible nor desirable at present, there exists significant potential for recalibrating R2P through softer, targeted, and context-responsive strategies.

The key findings point to a persistent and deep-seated reluctance among powerful international actors, particularly China, Russia, and India, to support any interventionist norm that could undermine state sovereignty or their own strategic interests. This impasse has been compounded by a declining global appetite for humanitarian action, eroding normative coherence around the application of R2P. Nevertheless, Myanmar's post-coup fragmentation, the growing assertiveness of non-state actors such as the AA, and the erosion of central state control offer a new terrain within which normative leverage can be explored. These changing realities challenge the international community to rethink old assumptions about Myanmar's territorial integrity and to reconsider the applicability of R2P in a more decentralised humanitarian and diplomatic space.

Despite the normative fatigue surrounding R2P, its continued relevance lies in its adaptability. The principle remains an important moral and legal imperative, particularly for cases like the Rohingya crisis that clearly involve mass atrocities. While military intervention is no longer viewed as a legitimate or effective route, other tools embedded within the second and third pillars of R2P such as preventive diplomacy, international pressure, and support for humanitarian access, retain their value. Myanmar's current instability may in reality lower the threshold for some forms of international engagement, including humanitarian channels and regional pressure, especially if supported by states like Bangladesh that have a moral and normative stake on the matter with strong empirical credentials of supporting humanitarian efforts.

In this light, the next steps for both affected and interested states must involve reviving the credibility and applicability of R2P through proactive, context-specific strategies. Bangladesh possesses a unique moral and diplomatic standing to influence the global agenda, given its status as the host of over a million forcibly displaced Rohingyas. Far from being a passive victim of regional geopolitics, Bangladesh can position itself as a norm entrepreneur capable of mobilising multilateral platforms such as the UNGA, the OIC, and humanitarian alliances to re-centre the Rohingya crisis on the international stage. It can also work toward encouraging the decoupling of the Rohingya issue from broader Myanmar geopolitics, allowing the international community to address it as a distinct humanitarian crisis warranting specific action.

To achieve this, Bangladesh and its partners must adopt a posture of evidence-based diplomacy, one that combines the theoretical imperatives of R2P

with a grounded understanding of regional power dynamics and state preferences. It must draw upon credible documentation, fact-finding, and legal precedents while simultaneously engaging with shifting realities inside Myanmar and leveraging international norms strategically. This includes building coalitions around humanitarian objectives, investing in regional trust-building, and reinforcing the moral imperative to prevent further atrocities through non-coercive means. It should be noted that R2P's non-interventionist provisions of assistance should be kept in mind so that amicable relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar continue. Along with this, keeping the Rohingyas' plight alive in global fora in consistently evolving ways (by framing it as a wider concerns for the region and beyond, for example) can keep this agenda in focus, so that Bangladesh can expect a better environment for their repatriation should Myanmar's situation improves.

While R2P's original vision may not be wholly realised in the current context, its principles remain vital. The crisis facing the Rohingyas is not simply a question of refugee management or regional burden-sharing, it is a test of the international community's capacity to uphold the most fundamental norms of human dignity and protection. Bangladesh's leadership in reframing the discussion and generating constructive dialogue and concrete actions could not only advance the cause of Rohingya justice and repatriation, but may also contribute to a necessary evolution of R2P itself, and one that is suited to the complexities of 21st century humanitarian affairs.