



ETHNO-SOVEREIGN CATASTROPHISM: SOVEREIGNTY, STATELESSNESS, AND THE ROHINGYA CRISIS IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL HUMANITARIANISM

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.240206021>

Abstract

The Rohingya crisis is the symptom of a complex landscape of overlapping crises, where the fractures between outdated concepts of Westphalian sovereignty and the sought-after universality of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine become visible in a profoundly tragic manner. The methodical marginalization and eventual extermination of the Rohingya ethnic group—a depiction of coordinated state violence, geopolitical apathy, and moral uncertainty—raises fundamental deficiencies in modern global governance structures. This paper interrogates the epistemic dissonance in international legal praxis and normative frameworks vis-à-vis Myanmar's invocation of sovereignty as a sanctum against accountability. Through a multi-pronged analysis of geopolitical stratagems, refugee-host state dynamics, and the necropolitics of statelessness, it examines the dialectics of legalistic sophistry and moral obfuscation. The discourse advances novel paradigms for transcending the impasse, asserting the exigency of radical reformulations in cosmopolitan humanitarianism to arrest the descent into global moral entropy.

Keywords: *Westphalian Sovereignty, Responsibility to Protect (R2P), State Violence, Necropolitics of Statelessness, Cosmopolitan Humanitarianism*

Introduction

In the current international system, sovereignty and nationality are part of a human right, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) declared the basic right to nationality (UN,1998). However, statelessness remains an epitome of the most serious violation of this right—the right to have rights as conceptualized by Hannah Arendt in 1976. The legal protection that membership in a nation provides is denied to such persons and leaves them vulnerable to systemic disenfranchisement. According to scholars, such as Giorgio Agamben (1998), it is a "bare life", in which their existence enjoys neither legal nor political recognition. Such international legal frameworks guarantee an individual's right to a nationality, yet statelessness remains a global issue frequently referred to as a "forgotten human rights crisis" (Kingston, 2013). The national interest, which often takes precedence in foreign policy, further marginalizes stateless populations because sovereign states, concerned with security and power maximization (Morgenthau,1993; Waltz,1988), pay little heed to humanitarian concerns. This ideological difference between political realism and the moral imperatives of human rights is quite vivid in the treatment of stateless communities, especially in that of the Rohingya whose misery is further compounded by host nations' indifference based on national security concerns, (Buzan,1997). While much research has been done on the humanitarian and identity crises of the Rohingya, hardly any study seriously questions the foreign policy implications of statelessness, a critical challenge that requires an integrated international response to tackle these intertwined issues. The Rohingya crisis is often described as "the nadir of human conscience." It speaks to a much more profound malaise than a scandalous immediacy of physical displacement and genocide: it speaks to an ontological crisis of international law and the inertia of collective morality. Based on the ethno-nationalist exclusions of Myanmar, the case of the Rohingya reveals the fraught dialectic between sovereignty and universal human rights, where normative commitments fail before the altar of geopolitical pragmatism. The tension between "universal society" and "society of states" accentuates the ethical dilemma: should humanitarian obligations win over state sovereignty when human rights are involved (Appiah, 2005)? Academics contend that the conflict in Myanmar to prevent its Rohingya from receiving protection is symptomatic of the ethno-nationalist policies as well as the refusal to allow international interventions from overcoming it (Amnesty International Reports, 2004, 2018). The distinction made between

refugees and stateless persons under the 1951 Refugee Convention highlights important legal as well as humanitarian dimensions through which the lives of those people are framed. However, whereas refugees are compulsorily forced to flee their country with a well-founded fear of persecution, they retain their citizenship and can technically return when the fear subsides; stateless persons are not so lucky. Statelessness occurs when a person is not recognized as a national by any state, which makes them not covered by national laws and very vulnerable to extreme marginalization. Some of the reasons are: gender, ethnic or religious-based discrimination; state conflict; lack of nationalization legislation provisions; marriage; no registration at birth; succession of states; and complexities in the form and nature of the nation-states themselves (Muni and Baral, 1996; Chakarborty, 2001; Samaddar, 2003; UNHCR, 2020). Higher risks for statelessness happen if displacements are habitual or prolonged. The priorities and philosophies of development by the West form an agenda often unrelated to, even diametrically at odds with, the real needs and values of these populations the aid is notionally targeted to support in (Indra, 1999; Kaveri, 2020). Foreign policy tool-usage Humanitarian aid allows other, otherwise influential, donors to dictate their agendas or assert some degree of indirect influence without a corresponding amount of accountability by being on their sovereign borders. For example, when Bangladesh and India had tensions due to the Rohingya crisis, India started "Operation Insaniyat" in which aid was provided to the refugees in Bangladesh without speaking on the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar (Mitra, 2017).

Historical arc of the Rohingya: Intersections of Identity, Exclusion, and Conflict

The term "Rohingya" itself tells disputed stories. Etymological explanations trace back the origin to the Arabic "Rahm" (mercy) or Sanskrit "Roh" (mountain). In contrast, colonial records like Buchanan (1799) and others utilized the term to describe Muslim communities in Arakan as "Rooinga". However, this descriptor was later politicized by ethnic leaders after 1950 (Charney, 2005; Saw, 1993). Other narratives categorize Rohingya as either descendants of medieval Arab settlers or later Bengali migrants during the colonial period (Rosenblat, 2015). Situated in a very important geostrategic location on the Bay of Bengal, Arakan, or modern Rakhine, was historically sovereign until 1784. After having had a rich cultural past under the Mrauk-U Dynasty, its current reality is one of acute underdevelopment and ethno-religious tensions (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 1997). Its turbulent history, marked by the convergence of Persian, Arab, and Bengali influences, has produced an enduring Rohingya identity, even as it remains relentlessly contested and erased by successive regimes (Karim, 2000). The Rohingya saga thus represents an intricate mosaic of historical, cultural, and political layers, in which the frontier geography of Myanmar's Rakhine State and Bangladesh's Chittagong plays a role. Already in the 7th century CE, Arab traders would have disseminated Islam along Rakhine's coasts, which facilitated interfaith exchanges and created a syncretic milieu by the 15th century (Islam, 2009). This hybridity, with a fluid nexus between Muslim and Buddhist communities, was exemplified in the Mrauk-U Kingdom (1429–1785), at times influenced by the Bengal Sultanate (Harvey, 1925). When this area was annexed into the Burmese Empire in 1784, it ended the fragile balance and initiated cycles of political and cultural redefinition (Phayre, 1967). British colonial cartography and census classifications hardened ethnic boundaries that excluded the Rohingya, who were labeled as a transnational "outsider" (Chan, 2005). After independence, their precarious status was compounded by exclusion from formal citizenship through the 1948 Union Citizenship Act—legally disenfranchising them, though this legal status was only consolidated by the 1982 Citizenship Law to render the Rohingya stateless (International Human Rights Clinic, 2019). These steps were facilitated by General Ne Win's regime exclusionary ethno-nationalism (1962-1988) which institutionalized a rigid "national races" framework placing the Rohingya at Myanmar's periphery in its sociopolitical fabric (Mohajan, 2018). The Codification of Statelessness; The peak of Rohingya exclusion was inscribed in Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, which retroactively annulled their citizenship rights and relegated them to statelessness. This legislation sanctioned a course of systemic violence, culminating in orchestrated pogroms in 2012, 2015, and 2017. Such massacres, displacements, and internments saw more than 125,000 people confined to squalid camps without basic dignity (Human Rights Watch, 2013). At least as of 2017, more than 700,000 fled to Bangladesh, part of a modern exodus emblematic of Myanmar's entrenched Bamar-majority hegemony and historical revisionism—most recently, the government's rejection of "Rohingya" nomenclature in favor of generic identifiers such as "Muslims in Rakhine."

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual space of Ethno-Sovereign Catastrophism allows one to pluck the ideational promises of cosmopolitan humanitarianism with the hardened territoriality of Westphalian sovereignty. This framework interrogates not just the mechanisms of systemic exclusion but also seeks to suture the ideological vacuums present in universalist frameworks for a nuanced valuation of the efficacy of cosmopolitanism against statelessness and ethnonational violence. The claim by Cohen (1999) that cosmopolitanism emerges as a natural response to globalization, nationalism, and multiculturalism places it in the position of both being a problem and a cure for the modern world (Cohen, 1999: 25). However, its universalistic spirit—placating shared humanness and sympathy—cannot account for the deep-seated power dynamics that define nation-state politics (Cheah, 2006). This study analyzed theories focusing on geopolitical significance for developing global power. Such research emphasizes spatial and territorial conditions in forming world affairs, as explained above. However, to view this broadly, Table 01 describes how significant these critical geopolitical approaches could be. In Myanmar, the Rohingya disenfranchisement is a strong testament to these said limitations. Westphalian sovereignty, with its emphasis on territorial integrity and national unity, consolidates identity by defining "others" externally (Beck, 2006), which, in this case, manifests in

the Rohingya's classification as non-citizens. This illustrates how nationalism operationalizes exclusion to stabilize internal cohesion, rendering the cosmopolitan promise of inclusivity practically impotent in dismantling such systems. An attempt at reconciling loyalty to the state with universal human rights, Appiah's (1998) concept of "rooted cosmopolitanism" does provide a very pragmatic approach to coexistence. However, according to Scarry (1996) and Breckenridge (2002), this vision tends to exist very abstractly, failing to transcend the most deeply embedded cultural and political realities (*cf.* Scarry, 1996). The ideal of "world citizenship" posits a degree of equality and mutual recognition that conspicuously fails to materialize in cases such as that of the Rohingya, whose ethnonationalist policies explicitly negate their cultural and existential legitimacy. As Appiah goes on to argue, the challenge of promoting dialogue across clashing values is complicated further by the state's active suppression of such discourses, illustrating the disconnect between theoretical cosmopolitanism and lived statelessness (Appiah, 1996: 29). Himmelfarb's (1996) critique of cosmopolitanism as utopian draws attention to its neglect of rooted identities—family, religion, and culture—integral to human belonging (Himmelfarb, 1996: 76-77). In Myanmar's ethnocentric framework, these factors are weaponized to justify exclusion, amplifying the inaccessibility of cosmopolitan ideals in resolving ethnic conflicts. It is here that Wallerstein's (1996) reflection (1996: 124) on people living in specific niches in an unfair world acutely resonates; cosmopolitan empathy may more readily heighten sensitivity to global disparities but lacks the structural authority to do much to stem systemic states' violence. Multiculturalism, in pressing for pluralism, thus also fails at national borders (Beck, 2006: 67), Beck (2006) identifying its paradoxical possibility of fostering segregation rather than integration. For the Rohingya, Myanmar's multicultural aspirations, subordinated to its ethnonationalist agenda, crystallize the failure of both multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism to deliver substantive equity. The plight of the Rohingya, therefore, exemplifies Beck's (2006) call to reimagine nationalism along cosmopolitan lines—a transformation essential yet improbable within the entrenched hierarchies of the global order. The evolution of humanitarian norms, as fashioned by constructivist international relations theory, reveals profound insight into the dilemmas of ethics and systemic contradiction posed by modern humanitarianism. In contrast with the materialist paradigms embodied in neorealism and neoliberalism, constructivism stresses that state behavior is enacted not only by rational calculations but also by deep-seated norms and identities. This translates to Martha Finnemore's statement that humanitarian norms pose basic contradictions to sovereignty concepts (Finnemore, 1996).

However, on a paradoxical note, humanitarian norms also support the same sovereignty they are trying to overthrow by formulating different concepts of sovereignty under the new responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine, defining sovereignty as a responsibility instead of absolute domination over territory or people (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001). The place of non-state actors as "norm entrepreneurs" has complicated the story of sovereignty. Groups, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, that have offered to redefine state interests over centuries have moved from pleading moral obligation over pragmatic self-interest (Finnemore, 2003). However, studies by scholars David Kennedy (2004) and Fiona Terry (2002) expose the inherent limitations of humanitarian norms. While they address immediate suffering, they often perpetuate systemic inequalities, creating a paradox where the very structures enabling aid to sustain the conditions necessitating it. This duality is evident in the Rohingya crisis, where international humanitarian efforts, while critical, have failed to address the systemic disenfranchisement underpinning the plight of this community. While the constructivist framework is valuable in offering critical insights into the sociopolitical construction of humanitarian norms, it inadequately interrogates the historical and cultural hegemony embedded within such norms. The epistemic violence, inherent in the imposition of moral categories that often reflect Eurocentric ideals rather than universal values, is criticized by Michael Barnett in his attack on humanitarianism as a Western project (Barnett, 2011). This critique resonates in the context of the Rohingya crisis, where global humanitarianism has been critiqued for its performative solidarity, overshadowing the agency of local actors and failing to address root causes such as statelessness and ethnic marginalization (Rieff, 2002; Kennedy, 2004). Future studies are thus compelled to move beyond the normative paradigm to challenge the complex interplay of power, identity, and structural violence through which humanitarian crises are sustained so as to provide a more multidimensional and transformative cosmopolitan humanitarian discourse. So conceived, the Westphalian paradigm of sovereignty, which notionally derives from the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, remains a foundational pillar of the international system inasmuch as it espouses doctrines of non-intervention and state-centric authority. This framework, while initially invented to create coexistence, has been used historically to support the establishment of oppressive monarchies and the colonization of non-European states as these states' "insufficient" sovereignty (Aijazuddin, 2020; McNeil, 2020).

Table 01: Key Concepts and Theories in Geopolitics and Refugee Studies

Concept/Model/Theory	Description	Key Scholars/References
Critical Geopolitics	Focuses on political discourses, performances, and announcements. Emphasizes spatial dynamics, not power-politics relationship.	(Chen et al., 2012; David & Marcus, 2010; Tuathail & Toal, 1996)
	Centers on the interaction of geography and politics to achieve equilibrium and	(Kissinger, 1979; Sloan & Gray,

Classical Geopolitics	national interest on the global stage.	1999; Sprout & Sprout, 1960)
Kinetic Model of Refugee Theory	Differentiates between anticipatory and acute refugee movements based on their pre-flight conditions and attitudes.	Kunz (1973, 1981); Jolles (1969)
Middlemen Minority Theory	Describes sojourner refugees who face socio-economic vulnerabilities due to cultural and resource-driven separation from host societies	Bonacich (1973); Murphy (2018)
The Role of Geography in Politics	Location, space, and distance feature as central variables in geopolitical decision-making; it is indeed well captured in the maxim "power is local."	(Sprout & Sprout, 1960; Kissinger, 1979)
Theories of Refugee Migration	Explains refugee displacement as multifaceted social and political processes influenced by national and international policies.	(Kunz, 1973, 1981; Murphy, 2018; Stein, 1981)
Post-Colonial Refugee Theory	Explores refugee issues through the lens of colonization, dependency, and social trauma while proposing humanitarian interventions.	(Payne, 2020; Murphy, 2018; Kunz, 1981)

This absolutist understanding carried over into the 20th century with sovereignty defined as unaccountable power (Lansing, 1921). However, the post-World War II dynamics of globalization turned out to be a wrench that threw the paradigm into disarray and directed authority toward supranational entities, which further developed to become transnational governance structures (Krasner, 1999; Nye & Keohane, 1977). Crucially, the Rohingya crisis perfectly underlines the contradictions inherent within this sovereignty framework. Myanmar's dependence on the concept of state sovereignty to rationalize exclusionary measures against the Rohingya exemplifies a distortion of this principle, which was originally intended to foster order and coexistence (Reisman, 1990). This situation highlights the shortcomings of the Westphalian framework in effectively addressing issues related to stateless individuals and the responsibilities associated with transnational human rights. This calls for a redetermination of sovereignty that is not only an exclusively state-centric construct but as a collective and contingent principle that integrates humanitarian factors (Philpott, 2001). Consequently, although the concept of Westphalian sovereignty remains highly relevant, it is increasingly eroded by the complexities of international interdependence and the need to balance national power with international moral responsibilities. As the language of sovereignty changes, its historical basis in absolutism and its use to justify both domestic repression and colonial expansion requires a far-reaching reappraisal, especially in light of the new global issues such as the plight of stateless people and the diffusion of political authority. The paradoxical role of sovereignty-as-protector-of-peace and as an enabler of exclusion-demands a nuanced approach, one which absorbs its foundational principles with current global realities.

Doctrine of R2P: Genesis and Theoretical Dimensions

R2P, the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, was first presented in 2005 to the United Nations World Summit as a response to failures of the world community to halt genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and Srebrenica in 1995. Enshrined in a global political commitment, R2P holds that it is a state's responsibility to protect populations against such acts as genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. It means, however, that if the state fails or refuses to act, it is the international community which is conscripted to intervene, taking diplomatic, humanitarian, or even military means as required. So the core of the principle of R2P takes its basis in a thickening process of the concept of state sovereignty. Traditionally, sovereignty had always been regarded as an absolute right of states, according to the Westphalian system. Indeed, the concept of R2P has reinterpreted sovereignty in the sense of conditional sovereignty: Sovereignty hangs in the balance in respect of the protection of their rights and dignity accorded to their own people. Once the state fails in this important task, it surrenders part of its defense wall against interference by externals. The Rohingya crisis became one of the cases proved to be an actual implementation of the 'Responsibility to Protect' principle as, almost everywhere, the members of the Myanmar minority were made subject to violence and comprehensive discrimination. While UN R2P doctrine had a well defined structure in place,

vested geopolitical interests by Russia and China in the Security Council of the UN through veto power had prevented proper intervention. Such inaction brings back the haunting threat of another Rwanda-like atrocity and thus underlines the need for international accountability mechanisms to escape the limitations of state sovereignty. However, since the inception of the UN, the organization has fought against mass atrocities: through instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and most currently with the R2P framework under which the principles of safeguarding populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity were entrenched by the United Nations General Assembly, 2009. However, the disinclination of the member states to codify R2P into international law as binding serves only for calculated moral sidestepping on matters of non-intervention (Ibrahim, 2016). Actually, deleting the word genocide in important humanitarian resolutions presents a way in which state-centric paradigms supplant and prevail upon human rights considerations.

Realpolitik Versus Ethical Imperatives

The historic indolence of the international body can be attributed to the interplay between strategic calculus and the doctrine of non-interference. Kennan (1985) argues eloquently that diplomatic and political relations are undertaken solely when it serves the interest of a state, as moral imperatives take a back seat. These two contrasting roles are sharply highlighted in the reaction of international society to the genocides of Bosnia and Rwanda. NATO's military intervention in Bosnia (Daalder, 1998), juxtaposed with the passive diplomatic stance during Rwanda's catastrophic 1994 genocide, exemplifies this selective engagement (Human Rights Watch, 1999; BBC, 2019).

Geostrategic Gridlock and Great Power Politics

The institutional paralysis of the UN Security Council vis-à-vis the Rohingya crisis is symptomatic of a far more profound geopolitical schism. That is to say, as Western powers - United States, United Kingdom, France, and others - push to operationalize R2P as a prescription against global instability, Russia and China remain skeptically committed to state sovereignty. Notably, the vetoes of these permanent members are highlighted by their opposition to the 2007 Burma resolution and following blockade on the UN resolutions on Myanmar (Steinberg, 2007; The Guardian, 2018). Their interests lie in their motivation to shield their client states from international pressures. The Chinese calculus of an aggressive global policy is inextricably linked to its BRI, while Myanmar is still a very important node for maritime and economic expansion. Still, investments in the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port (Chau, 2019) and negotiations for a preferential stake (Lee & Myint, 2017) reflect Beijing's economic interests, which are compounded by its wish to counterbalance the Western hegemony in the region. Analogously, the military-industrial complex and energy diplomacy of Russia underpin its firmly pro-junta stance towards Myanmar. Arms sales -for example, the 2018 agreement on the purchase of Sukhoi fighter jets (Myint, 2019) -and energy investments make Myanmar a pivot for Moscow in its Southeast Asian strategy (Lutz-Auras, 2015). Myanmar's apparent transition to democracy after the country's constitutional reforms in 2008 has done little to weaken the military's grip on issues such as national security, foreign policy, and the governance of resources (Yi, 2018). Clergy and secular leaders of both extremes have instigated Buddhist nationalism, thus enabling mass social complicity in the ongoing, systemic exclusion of Rohingya Muslims (Ibrahim, 2016). Socio-political conditions, complemented by military impunity, render R2P relevance in question. Cases like Kosovo and Darfur demonstrate how the deadlock in the Security Council can be overcome by multilateral and regional responses (Gholiagha, 2013; UN Security Council Resolution 1769, 2007).

The Rohingya: Ethnic Cleansing, Statelessness, and Systematic Marginalization

Systemic discrimination and exclusion have long been the lot of the Rohingya – Myanmar's predominantly Muslim ethnic minority in Rakhine State. They haven't been treated as officially recognized citizens since Myanmar implemented the Citizenship Law of 1982, leaving them stateless and vulnerable to harsh vulnerabilities. As stated in **Table 02**, this legal disenfranchisement went hand-in-hand with extreme restrictions on their freedom of movement and to essential services, such as education and healthcare, alongside civil liberties, which thus entrenched the marginalization of these subjects in the socio-political fabric of Myanmar. This was the climax of the persecution of the Rohingya in 2017 when Myanmar's military mounted large-scale operations widely condemned as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing." Ostensibly, these operations framed a counter-insurgency against the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA); they unleashed a wave of systematic atrocities that ran the gamut from extrajudicial executions to sexual violence and the utter destruction of villages entire. These acts resulted in the mass displacement of over 700,000 Rohingyas who fled to Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2023), adding numbers to already a significant population displaced by earlier incidents of violence. International human rights bodies, including the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, have documented these crimes in minute detail, advancing global calls for justice. The ICC has opened an investigation into the military's conduct, and The Gambia has filed a case in the ICJ against the acts that it believes involve contraventions of the Genocide Convention. Still, Myanmar's government and military have maintained their disdainful indifference toward the allegations by distracting with national sovereignty and security concerns, refusing to give credence to the reality of the extent of genocide perpetrated against the Rohingya.

Table 02: Oppression of the Rohingya: A Systematic Examination of Persecution

Dimension(s)	Description	Source(s)
Historical Context	The systematic marginalization of Rohingya Muslims can be traced back to King Bodawpaya's reign (1782–1819), marked by religious intolerance and territorial subjugation.	Bahar (2010a)
Citizenship and Legal Status	The 1982 Citizenship Law rendered the Rohingya stateless, effectively excluding them from the legal framework of Myanmar and depriving them of fundamental rights.	Azad & Jasmin (2013); Mathieson (2009)
Forced Displacement	Crackdowns since the 1970s, including the brutal Nagamin (Dragon King) operation in 1978, led to mass exoduses of Rohingya to Bangladesh and beyond.	Grundy-Warr & Wong (1997); Mathieson (1995)
Targeted Violence	Mass killings, systematic rape, and arson by the Myanmar Army and allied groups have resulted in widespread displacement, with over 620,000 fleeing by late 2017 alone.	HRW (2012); International Crisis Group (2016); Wright & Westcott (2017)
Religious Persecution	Mosques and Islamic institutions have been destroyed or repurposed, while practicing Islam has been severely restricted.	Selth (2012); HRW (2012)
Gendered Oppression	Rohingya women face gender-specific persecution, including gang rapes and forced pregnancy tests as prerequisites for marriage licenses.	Lindblom et al. (2015); UNHCR (2016)
Economic Exploitation	The Myanmar Army has conscripted Rohingya into forced labor, confiscated their property, and excluded them from economic opportunities.	HRW (2013); Islamic Human Rights Commission (2005)
Ethnic Cleansing Campaigns	Military offensives in 2017 and beyond have involved indiscriminate killings, mass graves, and the destruction of over 400 Rohingya villages.	Martin (2017); Pitman & Gecker (2015)
Root Causes of Antagonism	Buddhist nationalism, coupled with fears of demographic dominance and economic competition, fuels societal hostility toward Rohingya communities.	Yunus (1994); Walton & Hayward (2014); Sohel (2017)
International Implications	Over one million Rohingya refugees strain the resources of host nations like Bangladesh, exacerbating food, shelter, and public health crises.	FAO (2018); UNHCR (2016)
Role of Extremist Movements	The 969 Movement, led by Ashin Wirathu, disseminates anti-Muslim propaganda and justifies persecution under the guise of protecting Buddhist traditions.	Walton (2013); Routray (2014)

Geopolitical Stalemate: National sovereignty, Veto dynamics, and deadlocks in Myanmar

The deliberations of the UNSC on Myanmar again brought up the clash of humanitarian obligations and this long-established principle of state sovereignty. Even multilateral systems, as this stalemate in the current situation after vetoes by China and Russia shows, are susceptible to interplay by the geopolitical will of superpowers. A British effort to voice concern at a worsening humanitarian situation in Myanmar and that junta's plain failure to live up to the Five-Point Consensus of ASEAN was vetoed on spurious linguistic grounds, fundamentally symptomatic of deeper ideological divisions (Strangio, 2022). China's blockade over the use of gentler terminology in the draft—not using words like "limited" progress in exchange for the apparently less hurtful "slow"—underlines its overarching strategy to shield Myanmar's military junta from global condemnation. In a similar vein, the observant posture by Russia towards this obstructionist position by the two nations indicates how much sovereignty and bilateral cooperation is valued over collective responsibility. Both nations, using their veto power, have eroded the normative structures that enhance global governance; therefore, the practicality of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle becomes obscured amid present-day crises. Conceptualized at the time as a moral and operational framework following the international community's catastrophic inaction during the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, R2P predicated its legitimacy on a conditional redefinition of sovereignty: that sovereignty is not an absolute shield but is instead a contingent responsibility which requires, amongst other things, the protection of a state's population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. In theory, at any rate, R2P imposes a mandate on the international community to intervene—through diplomatic means, humanitarian action, or military intervention—when states fail in this regard. The doctrine is thus prone to paralysis within the UNSC because its implementation depends on an accord among the permanent members of the UNSC. The deadlock over Burma illustrates the critical limitations of R2P. Notwithstanding all these compelling evidence on pervasive violence, disenfranchisement, and forced displacement inflicted on the Rohingya and other at-risk populations, geopolitical considerations have paralysed effective intervention. The Five-

Point Consensus established by ASEAN—a regional framework set up on dialogue and cessation of hostilities—has been insidiously manipulated by Myanmar's ruling junta to placate global oversight while refraining from implementing meaningful reforms. This junta intransigence, combined with the diplomatic shield thrown around them by China and Russia, has laid bare the impotence of normative frameworks that lack coercive mechanisms. This geopolitical stalemate draws attention to the broader erosion of the humanitarian consensus that underpinned the inception of R2P: the doctrine has been repeatedly undermined by realpolitik in reliance on the ethical commitment of sovereign states. The veto, this structural anomaly of the UNSC, has become an instrument not of protecting international peace, but of impunity. For Myanmar, as for so many crises, the gap between normative aspirations and operational realities grows increasingly untenable, raising urgent questions about the recalibration of international mechanisms to reconcile sovereignty with global accountability.

Bangladesh's Burden: Rohingya Refugees and Global Inaction

Myanmar's systemic persecution of the Rohingya has engendered a humanitarian crisis in which Bangladesh bears a disproportionate burden, shedding bright light on the gross inadequacies of international response mechanisms. With limited economic and infrastructural resources, Bangladesh has managed to offer sanctuary to more than a million Rohingya refugees, mostly housed in the sprawling Cox's Bazar camps—the largest refugee settlement globally. This act of humanitarian commitment initiated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been framed as a matter of both moral obligation and a demonstration of Bangladesh's status as a responsible regional actor. The more tenuous, however, becomes the prospect of the sustainability of such a response in the face of prolonged displacement, which strains local resources, infrastructure, and social cohesion. The Rohingya crisis received rhetorical condemnation from the international community, along with episodic financial aid, but there has been glaringly insufficient pressure to seriously address the root causes of the crisis or to build durable solutions. Bangladesh has continuously urged concerted international action toward creating conditions that are safe, voluntary, and dignified for the repatriation of Rohingya refugees. However, these initiatives have achieved little success. The bilateral repatriation accord that was signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar in 2017, reportedly aimed at enabling the readmission of the displaced Rohingya, has largely remained dead letter due to Myanmar's resistance to providing security guarantees and the refugees' fear of persecution at home—justifiably so. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine has been espoused as a moral and operational framework for preventing atrocities, yet it has offered scant solace to Bangladesh. While R2P theoretically obligates the international community to intervene when states fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, its operationalization in the Rohingya crisis has been minimal. Geopolitical considerations, sovereignty-based objections and the deeply ingrained realpolitik of the United Nations Security Council have made R2P utterly ineffective in this regard. Rather than dealing with the structural drivers of the crisis—Myanmar's institutionalized discrimination and violence against the Rohingya has limited international engagement to humanitarian relief work. This gap marks a critical limitation of R2P: its dependence on the political will of great powers to overcome sovereignty concerns and put humanitarian imperatives above all else. In the case of Myanmar, the lack of robust sanctions, diplomatic pressure, or military intervention reveals the doctrine's inability to catalyze decisive action against states that enjoy the backing of veto-wielding powers such as China and Russia. The international community has failed to actually seize the potential of R2P, and the result has fallen on Bangladesh's shoulders—the country now grapples with growing social and economic pressure that has resulted from the protracted presence of refugees. The Cox's Bazar camps, which shelter nearly 900,000 Rohingya refugees as of mid-2021, symbolize both the resilience of displaced communities and the fragility of global refugee protection frameworks. International praise has gone to Bangladesh for its generosity, but it has also exposed the inequities of a system in which frontline states disproportionately absorb the fallout of geopolitical inertia. Without substantive international intervention on the root causes of the crisis, the specter of indefinite displacement looms, threatening further destabilization of the region.

Repatriation: A Way Forward towards Sustainable Solution

International law remains challenged in providing for the protection and rights of refugees since the corpus of refugee law and the domestic policies of host nations are rarely well-aligned. The field of global geopolitics continues to be perennially dominated by superpowers in competition for supremacy, often shrouding self-interest behind a mask of regional cooperation. The plight of the Rohingya refugees represents this tragic dissonance. Their persecution in Myanmar, compounded by state-sponsored deprivation, resulted in an exodus starting over four decades ago, while their predicament remains unresolved today. The strategic inertia and equivocation of regional powers have only added to the vulnerabilities of the Rohingya community, where their future is entangled in geopolitical impasses. The rhetoric is primarily dominated by national interests that often overlook the security and prosperity of others as the paradigm of security shifts from conventional threats to emergent ones. Such a context has amplified regional tensions, fostered a lucrative arms trade, and reallocated critical resources towards militarization rather than humanitarian investment. In such an aspect, the Rohingya crisis does not merely reflect a humanitarian catastrophe but also speaks of an unflattering indictment of global and regional governance structures (Edwards, 2008; Momem, 2021).

The indefinite encampment of Rohingyas in Bangladesh is a serious challenge, undergirded by serious socio-economic constraints. Their confinement in overcrowded camps denies them education and self-reliance opportunities; further, they are

critically deprived of mobility for gainful employment and deteriorating relationships with the host community, which makes this arrangement unsustainable. The local resources are under stress, competition for livelihoods rises, and tension grows between refugees and Cox's Bazar residents. Often accepted as the only viable long-term solution, repatriation remains fraught with major obstacles. Current conditions in Myanmar remain hostile to a safe and dignified return, marked by continued political instability and a lack of credible assurances for Rohingyas' security and citizenship. Successive efforts at triggering the process have failed, and it would be in the strongest interest of international intervention to ensure that this process moves forward. The international humanitarian community, along with Bangladesh and other stakeholders, has consistently urged Myanmar to establish enabling conditions within Rakhine State. However, without concrete advancement on realizing the rights and safeguards of returnees, repatriation may turn into an exercise of mere gestures in an otherwise lack of concrete results. This precarious position is exacerbated by the alarming contraction in international funding, which threatens crucial humanitarian services like food, medical care, and education, according to the JRP of IOM. The latter can further deteriorate living conditions and escalate the level of discontent, thus increasing the potential for instability within the camps and their surroundings. Against this background, it is important to highlight that safe and voluntary and dignified repatriation of the Rohingyas to their homeland in Rakhine State, Myanmar is the only sustainable and humane solution. However, this must be based on unconditional guarantees of citizenship, freedom of movement, and access to livelihoods. Without these and many other assurances, repatriation risks again being portrayed as perpetuating an era of displacement and marginalization. The safe and dignified return of the Rohingya requires a strong, multi-dimensional diplomatic effort. International pressure on Myanmar should be consistently maintained, specifically through ASEAN and other world powers, to create an environment that is conducive to repatriation. Separate monitoring mechanisms independent of the government must ensure the safety and dignity of returnees while preventing further persecution. At the same time, equipping the Rohingyas with customized vocational training and education would bolster the ability of reintegration. Laying bilateral cooperation with key stakeholders—India, China, and Japan—could reinforce such efforts. India's regional influence, China's strategic ties with Myanmar, and Japan's development outreach must be deployed to secure commitments for stable, sustainable reintegration in Rakhine State to set humanitarian objectives within geopolitical imperatives. The Rohingya crisis can only be appropriately addressed with thorough reforms in Myanmar's legal, political, and social frameworks. The GoM has to:

1. Amend the 1982 Citizenship Law to make Rohingyas full citizens, therefore enhancing national integration.
2. Close Rakhine State's internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and allow for the return of refugees safely to Rakhine State.
3. Freedom of movement and access to education and healthcare for all citizens, including minorities, should be guaranteed.
4. To collaborate with Bangladesh to establish a Joint Commission for safe repatriation and resettlement of the Rohingya refugees.
5. Make media access to areas of conflict so there will be transparency and accountability (HRW, 2012; Lindblom et al. 2015).

Acknowledgement: No

Authors Contribution: *Hitesh:* Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No funding.

Declarations/Consent for Publication: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

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