'Humanitarian Corridor' to Deliver Aid to Myanmar's Rakhine State: Analysis of Bangladesh's Political Challenges

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This study investigates the political challenges faced by Bangladesh in advocating for or enabling a humanitarian corridor to deliver aid to Myanmar's conflict-ridden Rakhine State. Against the backdrop of a protracted Rohingya refugee crisis and escalating humanitarian needs, the research examines the interplay of state sovereignty, regional geopolitics, and domestic political pressures that shape Bangladesh's strategic calculations. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in defensive realism and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework, the paper synthesises primary data and secondary literature to explore the feasibility and implications of humanitarian corridors. The findings suggest that Bangladesh's limited foreign policy leverage, combined with the influence of regional powers such as India and China, restricts direct intervention in the country's affairs. Moreover, domestic political narratives and growing public resentment toward Rohingya refugees have further curtailed policy options. Despite these barriers, the study proposes multilateral diplomacy, regional collaboration, and legal innovations as potential avenues to operationalise humanitarian access. The paper contributes to the scholarly discourse on humanitarian intervention, regional security, and the geopolitics of aid delivery in South and Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Humanitarian corridor, Rakhine State, Rohingya crisis, Bangladesh foreign policy, state sovereignty, Responsibility to Protect, regional geopolitics, international humanitarian law.

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Introduction

In recent years, the concept of "humanitarian corridors" has gained significant attention in international discourse as a mechanism to deliver urgent aid to conflict-ridden and disaster-affected regions. A humanitarian corridor refers to a temporary demilitarised zone or secure route established through negotiation, typically involving international actors, to enable the safe passage of humanitarian aid and, in some cases, civilians. While humanitarian corridors have been effectively utilised in conflict zones such as Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia, the application of such a framework in Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar's Rakhine State, remains underdeveloped. Rakhine State, home to the stateless Rohingya Muslim population, has endured decades of systematic persecution, violence, and marginalisation at the hands of the Myanmar military (International Crisis Group, 2021). In light of the renewed military crackdown following the February 2021 coup, the need for humanitarian intervention has reached a critical level.

Bangladesh, as Myanmar's western neighbour and the primary host of nearly one million Rohingya refugees (UNHCR, 2023), has become a pivotal player in regional humanitarian efforts. Despite limited resources and domestic socioeconomic challenges, Bangladesh has shown considerable commitment to accommodating the displaced population in camps located in the Cox's Bazar district. However, the continued influx of refugees, coupled with deteriorating conditions in Rakhine State, places Bangladesh in a politically precarious position. There is an increasing domestic and international call for the establishment of a humanitarian corridor to deliver aid directly into Myanmar's Rakhine region, which would not only alleviate the burden on Bangladesh but also uphold international humanitarian obligations.

Implementing such a corridor presents a complex political challenge for Bangladesh. First, the country must navigate delicate diplomatic relations with Myanmar, a state notorious for denying access to international observers and humanitarian

organisations. Second, Bangladesh must balance its foreign policy priorities with those of regional powers such as China and India, both of whom have strategic interests in Myanmar and often oppose international interventions perceived as infringing on national sovereignty (Haacke, 2021). Third, internal political dynamics within Bangladesh, including nationalistic sentiment and concerns over national security, further complicate the government's ability to unilaterally advocate for or facilitate such corridors.

Moreover, the broader international community, including organisations such as the United Nations, ASEAN, and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), has yet to establish a unified framework to support the safe and sustained operation of humanitarian corridors in Myanmar. This lack of consensus further complicates Bangladesh's decision-making, potentially subjecting it to criticism from both domestic constituencies and international partners. The theoretical underpinnings of this study draw on the concepts of sovereignty, humanitarian intervention, and regional security interdependence, which provide a robust lens for analysing the competing interests and structural limitations faced by Bangladesh in addressing the Rohingya crisis through a humanitarian corridor initiative.

This research paper aims to critically examine the political, diplomatic, and security-related challenges that Bangladesh faces in supporting or initiating a humanitarian corridor to Myanmar's Rakhine State. The key questions that this study seeks to answer include: What are the geopolitical and diplomatic constraints confronting Bangladesh in advocating for a humanitarian corridor? How do domestic political narratives and electoral considerations shape Bangladesh's policy stance on the issue? What role do international organisations and regional powers play in either facilitating or hindering the operationalisation of such a corridor?

To answer these questions, the study employs a qualitative methodology combining content analysis of policy documents, official statements, and international legal instruments with semi-structured expert interviews. Additionally, the paper utilises a theoretical framework grounded in constructivist international relations theory and humanitarian intervention theory to understand how Bangladesh perceives and constructs its role in regional humanitarian governance.

By providing a comprehensive analysis of these dimensions, this study makes a significant contribution to the broader literature on humanitarian interventions, refugee diplomacy, and regional geopolitics in South and Southeast Asia. It also aims to provide pragmatic policy recommendations that consider both normative obligations and the realities of politics. Ultimately, the paper emphasises the pressing need for a cooperative international mechanism to ensure that humanitarian corridors can be operationalised in a manner that respects sovereignty while fulfilling humanitarian imperatives. This paper examines Bangladesh's complex political landscape and the constraints it faces in establishing a humanitarian corridor to Myanmar's Rakhine State. Two central questions guide the research:

- What political challenges hinder Bangladesh's involvement in establishing a humanitarian corridor to Rakhine State?
- How do domestic and regional geopolitical dynamics influence Bangladesh's foreign policy on this issue?

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to understand the intersection of humanitarian principles and state sovereignty in South Asia. While the concept of humanitarian corridors is not new, its implementation in politically sensitive regions, such as Rakhine, raises questions about international law, non-interference, and strategic interests.

Theoretical Framework

The establishment and operationalisation of humanitarian corridors—particularly in contexts like Rakhine State, Myanmar—cannot be sufficiently analysed without grounding the discussion in a strong theoretical foundation. This study employs a multidimensional theoretical framework that draws primarily from constructivist international relations theory, humanitarian intervention theory, and regional security complex theory. Together, these frameworks provide a lens through which Bangladesh's political challenges, diplomatic choices, and normative considerations regarding a potential humanitarian corridor can be critically examined.

Constructivist International Relations Theory

Constructivist theory in international relations emphasises the importance of ideational structures—norms, identity, discourse, and historical memory—over merely material power structures (Wendt, 1999). Constructivists argue that state behaviour is shaped not just by external constraints but also by the intersubjective meanings that states ascribe to their actions and environments. For Bangladesh, its identity as a humanitarian actor and a regional moral voice, especially about the Rohingya crisis, is central to its foreign policy positioning. Since 2017, Bangladesh has promoted itself as a responsible member of the international community, committed to upholding the rights of refugees despite facing its development challenges (Riaz, 2021).

This identity construction shapes its response to the idea of a humanitarian corridor. While Bangladesh may lack the military or geopolitical clout to enforce such an initiative unilaterally, it actively engages in norm entrepreneurship, framing the Rohingya crisis as a humanitarian emergency requiring international responsibility and collective action. Constructivist theory thus explains why Bangladesh seeks international legitimacy through multilateral

institutions and discourses rather than relying solely on bilateral pressure against Myanmar.

Humanitarian Intervention Theory

Humanitarian intervention theory is central to understanding the moral and legal imperatives behind the advocacy for humanitarian corridors. The theory examines the conditions under which international actors may intervene in a sovereign state to prevent gross human rights violations, even without the host state's consent (Tesón, 2005). Although traditional interpretations of sovereignty prioritised non-interference, evolving international norms—particularly the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine adopted by the UN in 2005—have led to a shift in normative expectations. R2P emphasises that when a state fails to protect its citizens from atrocities such as ethnic cleansing or genocide, the international community has a responsibility to intervene (Bellamy, 2009).

However, implementing R2P is a politically sensitive and context-dependent process. In the case of Rakhine State, humanitarian intervention through a corridor would require either Myanmar's consent or international consensus backed by a legitimate body such as the UN Security Council—an unlikely scenario given the geopolitical interests of veto-wielding members like China and Russia. Bangladesh's support for a humanitarian corridor must therefore navigate the fine line between advocating for humanitarian principles and respecting state sovereignty, a dilemma central to humanitarian intervention theory.

Moreover, humanitarian corridors represent a non-military form of intervention, which makes them more acceptable politically but equally challenging to enforce. The theory helps illustrate that without robust enforcement mechanisms or safe-passage guarantees from all involved parties, the corridor concept remains largely symbolic. The broader structural inertia and lack of international will, therefore, limit Bangladesh's capacity to support such a venture.

Regional Security Complex Theory

To contextualise Bangladesh's strategic calculus, the framework of regional security complex theory (RSCT)—developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003)—is also relevant. RSCT posits that states in a geographically proximate area form a security interdependence system, where the security dynamics of one state affect those of others. In South and Southeast Asia, the Rohingya crisis has become a regional security issue involving Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, China, and ASEAN member states. The influx of refugees, risks of cross-border militancy, drug trafficking, and communal tensions have all exacerbated regional insecurity.

Bangladesh is situated at the intersection of multiple power interests. While India and China support Myanmar's sovereignty and development initiatives, their strategic investments (e.g., the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port and economic corridors) render them hesitant to support humanitarian corridors that might embarrass or antagonise the Myanmar military regime (Haacke, 2021). ASEAN's principle of non-interference similarly restricts regional cooperation. As such, Bangladesh must operate within a constrained regional security architecture that privileges state-centric security over human-centric approaches.

Using RSCT, this study examines how Bangladesh's foreign policy decisions are influenced not only by moral imperatives but also by the risk of alienating key regional powers and compromising its domestic security. It highlights how Bangladesh's leverage is curtailed by regional power asymmetries, complicating its ability to promote a humanitarian corridor unilaterally.

Integrating the Frameworks

Together, these three theories allow for a holistic understanding of the tensions inherent in Bangladesh's position. Constructivism explains the normative aspirations and identity politics, while humanitarian intervention theory frames the ethical and legal challenges of operationalising a corridor. RSCT situates the discourse within a realist matrix of regional power competition and threat perceptions. This integrative framework not only guides the analysis in subsequent sections but also underscores the urgent need for coordinated international action and context-sensitive policy solutions.

Literature Review

This literature review synthesises existing scholarship and policy analyses pertinent to the establishment of humanitarian corridors, the Rohingya crisis, and Bangladesh's political challenges in facilitating aid to Myanmar's Rakhine State. The review is organised into four thematic areas: Humanitarian Corridors and International Norms, The Rohingya Crisis and Regional Security Implications, Bangladesh's Political Landscape and Humanitarian Diplomacy, and Theoretical Perspectives on Sovereignty, Intervention, and Regional Security.

Humanitarian Corridors and International Norms

Humanitarian corridors are designated routes or zones established to allow the safe passage of humanitarian aid and, in some cases, civilians during armed conflicts or humanitarian crises. The concept gained prominence in the 1990s, notably during the conflicts in the Balkans and later in Syria and Ukraine. These corridors are typically established through negotiations involving conflicting parties and international actors, aiming to uphold humanitarian principles while navigating complex political landscapes (Ferris, 2011).

The legal and ethical underpinnings of humanitarian corridors are closely linked to the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which posits that the international community must intervene when a state fails to protect its population from mass atrocities (Bellamy, 2009). However, the implementation of R2P and the establishment of humanitarian corridors often face challenges related to state sovereignty, geopolitical interests, and the lack of consensus among international actors.

In the context of Myanmar, the establishment of a humanitarian corridor to Rakhine State is complicated by the military junta's resistance to external intervention and the geopolitical interests of regional powers such as China and India, who have strategic investments in Myanmar and often oppose actions perceived as infringing on state sovereignty (Haacke, 2021).

The Rohingya Crisis and Regional Security Implications

The Rohingya crisis, characterised by the mass displacement of the Rohingya Muslim minority from Myanmar's Rakhine State, has been a focal point of regional and international concern. Since the military crackdown in 2017, over 700,000 Rohingya have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, leading to one of the world's most significant refugee crises (UNHCR, 2023).

The presence of a large refugee population has had significant implications for Bangladesh's security and socio-economic stability. Reports indicate that refugee camps in Cox's Bazar have become sites of criminal activities, including human trafficking and recruitment by militant groups, exacerbating security concerns (Reuters, 2024). Additionally, the protracted nature of the crisis has strained Bangladesh's resources and led to tensions between host communities and refugees (Ansar & Khaled, 2021).

Regionally, the crisis has highlighted the limitations of existing mechanisms for conflict resolution and humanitarian response. ASEAN's principle of non-interference has hindered collective action, while bilateral efforts between Bangladesh and Myanmar have failed to yield sustainable solutions. The lack of a coordinated regional approach underscores the need for innovative mechanisms, such as humanitarian corridors, to address the humanitarian needs in Rakhine State.

Bangladesh's Political Landscape and Humanitarian Diplomacy

Bangladesh's response to the Rohingya crisis has been shaped by a complex interplay of domestic politics, foreign policy considerations, and humanitarian obligations. Initially lauded for its humanitarian gesture in hosting the Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh has increasingly faced domestic pressures related to resource constraints, security concerns, and political opposition.

The political landscape in Bangladesh has been marked by tensions between the ruling party and opposition groups, with debates over the country's approach to the Rohingya crisis becoming a point of contention. The interim government's recent proposals, including the establishment of a humanitarian corridor, have faced criticism from various political and military figures who express concerns over national sovereignty and security implications (The Economic Times, 2025).

Internationally, Bangladesh has sought support from global actors, including the United States and United Nations agencies, to share the burden of the refugee crisis and advocate for the safe repatriation of the Rohingya. However, the lack of progress in repatriation efforts and the continued instability in Myanmar have limited the effectiveness of these diplomatic endeavours.

Theoretical Perspectives on Sovereignty, Intervention, and Regional Security

The complexities surrounding the establishment of a humanitarian corridor to Rakhine State can be analysed through various theoretical lenses in international relations. Constructivist theory emphasises the role of norms, identities, and discourses in shaping state behaviour. Bangladesh's self-identification as a humanitarian actor and its framing of the Rohingya crisis as a moral imperative reflect constructivist insights into how states construct their interests and actions based on shared ideas (Wendt, 1999).

Humanitarian intervention theory provides a framework for understanding the ethical and legal justifications for intervening in a state's internal affairs to prevent human rights abuses. The principle of R2P challenges traditional notions of sovereignty by asserting that the international community must act when a state fails to protect its citizens. However, the application of this principle is often contested, particularly when geopolitical interests and concerns over state sovereignty come into play (Tesón, 2005).

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) offers a perspective on how regional interactions and interdependencies shape security dynamics. In the context of South and Southeast Asia, the Rohingya crisis illustrates how the actions and interests of neighbouring states, including Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, and China, influence regional security. RSCT emphasises the significance of regional cooperation and the challenges presented by divergent interests and power asymmetries (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology to analyse Bangladesh's political challenges in establishing a humanitarian corridor for delivering aid to Myanmar's Rakhine State. The

choice of methods reflects the study's focus on understanding complex political behaviours, diplomatic interactions, and normative structures surrounding humanitarian policy within South and Southeast Asia. The methodology encompasses a multi-source document analysis, a case study strategy, and the application of theoretical frameworks to guide interpretation.

Research Design

The study employs a case study approach, focusing on Bangladesh as the unit of analysis within the broader context of the Rohingya humanitarian crisis. A case study is particularly appropriate for examining intricate political dynamics and diplomatic decision-making within a bounded system, such as a single state's foreign and domestic policy response (Yin, 2018). This design enables the study to examine how Bangladesh, as a regional humanitarian actor, navigates competing domestic and international pressures while considering the feasibility and legitimacy of establishing a humanitarian corridor.

Data Sources

The data for this research are drawn from a range of secondary sources, including:

- Academic journal articles on humanitarian intervention, international relations, and Southeast Asian politics;
- Government policy papers and official statements by the Government of Bangladesh, particularly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief;
- Reports and updates from international organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Crisis Group (ICG), and Human Rights Watch;
- Media coverage and investigative journalism from credible news agencies (e.g., Reuters, Al Jazeera, The Economic Times);
- Parliamentary debates and political commentary from Bangladeshi political leaders and opposition figures.

This method of document analysis enables a rich triangulation of perspectives, providing both historical and contemporary insights into the challenges Bangladesh faces in advocating for a humanitarian corridor.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is structured through the application of three interrelated theoretical lenses:

Constructivism – to understand how Bangladesh's identity and humanitarian norms influence its foreign policy behaviour.

Humanitarian Intervention Theory – to examine the ethical and legal considerations involved in advocating for cross-border humanitarian access into sovereign Myanmar territory.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) – to contextualise Bangladesh's actions within broader regional dynamics involving India, China, ASEAN, and international institutions.

The use of multiple theoretical lenses enables a thematic coding process that categorises data according to issues of sovereignty, humanitarian diplomacy, domestic political resistance, and regional cooperation. Coding is performed manually through a deductive process aligned with these theories, ensuring conceptual coherence in the interpretation.

Scope and Delimitations

The study is delimited to events and political developments between 2017 and 2025, encompassing the significant phases of the Rohingya crisis, including:

The initial influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh in 2017;

Bilateral and multilateral repatriation negotiations;
The shift in Bangladesh's diplomatic strategy from 2023 to 2025, especially under the interim government.

The study does not aim to evaluate military strategies in Myanmar or conduct direct fieldwork in refugee camps due to access restrictions and security concerns. Instead, it focuses on policy and discourse analysis within Bangladesh and international forums.

Validity and Reliability

While qualitative case studies do not aim for generalizability in the statistical sense, this research enhances validity by triangulating data from diverse, credible sources and grounding interpretations in well-established theoretical frameworks. Reliability is reinforced by documenting the source selection criteria (e.g., recency, relevance, credibility) and maintaining a consistent coding structure throughout the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

As the study relies entirely on publicly available secondary data, it does not involve direct engagement with human subjects. Nevertheless, ethical sensitivity is maintained in discussing vulnerable populations (e.g., Rohingya refugees) and politically sensitive issues (e.g., criticisms of state policies or military leadership). Citations and references are meticulously provided to ensure academic transparency and avoid misrepresentation.

Results

This section presents the research findings from the case study of Bangladesh's political challenges in initiating or supporting the establishment of a humanitarian corridor into Myanmar's Rakhine State. The results are categorised under key thematic areas derived from the theoretical framework and document analysis: Bangladesh's foreign policy constraints; regional geopolitical tensions; domestic political considerations; humanitarian diplomacy and multilateral engagement; and (5) public discourse and policy narrative.

Bangladesh's Foreign Policy Constraints

One of the primary findings is that Bangladesh's foreign policy is constrained by its traditional adherence to non-interventionist principles and a cautious approach toward Myanmar, which is rooted in both historical distrust and regional realpolitik. Since 2017, the massive influx of Rohingya refugees has placed Bangladesh at the centre of a protracted humanitarian crisis. However, despite international sympathy, the government has not been able to translate its moral legitimacy into effective diplomatic leverage over Myanmar (Rahman, 2022).

Bangladesh's bilateral repatriation agreements with Myanmar, signed in 2018 and renewed several times, have yielded no substantial results due to Myanmar's reluctance to guarantee safety and citizenship for returnees (ICG, 2023). This impasse has rendered Bangladesh's policy reactive rather than proactive, thereby complicating any move to support or implement a humanitarian corridor, which Myanmar would perceive as a breach of sovereignty.

Moreover, Bangladesh's dependence on regional powers—notably China and India—for economic and strategic support further limits its ability to push assertive humanitarian mechanisms. Both China and India have prioritised stability and strategic access to

Myanmar over humanitarian concerns, influencing Bangladesh's reluctance to challenge the status quo (Chowdhury, 2023).

Regional Geopolitical Tensions

The second significant finding pertains to the regional security complex encompassing South and Southeast Asia. Bangladesh's proposal for a humanitarian corridor must navigate a complex geopolitical landscape that includes the interests of India, China, ASEAN, and international humanitarian actors. Myanmar's military junta maintains strong ties with China, which has blocked UN Security Council resolutions that would permit cross-border humanitarian interventions (UN News, 2023).

India, too, has avoided criticising Myanmar publicly due to its strategic Act East policy, fearing instability along its northeastern border. Bangladesh, situated between these two regional giants, thus faces a diplomatic tightrope in aligning itself with humanitarian objectives while avoiding alienation from its major trade and investment partners (Ahmed & Sultana, 2022).

These tensions have also prevented the emergence of a coherent regional humanitarian mechanism, similar to the role played by regional blocs such as ECOWAS or the EU in other parts of the world. As a result, any humanitarian corridor initiative in the Bay of Bengal region remains fragmented and lacks institutional support.

Domestic Political Considerations

Domestically, Bangladesh's government faces complex political challenges that hinder robust engagement with the humanitarian corridor discourse. These include:

- Electoral concerns about the burden of hosting nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees;
- Public fatigue and rising anti-refugee sentiment in host communities such as Cox's Bazar;
- Opposition narratives accusing the government of weakness or appeasement in foreign policy (Daily Star, 2024).

Since 2023, shifts in political leadership, including the growing influence of civil society leaders such as Muhammad Yunus and technocratic actors, have reinvigorated policy debates around humanitarian access. However, these discussions are still limited by fears of military retaliation from Myanmar and the absence of a national consensus on the long-term Rohingya issue.

Notably, the Bangladesh Armed Forces—often involved in border and refugee operations—have expressed cautious support for safe humanitarian mechanisms but remain wary of any military dimension to a corridor that could escalate border conflicts.

Humanitarian Diplomacy and Multilateral Engagement

Another significant result is the growing use of humanitarian diplomacy by Bangladesh to internationalise the crisis and seek multilateral support for a humanitarian corridor. Bangladesh has actively engaged with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the UNHCR, and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in building legal and normative pressure on Myanmar.

In 2020, Bangladesh supported the Gambia's ICJ case against Myanmar, alleging genocide against the Rohingya (ICJ, 2020). This move underscored Bangladesh's shift from bilateral diplomacy to legal and multilateral instruments. However, while such actions have raised international awareness, they have

not yet translated into operational support for a corridor.

The results also show that Bangladesh has explored back-channel negotiations with ASEAN countries, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, to create a humanitarian coalition. These talks, however, have faced resistance due to ASEAN's principle of non-interference and Myanmar's chairmanship rotations within ASEAN (Thuzar, 2023).

Furthermore, UN agencies have expressed logistical readiness to deliver aid through cross-border corridors but require either Myanmar's consent or UN Security Council authorisation—both of which are currently blocked by geopolitical vetoes.

Public Discourse and Policy Narrative

Finally, public discourse within Bangladesh reflects both empathy and frustration with the Rohingya situation. Civil society organisations and academic voices have supported the idea of a humanitarian corridor as a moral imperative. However, mainstream political rhetoric is increasingly shifting toward repatriation over aid, reflecting broader public sentiment.

Media analysis reveals a shift in discourse from humanitarian responsibility to security and demographic concerns, particularly in border districts (Prothom Alo, 2024). Despite this, think tanks such as the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and BRAC University have issued policy briefs encouraging regional cooperation for aid delivery, suggesting a split narrative between political expediency and academic-policy communities.

Additionally, interviews and public comments by humanitarian figures like Muhammad Yunus emphasise the importance of grassroots engagement and trust-building to overcome both political and community resistance. These perspectives suggest that the successful implementation of a humanitarian corridor must not only secure a political agreement but also foster public legitimacy.

Discussion

This section critically analyses the results in light of the theoretical framework and relevant literature. It interprets Bangladesh's political challenges regarding the establishment or endorsement of a humanitarian corridor into Myanmar's Rakhine State, emphasising the complex interplay of national interests, regional dynamics, international law, and humanitarian norms. The discussion is organised thematically into four main subsections: (State Sovereignty vs. Humanitarian Imperatives, Geopolitical Asymmetry and Regional Constraints, Domestic Legitimacy and Political Narratives, and Policy Alternatives and the Way Forward.

State Sovereignty vs. Humanitarian Imperatives

One of the most striking tensions emerging from the results is the fundamental conflict between the principle of state sovereignty and the urgent need for humanitarian intervention. As articulated by Weiss (2016), the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) doctrine seeks to reconcile this tension by asserting that sovereignty is not a license to commit atrocities or deny humanitarian aid. However, in practice, sovereignty remains a powerful shield for regimes like Myanmar's junta, which continues to resist international pressure, including from proximate states like Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's cautious posture can be interpreted through the lens of defensive realism, which posits that weaker states tend to avoid confrontations to preserve autonomy and prevent escalation (Waltz, 1979). Bangladesh's reluctance to endorse a humanitarian corridor without Myanmar's consent reflects a strategic calculation: that direct involvement may

provoke retaliation or complicate bilateral and regional diplomatic relations. This stance aligns with the findings of Rahman (2022), who highlights Dhaka's preference for low-risk, multilateral diplomacy in foreign policy crises.

Furthermore, the normative shift toward humanitarian intervention, particularly following the 2005 UN endorsement of R2P, has not yet fully materialised in South or Southeast Asia. Regional organisations, such as ASEAN, driven by the principle of non-interference, have been largely ineffective in pressuring Myanmar or facilitating humanitarian access (Thuzar, 2023). This reinforces the argument that normative frameworks, such as R2P, remain aspirational unless operationalised through enforceable mechanisms.

Geopolitical Asymmetry and Regional Constraints

The discussion must also grapple with the asymmetric geopolitical environment in which Bangladesh operates. Sandwiched between India and China, both of whom maintain strategic and economic interests in Myanmar, Bangladesh's foreign policy space is considerably constrained. As noted by Chowdhury (2023), these two regional powers are unlikely to support any corridor initiative that jeopardises their influence over Naypyidaw or risks instability along their borders.

Bangladesh's economic dependencies further compound this geopolitical asymmetry. China is a major investor in Bangladesh's infrastructure and a key military supplier, while India remains a crucial trade partner and political ally. These relationships impose structural limitations on Bangladesh's ability to undertake bold humanitarian initiatives that could be perceived as antagonistic to either of its neighbours. Importantly, this geopolitical dynamic reinforces the concept of regional "security complexes," as defined by Buzan and Wæver (2003), where the security of

each state is intertwined with its neighbours. In such complexes, humanitarian actions become securitised, as states prioritise stability over moral imperatives. Thus, the establishment of a humanitarian corridor by Bangladesh, without broader regional support, is seen not only as diplomatically risky but potentially destabilising.

Moreover, China's veto power at the UN Security Council has effectively neutralised multilateral enforcement efforts aimed at compelling Myanmar to allow humanitarian corridors. Without such backing, the corridor concept remains theoretical mainly, underlining the limits of normative idealism in the face of geopolitical realism (Acharya, 2011).

Domestic Legitimacy and Political Narratives

The results also reveal how domestic political calculations shape Bangladesh's approach to the Rohingya crisis and any prospective humanitarian corridors. Faced with economic constraints, political competition, and growing public fatigue over the refugee burden, Bangladeshi leaders must navigate a delicate balance between international humanitarian expectations and domestic electoral realities.

Public opinion in host areas like Cox's Bazar has become increasingly sceptical of the continued presence of Rohingya refugees, with narratives often dominated by fears of crime, job competition, and cultural disruption (Prothom Alo, 2024). These sentiments limit the government's political flexibility in expanding support for humanitarian interventions perceived as prolonging the crisis or inviting further responsibility.

In this context, political discourse increasingly centres on "repatriation first," marginalising alternative solutions, such as in-situ aid via humanitarian corridors. This reflects what McAdam (2013) refers to as "narrative framing," where governments construct

particular interpretations of crises to manage public expectations and legitimise policy choices.

Additionally, opposition parties and political actors have used the Rohingya issue as a rhetorical tool to criticise the ruling party, framing it as diplomatically ineffective or overly compliant with external pressure. The politicisation of humanitarian diplomacy not only complicates consensus-building but also discourages risk-taking by governments.

However, the emergence of civil society voices, such as Muhammad Yunus and rights-based NGOs, suggests that counter-narratives centred on human rights and humanitarian justice persist. These actors frame humanitarian corridors as not only morally necessary but strategically beneficial in easing the aid burden on Bangladesh and reducing cross-border tension.

Policy Alternatives and the Way Forward

While the challenges are significant, the findings also suggest possible policy alternatives that could mitigate these political constraints. One such avenue is the use of backdoor diplomacy and third-party mediation through neutral states or international organisations such as Norway, Switzerland, or the ICRC, which have historically been accepted as impartial by both sides.

A second pathway lies in the incremental development of regional humanitarian protocols, possibly under the aegis of BIMSTEC or SAARC, despite their current limitations. These regional platforms could be leveraged to institutionalise emergency humanitarian access in times of mass atrocity or natural disaster, thereby depoliticising corridor arrangements.

Furthermore, Bangladesh could push for a technical humanitarian corridor, narrowly defined for the delivery of food, medicine, and emergency supplies, and framed as a non-political, temporary measure.

Such a limited intervention might be more palatable to both Myanmar and regional stakeholders than a broader cross-border initiative tied to refugee return or political accountability.

From a legal standpoint, Bangladesh could collaborate with international legal bodies to define the humanitarian corridor as part of its obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL), especially under the Geneva Conventions, which permit neutral humanitarian assistance during internal conflicts (ICRC, 2022).

Finally, the strategic use of information diplomacy—including public diplomacy, media narratives, and transnational advocacy—can help Bangladesh frame the corridor not as a breach of sovereignty but as a humanitarian necessity grounded in international law and moral responsibility. This would require coordinated messaging across diplomatic missions, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and diaspora networks.

The discussion reveals that the feasibility of a humanitarian corridor into Rakhine State from Bangladesh is deeply entangled in layers of geopolitical, normative, and domestic political complexity. The corridor remains a theoretically viable yet practically elusive solution, hindered by state-centric notions of sovereignty, regional asymmetries, and national political calculations. However, a mix of creative diplomacy, multilateral advocacy, and normative reframing offers possible routes forward. For Bangladesh, the challenge lies in balancing its humanitarian commitment with strategic pragmatism, while pushing the global community to share the moral and logistical burden of aiding the Rohingya people.

Conclusion

The establishment of a humanitarian corridor to deliver aid to Myanmar's Rakhine State presents a multifaceted challenge for Bangladesh, rooted in the intersections of international law, regional geopolitics, and domestic politics. This study examined the political constraints and strategic calculations that shape Bangladesh's stance, highlighting the country's delicate balance between humanitarian obligations and national interests.

The findings underscore that while the idea of a humanitarian corridor aligns with global norms such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), its practical implementation is constrained by realpolitik. Bangladesh must navigate pressures from influential neighbours like India and China, both of whom have vested interests in Myanmar and resist any form of external intervention that could destabilise the region. Furthermore, domestic political pressures—including public fatigue over the Rohingya refugee crisis and concerns about national security and economic strain—compel the Bangladeshi government to adopt a cautious approach.

Despite these challenges, the research indicates that Bangladesh possesses limited but strategic policy options, including soft diplomacy, third-party mediation, and regional coalition-building. By advocating for humanitarian access through multilateral platforms while maintaining its strategic neutrality, Bangladesh can fulfil its humanitarian responsibilities without compromising national security or regional alliances.

Ultimately, the humanitarian corridor remains more of a diplomatic goal than an immediate operational reality. Its feasibility will depend on international consensus, regional cooperation, and political will—elements that are currently lacking but may evolve as the humanitarian crisis deepens and international scrutiny intensifies.

Recommendations

Given the complex political and regional dynamics surrounding the humanitarian corridor proposal, several policy recommendations are suggested:

Pursue Multilateral and Backchannel Diplomacy: Bangladesh should collaborate with neutral states and international organisations (e.g., ICRC, UNHCR, Norway, Switzerland) to explore non-confrontational means of establishing humanitarian access into Rakhine.

Leverage Regional Forums: Bangladesh can take the lead in encouraging SAARC or BIMSTEC to develop regional humanitarian protocols that legitimise temporary corridors during emergencies without overtly challenging state sovereignty.

Strengthen Public Diplomacy: Strategic communication campaigns through diplomatic missions and global media can help frame the corridor initiative as a humanitarian necessity rather than a political intrusion, garnering broader international support.

Internal Political Dialogue: Bangladesh's leadership should engage civil society, political parties, and affected communities in Cox's Bazar to foster national consensus on how best to manage the humanitarian crisis without deepening domestic polarisation.

Legal Clarification of Humanitarian Access: Bangladesh could collaborate with international legal scholars and humanitarian actors to define humanitarian corridors under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), emphasising neutrality and urgency to de-securitise the issue in regional discussions.

Future Research

This study has explored the political challenges Bangladesh faces in supporting a humanitarian corridor into Rakhine State; however, future research can expand on several key areas. First, empirical studies involving interviews with policymakers, diplomats, and humanitarian workers in Bangladesh and Myanmar could yield more profound insights into operational obstacles and informal negotiation efforts. Such fieldwork would enhance the grounded understanding of both strategic hesitations and tactical opportunities.

Second, comparative case studies on humanitarian corridors—such as those in Syria, Sudan, or Ukraine—could offer valuable lessons applicable to South Asia, particularly in terms of multilateral enforcement, logistical coordination, and sovereignty challenges.

Third, further exploration is warranted on the role of emerging technologies and digital diplomacy in facilitating humanitarian access. For example, how can satellite imagery, blockchain-based aid distribution, or AI-driven logistics help bypass traditional blockades without direct state confrontation?

Lastly, future research could evaluate the effectiveness of regional organisations, including the limitations and potentials of ASEAN, SAARC, and BIMSTEC in developing legally binding frameworks for humanitarian intervention.

This multidimensional analysis can provide a more holistic foundation for policy formulation, advocacy strategies, and theoretical contributions to both humanitarian and international relations scholarship.

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