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‘Humanitarian Corridor’ to Deliver Aid to Myanmar’s Rakhine State: A Theoretical Analysis of Myanmar-Bangladesh Bilateral Relationship

Rotna Moni^{*1}; Md. Tawhid Mondol¹; Hasib Khan¹; Sarbary Das Roy¹; Md. Fayjul Karim Hridoy¹; Prof. Dr Kazi Abdul Mannan²

This study explores the theoretical and practical dimensions of establishing a humanitarian corridor to deliver aid to Myanmar’s Rakhine State through Bangladesh, amid the protracted Rohingya crisis. Framed within the theories of realism and liberal institutionalism, the article critically assesses the bilateral dynamics of Myanmar-Bangladesh relations, the historical and political context, and the strategic, legal, and logistical challenges involved in implementing a humanitarian corridor. Utilising qualitative content analysis and comparative case studies, the research identifies key barriers, including sovereignty concerns, geopolitical competition, and institutional mistrust. The paper proposes a multilateral framework involving ASEAN, the United Nations, and key regional actors to ensure legitimacy and operational effectiveness. It further recommends embedding human security principles, investing in local capacity, and exploring contingency alternatives, including maritime and aerial aid routes. This article contributes to the growing discourse on humanitarian access in conflict zones and offers actionable policy pathways for conflict-sensitive and rights-based humanitarian intervention in Rakhine State.

Keywords: Humanitarian Corridor, Myanmar-Bangladesh Relations, Rohingya Crisis, International Humanitarian Law, ASEAN, Human Security, Geopolitics, Bilateral Diplomacy.

¹Department of Science and Engineering

²Department of Business Administration

Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology, Dhaka, Bangladesh

*Corresponding author: Rotna Moni, Email: rotnamoni49@gmail.com

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Introduction

The humanitarian crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine State, especially following the violent military crackdown against the Rohingya Muslim minority in August 2017, has captured global attention for its severity and complexity. Characterised by mass displacement, ethnic persecution, and alleged crimes against humanity, the crisis has had profound humanitarian, political, and geopolitical consequences. Over 700,000 Rohingya crossed into neighbouring Bangladesh within months of the crackdown, adding to a population of refugees who had fled earlier waves of violence (UNHCR, 2020). The influx placed immense pressure on Bangladesh's resources, triggering a wave of international humanitarian and diplomatic responses. However, despite repeated bilateral and multilateral efforts, meaningful progress on repatriation and rehabilitation has remained elusive.

In light of the protracted nature of the crisis and the deteriorating situation within Rakhine State, the concept of a "humanitarian corridor" has emerged as a potential instrument for alleviating suffering and facilitating the delivery of aid to conflict-affected populations. A humanitarian corridor refers to a designated route or area, typically established through negotiation and sometimes protected by legal or military mechanisms, through which humanitarian assistance and civilians can safely pass during conflicts or crises (Slim, 2015). While these corridors have been proposed and implemented in conflict zones such as Syria, Ethiopia, and Ukraine, their application in the South and Southeast Asian context, particularly between Myanmar and Bangladesh, remains largely unexamined.

Bangladesh, as the primary host of Rohingya refugees, has consistently advocated for their safe, voluntary, and dignified return to Myanmar. However, the Myanmar military's refusal to guarantee citizenship rights or security for the Rohingya population complicates repatriation efforts (Selth, 2018). The establishment of a humanitarian corridor from

Bangladesh into Myanmar's Rakhine State could provide a practical mechanism for delivering essential services, such as food, medicine, shelter, and healthcare, while circumventing the political paralysis that has hindered broader solutions. However, this idea raises fundamental questions about state sovereignty, territorial control, regional diplomacy, and the political will of both governments.

This paper examines the feasibility of establishing a humanitarian corridor between Bangladesh and Myanmar by analysing the bilateral relationship through theoretical lenses from the field of international relations. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research question: How do the theoretical underpinnings of Myanmar-Bangladesh bilateral relations inform the possibility of establishing a humanitarian corridor into Rakhine State? The relevance of this question is underscored by the persistent diplomatic impasse, the strategic significance of Myanmar-Bangladesh ties within the broader regional context, and the growing urgency of humanitarian needs in Rakhine.

The paper adopts a multidimensional theoretical framework that incorporates realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Realism emphasises the national interests, security concerns, and power asymmetries that shape state behaviour. From this perspective, Myanmar and Bangladesh prioritise sovereignty, border control, and regime survival, making bilateral cooperation on humanitarian grounds difficult (Morgenthau, 1948). Liberalism, on the other hand, focuses on the role of institutions, international cooperation, and interdependence, suggesting that regional organisations like ASEAN or BIMSTEC, and international agencies such as the UNHCR or IOM, could facilitate humanitarian access (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Constructivism, finally, offers insight into how state identities, historical narratives, and normative frameworks shape state behaviour, providing a lens for understanding the deeply entrenched mistrust and

divergent worldviews between the two nations (Wendt, 1992).

Bangladesh's foreign policy posture has increasingly emphasised humanitarianism and multilateralism, particularly in its role as a host country to one of the largest stateless populations in the world. Conversely, Myanmar's military regime, dominated by authoritarianism and ethno-nationalism, has remained resistant to international scrutiny and intervention (Haacke, 2006). These contrasting orientations influence the possibilities and limitations of bilateral dialogue and humanitarian cooperation. Understanding how these states conceptualise their interests, roles, and responsibilities in international affairs is critical to assessing the potential for a humanitarian corridor.

This study makes significant contributions to the existing literature in several important ways. First, it offers a rare application of international relations theory to a regional humanitarian context in South and Southeast Asia. Second, it focuses on the dynamics of a humanitarian corridor—an increasingly important yet under-theorised policy instrument in international relations. Third, it provides a critical assessment of the prospects and obstacles to bilateral cooperation, with implications for regional peacebuilding and global humanitarian governance.

In examining the theoretical dimensions of this bilateral relationship, this paper aims to not only assess the viability of a humanitarian corridor but also to illuminate broader patterns of humanitarian diplomacy, cross-border cooperation, and conflict mediation in South Asia. In doing so, it addresses a vital policy question with both immediate humanitarian relevance and long-term geopolitical implications.

Literature Review

The concept of humanitarian corridors and their intersection with bilateral relationships in conflict-affected regions has attracted significant academic interest in recent years. The literature spans international relations theory, humanitarian law, refugee studies, and regional diplomacy. This review synthesises scholarly contributions in five thematic areas relevant to this research: the conceptual foundations of humanitarian corridors, the geopolitics of humanitarian intervention, Myanmar-Bangladesh bilateral relations, the regional and institutional frameworks for humanitarian cooperation, and theoretical applications to humanitarian diplomacy. By integrating insights from these strands of literature, this review establishes the groundwork for examining the viability and implications of a humanitarian corridor between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Conceptual Foundations of Humanitarian Corridors

Humanitarian corridors are defined as designated areas or routes that enable the safe passage of civilians or the delivery of humanitarian aid during armed conflicts or humanitarian emergencies. These corridors are usually established through negotiated agreements between state or non-state actors, often under the supervision of international organisations such as the United Nations (Slim, 2015). The primary aim is to ensure humanitarian access without compromising the sovereignty or security of the states involved.

Kellenberger (2003) emphasised that humanitarian corridors must be clearly distinguished from military operations or “safe zones,” which can become politicised or militarised. In contrast, corridors are intended to be neutral, time-bound, and temporary, thereby facilitating the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. However, the application of these corridors in real-world contexts—such as Syria, Ethiopia, and Bosnia—has

often revealed tensions between these principles and political or military imperatives (Pantuliano, 2014; Ferris, 2011).

In terms of legal grounding, humanitarian corridors are loosely supported by international humanitarian law (IHL), particularly the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. While IHL encourages the free passage of humanitarian relief, the actual establishment of corridors requires the consent of the conflicting parties, which complicates their implementation in cases involving state sovereignty and internal conflict (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2013). This legal ambiguity is especially relevant to the Myanmar-Bangladesh context, where Myanmar's military junta has consistently resisted external intervention.

Geopolitics of Humanitarian Intervention

Humanitarian corridors are not only logistical arrangements but also political tools. As Barnett (2011) argues, humanitarianism is inherently political because it involves power dynamics, access negotiations, and moral claims. Humanitarian corridors are often embedded in broader geopolitical struggles, wherein states pursue strategic objectives under the guise of humanitarianism. This phenomenon, termed "humanitarian interventionism," has been critiqued for masking neocolonial agendas or exacerbating conflicts (Chandler, 2001).

Donini (2012) observed that the effectiveness of humanitarian corridors often depends on the geopolitical interests of powerful states and regional stakeholders. For example, the humanitarian corridors in northern Syria required approval from Russia and Turkey, who were also militarily involved in the conflict. Similarly, the Ethiopian government's partial approval of aid routes into Tigray was influenced by its desire to maintain territorial control while placating international pressure (de Waal, 2021).

In the Myanmar context, China's strategic interests in Rakhine State, particularly the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) and the Kyaukphyu port project, complicate external humanitarian interventions. China has traditionally shielded Myanmar from international censure at forums such as the UN Security Council, thereby reducing the leverage of humanitarian actors (Lall, 2016). Therefore, any attempt to establish a humanitarian corridor must take into account these overlapping geopolitical interests.

Myanmar-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations

Colonial legacies, border disputes, ethnic tensions, and economic asymmetries have shaped the historical and political relationship between Myanmar and Bangladesh. Although the two countries have maintained diplomatic relations since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, their relationship has often been marked by mistrust and competition.

Selth (2018) points out that the Rohingya issue has been the most contentious element in bilateral relations. While Bangladesh views the Rohingya as forcibly displaced persons deserving of repatriation and protection, Myanmar's military leadership considers them illegal immigrants, often refusing to use the term "Rohingya" in official discourse (Leider, 2013). This divergence has prevented the signing of durable bilateral agreements on refugee repatriation, despite multiple attempts facilitated by international mediators (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2019).

On security issues, both countries have occasionally accused each other of harbouring insurgents or failing to police their borders effectively. Moreover, Bangladesh has perceived Myanmar's military build-up along the border with suspicion, especially during periods of heightened refugee flows (Fink, 2009). These tensions underscore the fragile nature of their

bilateral cooperation, which must be addressed if a humanitarian corridor is to be considered viable.

Regional and Institutional Frameworks for Humanitarian Cooperation

Regional organisations in South and Southeast Asia have been notably cautious in dealing with the Rohingya crisis and broader humanitarian interventions. ASEAN's response has been shaped by its principle of non-interference, limiting its ability to act decisively. However, ASEAN has made some progress by forming the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre), which has been involved in delivering limited aid to Rakhine State (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

Meanwhile, South Asian regional forums, such as SAARC, have remained largely inactive on the issue, partly due to their structural weaknesses and geopolitical rivalries. Bangladesh's efforts to mobilise support within SAARC have yielded limited outcomes, reinforcing the need to engage with international organisations such as the UNHCR, WFP, and IOM, which have a more robust presence and mandate for humanitarian operations (Khalid, 2021).

The failure of regional mechanisms has compelled Bangladesh to internationalise the crisis, engaging in lobbying at the UN and partnering with donor countries. However, Myanmar has resisted these efforts, framing them as violations of its internal sovereignty (Haacke, 2006). This institutional vacuum complicates the establishment of humanitarian corridors, which typically require multilateral buy-in and coordinated oversight.

Theoretical Applications to Humanitarian Diplomacy

The theoretical literature on international relations provides valuable frameworks for understanding state

behaviour in humanitarian contexts. Realism, as articulated by scholars such as Morgenthau (1948) and Waltz (1979), emphasises the role of power, security, and self-interest in international affairs. From a realist perspective, Myanmar's refusal to accommodate humanitarian concerns can be seen as a strategy to maintain sovereignty, territorial integrity, and control over ethnic minorities.

Conversely, liberal theorists such as Keohane and Nye (1977) argue that international institutions, interdependence, and cooperative regimes can help mitigate conflict and promote humanitarian goals. This school of thought underpins the work of international agencies and multilateral platforms that advocate for humanitarian corridors as part of conflict resolution strategies.

Constructivist perspectives, particularly those of Wendt (1992), offer a more nuanced understanding by emphasising the role of identity, norms, and discourse. Myanmar's denial of Rohingya identity and Bangladesh's self-conception as a humanitarian actor are rooted in deep historical narratives and societal beliefs. These identity constructs influence policy positions, making cooperation more complex than a simple calculation of costs and benefits.

Scholars such as Hopf (2002) and Finnemore (1996) have extended constructivist insights into humanitarian diplomacy, highlighting how norms of intervention, sovereignty, and human rights evolve. In this context, the idea of a humanitarian corridor may gain legitimacy if framed not just as a strategic necessity but also as a moral imperative aligned with emerging global norms.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing academic interest, the literature reveals several gaps relevant to this study. First, while there is extensive scholarship on humanitarian

corridors in the Middle East and Africa, their potential in South and Southeast Asia remains underexplored. Second, few studies explicitly link bilateral relations with the operationalisation of humanitarian corridors, focusing instead on multilateral or UN-led initiatives. Third, theoretical applications to bilateral humanitarian diplomacy remain limited, with most studies either normatively descriptive or heavily empirical.

This study addresses these gaps by applying international relations theory to the specific context of Myanmar-Bangladesh relations and evaluating how their bilateral dynamics impact the prospects for humanitarian corridors. It aims to bridge the gap between theory and policy by offering both analytical insights and practical implications.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical analysis of the humanitarian corridor proposal between Myanmar and Bangladesh necessitates a multidisciplinary and pluralist approach. This study is grounded in three primary theories of international relations: realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism. Each of these frameworks provides unique insights into how state behaviour, international norms, and institutional dynamics impact the prospects of establishing a humanitarian corridor in a highly contentious bilateral context. By triangulating these perspectives, the study provides a holistic understanding of the underlying forces shaping policy decisions, cooperation potential, and resistance.

Realism: National Interest and Sovereignty

Realism, as one of the foundational theories in international relations, provides a critical lens for analysing the strategic calculations that underpin state behaviour. Central to realist thought is the assumption that states operate in an anarchic international system where survival, sovereignty, and national interest

prevail over ethical or normative concerns (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). From a realist perspective, both Myanmar and Bangladesh prioritise their national interests over humanitarian imperatives. Myanmar's reluctance to allow humanitarian access to Rakhine State can be interpreted as a strategy to maintain internal control and reinforce its sovereignty. The military junta views external humanitarian intervention as a potential threat to its authority, fearing that such corridors could internationalise domestic ethnic conflicts or open the door to foreign influence (Haacke, 2006). Moreover, the junta's longstanding portrayal of the Rohingya as illegal immigrants renders any corridor facilitating aid to them politically undesirable (Leider, 2013).

From Bangladesh's standpoint, the support for a humanitarian corridor is not solely altruistic. Hosting over a million Rohingya refugees imposes economic, environmental, and security burdens on the state (Khalid, 2021). Bangladesh's advocacy for the corridor thus aligns with a realist agenda to facilitate repatriation or reduce pressure on its domestic infrastructure. Consequently, both countries' approaches to humanitarian corridors can be framed as strategic manoeuvres driven by perceived threats and power calculations.

Liberal Institutionalism: Cooperation through International Frameworks

Liberal institutionalism offers a contrasting perspective, emphasising how cooperation is possible—even among adversaries—through institutions, rules, and shared interests. Pioneered by scholars such as Keohane and Nye (1977), this theory posits that international institutions can mitigate anarchy by providing platforms for negotiation, information sharing, and enforcement mechanisms that reduce uncertainty and promote collective benefits.

In the case of the proposed humanitarian corridor, institutions such as the United Nations, ASEAN, and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) could serve as mediating actors to facilitate negotiations, ensure accountability, and monitor implementation. The presence of third-party guarantors could help reduce the trust deficit between Myanmar and Bangladesh, making cooperation more feasible. For instance, previous ASEAN-led missions in Rakhine, though limited, established a precedent for regional involvement in humanitarian issues (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

Moreover, liberal institutionalism argues that economic interdependence and long-term diplomatic engagement can create incentives for cooperation. Myanmar, under increasing international sanctions and economic isolation, may find institutional cooperation a way to rehabilitate its global image, while Bangladesh could leverage international partnerships to bolster its position (Donini, 2012). Therefore, this framework suggests that the successful establishment of a humanitarian corridor depends significantly on the role of international institutions and the willingness of states to engage in cooperative bargaining.

Constructivism: Identity, Norms, and Perception

Constructivism introduces a third dimension to the analysis by emphasising the importance of ideas, identity, and social norms in shaping state behaviour (Wendt, 1992). Unlike realism and liberalism, constructivism argues that international politics is not merely a competition for power or gains but is constructed through historical narratives, collective beliefs, and intersubjective meanings.

Myanmar's identity-based exclusion of the Rohingya is central to understanding its resistance to humanitarian corridors. The denial of Rohingya citizenship and the framing of their presence as a

demographic threat are rooted in long-standing narratives about national identity and ethnic purity (Selth, 2018; Fink, 2009). These identity constructions shape policy preferences, making humanitarian engagement politically sensitive and ideologically challenging.

Bangladesh's role as a humanitarian host also derives from normative self-perceptions. The state has positioned itself as a responsible international actor committed to human rights and refugee protection, often invoking Islamic and humanitarian solidarity in its domestic discourse (Imtiaz, 2020). Constructivism helps explain how these identities shape Bangladesh's proactive diplomacy and inform its appeals to international norms for intervention and assistance.

Norm diffusion, a key concept in constructivism, also sheds light on how ideas such as humanitarian corridors gain legitimacy. As global awareness of the Rohingya crisis grows, international pressure and the mobilisation of transnational advocacy networks may reshape the discourse, pushing both Myanmar and Bangladesh toward more norm-compliant behaviour (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). However, the effectiveness of such norm diffusion is contingent upon local receptivity, which remains low in Myanmar's military regime.

Integrative Theoretical Approach

While each theoretical lens provides valuable insights, none is sufficient in isolation to explain the complex dynamics of the Myanmar-Bangladesh humanitarian corridor fully. A theoretical triangulation approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between material interests, institutional opportunities, and ideational constraints. Realism explains the structural impediments and strategic calculations; liberal institutionalism highlights pathways for cooperation and multilateral engagement; and constructivism uncovers the deep-

seated narratives and normative structures shaping policy decisions.

This integrative approach enables a more nuanced evaluation of the corridor's feasibility. It recognises that any durable solution must address not only security and institutional mechanisms but also historical grievances, identity politics, and normative transformation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design to analyse the political and theoretical dimensions surrounding the proposal for a humanitarian corridor between Myanmar and Bangladesh. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for this investigation because it enables an in-depth understanding of complex socio-political phenomena, particularly those influenced by historical narratives, diplomatic discourse, and normative frameworks (Creswell, 2014). The exploratory nature of the design is justified by the limited academic work specifically addressing humanitarian corridors in the Myanmar-Bangladesh context, particularly in terms of bilateral theoretical engagement.

Data Collection Methods

Secondary Document Analysis

The primary method of data collection involves secondary document analysis, including official policy statements, bilateral agreements, UN and ASEAN humanitarian reports, international human rights documentation, academic journal articles, news media, and NGO briefings. The documents analysed range from 2012 (when violence in Rakhine State escalated significantly) to 2025, ensuring both historical depth and contemporary relevance. This method is effective for capturing state-level intentions, international reactions, and evolving discourses on humanitarian norms (Bowen, 2009).

Key documents include:

- Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs press releases and policy statements,
- Myanmar's official responses to international pressure regarding the Rohingya crisis,
- Reports by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and ASEAN's humanitarian assessments in Rakhine State,
- Peer-reviewed publications on international relations theories applied to Southeast Asian geopolitics.

Key Informant Reports and Policy Briefs

The study also incorporates grey literature, such as policy briefs from think tanks (e.g., International Crisis Group, Asia Foundation) and reports from transnational advocacy networks (e.g., Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International). These sources offer insights into the perspectives of non-state actors and provide nuance to the understanding of stakeholder positions. They are critical in revealing informal power dynamics and humanitarian logistics often absent from official state documentation (Mogalakwe, 2006).

Analytical Framework

The study uses thematic content analysis informed by a multi-theoretical framework (realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism). The data are coded according to recurring themes aligned with these theoretical constructs:

- **Power and Sovereignty (Realism):** Analysis focuses on state behaviour, national interest, strategic military control of Rakhine, and border securitisation.
- **Institutional Engagement (Liberalism):** Thematic categories include ASEAN mediation, United Nations diplomacy,

regional cooperation, and intergovernmental coordination for humanitarian delivery.

- Identity and Norms (Constructivism): Themes cover national identity narratives, historical memory of the Rohingya crisis, discursive constructions of legitimacy, and norm diffusion processes.

Coding was conducted manually, and themes were developed inductively, allowing emergent patterns to guide the interpretation of state strategies and humanitarian responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Case Study Method

This research applies a single-case study method, with the Myanmar-Bangladesh relationship serving as the core unit of analysis. The rationale behind this approach stems from the unique geopolitical and humanitarian complexities of the Rohingya crisis. Yin (2014) argues that a single-case design is suitable when the case is “extreme or unique,” particularly when it allows for theory-testing and policy-oriented reflection. By analysing this bilateral relationship through the lens of a humanitarian corridor, the study investigates the intersection of international norms and state interests in a live geopolitical context.

Validity and Reliability

Given the qualitative nature of the study, credibility and transferability are prioritised over statistical generalizability. Triangulation of sources—using academic, institutional, and media texts—ensures the validity of findings and reduces interpretive bias (Denzin, 2012). Furthermore, theoretical triangulation enhances analytical robustness, as findings are interpreted through multiple theoretical lenses, allowing for broader insights and critical comparison. Reliability in qualitative research often hinges on transparency of method and consistency in coding. A clearly defined codebook and thematic classification scheme were maintained throughout the analysis

process to ensure consistency. Regular peer discussions were conducted with other scholars specialising in Southeast Asian politics to validate thematic interpretations and minimise subjective bias.

Limitations

Despite its methodological rigour, this study has limitations. Firstly, the reliance on secondary sources may lead to gaps in firsthand insights from policymakers or affected populations. Due to the ongoing political volatility in Myanmar and security constraints in refugee camps in Bangladesh, primary fieldwork was not feasible. Secondly, access to credible government documentation from Myanmar is limited due to censorship and opacity under military rule. This asymmetry in data availability may skew interpretations toward more transparent actors, such as Bangladesh or international organisations.

Nevertheless, these limitations are mitigated by the study’s triangulated approach, multi-theoretical perspective, and reliance on a broad array of publicly accessible, reputable sources. Future research could complement this study through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, or survey-based assessments among refugee communities and policymakers.

Historical and Political Context of Myanmar-Bangladesh Relations

Historical Foundations of Bilateral Relations

The historical roots of Myanmar-Bangladesh relations are complex and deeply entangled with colonial legacies, ethno-religious dynamics, and shifting regional geopolitics. The two modern states share a 271-kilometre land border and historical interactions dating back centuries, particularly in the region of Rakhine State (formerly Arakan) and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Under British colonial rule, both regions underwent demographic shifts that laid the groundwork for later political tensions.

During the colonial period, the British administration of Burma (then a part of British India until 1937) facilitated the movement of labour across territories, particularly Muslim workers from the Chittagong region into Arakan. This movement sowed the seeds of demographic anxiety among the local Rakhine Buddhist population and the central Burmese state, which came to view the Muslim Rohingya population as colonial-era migrants rather than indigenous people (Yegar, 2002). Although many Rohingya families have resided in Rakhine for generations, their contested historical presence has contributed to their political marginalisation in independent Myanmar.

Following the independence of Myanmar in 1948 and Bangladesh in 1971, bilateral relations have been shaped by these historical tensions. The earliest recorded refugee influx of Rohingya into Bangladesh occurred in 1978, when the Burmese military launched Operation Nagamin (“Dragon King”) to register citizens and expel “foreigners,” resulting in the forced displacement of an estimated 200,000 Rohingya (Ullah, 2011). This incident marked the beginning of Bangladesh’s humanitarian engagement with Myanmar, often under international pressure.

Post-1971 Diplomatic Engagements and Contentions

Diplomatic relations between the two nations were formally established after Bangladesh’s independence in 1971. However, these relations have remained fragile, often fluctuating in response to episodes of violence in Myanmar’s Rakhine State. Key diplomatic events include bilateral talks in 1992 following another major refugee exodus of 250,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. The 1992 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two countries and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) allowed for repatriation. However, many refugees remained in camps due to concerns over safety and statelessness (Parnini, 2013).

Despite multiple bilateral attempts at refugee repatriation, the political will and conducive conditions in Myanmar have been consistently lacking. Furthermore, Bangladesh has grown increasingly frustrated by Myanmar’s perceived intransigence and lack of accountability regarding the Rohingya situation. Myanmar, on the other hand, perceives international attention on the crisis as undue interference in its domestic affairs and a threat to its sovereignty (Selth, 2018).

Geopolitical interests have also influenced the bilateral relationship. Myanmar’s ties with China and India, particularly through infrastructural investments and energy security, offer Naypyidaw strategic alternatives that reduce its incentive to prioritise relations with Dhaka. Conversely, Bangladesh has increasingly internationalised the Rohingya issue, seeking multilateral forums such as the UN General Assembly, OIC, and ASEAN to pressure Myanmar (Chowdhury, 2021).

The 2017 Rohingya Crisis: A Diplomatic Turning Point

The 2017 military crackdown in Rakhine State, which the UN and several human rights groups described as ethnic cleansing or genocide, resulted in the most significant and most catastrophic refugee exodus to date—over 740,000 Rohingya fled to Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2022). This humanitarian emergency placed unprecedented strain on Bangladesh’s resources, environment, and local communities, while also galvanising its global advocacy efforts.

Following the 2017 crisis, Bangladesh initiated a series of bilateral meetings and trilateral arrangements involving China to facilitate Rohingya repatriation. However, these efforts have produced limited success, mainly due to Myanmar’s restrictive conditions and the lack of guarantees for safety, citizenship, or

reintegration. Dhaka's frustration has been compounded by repeated diplomatic rebuffs from Naypyidaw and rising domestic pressures from hosting a large stateless population (Hassan, 2020).

Security tensions have also increased along the border, with incidents involving landmine explosions, cross-border fire, and airspace violations. These events illustrate how the Rohingya crisis has not only generated a humanitarian disaster but also a serious security dilemma for Bangladesh. Consequently, the idea of a humanitarian corridor, grounded in international law and regional cooperation, is increasingly being discussed as a means of addressing both immediate humanitarian needs and longer-term political solutions.

Border Management and Cross-Border Humanitarianism

The Myanmar-Bangladesh border has been a focal point of both cooperation and conflict. In times of relative calm, joint border meetings have taken place, particularly through mechanisms involving border guard coordination. However, the militarisation of the Rakhine border following the 2017 crisis has significantly reduced cross-border cooperation.

Humanitarian aid has been channelled mainly through Bangladesh, particularly in the camps of Cox's Bazar. The question of cross-border humanitarian delivery directly into Myanmar, bypassing the state's restrictive frameworks, has been a politically sensitive issue. Myanmar has traditionally opposed foreign-led aid delivery without its consent, citing concerns over sovereignty. Conversely, Bangladesh and international organisations have emphasised the need for unimpeded humanitarian access to Rakhine, particularly to ensure safe repatriation and to address ongoing human rights abuses (OCHA, 2021).

The possibility of creating a neutral, internationally monitored humanitarian corridor—with land or riverine access through southeastern Bangladesh into northern Rakhine—raises critical diplomatic questions. Such a corridor would require not only the political will of both states but also the legal mechanisms to ensure safe passage, non-refoulement, and accountability. While Bangladesh has expressed openness to multilateral humanitarian frameworks, Myanmar's military-dominated government remains resistant to any arrangement that appears to undermine its territorial sovereignty (Lynch, 2021).

Role of Regional and Global Actors

External powers and multilateral bodies further influence the bilateral dynamics between Myanmar and Bangladesh. China has played a mediating role in repatriation dialogues, although its interest is primarily strategic, focusing on infrastructural projects such as the Kyaukphyu port and the economic corridor through Rakhine. India has adopted a more cautious approach, striking a balance between its security concerns in northeastern India and its desire to maintain relations with both Myanmar and Bangladesh (Haider, 2020).

ASEAN has faced criticism for its limited role in resolving the crisis. While it has conducted humanitarian assessments in Rakhine, ASEAN's policy of non-interference and its consensus-based decision-making have constrained its impact. Nevertheless, regional actors may be key to legitimising a humanitarian corridor if Myanmar perceives it as a regional, not Western-imposed, initiative (Weatherbee, 2019).

The United Nations has played a more active role in documenting human rights abuses and coordinating humanitarian responses. However, Security Council action has been hindered by the vetoes of China and Russia. The International Court of Justice (ICJ)

proceedings initiated by The Gambia, combined with the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigations, have further strained Myanmar's international standing, potentially creating diplomatic pressure conducive to innovative solutions, such as humanitarian corridors.

Geostrategic Importance and Implementation Challenges of a Humanitarian Corridor

Geostrategic Significance of Rakhine State and Southeastern Bangladesh

The proposal for a humanitarian corridor between Bangladesh and Myanmar, particularly to access Myanmar's Rakhine State, must be understood within the broader geopolitical and geostrategic context of the Bay of Bengal region. Rakhine State, bordering southeastern Bangladesh, holds immense strategic importance due to its proximity to key sea lanes and its role in hosting vital infrastructure projects backed by foreign powers, particularly China.

The Bay of Bengal region has become a highly competitive geopolitical arena where regional and global actors vie for influence. Rakhine State hosts the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port, a linchpin in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which links the Bay of Bengal to Yunnan Province through oil and gas pipelines and a proposed railway (Myint-U, 2020). This strategic connectivity enables China to reduce its dependence on the Strait of Malacca for energy imports, thereby enhancing Rakhine's value from a Chinese perspective. A humanitarian corridor passing through or near such strategic infrastructure would, therefore, not only serve humanitarian purposes but also intersect with the economic and security interests of major powers.

On the other side of the border, in southeastern Bangladesh, particularly the Cox's Bazar-Teknaf corridor, is currently hosting over a million Rohingya

refugees. The region has developed substantial humanitarian logistics infrastructure with support from the UN and other international organisations (UNHCR, 2023). These assets make the region an operational base for potential corridor management, including warehousing, medical support, and monitoring. Thus, the geographic adjacency and logistical potential further enhance the viability of a corridor initiative.

Strategic Interests of Regional and Global Actors

Regional powers, especially India and China, have vested interests in the stability and development of Rakhine and southeastern Bangladesh. China's involvement in Myanmar is extensive; its mediation in Rohingya repatriation talks (including the 2018 tripartite agreement) signals a preference for stability that supports its economic investments (Sun, 2020). Although China has traditionally opposed external intervention in Myanmar's domestic affairs, it could potentially support a humanitarian corridor if it ensures the safeguarding of its projects and bolsters its diplomatic leverage.

India, while more reserved, has also invested in connectivity projects, such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project (KMTTP), which links Kolkata to Sittwe Port in Rakhine and onward to India's northeastern states. India's concern lies in ensuring that the region does not become a hotspot for militancy or a humanitarian catastrophe that could spill over into its borders (Haider, 2020). India may thus tacitly support limited humanitarian access if it serves the stability of the region.

The United Nations and international NGOs have long called for unimpeded humanitarian access to Rakhine. However, efforts have been constrained by Myanmar's insistence on sovereignty and its suspicion of foreign actors. Nonetheless, the Security Council deadlock has forced UN agencies to explore

alternative mechanisms, including negotiations for localised humanitarian corridors or safe zones under international supervision (ICG, 2021). ASEAN's involvement has been largely rhetorical, although it has initiated needs assessments and provided limited humanitarian assistance within Myanmar.

These multiple actors, each with different strategic priorities, complicate the corridor's design and implementation. However, the shared interest in preventing further regional destabilisation creates a strategic opening for coordinated action if framed appropriately.

Legal and Political Challenges of Implementation

One of the core challenges of implementing a humanitarian corridor lies in reconciling sovereignty with humanitarian imperatives. Myanmar's military junta has consistently viewed external humanitarian mechanisms as potential encroachments on its territorial integrity and political authority (Lynch, 2021). Any corridor that appears to undermine central control—even temporarily—faces strong resistance. This has been evident in Myanmar's rejection of UN-led efforts to establish access routes independent of government monitoring.

Furthermore, the legal architecture for establishing a humanitarian corridor is complex. Under international humanitarian law (IHL), corridors require the consent of the affected state unless authorised by the UN Security Council (ICRC, 2016). Given China and Russia's veto power and historical resistance to interfering in Myanmar's internal affairs, such authorisation is unlikely in the near term.

Politically, the lack of trust between Myanmar and Bangladesh also poses an obstacle. Myanmar has often accused Bangladesh of harbouring Rohingya insurgents and turning the refugee crisis into a diplomatic tool to shame Naypyidaw (Parnini, 2013).

In turn, Bangladesh remains sceptical of Myanmar's sincerity in resolving the crisis, especially in the absence of guarantees for Rohingya safety, citizenship, and dignity upon return.

Additionally, Myanmar's military domination of civilian administration complicates negotiation pathways. Since the 2021 coup, the State Administration Council (SAC) has tightened control over humanitarian access and imposed bureaucratic restrictions on aid agencies (UN OCHA, 2022). This reduces the likelihood of the junta permitting a corridor that would operate outside its regulatory framework.

Operational and Logistical Constraints

Assuming the legal and diplomatic hurdles can be overcome, the actual implementation of a humanitarian corridor faces considerable logistical challenges. These include terrain-related difficulties, seasonal weather conditions, and the absence of reliable infrastructure in parts of Rakhine State. Even if the corridor is confined to a short land stretch between southeastern Bangladesh and northern Rakhine, significant investments in road maintenance, communication lines, and security mechanisms would be required.

Moreover, the safe and effective functioning of a corridor would necessitate neutral oversight, potentially by a third-party actor such as the United Nations (UN) or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). This includes tasks such as monitoring aid delivery, verifying beneficiaries, and coordinating with local authorities to ensure the effective distribution of aid. In a conflict zone where ethnic tensions remain high, ensuring the safety of both aid workers and aid recipients becomes a non-trivial challenge (ICG, 2021).

Another concern is the possibility of military exploitation of the corridor. There is precedent in other humanitarian contexts—such as in Syria and South Sudan—where warring parties have manipulated aid corridors to achieve military objectives or to control population movements (Slim, 2015). Ensuring that a Myanmar-Bangladesh corridor remains strictly humanitarian would require robust transparency and accountability measures.

Human Security and Ethical Considerations

A booming humanitarian corridor must centre the human security of affected populations, particularly the Rohingya. Beyond material aid, it should serve as a pathway to long-term dignity and protection. This involves ensuring that aid does not become a substitute for durable solutions such as repatriation with rights, resettlement, or local integration.

Furthermore, ethical concerns abound regarding the risk of refoulement—that is, forcing Rohingya refugees back into Myanmar under the guise of humanitarian access. Bangladesh must tread carefully to avoid violating the principle of non-refoulement, enshrined in international refugee law (UNHCR, 2023). Any corridor initiative must therefore be coupled with independent monitoring to verify voluntariness, safety, and dignity of movement.

Pathways Forward: Toward a Multilateral Framework

Given these intersecting geostrategic and operational challenges, the humanitarian corridor concept must be embedded within a multilateral framework that includes regional ownership and international legitimacy. One viable model could involve a Bangladesh-Myanmar-ASEAN-UN consortium, where Bangladesh provides logistical access, Myanmar grants consent, ASEAN provides regional legitimacy, and the UN offers oversight and technical capacity.

Such an approach could mitigate sovereignty concerns while creating a cooperative mechanism to address urgent humanitarian needs. Confidence-building measures—such as joint training, transparent aid audits, and community-based participation—could enhance trust between the two states.

Ultimately, the corridor must be conceived not as an end in itself, but as part of a broader roadmap for Rohingya protection and repatriation, linked to international commitments and regional peacebuilding strategies. Without this strategic alignment, the corridor risks becoming a temporary fix in a protracted and unresolved crisis.

Policy Recommendations and Strategic Alternatives

The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State and the mass displacement of the Rohingya community have underscored the urgent need for practical, ethical, and multilateral interventions. Establishing a humanitarian corridor between Bangladesh and Myanmar is a compelling concept, yet one fraught with geostrategic, legal, and political complexities. In this section, comprehensive policy recommendations and strategic alternatives are offered to facilitate effective, rights-based humanitarian access and regional cooperation.

Establishing a Multilateral Humanitarian Corridor Framework

To overcome sovereignty concerns and ensure operational feasibility, a multilateral corridor framework involving Bangladesh, Myanmar, ASEAN, and the United Nations is critical. This quadrilateral arrangement would allow Myanmar to maintain its national dignity, while granting the corridor legitimacy and neutrality under international oversight.

In practice, this model could resemble hybrid arrangements used in Syria and Sudan, where humanitarian corridors were authorised through regional blocs with UN participation (Slim, 2015). Bangladesh's role would involve hosting staging and logistics operations. Myanmar would grant corridor access and security guarantees. ASEAN would offer regional legitimacy and political cover. The UN would provide coordination, technical standards, and monitoring.

Such a framework must be based on the principles of international humanitarian law (IHL), particularly the requirement for consent, neutrality, and proportionality (ICRC, 2016). Corridor operations should be guided by clear memoranda of understanding (MoUs), operational transparency, and third-party monitoring. To gain Myanmar's consent, confidence-building measures such as mutual inspections, joint humanitarian assessments, and regional summit-level endorsements should be employed.

Incorporating Human Security Principles into Corridor Design

The policy framework should prioritise human security, not merely the physical transfer of aid. Human security includes freedom from fear, want, and indignity (UNDP, 1994). A successful corridor must provide access to essential services—such as food, healthcare, education, and protection—especially for vulnerable groups, including women, children, and the elderly.

In practical terms, this means embedding gender-based violence (GBV) protection, trauma counselling, and rights-based monitoring into aid delivery mechanisms (UNHCR, 2023). Humanitarian actors should engage with local Rohingya and Rakhine communities to design culturally appropriate, conflict-

sensitive interventions that do not exacerbate ethnic or religious divisions.

Moreover, the corridor should not become a tool for premature or coercive repatriation. The principle of non-refoulement must be upheld, ensuring that any return to Myanmar is voluntary, informed, and dignified (UNHCR, 2023). Returns through the corridor must be part of a broader repatriation framework, including citizenship guarantees and community reintegration.

Strengthening Bangladesh's Diplomatic Strategy

Bangladesh must recalibrate its foreign policy posture toward Myanmar by striking a balance among bilateral, regional, and international levers. First, it should intensify diplomatic efforts through ASEAN mechanisms such as the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Centre (AHA Centre), pushing for joint needs assessments and operational mandates for aid corridors. Although Myanmar is a member of ASEAN, pressure from fellow members—especially Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines—can influence Naypyidaw's decision-making.

Second, Bangladesh should enhance cooperation with India and China, both of whom wield significant influence over Myanmar. While India may be reticent to engage due to geopolitical balancing, its interest in regional stability and anti-insurgency cooperation may prompt support for humanitarian engagement (Haider, 2020). China, concerned about the protection of its investments in Rakhine, may support limited humanitarian access if it is framed as a stabilising measure. Bangladesh should leverage these interests to secure buy-in for a monitored corridor.

Third, Bangladesh should engage with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the European Union (EU) to internationalise the humanitarian narrative. The OIC has consistently advocated for Rohingya rights, while the EU remains

a significant humanitarian donor. Bangladesh can present the corridor as an opportunity for tangible impact, aligning with the “Responsibility to Protect” doctrine under the UN framework.

Investing in Localised Infrastructure and Capacity

Successful implementation of a humanitarian corridor will require substantial investment in cross-border infrastructure, security, and aid management. Bangladesh, with support from international donors, must upgrade logistics hubs in Cox’s Bazar and Teknaf to serve as entry points and coordination centres. These hubs should include cold-chain storage, medical facilities, and real-time information systems to track the distribution of aid.

Moreover, capacity building for local government bodies and NGOs is essential. Training in humanitarian logistics, emergency response coordination, and conflict sensitivity will enhance operational efficiency and community trust. Special attention should be given to community-based participation, involving the Rohingya and local populations in decision-making to reduce tensions and enhance ownership.

Myanmar, for its part, should be encouraged, through diplomatic incentives and economic aid, to remove bureaucratic barriers and allow international actors to operate in designated zones. Pilot projects in relatively stable parts of northern Rakhine may demonstrate the corridor’s feasibility and benefits to reluctant stakeholders.

Developing Contingency Strategies: Alternatives to a Land Corridor

Given the fragility of Myanmar’s political landscape, policy planners must prepare alternative humanitarian access mechanisms in case a land corridor proves unfeasible. These include:

- **Aerial Humanitarian Drops:** In coordination with international organisations, air-drops of food and medical supplies can reach remote areas of Rakhine. Though costly and logistically complex, they are viable in emergency scenarios where road access is denied.
- **Maritime Aid via the Bay of Bengal:** Bangladesh and ASEAN could explore naval-based delivery of aid through ports like Sittwe, under UN supervision. This would require diplomatic agreements with Myanmar’s navy and verification by a neutral third party.
- **Cross-Border Mobile Clinics:** To address medical needs, cross-border health caravans—jointly operated by Bangladesh and international NGOs—can be deployed in buffer zones or under corridor-like arrangements. These are mobile, adaptable, and less politically threatening than large-scale operations.
- **Third-Country Coordination Centres:** Establishing regional aid coordination centres in Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, or New Delhi could ensure continuity of planning and resource pooling. These would also help avoid overburdening Bangladesh’s infrastructure.

Each of these alternatives presents its own set of challenges, but they should be integrated into a comprehensive contingency blueprint to maintain humanitarian responsiveness in a volatile environment.

Leveraging Transitional Justice Mechanisms

A long-term solution to the Rohingya crisis—and the corridor’s sustainability—requires integrating transitional justice mechanisms. These include accountability for past human rights abuses,

reparations for affected populations, and institutional reforms within Myanmar (Cheesman, 2017). While the corridor itself cannot deliver justice, it can serve as a platform for documentation, monitoring, and advocacy.

Bangladesh and its allies should support fact-finding missions, ensure the documentation of abuses, and collaborate with the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) where applicable. This will signal that humanitarian aid is not a substitute for justice, but a complementary measure in a broader peace and reconciliation agenda.

Conclusion

The establishment of a humanitarian corridor between Bangladesh and Myanmar to deliver aid to Rakhine State represents both a moral imperative and a complex geopolitical challenge. This study has explored the feasibility of such a corridor through a theoretical lens of realism and liberal institutionalism, revealing the intricate balance of state interests, sovereignty concerns, and humanitarian obligations. While Bangladesh's humanitarian leadership and Myanmar's internal complexities have shaped the bilateral dynamics, external actors, including ASEAN, China, and the United Nations, play crucial roles in influencing the outcomes.

Historically, the Bangladesh-Myanmar relationship has oscillated between cautious engagement and mutual suspicion, particularly in the context of the Rohingya crisis. Despite multiple repatriation attempts and diplomatic dialogues, the situation remains unresolved. A properly negotiated and monitored humanitarian corridor offers a realistic interim solution that can alleviate immediate suffering while laying the groundwork for long-term reconciliation and regional cooperation.

Implementation, however, hinges on multilateral diplomacy, infrastructure development, and adherence to international humanitarian principles. The strategic recommendations offered herein—ranging from a multilateral framework to contingency planning and transitional justice advocacy—highlight the multidimensional approach necessary to overcome political and logistical obstacles.

Ultimately, the corridor is not merely a logistical construct but a symbol of collective regional responsibility and the potential for human-centred diplomacy. As conflicts become increasingly protracted and cross-border in nature, the corridor model may serve as a precedent for future humanitarian interventions in Asia and beyond.

Future Research Directions

This study contributes to the evolving discourse on humanitarian corridors in conflict and post-conflict settings, particularly within the South and Southeast Asian geopolitical context. However, several avenues warrant further academic investigation. First, empirical research is needed on the operational models of existing humanitarian corridors in other regions, such as Syria, Ethiopia, and Sudan, to identify best practices applicable to the Myanmar-Bangladesh corridor. Comparative studies can illuminate success factors and pitfalls related to consent, coordination, and security.

Second, future research should delve into the socio-political perceptions of the Rohingya community and local stakeholders in Rakhine State and Cox's Bazar. Participatory action research could help align humanitarian strategies with community needs and promote sustainable peacebuilding.

Third, there is a critical need for quantitative modelling of the economic, social, and logistical implications of implementing such corridors,

including cost-benefit analyses and scenario-based forecasting. This would equip policymakers with actionable data to make informed decisions.

Ultimately, interdisciplinary studies that integrate political science, international law, humanitarian logistics, and digital technologies—such as AI-driven aid distribution—could enrich the theoretical and practical aspects of this topic. Bridging these gaps will enhance the scholarly and policy-oriented understanding of humanitarian corridors in fragile bilateral relations.

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