The Rohingya Crisis

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1. Introduction

Following the golden ages of interventionism in the 1990s, the decades after 9/11 were marked by a growing unwillingness to support military intervention. In light of current humanitarian crises, considerations of responsibility and morality regarding humanitarian interventionism are more relevant than ever. The case of Myanmar and its humanitarian crisis is an excellent example of the wider discourse surrounding humanitarian intervention and ultimately showcases the ineffectiveness of international mechanisms in protecting fundamental human rights. The persecution of the Rohingya religious minority in Myanmar is one of the biggest contemporary humanitarian crises. Due to a surge in violence, next to the denial of citizenship and thus, deprivation of rights to public services, almost a million Rohingyas were forced to flee to Bangladesh since August 2017 (Ibrahim and Nordin 2015, 4; Rahman and Akon 2020, 198). Myanmar is neglecting its responsibility to ensure the rule of law in order to protect its population's security, as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) stipulates in the principle of 'state sovereignty as a responsibility'. The UN Security Council (UNSC), the only organ in the UN with the authority to undertake military action, is responsible for implementing an R2P response, i.e., humanitarian military intervention. Unanimity among the five permanent members is a condition for such action. Despite reports accusing the Myanmar government of ethnic cleansing as well as calls for intervention because of an extremely high risk of genocide committed against the Rohingya, the UNSC has not yet invoked R2P due to vetoes of Russia and China (Ibrahim and Nordin 2015, 9). Therefore, the question arises why China has blocked attempts to invoke the R2P doctrine in the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. It is argued that humanitarian concerns are overshadowed by China's national economic and geostrategic interests. First, the preservation of internal stability through the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Second, China's long-term strategic interests in South Asia vis-a-vis India as a regional rival, and third, the maintenance and improvement of China's position relative to the US as the hegemon in the international system.

2. History of the Conflict

Despite their status as the second-largest religious and ethnic minority in Myanmar and their long historical presence in Rakhine State, the Rohingya have consistently been denied recognition as citizens by the state. Although the most visible violence has intensified in recent years, persecution of the Rohingya represents a protracted and gradual process spanning several decades. Since the military first assumed power in 1962, state policies have become increasingly exclusionary and hostile toward the Rohingya population. The government institutionalized this exclusion by officially recognizing 135 ethnic groups while deliberately omitting the Rohingya, culminating in the 1982 Citizenship Law, which rendered them effectively stateless by classifying them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (Kamal, Kaiser, Mariano 2024, 545). This legal misrecognition enabled severe restrictions on nearly all aspects of Rohingya life, including political participation, marriage, education, religious practice, and freedom of movement. Through state narratives portraying the Rohingya as a threat to national and Buddhist cultural identity, Myanmar authorities legitimized widespread discrimination and violence. Large-scale military operations, beginning with Operation Nagamin in 1978, involved the confiscation of identity documents, mass violence, and forced displacement, driving hundreds of thousands of Rohingya into neighboring countries. Similar patterns of persecution continued through the 1990s and 2000s, marked by arbitrary arrests, forced labor, sexual violence, and state-sponsored propaganda that fueled public hostility. Violence escalated dramatically in 2012, when coordinated attacks by security forces and local actors killed hundreds and displaced over 140,000 Rohingya, with perpetrators protected by state-backed impunity (Kamal, Kaiser, Mariano 2024, 546, 549-551). The situation reached a critical point in August 2017, when Myanmar's military and allied extremist groups carried out systematic attacks involving mass killings, sexual violence, and the destruction of entire villages, forcing more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee, primarily to Bangladesh, which now hosts over one million refugees (Choi 2025, 263-264). The UN has identified these actions as crimes against humanity with strong indications of genocidal intent. Conditions for the Rohingya have further deteriorated since the 2021 military coup, as economic collapse, rising prices, and renewed inter-communal violence since 2023 have triggered additional displacement and cross-border migration, underscoring the ongoing and unresolved nature of the crisis (Médecins Sans Frontières 2025; IOM and UNHCR 2025).

3. The Responsibility to Protect vs National Interests

R2P is a principle applied in situations of severe human rights violations, such as mass atrocities and ethnic cleansing, thus, it is triggered when a state is either unable or unwilling to protect its population or is itself responsible for committing such abuses. Under R2P, the primary duty to

protect populations rests with the state itself, encompassing both its actions and failures to act, yet, the international community is expected to support states in realizing this duty. State sovereignty is therefore no longer absolute but is linked to the responsibility to uphold human rights and ensure human security (Islam, Muhibbullah and Ahmed 2023, 16). Despite this commitment, the implementation of R2P remains contentious. Concerns persist regarding potential violations of national sovereignty and the legitimacy of using military force for humanitarian purposes. Additionally, General Assembly resolutions supporting R2P are considered "soft law" and lack binding legal force, limiting enforceability. Furthermore, the limitations of the UNSC and the use of veto power make international mechanisms ineffective in protecting fundamental human rights (Islam, Muhibbullah and Ahmed 2023, 17). China has repeatedly used its veto power to block international action against Myanmar. In 2018, it obstructed efforts to adopt resolutions condemning Myanmar's military for alleged genocide, and in 2020, it prevented a joint UN statement responding to the International Court of Justice's measures on the Rohingya issue. Following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, China again blocked a UNSC resolution addressing the worsening human rights situation. At the same time, China has continued to support Myanmar by offering political and economic alternatives amid Western sanctions, driven largely by its strategic, economic, and regional influence interests (Swadhin 2024, 6).

3.1 Internal Stability

While the US and many other states have condemned Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya, China has remained one of the few countries to openly support the Myanmar government. In 2017, China publicly endorsed Myanmar's military operations, framing them as a domestic response to extremism and reaffirming its willingness to assist Myanmar in maintaining stability and development. This stance is closely linked to its own domestic concerns over ethnic minority governance. By framing ethnic conflicts as internal security matters, China seeks to prevent international scrutiny that could set precedents affecting its policies toward groups such as the Uyghurs and Tibetans (Choi 2025, 277). Having created a similarly hostile environment for its Uyghur population, China is concerned about the spillover effect Western interference in Myanmar's internal affairs could have on its own crisis. Moreover, calls for the deployment of UN troops or international monitoring groups in Myanmar are perceived as an attack on Myanmar's territorial integrity and national sovereignty (Aung 2020, 26). This approach reinforces China's broader narrative that sovereignty and state security should take precedence over external human rights norms and "is deeply rooted in its long-standing foreign policy principle of non-interference" (Choi 2025, 273, 277). Defending Myanmar thus also strengthens China's domestic legitimacy and limits international criticism of its own minority policies. Beyond ideology, China's support for Myanmar reflects long-standing strategic and geopolitical interests. Since Myanmar

backed China's entry into the UN in 1971, Beijing has encouraged its non-alignment and established close military and economic ties, particularly from the 1980s onward. This fraternal partnership helps China counter Western influence in Southeast Asia, protect regional stability on its terms, and consolidate its broader regional dominance (Choi 2025, 275, 277).

3.2 China's Long-Term Strategic Interests in South Asia

Figure 1. Planned China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (Bicker 2024).

By supporting Myanmar, China also presents itself as a champion of South–South cooperation while simultaneously attempting to achieve its strategic objective of becoming the regional hegemon (Choi 2025, 277). China's approach to the Bay of Bengal is shaped by its rivalry with India. Seeking to counter India's longstanding regional influence, China has strengthened ties with South Asian states, including Myanmar, and used its involvement in the Rohingya crisis as a diplomatic balancing act (Obaidullah and Hossain 2024, 12). While publicly engaging in mediation efforts, Beijing has remained careful to protect its strategic investments and broader regional objectives. Alongside its political and economic support, China has pursued a form of humanitarian diplomacy, proposing a "three-phase solution" centered on ending violence, facilitating the return of refugees, and promoting long-term economic development in Rakhine State. This framework emphasizes cooperation between Myanmar and Bangladesh, promoting development as the primary solution to the crisis. This strategy allows China to alleviate aspects of the humanitarian crisis while simultaneously projecting itself as a responsible regional power committed to peace, stability, and development (Obaidullah and Hossain 2024, 14-15).

3.3 Balance of Power: US-China Rivalry

Beyond its regional power competition with India, China's long-term strategic interest is to improve its position relative to the US and eventually replace the US as a global hegemon. The emergence of a hegemon in the global order requires three broad forms of control to regulate the behavior of other states. First, 'coercive capabilities to force compliance,' second, 'consensual inducements to incentivize it' and third, 'legitimacy to rightfully command it' (Doshi 2021).

Since power is a zero-sum game, the most important variable shaping China's strategy is to weaken the US exercise of control and to take its place exercising control (Heywood 2014a, 63; Doshi 2021). Therefore, Myanmar is vital for its global expansionist ambitions, realized in strategies such as the 'Belt and Road Initiative' connecting China with South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Europe, as a consensual inducement (Rahman and Akon 2019, 387). However, Myanmar is of strategic importance to the US as well, due to its location in the Indo-Pacific region that serves as a transport corridor for energy imports and exports, and its position as one of the fastest-growing economies in Southeast Asia with abundant natural resources, making it attractive for increased engagement and investments (Aung 2020, 33; Rahman, and Akon 2019, 387).

Figure 2. US Energy Trade through Maritime Oil Chokepoints (million barrels per day) in 2023 (EIA 2024).

During the 2017 Rohingya crisis, the US response was restrained, with the Trump administration imposing limited sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act and avoiding a genocide designation. In its subsequent term, US engagement with the Rohingya crisis further declined, as sanctions on military-linked actors were quietly eased and support for pro-democracy forces was deprioritized, reflecting a shift in US priorities (Choi 2025, 270-272). Increasingly, the US approach has been shaped by strategic and economic concerns, particularly access to rare earth minerals. Myanmar is among the world's leading producers of heavy rare earths, which are critical for clean energy technologies and advanced defense systems. Despite being a major producer itself, the US remains heavily reliant on China, which dominates global processing. Thus, by mid-2025, the US explored engagement with both the junta and ethnic armed groups to access these resources, viewing Myanmar as a potential avenue to reduce reliance on China and counter its influence in Southeast Asia (Banerjee 2025).

Simultaneously, China views the persistence of the crisis as an opportunity for the US to increase its presence in the Rakhine State, legitimizing its exercise of control "in the name of human rights and humanitarian support via the UN and international organizations" (Aung 2020, 23). Therefore, China desires to play a leading role in Myanmar's internal conflict, thereby minimizing the role of the US as an external power, aiming to, on the one hand, protect its investments in the country and push forward strategic projects of national interest and, on the other hand, promote its diplomatic role in the UN (Yhome 2019, 20). Taking a proactive role as a mediator between Myanmar and Bangladesh hampers the possibility of US interference in the conflict and thus decreases the US' ability to exercise control through consensual inducements or worse, its coercive capabilities in the form of humanitarian intervention via the UN. Moreover, it will endorse Chinese ambitions to promote its relations with the Muslim world by taking responsibility for mediating the conflict and promoting economic development in the Rakhine state. Support from Muslim countries is crucial for China to counter the US and the West as it gets more involved in international affairs and its role in the UN expands (Aung 2020, 24, 41).

4. Conclusion

The failure to invoke the Responsibility to Protect in response to the Rohingya crisis cannot be explained by humanitarian considerations alone, but must be understood through the lens of great-power politics and national interests. While the UN has identified the actions of the Myanmar government as crimes against humanity with strong indications of genocidal intent, the R2P doctrine's implementation has been constrained by structural limitations within the UNSC that enable China to use its veto power

to achieve its national interests. China's consistent obstruction of international action reflects its prioritization of sovereignty, internal stability, and long-term geopolitical and economic interests in the South Asia region and beyond, particularly in relation to energy security, regional influence, and the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, the US's restrained and increasingly selective engagement with the crisis underscores how humanitarian responses are subordinated to broader strategic rivalries, notably the intensifying competition with China. The Rohingya crisis illustrates the limitations of R2P in a multipolar world, where great-power rivalry and strategic interests continue to outweigh collective responsibility for the protection of vulnerable populations.

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