THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT IN NORMATIVE DEADLOCK: ASEAN'S DILEMMA IN THE ROHINGYA ISSUE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the limitations of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in Southeast Asia, using the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar as a case study. While ASEAN has formally endorsed R2P, its response to the crisis reveals a persistent gap between normative commitment and institutional capacity. This study investigates how deeply entrenched principles of non-interference and consensus have shaped ASEAN's reluctance to operationalise protective norms, even amid documented mass atrocities. Drawing on qualitative document analysis and framed within constructivist and norm localisation theories, the article explores both regional and global failures to act. The analysis reveals that ASEAN's response was fragmented, with individual member states selectively engaging based on domestic interests, and that international inaction further eroded the credibility of R2P. By highlighting the disjuncture between rhetorical acceptance and practical implementation, the article argues for a reinterpretation of sovereignty and a rethinking of institutional mechanisms in order to strengthen atrocity prevention in the region. The study further recommends that ASEAN develop a regional monitoring and early-warning mechanism to enhance timely and coordinated responses to emerging mass-atrocity risks.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of humanitarian norms in global politics has led to the development of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as one of the most contested and discussed frameworks in international relations. Conceived as a response to repeated failures to prevent mass atrocities in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo, the R2P doctrine seeks to recalibrate the balance between state sovereignty and the international obligation to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. Adopted unanimously at the 2005 UN World Summit, R2P is structured around three pillars: the state's responsibility to protect its population; the international community's

responsibility to assist; and, where necessary, the responsibility to take timely and decisive action (Global Centre For The Responsibility to Protect, n.d.).

The doctrine, although strongly rooted in normative aspirations, has encountered resistance in various geopolitical contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia. The case of the Rohingya people in Myanmar between 2012 and 2018 presents a concrete example of the widening gap between international normative commitments and regional political realities. The conflict, which intensified following allegations against Rohingya individuals in 2012, led to large-scale displacement and violence. Reports by the United Nations indicated that approximately 168,000 Rohingyas were forcibly displaced, with estimates suggesting that at least 6,700 individuals were killed in that year alone (Al Jazeera, 2017). Despite these developments, Myanmar persistently refused to accept any international humanitarian intervention and rejected R2P-based obligations. ASEAN, bound by its foundational principle of non-interference, offered little beyond rhetorical concern.

Myanmar's official denial of the Rohingya's citizenship rights under the 1982 Citizenship Law created structural exclusion that allowed state and non-state violence to occur with impunity. The Rohingya, despite having lived in Myanmar long before its independence in 1948, were systematically stripped of nationality and access to basic protections (Charney, 2009). With their statelessness entrenched, any international legal appeal on their behalf faced major roadblocks. These developments coincided with a broader debate in international relations regarding the effectiveness of humanitarian intervention in the post-Westphalian order, where sovereignty remains a paramount value, particularly in ASEAN's political culture (Cheesman, 2017).

The non-interference principle has long been a defining norm within ASEAN's institutional framework. Originating from the Bangkok Declaration of 1967, this principle prioritises mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention in the internal affairs of member states. While it was historically intended to maintain regional stability in the aftermath of decolonisation and Cold War rivalries, its continued dominance has increasingly come under scrutiny, particularly in situations of mass human rights violations. The Rohingya crisis, in this regard, serves as a litmus test for ASEAN's willingness and capacity to adapt its normative commitments in response to evolving international expectations.

ASEAN's official response to the Rohingya issue has been largely limited to expressions of concern and offers of humanitarian assistance. In 2017, ASEAN issued a Chairman's Statement addressing the humanitarian situation in Rakhine State, extending condolences and offering support for collaboration with the International Red Cross and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management AHA Centre delivered 80 tonnes of relief materials to affected populations (ASEAN, 2017). However, this response remained squarely within the realm of logistical assistance, avoiding any explicit condemnation of the Myanmar government's conduct or invocation of international protection norms.

The structural weaknesses of ASEAN's human rights apparatus also played a significant role in its ineffective engagement. The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), established in 2009, was envisaged as a regional mechanism to promote and protect human rights. However, AICHR's lack of enforcement authority, combined with its consensus-based decision-making model, has rendered it ineffective in addressing systemic abuses. Its role in the Rohingya crisis was conspicuously absent,

despite credible allegations of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity (The Wall Street Journal, 2009).

Moreover, individual ASEAN member states often resorted to bilateral or symbolic gestures, further exposing the absence of a unified regional stance. In 2017, for instance, the Malaysian Prime Minister openly criticised the Myanmar government and sent humanitarian aid by ship, which was subsequently rejected by Myanmar authorities (The Guardian, 2016). Similarly, Indonesia pursued a diplomatic approach. The Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, through a series of bilateral meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi, succeeded in persuading the Myanmar government to allow limited access for humanitarian relief and media coverage (Salle, Zainuddin, and Risma, 2025). While these efforts were not insignificant, they fell short of constituting a coherent regional intervention aligned with the principles of R2P.

These fragmented and cautious responses underscore the entrenched nature of ASEAN's adherence to non-interference. Even as R2P has gained normative legitimacy in global forums, its practical application in Southeast Asia continues to be filtered through a lens of sovereignty sensitivity. This disjuncture raises critical questions about the regional capacity to internalise and operationalise international norms aimed at protecting vulnerable populations. Without institutional reform or normative recalibration, ASEAN's engagement with R2P remains unlikely to move beyond its current symbolic function.

The reluctance of ASEAN to engage R2P more robustly in the Rohingya crisis reflects not only a crisis of capacity but a deeper normative disjuncture. While R2P has attained rhetorical recognition within the region, the lack of institutional will and normative internalisation prevents it from achieving behavioural change. ASEAN's reliance on consensus and non-interference results in risk-averse diplomacy, particularly when addressing the internal conduct of its member states. The result is a region that speaks the language of human rights but acts primarily in defence of sovereignty (Acharya, 2004).

Although ASEAN has formally adopted documents such as the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration in 2012 and established the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights in 2009, these developments have not generated the enforcement tools or normative authority necessary to respond to atrocity crimes. The institutional design and political logic of ASEAN continues to favour quiet diplomacy, national discretion, and avoidance of public confrontation. In this context, norms such as R2P are filtered through a regional lens that prioritises regime stability over transnational humanitarian obligations (Caballero-Anthony, 2022).

This study investigates how deeply entrenched principles of non-interference and consensus have shaped ASEAN's reluctance to operationalise protective norms, even amid documented mass atrocities. To analyze this normative disjuncture, this article applies a constructivist perspective, drawing specifically on norm diffusion theory (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998a) and norm localisation concept (Acharya, 2004). The norm life-cycle model helps explain how R2P, despite entering the international normative agenda and reaching the "cascade" phase of rhetorical acceptance, has stalled in Southeast Asia at the implementation stage. Simultaneously, norm localisation theory illuminates how ASEAN has selectively adapted and diluted R2P to fit its own regional values of sovereignty and non-interference.

This paper adopts a constructivist approach to international relations by grounding its analysis in norms theory, particularly as it applies to the Responsibility to

Protect (R2P). International norms are defined as collectively held expectations about appropriate behaviour for actors within a given context (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Norms theory in international relations focuses on how such standards emerge, are institutionalised, and become subject to resistance, reinterpretation, or internalisation. This framework is particularly relevant in analysing why R2P, despite global endorsement, has not been fully implemented in Southeast Asia. Two central strands within norms theory are used here: the norm diffusion model and the norm localisation model.

The norm diffusion model is exemplified in the work of Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), who argue that norms evolve through stages: emergence, cascade, and internalisation. In the context of R2P, the emergence phase was marked by advocacy from humanitarian actors following the failures in Rwanda and Srebrenica. This led to the adoption of R2P at the 2005 UN World Summit, signalling its entry into the cascade phase where states increasingly recognise the norm in principle. However, in many regional contexts, including Southeast Asia, this cascade has not translated into the kind of institutional or behavioural change that characterises internalisation (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Although R2P has been endorsed by all UN member states and included in Security Council resolutions and UN Secretary-General reports, its operationalisation depends on political will, regional institutions, and normative alignment. In regions such as ASEAN, this diffusion has stalled due to normative friction.

The second theoretical lens applied here is norm localisation, as developed by Acharya (Acharya, 2004). This approach shifts focus from how norms spread to how they are received and reshaped by local actors. Localisation is a process in which external norms are not simply adopted but are actively modified to fit within existing normative frameworks. This makes localisation especially relevant for regions like ASEAN, where norms such as non-interference, sovereignty, and consensus dominate political behaviour. According to Acharya (Acharya, 2004), ASEAN's engagement with international norms often results in rhetorical acceptance without substantive change. In the case of R2P, localisation has occurred in a diluted form, where humanitarian language is adopted, but institutional or coercive tools remain absent due to fear of violating sovereignty or disrupting regional unity.

These theoretical frameworks together offer a lens through which to examine why ASEAN has failed to move beyond rhetorical support for R2P and what this failure reveals about the regional dynamics of norm internalisation and resistance. Although a wide body of literature has examined ASEAN's adherence to non-interference and its general limitations in addressing human rights crises, existing studies have not sufficiently explained why R2P fails to progress beyond rhetorical endorsement within the region. Prior research tends to treat ASEAN's inaction as an institutional weakness or political reluctance, but it rarely integrates norm diffusion and norm localisation frameworks to analyse how global protection norms are reinterpreted, reshaped, or resisted by regional actors. Moreover, scholarship on the Rohingya crisis often focuses on geopolitical dynamics or humanitarian conditions rather than interrogating the normative mechanisms that prevent the operationalisation of R2P. This study fills these gaps by offering a theoretically grounded and empirically specific explanation of how ASEAN's normative order constrains the implementation of R2P in the Myanmar case.

This study aims to analyse why ASEAN has been unable to operationalise the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in the Rohingya crisis by examining how entrenched

principles of non-interference, consensus-based diplomacy, and normative resistance shape its institutional and political responses.

This article argues that R2P, though formally acknowledged by ASEAN states, has not been effectively localised within the region's political framework. While the language of atrocity prevention has appeared in diplomatic statements and summit communiqués, the norm has not been internalised in a way that influences institutional behaviour or collective regional responses. Instead, R2P has become part of ASEAN's normative vocabulary without being meaningfully translated into policy or action. This gap between verbal endorsement and operational engagement reveals a structural reluctance within ASEAN to accommodate global humanitarian norms when they challenge state sovereignty or threaten intra-regional consensus (Maulana & Newman, 2022).

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the extent and limitations of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) implementation in Southeast Asia, focusing specifically on the case of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar between 2012 and 2018. The design is intended to explore the normative, political, and institutional factors that shape the regional response to mass atrocities, with particular attention to ASEAN's position and mechanisms. The study is grounded in international relations theory, especially norm diffusion and localisation frameworks, and draws on both primary and secondary data sources to inform the analysis.

The study utilises both primary and secondary sources to establish a robust and triangulated understanding of the issue. Primary sources include speeches, interviews, resolutions, and policy statements from ASEAN bodies, the United Nations, and state actors involved in the Rohingya crisis. Relevant international legal instruments, such as the 2005 UN World Summit Outcome Document, ASEAN declarations, and Myanmar's domestic legal framework (including the 1982 Citizenship Law), are also included for institutional context. Secondary sources consist of scholarly publications, policy reports, NGO assessments, news articles, and analyses that address the Rohingya issue, R2P doctrine, and humanitarian intervention more broadly. These include reports by Human Rights Watch, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, and scholarly works on norm implementation in Southeast Asia.

The case of Myanmar was selected as a representative case where large-scale atrocity crimes occurred within a region that has normatively committed to R2P principles but structurally resists external intervention. The timeframe of 2012 to 2018 was chosen because it marks a clear escalation of violence against the Rohingya population, beginning with the Sittwe riots in 2012 and culminating in the military's clearance operations in 2017–2018. This period also reflects significant regional and international diplomatic activity concerning Rakhine State.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Intervention Discourse

The evolution of humanitarian intervention into the more structured doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) reflects a significant normative shift in global responses to mass atrocity crimes. While both concepts share the underlying goal of protecting civilian populations from gross human rights violations, their foundations, legal standing, and legitimacy in international relations are distinct. Humanitarian intervention, which gained prominence in the post-Cold War period, was often criticised

for being selective, ad hoc, and susceptible to the interests of powerful states. R2P, developed as a response to these criticisms, sought to institutionalise the international community's responsibility in cases of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Historically, humanitarian intervention was framed as the use of military force by one or more states across borders, without the consent of the host state, to prevent or stop widespread suffering. This model was evident in the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo, which, while successful in ending mass violence, triggered significant controversy regarding its legality and bypassing of United Nations Security Council authorisation (Evans Gareth, 2001). Many non-Western states viewed such interventions as violations of sovereignty under the guise of humanitarianism. In response, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) introduced R2P in 2001 as a more balanced alternative that preserved the principle of state sovereignty while recognising its responsibilities.

The core idea of R2P is that sovereignty entails not just control, but responsibility. If a state fails to protect its population from atrocity crimes, the international community, through the United Nations, is obligated to act using peaceful means first, and if necessary, collective coercive measures, including military force. This doctrine was formally adopted by all UN member states at the 2005 World Summit. Unlike earlier conceptions of humanitarian intervention, R2P established a three-pillar approach: the state's responsibility to protect its population, the international community's duty to assist, and the responsibility to take collective action when a state manifestly fails to protect its people (Bellamy, 2014).

Despite its broader legitimacy and moral appeal, R2P has not eliminated the concerns associated with humanitarian intervention. Critics argue that R2P may still be selectively applied and remains subject to the political interests of major powers. The dependence on Security Council authorisation means that interventions can be blocked for strategic reasons, as seen in Syria and Myanmar. Furthermore, the ambiguity surrounding what constitutes a "manifest failure" or "appropriate response" leaves significant room for interpretation, contributing to hesitancy in application.

In the context of Southeast Asia, these concerns are amplified by the region's normative environment. ASEAN's foundational principles emphasise non-interference, state sovereignty, and consensus-based diplomacy. These norms conflict with the coercive dimensions of both humanitarian intervention and R2P. As a result, ASEAN has historically framed crises involving internal violence as matters of domestic governance or intercommunal conflict rather than mass atrocity. This framing has allowed member states to avoid invoking international responsibility and instead emphasise humanitarian assistance or development cooperation.

The Rohingya crisis exemplifies this tension. While international observers and UN reports categorised the events in Rakhine State as ethnic cleansing or possible genocide, ASEAN statements avoided such terminology and focused instead on humanitarian access and dialogue. This linguistic restraint reflects ASEAN's unease with norms that challenge internal sovereignty, even when facing compelling evidence of systematic violence.

Yet, the discourse surrounding R2P and humanitarian intervention is not static. The increasing involvement of ASEAN in humanitarian activities, through mechanisms such as the AHA Centre, signals a gradual opening to discussions around protection norms, albeit within strict boundaries. Some member states, particularly Indonesia and

Malaysia, have shown greater willingness to engage with global humanitarian expectations, though largely through bilateral or extra-regional channels.

The normative trajectory from humanitarian intervention to R2P represents a global attempt to reconcile moral responsibility with political legitimacy. In Southeast Asia, the localisation of R2P remains incomplete. While the doctrine has gained rhetorical acceptance, its operationalisation continues to be constrained by regional norms and institutional design. The distinction between humanitarian intervention and R2P remains critical to understanding these dynamics. R2P provides a more legitimate and multilateral framework, but without regional commitment and structural support, it risks being perceived as yet another form of external interference. As the following sections will show, ASEAN's institutional engagement with R2P remains limited. The failure to integrate atrocity prevention into its core mechanisms, and the unwillingness to challenge member states on sovereignty grounds, has rendered R2P largely symbolic in the region.

The Responsibility to Protect Notion in ASEAN's Setting

The formal adoption of the R2P by all UN member states at the 2005 World Summit reflected a significant normative breakthrough, establishing the international consensus that states have the responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity (United Nations, 2005). However, this normative milestone has encountered structural constraints in its regional application, particularly within the ASEAN. Although ASEAN has acknowledged R2P in general diplomatic terms, the institutional uptake of the principle remains shallow and largely symbolic.

The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), established in 2009, is often cited as the region's primary mechanism for human rights monitoring. However, the body has been widely criticised for its limited mandate and lack of enforcement power. As stated by the Wall Street Journal, AICHR has been described as a "toothless council" incapable of addressing crises like the Rohingya situation due to its non-binding recommendations and adherence to the ASEAN norm of non-interference (The Wall Street Journal, 2009). While AICHR's creation might signal a regional aspiration toward normative progress, it lacks the autonomy and authority to initiate action against member states, let alone to enforce R2P.

In addition to institutional weakness, ASEAN's normative commitment to sovereignty and consensus decision-making presents significant barriers to the localisation of R2P. According to Article 2(e) of the ASEAN Charter, member states are bound to "respect the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all ASEAN Member States". This foundational principle of non-interference limits ASEAN's capacity to address intrastate violence or humanitarian crises unless the affected state consents to external engagement. In the Rohingya case, Myanmar's firm resistance to outside intervention, including humanitarian assistance and international fact-finding missions, effectively curtailed ASEAN's ability to respond (BBC, 2018)

This normative impasse results in a gap between rhetorical endorsement and substantive implementation of R2P. ASEAN member states have included references to R2P-related language in summit declarations and diplomatic statements, but these have largely remained at the level of moral expression rather than actionable commitment. The ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD), adopted in 2012, affirms the rights of individuals to life and dignity, yet it falls short of addressing state responsibility for mass

atrocity crimes or institutionalising protection mechanisms (Changrui, Tseen, and Lee, 2023).

Furthermore, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre), although operationally effective in disaster relief, is not mandated to intervene in cases of state-led violence. Its technical mandate restricts it to natural disasters and civil emergencies, thereby excluding political or ethnic conflicts such as the crisis in Rakhine State. Despite repeated public expressions of concern, ASEAN's actual response to the Rohingya crisis remained limited in both scope and impact. For example, the ASEAN Chairman's Statement on the Humanitarian Situation in Rakhine State issued in 2017 expressed sympathy and support for humanitarian efforts but avoided condemning Myanmar's actions or invoking any of the three pillars of R2P (ASEAN, 2017). This document represented the extent of ASEAN's formal engagement, highlighting its tendency to prioritise diplomatic tone over substantive pressure. Such statements reinforced ASEAN's image as a body concerned more with maintaining cohesion than responding effectively to grave human rights violations.

The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) mobilized logistical support in 2017 by delivering 80 tons of relief supplies to Rakhine State. However, its efforts were limited to technical assistance and carefully steered away from any implication of political intervention (AHA Centre, 2017). Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi, played a key role in persuading Aung San Suu Kyi to open humanitarian access during her diplomatic missions in December 2016, culminating in ASEAN's Retreat Program in Yangon. This bilateral diplomacy enabled some limited breakthroughs, such as humanitarian corridors and school construction, but failed to influence Myanmar's core policies towards the Rohingya population (The Jakarta Post, 2017).

ASEAN's institutional architecture compounds these challenges. The ASEAN Charter enshrines the principle of non-interference and consensus-based decision-making, both of which undermine the capacity for timely and decisive action in response to atrocities. The reliance on unanimity means that any effort to invoke stronger language or propose collective measures can be easily blocked by a single member state. In the Rohingya case, this effectively granted Myanmar veto power over ASEAN's regional position, allowing it to shield itself from criticism and external accountability (ASEAN, 2008).

Even within its human rights mechanisms, ASEAN has shown consistent reluctance to move beyond rhetorical endorsement. The ASEAN Human Rights Declaration articulates broad protections for life, dignity, and freedom from torture (ASEAN, 2012), but it does not include enforcement provisions. The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), established in 2009, operates as a consultative body without investigative or adjudicative powers. AICHR's inability to act decisively in the Rohingya crisis, despite its stated mandate to enhance regional human rights cooperation has drawn significant criticism. A 2009 editorial in the Wall Street Journal labelled AICHR "ASEAN's toothless council," underlining its failure to hold member states accountable or respond to mass atrocities (The Wall Street Journal, 2009).

In this context, R2P within ASEAN functions more as a normative veneer than a guiding framework for action. While references to human rights and atrocity prevention appear in ASEAN's discourse, they are not supported by institutional capacity or political consensus. This reflects the broader dynamic of norm localisation, where international

norms are selectively adopted to suit prevailing political cultures. ASEAN's commitment to R2P remains rhetorical, constrained by institutional design and state interests.

Understanding the Rohingya Issue

The Rohingya crisis presented a critical test of ASEAN's normative commitment to the R2P. Between 2012 and 2018, waves of violence targeting the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine State exposed the limits of ASEAN's human rights infrastructure and the fragility of its rhetorical endorsement of atrocity prevention. Despite being formally committed to human rights promotion, ASEAN failed to move beyond declaratory language when mass atrocities unfolded within the territory of one of its member states.

The crisis began in June 2012 following the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman in Rakhine State, allegedly committed by three Rohingya men. The incident sparked inter-communal riots that quickly escalated into widespread violence. According to international reports, more than 6,700 Rohingya were killed that year alone, while an estimated 168,000 people were displaced from their homes (Al Jazeera, 2017). Rather than framing the crisis as a potential case of ethnic cleansing or atrocity crime, ASEAN and its member states referred to the conflict as a communal clash, which allowed the organisation to avoid invoking any provisions related to R2P.

Over the following years, attacks against the Rohingya intensified, often involving the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) and nationalist Buddhist groups. In October 2016, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked several police posts, prompting a brutal military crackdown. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented mass killings, sexual violence, and village burnings committed by security forces, but Myanmar denied these allegations and restricted access to Rakhine State for journalists and UN observers (BBC, 2018).

In 2017, the situation escalated dramatically. The Tatmadaw launched what it termed a "clearance operation" in response to another ARSA attack, but the scale and nature of the violence suggested a deliberate campaign of ethnic cleansing. According to reports from the Ontario International Development Agency, more than 23,000 Rohingyas were killed in that year alone, with widespread reports of gang rape, torture, and arson targeting civilians (Habib et al., 2018). These events triggered one of the fastest mass displacements in recent history, with over 900,000 Rohingya fleeing across the border into Bangladesh in 2018 (UN Women, 2018).

Despite the visibility and severity of the atrocities, ASEAN refrained from issuing strong condemnations or invoking the language of R2P. The 2017 ASEAN Chairman's Statement merely expressed "concern" and supported humanitarian cooperation through the AHA Centre without addressing the nature or source of the violence (ASEAN, 2017). This cautious language reflected the structural limitations previously discussed, where ASEAN's reliance on consensus and state sovereignty effectively blocked any effort to name or pressure Myanmar. Consequently, the crisis revealed the hollow nature of ASEAN's commitment to atrocity prevention.

Despite the magnitude of the violence and international visibility of the crisis, the UN response remained fragmented and ineffectual. In 2017, following the clearance operations in Rakhine, UN officials repeatedly condemned the Myanmar government, but no Security Council resolution was passed due to opposition from China and Russia. In fact, China directly rejected proposed resolutions, arguing that the situation was an internal matter. This diplomatic deadlock undermined the enforcement of R2P and

confirmed the norm's vulnerability to geopolitical interests at the highest level of global governance (The Guardian, 2017).

Myanmar also consistently obstructed international investigative efforts. The UN Fact-Finding Mission, formed in response to the violence, was denied access to Myanmar. De facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi declared that the country did not need such an investigation. As early as 2012, Myanmar had imposed a media blackout and blocked humanitarian agencies, a tactic used repeatedly throughout the crisis to shield military operations from scrutiny (UN Fact-Finding Mission, 2018).

ASEAN's institutional machinery offered no credible alternative to international paralysis. The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre) delivered relief supplies, but its activities were confined to logistics and conducted only with Myanmar's approval. In 2017, for instance, it delivered 80 tons of materials to Rakhine but did not comment on the causes of displacement or the state's role in the crisis (AHA Centre, 2017). Meanwhile, the ASEAN Chairman's Statement that same year avoided any explicit mention of the Rohingya identity or Myanmar's military operations. The absence of such language underlined ASEAN's commitment to its long-standing policy of non-interference, even in the face of atrocity crimes.

Despite ASEAN's institutional silence, some member states broke rank to express stronger positions. Malaysia and Indonesia, in particular, took initiatives beyond ASEAN's formal structures. In 2017, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak publicly condemned Myanmar's actions and sent a 2,300-tonne shipment of aid, which was rejected by the Myanmar government (Kumar, 2017). Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi engaged in personal diplomacy with Aung San Suu Kyi, helping to open limited humanitarian access and secure commitments for aid corridors. These actions, however, remained bilateral and did not translate into a coherent ASEAN position.

In parallel, regional civil society and religious leaders also attempted to mediate or speak out. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia issued statements condemning the persecution, and various human rights groups urged ASEAN to act more decisively. Yet without institutional mechanisms or a normative mandate to protect populations, these efforts had little impact on the trajectory of the crisis.

Ultimately, the Rohingya case revealed how ASEAN's rhetorical embrace of human rights norms fails to materialise in practice. The crisis served as a litmus test of R2P's localisation in Southeast Asia and exposed a fundamental disjuncture between regional values and global expectations. The violence between 2012 and 2018 demonstrated not only Myanmar's impunity but also the hollowness of ASEAN's commitment to protect vulnerable populations.

Norm Resistance and Regional Sovereignty

The R2P, although globally recognised, has not been effectively internalised within ASEAN due to the persistent dominance of sovereignty and non-interference as regional norms. These principles are not merely procedural but are rooted in ASEAN's historical experiences with colonialism, state fragility, and regime survival. As codified in Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter, member states are expected to uphold the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of one another. This legal and political commitment has consistently impeded the regional application of R2P, even in situations involving mass atrocity crimes.

In the case of the Rohingya crisis, this normative rigidity became evident. Despite numerous reports confirming widespread violence against civilians in Rakhine State

between 2012 and 2018, ASEAN refrained from invoking any aspect of R2P. Instead, its official statements focused on humanitarian assistance and regional stability without addressing the root causes of displacement or holding Myanmar accountable (Limsiritong, 2017). This reluctance reflects what Acharya described as norm localisation, where international norms are adapted to align with existing regional values. In this framework, norms such as R2P are not rejected outright, but are reinterpreted in ways that avoid conflict with core ASEAN doctrines (Acharya, 2004).

The redefinition of R2P in ASEAN's context has led to what scholars describe as rhetorical institutionalism. ASEAN uses the language of protection and human rights without corresponding action. This disconnect was visible in the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration of 2012, which included commitments to life, dignity, and freedom from torture but did not provide any institutional mechanisms for enforcement or redress (ASEAN, 2012). Furthermore, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), while structurally established, lacks both investigative powers and independence from state influence (The Wall Street Journal, 2009).

Myanmar's resistance to any form of external inquiry into the crisis was consistent with this regional posture. The government rejected the presence of UN fact-finding missions and international observers, framing such efforts as infringements on national sovereignty (UN Fact-Finding Mission, 2018). ASEAN, in turn, respected Myanmar's position, even though it undermined regional credibility. Rather than invoke the R2P framework or press for collective action, ASEAN deferred to Myanmar's internal narrative, limiting its engagement to logistical support through the AHA Centre.

The behaviour of ASEAN during the Rohingya crisis illustrates the strength of regional resistance to norms perceived as intrusive. Although ASEAN has formally endorsed R2P through its support for the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, it has never operationalised the norm. The concept remains in discourse but has not translated into regional preparedness, early warning mechanisms, or accountability structures. In this environment, R2P has become a symbolic norm, present in ASEAN's norms but absent in its behaviour (Habib et al., 2018).

ASEAN's passive stance in the face of the Rohingya crisis cannot be attributed solely to institutional inertia. It reflects a deeper and deliberate adherence to regional political norms that prioritise sovereignty and consensus over international normative pressures. While R2P has gained rhetorical recognition, the political environment within ASEAN remains resistant to transforming that recognition into operational mechanisms. This resistance is grounded not just in procedural traditions, but also in realist calculations and post-colonial sensitivities.

The consensus-based decision-making structure within ASEAN serves to reinforce this resistance. Originally intended to ensure equal participation among member states, consensus has effectively become a barrier to action. In practice, it allows any single state to veto collective measures, especially those that might be perceived as intrusive. During the Rohingya crisis, this meant that Myanmar's objection to external scrutiny prevented any formal ASEAN condemnation or response beyond humanitarian aid. As Caballero and Anthony note, this institutional design has historically hindered ASEAN's ability to act decisively in matters of human rights and security (Caballero-Anthony, 2022).

Moreover, many ASEAN member states have experienced their own internal conflicts, separatist movements, or ethnic tensions. The fear of setting a precedent by endorsing intervention in Myanmar has discouraged governments from supporting the full application of R2P. Accepting international involvement in one case could open the

door to similar interventions elsewhere in the region. This concern has led to a defensive posture, in which humanitarian norms are cautiously acknowledged but not embraced as enforceable standards.

The Rohingya issue further illustrates how legal frameworks have been used to justify exclusion under the guise of sovereignty. Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, which stripped the Rohingya of legal recognition, was defended as a domestic policy matter (Rhoads, 2023). Despite extensive documentation of abuses, ASEAN states chose not to challenge the law or its effects. The legal framing provided a convenient shield against external accountability, reinforcing the notion that internal affairs are beyond regional intervention (Milanovic, 2023).

Underlying this dynamic is a broader skepticism toward norms perceived as externally imposed. The post-colonial experience of many ASEAN states has fostered a political culture wary of Western-origin frameworks, even when they emerge from multilateral platforms. While R2P was developed within the United Nations, it is often interpreted through a lens of strategic mistrust. This has slowed its localisation, as ASEAN governments reinterpret or downplay its core principles in order to align with existing values of non-interference and regime security. Acharya argues that localisation involves modifying external norms to make them acceptable within local normative orders, but in the case of R2P, this process has resulted in significant dilution rather than genuine adaptation (Smith & Williams, 2021).

The Rohingya crisis demonstrated that while ASEAN is willing to engage in logistical coordination, such as humanitarian relief, it remains unwilling to address the structural causes of mass atrocity. The absence of early warning mechanisms, accountability procedures, or political consequences for inaction underscores the symbolic nature of R2P in the region. Without a shift in both political will and institutional capacity, R2P will remain a nominal commitment rather than an actionable regional norm.

The Role of Key ASEAN States

Although ASEAN as a collective body failed to take a decisive stance on the Rohingya crisis, some member states diverged from the regional pattern of inaction. Notably, Indonesia and Malaysia demonstrated a form of selective engagement that challenged the non-interference norm and signalled the growing influence of domestic and bilateral considerations in shaping foreign policy. These responses, though not coordinated through ASEAN institutions, reflected the emergence of differentiated agency among member states concerning humanitarian issues.

Indonesia, as the largest democracy in the region and often considered the informal leader within ASEAN, pursued a diplomatic strategy that emphasised dialogue and quiet mediation. Between 2017 and 2018, then Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi made several visits to Myanmar and Bangladesh, engaging directly with Aung San Suu Kyi and other officials to urge a peaceful resolution and the repatriation of displaced Rohingya refugees. Jakarta framed these efforts as part of a humanitarian commitment consistent with ASEAN's principles, but crucially did so bilaterally rather than through the ASEAN platform. This allowed Indonesia to navigate between regional sensitivities and growing domestic demands for action, especially from Muslim civil society groups concerned with the plight of the Rohingya.

In a parallel but more confrontational tone, Malaysia adopted a clearer denunciatory approach. Former Prime Minister Najib Razak, in a 2016 public rally attended by thousands in Kuala Lumpur, explicitly condemned the violence in Rakhine

State and referred to it as genocide. This was a notable departure from ASEAN's typical diplomatic restraint and marked a rare moment when a member state openly criticised another over internal affairs. Malaysia also played a key role in raising the issue at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), calling for international pressure on Myanmar (Organization of Islamic Cooperation, 2017). While these moves strained bilateral relations with Naypyidaw, they earned Kuala Lumpur domestic support and international visibility as a defender of Muslim rights.

These divergent actions underline the tensions between ASEAN's commitment to unity and the political realities facing individual states. Both Indonesia and Malaysia had to respond to internal public pressure and uphold their international reputations, particularly among Muslim-majority constituencies. Their actions demonstrated that the principle of non-interference, while still dominant, could be selectively bypassed when national legitimacy or transnational identity politics were at stake.

The selective engagement seen in these cases illustrates how ASEAN's member states can pursue alternative tracks of diplomacy in response to regional crises, especially when ASEAN-level mechanisms remain paralysed. However, it also highlights the limitations of such unilateral responses. Neither Indonesia's diplomacy nor Malaysia's criticism translated into sustained regional reform or a shift in ASEAN's normative orientation. Instead, these actions remained largely symbolic, offering temporary relief to domestic audiences but failing to institutionalise a regional commitment to R2P.

The divergence of Indonesia and Malaysia from ASEAN's institutional silence during the Rohingya crisis reveals both the limits and possibilities of state-level humanitarian action within the regional framework. While these states displayed political will and normative sensitivity, their efforts did not lead to a coordinated regional response. Instead, they operated in parallel to ASEAN's official mechanisms, underlining the fragmented nature of norm engagement in Southeast Asia.

Indonesia's diplomatic approach was emblematic of its self-positioning as a responsible regional actor. Through a series of bilateral visits between 2016 and 2018, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi engaged with the Myanmar government to promote voluntary repatriation of displaced Rohingya and to open humanitarian access. Indonesia also contributed resources to support temporary shelters in Rakhine State. These initiatives gained praise for their pragmatism and tact, but they deliberately avoided naming the atrocities or invoking the Responsibility to Protect. Instead, Indonesia framed its actions as part of ASEAN's humanitarian cooperation, consistent with the principle of non-confrontation (Smith and Williams, 2021)

This approach reflects what has often been termed the ASEAN Way, a set of informal norms that guide regional conduct. Central to the ASEAN Way are the principles of non-interference, consensus-building, informality, and non-confrontational diplomacy (Muhammad & Sahide, 2022). While these principles have contributed to regional cohesion, they have also constrained collective responses to internal crises. The ASEAN Way favours quiet diplomacy over public condemnation and consensus over decisive action, particularly in sensitive political situations. Indonesia's engagement, although well-intentioned, ultimately conformed to these unwritten rules and, as a result, remained limited in its impact.

Malaysia's response, however, departed from this tradition. In December 2016, then Prime Minister Najib Razak publicly addressed a mass rally in Kuala Lumpur and described the violence against the Rohingya as "genocide". Malaysia also used international platforms such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to amplify

criticism of Myanmar and call for international accountability. This was a bold move, particularly within a regional context where open criticism of fellow member states is rare. Najib's actions clearly challenged ASEAN's conventional diplomatic restraint.

Yet, Malaysia's stance was also shaped by domestic political considerations. The Rohingya issue resonated with Malaysia's Muslim majority and was deployed to bolster Najib's support among conservative constituencies ahead of a general election. While the rhetoric was stronger than that of other ASEAN members, it lacked continuity. After the 2018 change of government, the Mahathir administration maintained a critical tone but de-escalated its public diplomacy. This shift highlighted the vulnerability of norm leadership when not grounded in institutional frameworks (Yusoff et al., 2022). The contrast between Indonesia's quiet diplomacy and Malaysia's assertive posture demonstrates the uneven pattern of norm diffusion within ASEAN. Both cases show that member states may bypass the ASEAN framework in order to respond to international and domestic pressures, but their actions do not necessarily translate into regional consensus or institutional change. While Indonesia operated within the boundaries of the ASEAN Way, Malaysia temporarily broke with it but failed to sustain momentum or alter ASEAN's normative stance on R2P.

This fragmentation points to a structural problem. ASEAN's institutional design does not support coordinated humanitarian responses. The absence of a mechanism to escalate human rights concerns or activate collective protection undermines norm internalisation. As a result, when crises occur, the regional body depends on voluntary state initiative, which varies in strength and direction. The Rohingya case illustrates how this model fails to uphold the core principles of R2P.

Without reforming the ASEAN Way to accommodate legitimate humanitarian intervention or preventive diplomacy, regional responses will continue to be ad hoc and state-driven. Selective engagement, while politically significant, remains insufficient in the absence of regional instruments that enable collective action. The credibility of ASEAN's normative commitments will continue to depend on the willingness of individual states to act, rather than on a shared framework for protecting vulnerable populations

Global Silence and the Responsibility to Protect Paradox

The R2P was introduced in the 2005 as a global commitment to prevent mass atrocities such as genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. However, its implementation in the case of the Rohingya crisis illustrates the paradox between the moral imperative to act and the political realities that inhibit such action. While Southeast Asia's internal norm resistance, as previously discussed, played a significant role in the failure to implement R2P in Myanmar, international silence and inaction equally contributed to the paralysis. The failure of major global actors and institutions to move beyond rhetorical condemnation has rendered R2P more symbolic than operational in this context.

At the heart of the global failure is the impasse within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Despite widespread documentation of the Myanmar military's atrocities, including reports by UN Fact-Finding Missions, the Security Council failed to pass any binding resolution to address the situation. China and Russia, both permanent members with veto power, have consistently blocked efforts to impose sanctions or authorise investigations under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Their stated rationale rests on principles of state sovereignty and non-interference, echoing ASEAN's internal logic. In

practice, this geopolitical calculus has allowed state-led violence to persist without consequence.

This failure reveals a structural weakness in the global implementation of R2P. While the doctrine is normatively strong, it lacks enforcement mechanisms independent of political interests. The principle of "timely and decisive response," as articulated in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, depends on the political will of Security Council members. In the case of Myanmar, that will was absent. This creates a situation where the international community's ability to act on R2P is inversely proportional to the geopolitical interests of powerful states.

Moreover, the global response to the Rohingya crisis has been marked by rhetorical overcommitment and practical under-delivery. Although several Western governments, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, issued statements condemning the violence and imposed targeted sanctions on select military officials, these measures lacked coordination and did not alter Myanmar's behaviour. Regional powers in South Asia, such as India and China, prioritised strategic and economic interests over human rights concerns. Both countries continued engaging with Myanmar on infrastructure and energy projects, effectively shielding the Tatmadaw from broader international isolation (International Crisis Group, 2019).

The humanitarian response, while robust in terms of financial support for refugee camps in Bangladesh, failed to address root causes or offer long-term solutions. International actors focused on emergency aid and diplomatic persuasion, often without confronting the political architecture that enabled mass atrocities. The United Nations-led repatriation initiatives lacked guarantees of safety, citizenship, or justice, and were repeatedly rejected by Rohingya communities and human rights organisations. These shortcomings underscore the limits of humanitarianism as a substitute for political action.

The R2P and its practice in ASEAN present a profound contradiction. On one hand, the Rohingya crisis is precisely the kind of situation R2P was designed to address. It involves a state targeting a minority population through coordinated campaigns of violence, displacement, and legal exclusion. On the other hand, the crisis exposed the limits of R2P as a practical framework. Without consensus among powerful states, and without regional commitment, the doctrine remains aspirational. The global silence or more precisely, global hesitation, turned R2P into a moral language of outrage, not an operational framework for protection.

This silence has had lasting consequences. It has contributed to the normalisation of impunity in Myanmar, emboldening the military to consolidate power and suppress dissent, as evidenced by the 2021 coup (Ganesan, 2023). The lack of a decisive international response has also weakened the legitimacy of R2P itself. Critics argue that the doctrine is inconsistently applied and often serves as a tool of selective intervention. The Rohingya case, therefore, highlights the danger of norm fatigue, where repeated failures lead to diminishing expectations and eroding credibility (Bellamy, 2014).

At a broader level, the failure of R2P in Myanmar reflects a global trend of retreat from multilateralism. In an era marked by rising nationalism, authoritarianism, and strategic rivalry, the space for norm-based international cooperation is shrinking. This has direct implications for atrocity prevention. Where political costs are high, and where enforcement depends on consensus, preventive diplomacy and humanitarian intervention are increasingly constrained. In the context of the Rohingya crisis, global silence must not be read as ignorance. It is a deliberate choice shaped by competing interests, diplomatic calculations, and institutional limitations. The paradox of R2P lies in

its normative clarity but strategic ambiguity. While the international community has agreed on the responsibility to protect, it has yet to agree on the responsibility to act.

The failure of the international community to act decisively in the Rohingya crisis not only exposed the limitations of the R2P as a policy instrument but also undermined its standing as a norm in global governance. While the rhetoric of R2P continues to appear in United Nations statements and regional diplomatic forums, the inability to translate that language into action in Myanmar represents a significant normative setback.

This crisis of implementation is not limited to Southeast Asia. Globally, R2P has been inconsistently applied, with notable interventions in Libya and Côte d'Ivoire, and conspicuous inaction in Syria, Yemen, and Myanmar. This inconsistency has led to growing scepticism regarding the credibility and universality of the norm. In academic literature, this is often referred to as "norm erosion," whereby the gap between normative commitment and behavioural application reduces the legitimacy and traction of the norm itself (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2023). In the context of Myanmar, norm erosion is evident in both regional and international responses. Although many states acknowledged the severity of the atrocities, their actions were limited to symbolic measures. For instance, Canada and the United States imposed targeted sanctions on key military figures, but these actions had minimal impact on Myanmar's political trajectory. Simultaneously, strategic actors such as China, Russia, and India continued to provide diplomatic cover and economic engagement, effectively weakening any attempt at coordinated international pressure.

The paralysis of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) further revealed the structural dependence of R2P on the political will of major powers. While the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council produced strong reports and established investigatory bodies, their findings had no enforcement capacity. Without binding UNSC resolutions, recommendations remained advisory. This institutional gap leaves R2P vulnerable to selective implementation, making its effectiveness conditional rather than principled.

For Southeast Asia, the implications are particularly acute. The failure to protect the Rohingya population despite widespread international awareness sets a dangerous precedent (Limsiritong, 2017). It suggests that unless a crisis aligns with the strategic interests of powerful states or dominant regional actors, protection will be neither prioritised nor pursued. This undermines the very idea that sovereignty entails responsibility, the core of the R2P doctrine as articulated in the 2001 ICISS report and adopted at the 2005 World Summit.

The long-term consequences for ASEAN are equally serious. The failure of regional institutions to respond meaningfully, as discussed in earlier sections, combined with global indifference, has left the Rohingya crisis as a symbol of collective failure. This has contributed to growing cynicism about the ability of both global and regional organisations to uphold the principles they claim to defend. For ASEAN, it risks reinforcing a culture of quiet diplomacy and internal fragmentation, where even norm-sensitive states like Indonesia or Malaysia cannot influence regional responses beyond isolated initiatives. However, the Rohingya crisis also offers important lessons. It demonstrates the necessity of embedding atrocity prevention into both global and regional institutional frameworks. While the United Nations faces structural constraints, ASEAN has the potential to develop early warning systems, fact-finding mandates, and peer review mechanisms that can mitigate the limitations of consensus diplomacy. These

steps require a re-examination of the ASEAN Way and a willingness to reinterpret sovereignty as a responsibility rather than a privilege.

From a normative perspective, R2P is not necessarily obsolete. Norms evolve through contestation, adaptation, and rearticulation. The current crisis of application could be a turning point if accompanied by institutional reform and political leadership. What is required is not merely rhetorical recommitment, but structural support for norm implementation. As Bellamy (Bellamy, 2014) argues, the survival of R2P as a meaningful framework depends on its ability to generate practical tools and institutional anchoring.

In conclusion, the global silence during the Rohingya crisis has revealed the paradox of R2P: a widely endorsed norm that remains dependent on fragile political consensus for implementation. The doctrine's future in Southeast Asia depends on overcoming both external indifference and internal resistance. Without these changes, R2P will remain a powerful but unrealised promise, a symbol of what should be done rather than a mechanism for what is done.

Operationalising the Theoretical Framework in the ASEAN - Rohingya Context

The issue of R2P implementation in the ASEAN context can be analyse using the indicator that drawn from the theories of norm diffusion, norm localization, and normative resistance. These indicators examined the ASEAN's behaviour not only in terms of stated commitments but also through observable institutional actions, diplomatic language, and patterns of engagement. An examination of these operational indicators in the context of the Rohingya crisis demonstrates how ASEAN's responses reflect varying degrees of norm uptake, adaptation, and constraint within its regional normative environment.

Table 1. Operational Indicators of Norm Dynamics Applied to the Rohingya Case

Theoretical Concept	Indicator	Application to the Rohingya Case
Norm Diffusion	1. Rhetorical adoption of the R2P 2. Norm acknowledgement in Statements 3. Absence of internalisation	ASEAN mentions humanitarian concern but avoids naming atrocities; no follow-up mechanisms; AICHR and ASEAN bodies do not internalise R2P
Norm Localisation	1. Reframing external norms into ASEAN-compatible narrative 2. Dillution of coercive components 3. Preference for humanitarian assistance over protection	AHA Centre limited to disaster relief; ASEAN reframes atrocity crimes as "internal conflict"; norm diluted into logistical aid delivery
ASEAN Way	1. Non-interference blocking regional action 2. Consensus preventing strong statements 3. Avoidance of naming and shaming 4. Institutional silence, the inaction of AICHR	2017 Chairman's Statement avoids "Rohingya"; AICHR silent; Myanmar warned stronger ASEAN language; ASEAN prioritises unity over accountability
Selective State Agency	1. Divergence of behaviour between member states 2. National politics overriding regional positions	Malaysia's "genocide" statement; Indonesia's quiet diplomacy; no ASEAN-wide impact
Global Norm Constraint	UN Inaction affecting regional willingness	No resolution from the UNSC (the abstain from China and Russia)

The first indicator rhetorical adoption of R2P without institutional follow-through aligns clearly with Finnemore and Sikkink's diffusion model. ASEAN was willing to acknowledge humanitarian concerns in its official statements, most notably in the 2017 Chairman's Statement, which expressed "concern over the situation in Rakhine State." However, the statement avoided mentioning the Rohingya community, did not characterise the violence as atrocity crimes, and contained no reference to state responsibility or protection obligations. This selective language demonstrates that R2P had entered the cascade stage, where legitimacy is acknowledged, but had not progressed toward meaningful internalisation. The absence of any investigative mechanisms, coordinated regional response, or mandate for AICHR to engage substantively with the crisis confirms that the institutionalisation of R2P within ASEAN remained superficial.

Norm localisation provides a second layer of explanatory insight. Acharya's framework predicts that external norms are accepted only when reframed in locally resonant terms. In ASEAN's response to the Rohingya crisis, this occurred through the transformation of R2P from a protection norm into a humanitarian assistance framework. The AHA Centre's involvement illustrates this dynamic. Despite the crisis involving mass displacement, systematic human rights violations, and widespread destruction, ASEAN restricted its engagement to logistical relief delivering 80 tonnes of humanitarian aid in 2017–2018 without addressing the perpetrators or underlying causes of violence. This reframing of atrocity crimes as a humanitarian challenge allowed ASEAN to engage without violating non-interference. Moreover, ASEAN repeatedly described the violence as "inter-communal tensions," reinforcing a narrative that obscured the organised and state-directed nature of the atrocities. This dilution of normative meaning demonstrates how localisation softened the coercive elements of R2P to fit ASEAN's preference for consensus, informality, and sovereign sensitivity.

The ASEAN Way further shapes this process of normative filtering. Indicators such as the avoidance of naming and shaming, the reliance on consensus-driven diplomacy, and persistent institutional silence are clearly visible in the empirical record. The 2017 Chairman's Statement, for example, was significantly diluted after Myanmar objected to any reference to the term "Rohingya," resulting in a lowest-common-denominator formulation that neither condemned the violence nor acknowledged the identity of the affected community. Member states prioritised regional cohesion over accountability, reinforcing the longstanding preference for non-confrontational diplomacy. AICHR, despite its formal mandate as ASEAN's human rights body, remained entirely silent during the height of the crisis, issuing neither reports nor public statements. This silence aligns with Acharya's argument that ASEAN institutions internalise the norm of non-interference even in the face of severe human rights violations. Taken together, these patterns illustrate a form of normative resistance in which member states do not openly repudiate protection norms but instead maintain procedural practices that prevent these norms from being operationalised.

Figure 1. Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi met with Myanmar Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi in the capital Naypyidaw on April 9, 2017 to discuss humanitarian assistance for the Rohingya issue.
Source: South China Morning Post, 2017

Selective state agency adds further nuance. Malaysia openly labelled the violence as "genocide" in 2016, breaking with ASEAN's norm of quiet diplomacy, while Indonesia engaged Myanmar through bilateral negotiation to open limited humanitarian access. However, these national initiatives did not translate into regional action. Smith and Williams argue that Indonesia's quiet diplomacy reflects a deliberate strategic choice to avoid undermining ASEAN unity, demonstrating how state behaviour is shaped by broader regional expectations (Smith & Williams, 2021). Malaysia's stronger stance, meanwhile, remained isolated, lacking institutional pathways to shift ASEAN's collective position. This divergence highlights the tension between national politics and regional normative constraints.

Global-level paralysis further constrained ASEAN's willingness to operationalise R2P. In late 2017, the United Kingdom circulated a draft UN Security Council resolution addressing atrocities against the Rohingya. The text called for an end to violence, unrestricted humanitarian access, and accountability for Myanmar's security forces. The draft was never tabled for a vote because China and Russia opposed its substantive provisions and signalled that they would block its adoption, effectively preventing any binding Council action (Security Council Report, 2017). This preventive veto threat produced a watered-down outcome in the form of Presidential Statement S/PRST/2017/22, which avoided references to the Rohingya and carried no enforcement measures. The inability of the Council to act decisively reinforced what Bellamy (Bellamy, 2014) identifies as a global erosion of protection norms, creating an external environment in which ASEAN faced no international pressure to escalate its response. ASEAN's limited engagement therefore reflected not only internal normative constraints but also the broader failure of global institutions to uphold R2P during the Rohingya crisis."

For ASEAN, this global paralysis translated into a permissive environment in which maintaining regional cohesion took precedence over advancing protection norms. The lack of Security Council action allowed member states to justify a minimalist response focused on humanitarian assistance rather than political pressure. Without a strong global mandate, ASEAN bodies, particularly AICHR could plausibly continue to frame the crisis as an internal matter of a member state rather than a regional protection obligation. Moreover, Myanmar leveraged its relationships with China and Russia to resist international scrutiny, signalling to ASEAN that any regional pressure would lack global backing. This geopolitical alignment effectively reinforced ASEAN's own norm of non-interference, further narrowing the space for regional initiatives grounded in R2P.

CONCLUSION

The Rohingya crisis illustrates the structural and normative constraints that continue to inhibit ASEAN from operationalising the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) despite its formal endorsement at the global level. Throughout the period of 2012–2018, ASEAN's engagement reflected a persistent gap between rhetorical commitment and practical implementation. The organisation expressed humanitarian concern, yet avoided acknowledging the violence as atrocity crimes or identifying the Rohingya by name. The analysis presented in this study shows that ASEAN's response was shaped less by a lack of information and more by a deeply embedded normative framework that prioritises sovereignty, consensus, and non-interference over regional protection responsibilities. These longstanding principles structured ASEAN's institutional behaviour, producing a response that remained narrow, humanitarian, and politically cautious even as clear evidence of systematic violence emerged in Myanmar.

The theoretical indicators applied in this paper highlight three major dynamics. First, norm diffusion regarding R2P has been shallow. ASEAN adopted the language of R2P but did not integrate its preventive or protective obligations into institutional procedures. Second, localisation processes filtered global expectations through the region's political culture, reducing R2P to non-political humanitarian assistance. This was visible in how the AHA Centre was activated for logistical coordination while all accountability-oriented aspects of R2P were excluded. Third, normative resistance persisted in subtle forms. Rather than rejecting R2P outright, member states constrained its operationalisation by relying on procedural norms consensus, deference to national sovereignty, and avoidance of open criticism that prevented stronger regional action. The silence of AICHR and Myanmar's ability to dilute the 2017 Chairman's Statement are clear manifestations of this dynamic.

Selective state agency, particularly by Malaysia and Indonesia, briefly challenged Southeast Asia's norm of non-interference, yet these actions did not translate into a collective regional shift. Malaysia's outspoken condemnation and Indonesia's quiet diplomacy were driven by domestic and bilateral considerations, not by an emerging ASEAN-wide commitment to atrocity prevention. Their efforts remained bounded within ASEAN's normative order, which ultimately limited their impact on regional decision-making. As such, member-state leadership alone proved insufficient to overcome the institutional logic of consensus and non-interference.

Global dynamics further reinforced ASEAN's reluctance to adopt stronger measures. The failure of the United Nations Security Council to advance a resolution on the Rohingya crisis in 2017 following opposition by China and Russia, signalled that no meaningful international enforcement or political backing would accompany regional

action. The resulting Presidential Statement lacked binding commitments and did not reference the Rohingya, mirroring ASEAN's own pattern of avoidance. This global paralysis interacted with regional norms, narrowing the perceived incentives for ASEAN to escalate its response. The Rohingya crisis therefore reflects not only ASEAN's internal normative constraints but also the broader erosion of international support for R2P.

The findings of this study suggest that meaningful progress is more likely to arise through incremental adjustments to ASEAN's established practices rather than structural overhaul. Strengthening region-wide expectations for information-sharing, coordinated humanitarian access, and early diplomatic engagement can create a more coherent foundation for preventive action. Existing bodies—such as AICHR and the AHA Centre—can support these functions, but their effectiveness ultimately depends on member states' willingness to allow more proactive regional coordination. The development of non-binding, consensus-compatible guidelines on how ASEAN should respond when indicators of mass violence emerge offers a realistic pathway for operationalising protective responsibilities without challenging foundational principles of sovereignty and consensus.

This study is not without limitations. Its analysis relies primarily on publicly available documents, official statements, and secondary sources, limiting insight into internal deliberations, confidential diplomatic negotiations, or elite-level motivations. The exclusive focus on the 2012–2018 period also excludes post-coup developments in Myanmar that may reshape ASEAN's understanding of protection norms. These limitations point to the need for future research incorporating elite interviews, deeper archival access, or comparative analysis across different ASEAN crises to further examine the organisation's evolving normative commitments.

Ultimately, the Rohingya crisis exposes the tension between ASEAN's long-standing norms and the demands of contemporary protection challenges. Unless ASEAN adapts its practices to incorporate preventive and protective responsibilities, even in modest, consensus-compatible forms, R2P will remain a principle recognised in rhetoric but constrained in practice.

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