



## Bangladesh's Leading Role of Foreign Policy Initiatives with Influential Countries and Multilateral Organizations in Sustaining Rohingya/FDMNs and Repatriation: A Study From 2017-2024

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### ABSTRACT

The post-2017 Rohingya crisis represents one of the most complex humanitarian and geopolitical challenges in South Asia, compelling Bangladesh to recalibrate its foreign policy in response to protracted displacement, international pressure, and domestic constraints for sustaining and repatriation. Following the mass influx of more than 740,000 Rohingya from Myanmar between 2017 and 2018, Dhaka adopted a multi-dimensional policy framework combining humanitarian response with diplomatic and strategic engagement. Anchored in neoclassical realism, this study examines how the crisis has shaped Bangladesh's foreign policy from 2017 to 2024, focusing on the interaction between systemic forces and domestic determinants. By using a qualitative and interpretive approach, the analysis identifies two interlinked dynamics: (1) external pressures including great power competition, UN intervention, and the roles of ASEAN, EU and the OIC and (2) domestic factors, such as security risks, economic burden, and political sensitivities within host communities. The findings indicate a notable transformation from a narrow bilateral policy toward a multilateral and humanitarian diplomacy, wherein Bangladesh has pursued repatriation, international legal recourse, and limited consideration of third-country resettlement while balancing relationships with major powers. The study contributes to theoretical and policy debates in international relations by illustrating how small and medium states adapt foreign policy under humanitarian and geopolitical stress. It offers empirical insights into crisis-driven foreign policy behaviour and the interplay of domestic and international variables in shaping state responses within the Global South.

**Keyword:** Rohingya crisis, Bangladesh foreign policy, humanitarian diplomacy, normative, South Asia, international relations

### 1. Introduction

The 2017 Rohingya exodus from Myanmar to Bangladesh constitutes one of the most consequential humanitarian and diplomatic crises in contemporary South Asia. Between August 2017 and early 2018, large-scale violence in Rakhine State precipitated a mass flight of Rohingya Muslims into Bangladesh, producing one of the world's largest and fastest-growing refugee emergencies and dramatically increasing the population sheltered in Cox's Bazar and related sites (UNHCR, 2023, 2024b). What began as an urgent humanitarian response rapid border opening, emergency camps, and large-scale relief operations evolved into a protracted crisis that has taxed Bangladesh's administrative, social, and fiscal capacities and forced Dhaka to internationalize what was initially a bilateral problem with Myanmar (Group,

2023b; UNHCR, 2024b). By the mid-2020s the Rohingya situation had become an entrenched, multi-actor challenge involving UN agencies, regional organizations, donor states, and international legal forums, while funding shortfalls and recurring shocks (including pandemic and climate hazards) raised the stakes for host-community relations and humanitarian sustainability (Bank, 2023; Paul, 2025). Reed Aeschliman, USAID Mission Director in Bangladesh said on 13 December 2023, government, donor, and development partners could not neglect the plight of Rohingya/ FDMNs and generous host country as WFP remarked that there is no hope of immediate return.

Domestically, the presence of an extended refugee Rohingya/Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs) population has produced a set of interlocking pressures: strained public services, risks to local livelihoods and environmental degradation in Cox's Bazar, security concerns, and growing social tensions between host communities and displaced populations (Hossain et al., 2023; Rahman & Sakib, 2021). These internal stressors, in turn, shaped Dhaka's external policy choices. Supporting with limited resources and sheltering over 40 years, easy access and porous border (Galache, 2020), demographic changes and social disharmony, possible proliferation of drugs, violence, armed conflicts, risky boat journey, abduction, trafficking, food crisis, lack of legal status, and Rohingya voice have created foreign policy issues. Confronted with limited legal options (Bangladesh is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention), finite resources, and the absence of safe, verifiable conditions for return, Bangladeshi policymakers sought burden sharing and political leverage through multilateral channels from Joint Response Plans (JRP) and humanitarian coordination mechanisms to appeals at the United Nations and regional fora while also pursuing legal avenues such as the case at the International Court of Justice that focused international attention on allegations of genocide and severe human-rights violations in Myanmar (ICJ, 2020; Group, 2023b; Jurists, 2020). The result was a marked shift away from exclusive bilateral negotiation toward a hybrid diplomatic strategy combining humanitarian advocacy, legal internationalization, and selective strategic engagement with major powers.

The international dimension of the crisis has been shaped by human rights violations, lack of freedom of movement, job opportunity and increasing security threats, malnutrition, disaster risk, food assistance, resilience building and wider geopolitical dynamics. Great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific and the Bay of Bengal has influenced the options available to Bangladesh: while Western states and multilateral bodies emphasized accountability and humanitarian norms, other influential powers, including China and Russia, tended to shield Myanmar diplomatically or pursue bilateral economic engagement, complicating efforts to induce changes in Rakhine State that would enable safe repatriation (Rahman, 2018). Meanwhile, regional organizations and neighboring states displayed varied responses ASEAN's normative constraints limited coherent regional leadership, and India's policy mixed strategic partnership with Myanmar and selective humanitarian cooperation creating a fractured external environment for resolving durable return or integration into Myanmar society (Ahmed, 2024; Howlader et al., 2025).

The interaction of these external pressures with domestic constraints is well interpreted through a neoclassical realist lens. Neoclassical realism argues that systemic incentives and constraints (e.g., international power distributions and normative pressures) are filtered through domestic level variables state capacity, elite perceptions, domestic politics, and institutional structures before shaping foreign policy outcomes (Lobell et al., 2009; Rose, 1998). For Bangladesh, international pressure to uphold humanitarian norms and obtain assistance intersected with domestic imperatives to preserve national security, manage fiscal burdens,

and maintain social stability; policymakers thus calibrated foreign policy to maximize international support while minimizing political and economic costs at home. This theoretical framing helps explain why Dhaka pursued simultaneous tracks: mobilizing international legal and humanitarian instruments to sustain donor involvement and normative/ superficial and ineffective pressure on Myanmar, while pragmatically maintaining strategic ties with powers essential for development and geopolitical balance.

Despite an extensive literature on the humanitarian, socio-economic, environmental and security consequences of the Rohingya displacement, comparatively fewer studies systematically examine how protracted refugee crises translate into foreign policy transformation for medium and small powers in the Global South (Hossain et al., 2023; Rahman & Sakib, 2021). Many contributions document the scale of displacement and the immediate response needs, or analyses legal and human-rights avenues (International Court of Justice-ICJ/ International Criminal Court-ICC), but relatively little scholarship theorizes the causal pathway through which mass displacement reshapes external strategy over time. This article addresses that gap by analyzing Bangladesh's foreign policy evolution between 2017 and 2024, focusing on how external systemic forces and domestic constraints jointly produced strategic recalibration for sustaining and repatriating FDMNs. Grounded in qualitative analysis of official statements, donor and UN reports, legal records, and policy documents, the paper traces three key dimensions of change in Dhaka's foreign policy: (1) normative multilateralization an increased reliance on multilateral and legal mechanisms to internationalize the problem and secure burden sharing; (2) strategic balancing careful engagement with multiple major powers to avoid strategic dependence while sustaining critical bilateral ties; and (3) pragmatic domestic adaptation policy adjustments to manage the socio-economic and security burdens of protracted hosting.

By placing Bangladesh's policy responses within the neoclassical realist framework, the study contributes to International Relation(IR) debates on crisis-driven foreign policy change and the agency of middle actors in contested geopolitical arenas. The findings illuminate how humanitarian emergencies can act as catalysts for foreign policy transformation, especially when they interact with asymmetric power politics and acute domestic constraints. Subsequent sections review the literature, explain the methodology, and present empirical findings that unpack the mechanisms by which the Rohingya crisis reshaped Bangladesh's external orientation and diplomatic behaviour between 2017 and 2024.

## 2. Literature Review

The Rohingya displacement that followed the 2017 clearance operations in Rakhine State generated a humanitarian crisis of exceptional scale and speed. UNHCR and subsequent syntheses show that the influx added hundreds of thousands to Bangladesh's existing displaced population and created one of the largest concentrated refugee settlements in the world, producing both immediate emergency needs and longer-term protracted displacement dynamics (Group, 2023b; UNHCR, 2023). The people of Bangladesh regard Rohingya/ FDMNs as victim and Myanmar nationals which have strengthened the possibility of repatriation (Lee, 2018). The issue has created humanitarian, economic, security, strategic, diplomatic and sub-regional, and international aspects because only few thousand registered Rohingya received continued relief, medical and sheltering support (Khatun and Kamruzzaman, 2020). Humanitarian coordination in Bangladesh typified by multi-agency Joint Response Plans (JRP) has attempted to shift from life-saving interventions toward resilience and burden-sharing, but chronic funding shortfalls and repeated shocks (such as cyclones and disease outbreaks) have

institutionalized the protracted nature of the displacement (Bank, 2024; Etang Ndip, 2024; Group, 2023a).

Scholars of protracted refugee situations emphasize that initial emergency responses often harden into long-term modalities of containment and external dependency; UNHCR literature on protracted situations argues that durable solutions rarely materialize without political resolve in the country of origin and sustained international engagement (Mohiuddin & Molderez, 2023; UNHCR, 2006). The Rohingya case exemplifies this pattern: despite bilateral agreements and periodic repatriation talk, structural obstacles in Myanmar (citizenship law, insecurity, verification disputes) have impeded sustainable returns, thereby forcing Bangladesh to pursue alternatives international legal action, multilateral diplomacy, and limited relocation schemes to reduce domestic exposure ((ICJ), 2020; Jurists, 2020).

At the domestic level, multiple studies document wide-ranging socio-economic and security pressures on host communities in Cox's Bazar and surrounding upazilas. The World Bank and independent analyses show measurable fiscal burdens, impacts on local labour markets, pressures on public services, and environmental degradation linked to camp expansion and resource extraction (firewood, land clearing) (Bank, 2024; UNHCR, 2024a). Empirical research using remote sensing and environmental assessments quantifies significant forest loss and land-cover change around camps, with implications for erosion, slope stability, and disaster risk that compound humanitarian vulnerability (Sarkar et al., 2023). These environmental costs amplify social tensions with host communities who perceive competition for livelihoods and public goods, an effect documented in qualitative field studies and the JRP's contextual analyses (Etang Ndip, 2024; Mohiuddin & Molderez, 2023).

Security and criminal-justice concerns are another frequently cited domain in the literature. Analyses by security scholars and policy reports highlight how protracted displacement can create governance vacuums at camp perimeters, fostering transnational smuggling, trafficking networks, and localized criminality; Bangladesh's security response has focused on containment, surveillance, and camp policing, measures that trade mobility and rights for perceived stability (Group, 2023a; Uppal et al., 2025). Research further notes that cuts to humanitarian programming or donor fatigue risk destabilizing fragile protection arrangements and may increase irregular movement or radicalization pressures risks that are politically salient in Dhaka's foreign-policy calculus (Islam & Siddika, 2022; UNHCR, 2024a).

Responses at the international and legal level constitute a critical strand of the literature. Bangladesh is greatly under pressure by the Rohingya crisis that necessitates some forms of deterrence to give strong support to diplomatic actions (Zarika, 2022). The Gambia's ICJ case against Myanmar and the ICC's investigative pathway demonstrate how affected and sympathetic states can internationalize accountability claims to apply diplomatic pressure when bilateral routes fail (Jurists, 2020; Rahman & Sakib, 2021). Scholars interpret Bangladesh's strategy as a combination of humanitarian advocacy, legal internationalization, and pragmatic diplomacy seeking donor support, legal attention, and strategic space to negotiate with Myanmar while avoiding over-dependence on a single external patron (Etang Ndip, 2024; Mallick, 2024). Humanitarian coordination documents likewise stress the need for robust burden-sharing mechanisms, yet practical shortfalls in funding and political unity among regional and global powers remain a major impediment to sustainable solutions (Etang Ndip, 2024; OCHA, 2023).

Relocation and resettlement have generated particular attention in both policy and scholarship. The Bangladesh government's use of Bhasan Char as a relocation site since 2015 prompted contested debates: proponents frame the island as a decongestion measure with development potential, while critics warned of isolation risks, environmental vulnerabilities, and rights-based concerns (Center, 2024; Mallick, 2024). Empirical studies and human-rights analyses urge careful assessment of long-term habitability and participatory consent; they also recommend linking any relocation to comprehensive protection guarantees and durable pathways beyond mere geographic dispersal (Ahmed et al.; Islam & Siddika, 2022).

Climate and disaster risk research adds another layer to the literature: Cox's Bazar is highly exposed to cyclones, landslides, and monsoon flooding, which endanger both siting of camps and prospects for return. Recent mixed-migration and climate studies argue that climate vulnerability should be integrated into planning and that the Rohingya burden can be reframed as climate-humanitarian risk to attract cross-sectoral support (development, disaster risk reduction, climate finance) (Center, 2024; Sarkar et al., 2023). This reframing can broaden appeal for multilateral engagement but requires linking protection needs to adaptation financing and host-community resilience schemes. A growing body of socio-political work examines how domestic political narratives and media shape policy. Analyses show political actors in Bangladesh engage the Rohingya issue differentially using humanitarian credentials for international legitimacy while electorally sensitive rhetoric often underscores security and economic costs domestically producing a policy stance that is both normative and instrumental (Group, 2023a; Mohiuddin & Molderez, 2023). This domestic political environment conditions Dhaka's external bargaining posture: balancing normative appeals for justice with strategic ties to major powers and development partners.

Methodologically, the literature is diverse but leans heavily on mixed reports: NGO/ UN operational documents, legal records, environmental science, and field-based qualitative studies. While strong on documenting impacts and immediate policy responses, the literature is thinner on longitudinal analyses that trace causal mechanisms linking protracted displacement to durable foreign-policy transformation. In particular, few studies integrate process-tracing across bureaucratic decision nodes in Dhaka to show how domestic constraints and international incentives jointly produce concrete diplomatic choices.

In sum, the scholarly and policy literatures converge on several points: (1) the Rohingya crisis is protracted and multi-dimensional, combining humanitarian, environmental, security, and political challenges; (2) domestic pressures in Bangladesh have been substantial and have influenced external strategy; (3) internationalization through legal and multilateral avenues is a prominent feature of the response; and (4) significant research gaps remain in systematically tracing how protracted displacement catalyzes foreign-policy transformation over time. This review motivates a focused, theory-driven inquiry here operationalized through a neo-classical realist lens that examines how external structural pressures are filtered through domestic variables to reshape Bangladesh's foreign policy between 2017 and 2024.

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative, explanatory, and interpretive research approach to investigate how the 2017 Rohingya crisis affected Bangladesh's foreign policy. Qualitative techniques provide a comprehensive contextual understanding of policy processes, actor perceptions, and institutional connections that quantitative measures cannot capture (Creswell & Creswell,

2017; Patton, 2014). The study, guided by the logic of neoclassical realism theory, combines systemic and domestic elements to explain foreign-policy behaviour. Explanatory study aims to explain causal patterns that relate internal and external factors in determining Bangladesh's diplomatic responses, rather than just describing events.

The research used a thematic analytical approach to identify recurring patterns in interview transcripts and materials (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is particularly effective in international relations research, where meaning, perception, and policy framing are critical units of analysis (Hudson, 2005).

### 3.2 Data Collection

Both primary and secondary data sources were used. Primary data derived from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with individuals possessing expertise in diplomacy, security, humanitarian operations, and academia. Thirteen respondents were selected through purposive and snow-ball sampling, ensuring that participants were knowledgeable about Bangladesh's foreign-policy environment and directly or indirectly engaged with the Rohingya issue (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The pool included retired ambassadors, senior military officers, professors, journalists, and representatives of international and non-governmental organizations in table 1.

**Table 1.** Summary of Respondents Interview

Individual Category	KII (N)	Year	Medium
Academia	5	2024-2025	Physical and online
Diplomatic/Military	2	2024	Physical
NGO / INGO	2	2024-2025	Physical and online
Media	1	2024	Physical
Policy Institutes	1	2025	Online
Health/Humanitarian Officials	1	2025	Physical
Other	1	2025	Online

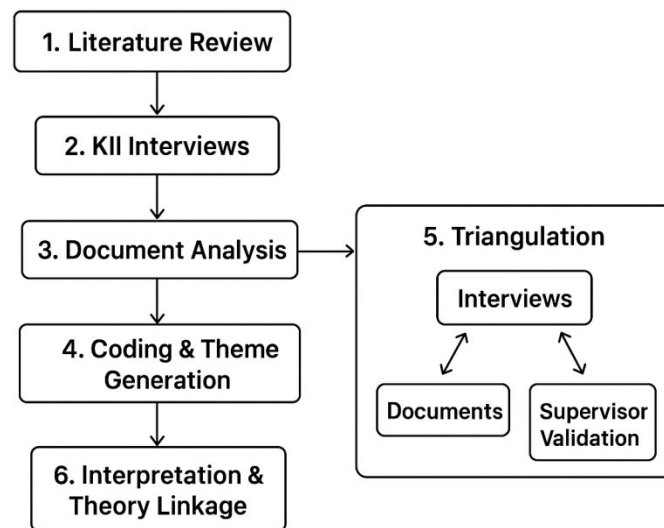
Between October 2024 and May 2025, interviews were done both online using Zoom and in person in Dhaka. Six thematic questions about the development of Bangladesh's foreign policy, regional influences, and humanitarian coordination were included in the semi-structured framework of each one- to two-and-a-half-hour interview. All participants gave their informed consent, and confidentiality was ensured. In addition to academic journals, policy papers, and credible news reports, secondary data included official comments and press releases from MOFA, UN organizations (UNHCR, IOM, OCHA), the ICJ and ICC, ASEAN, EU and the OIC. The robustness of interpretation was improved by documentary triangulation.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts and textual materials were coded manually using a combination of a priori and inductive codes. Emerging categories—such as humanitarian diplomacy, multilateral engagement, security and burden-sharing, and strategic balancing—were refined through iterative comparison. The entire research process followed a systematic triangulation model, as illustrated in Figure 1, ensuring the internal validity and consistency of data interpretation. The process began with an extensive literature review, followed by KIIs and document analysis, from which recurring themes were identified

and coded. These themes were then cross-verified through triangulation comparing interview narratives with documentary sources and supervisor validation to enhance analytical accuracy and minimize interpretive bias.

This multi-layered approach culminated in the interpretation and theoretical linkage of findings using the lens of neoclassical realism, connecting empirical observations with broader conceptual insights on small-state foreign-policy behavior



**Figure 1.** Research Process and Triangulation Flow

This process ensured internal validity by cross-checking patterns across multiple evidence streams (Yin, 2017). While the study primarily employed qualitative interpretation, limited quantitative data from secondary sources (e.g., UNHCR, World Bank statistics) were organized in tables for contextual illustration. The qualitative core of the research thus provides explanatory depth, whereas secondary quantitative indicators corroborate thematic findings. The mixed use of thematic interpretation, document analysis, and limited quantitative contextualization allows this research to construct a comprehensive picture of how the Rohingya crisis has affected Bangladesh's foreign policy. The methodological triangulation, grounded in neoclassical realist theory, links micro-level perceptions of decision-makers with macro-level international structures, thereby ensuring analytical rigor and credibility.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

All research activities complied with standard ethical guidelines for social-science fieldwork. Participants were informed about study objectives, their right to withdraw, and confidentiality measures. No identifying information appears in analytical outputs. Interview recordings were stored securely and destroyed after transcription verification. Ethical approval and supervisory oversight were obtained prior to data collection.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate how the post-2017 Rohingya crisis fundamentally reconfigured Bangladesh's foreign-policy behaviour since all UN agencies, in collaboration with development partners, EU, World Bank review the implementation directives and put forward the recommendations to concern Ministry of Bangladesh. The qualitative evidence drawn from expert interviews and extensive document analysis reveals an adaptive, multi-layered diplomatic posture shaped by the simultaneous influence of external systemic pressures and internal do-

mestic constraints. Interpreted through the lens of neoclassical realism, Bangladesh's responses exemplify how small and middle powers recalibrate their external strategies under humanitarian and geopolitical stress (Lobell et al., 2009; Rose, 1998).

#### 4.1 Transformation of Foreign-Policy Orientation

The data show a marked evolution from a bilateral, state-centric diplomacy toward a more multilateral and humanitarian-oriented approach. Initially, Bangladesh engaged Myanmar directly through repatriation agreements in 2018 and 2019. However, the lack of implementation, Myanmar's domestic political upheaval following the 2021 coup, and persistent insecurity in Rakhine compelled Dhaka to internationalize the crisis. By mobilizing UN forums, the OIC, and legal institutions such as the ICJ, Bangladesh sought to transform a bilateral refugee problem into a matter of global accountability ((ICJ, 2020; UNHCR, 2023). This strategic shift aligns with Rose's (1998) proposition that domestic perceptions and leadership assessments of international constraints mediate foreign-policy adaptation (Rose, 1998).

Beyond the general transformation of its diplomatic orientation, Bangladesh has pursued a set of targeted foreign-policy initiatives with influential countries and multilateral organizations to sustain engagement on the Rohingya issue. With the United States and the European Union, Dhaka intensified high-level dialogues on humanitarian aid and human-rights accountability, often linking these to broader Indo-Pacific cooperation. Through the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Bangladesh co-sponsored resolutions on refugee protection and supported The Gambia's legal proceedings at the International Court of Justice. Engagement with China and India remained pragmatically focused on maintaining economic and strategic relations while seeking assurances of constructive influence over Myanmar. Japan emerged as a key development and humanitarian partner through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) projects in Cox's Bazar and participation in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). These multi-layered initiatives underscore Dhaka's strategy of leveraging diverse partnerships to preserve political attention and resource commitments despite the protracted nature of the crisis.

#### 4.2 Humanitarian Diplomacy and Internationalization

1946 Foreigners Act has allowed Bangladesh to provide extended support to displaced people as well as Bangladesh thought that they would be repatriated like 1978 and 1991. Evidence indicates that Bangladesh's external engagement since 2018 has increasingly relied on humanitarian diplomacy leveraging moral legitimacy and humanitarian credentials to sustain international attention and aid flows (KII-1, 2024). The country hosted repeated visits from UN and donor delegations, advanced legal cases through The Gambia at the ICJ, ICC and UN Human Rights Council and maintained close coordination with UNHCR and IOM to demonstrate compliance with global norms (Bank, 2023; OCHA, 2023). Disruptive Asia considers that the Rohingya crisis is a joint diplomatic challenge for Asia and Australia. This humanitarian framing also served domestic objectives: maintaining international support for development projects in Cox's Bazar, and projecting Bangladesh as a responsible regional actor committed to international law (KII-4, 2024). Additionally, Bangladesh's embassies and permanent missions have functioned as central instruments of humanitarian diplomacy. The Permanent Mission in New York and the Geneva Mission regularly briefed UN member states and agencies on the evolving refugee situation, coordinating side events during the Human Rights Council and the Global Refugee Forum. The Bangladesh Embassy in Washington D.C., alongside missions in London, Tokyo, and Brussels, organized policy dialogues and donor consultations to sustain financial pledges for the Joint Response Plan. Domestically,

MOFA convened annual Rohingya Response Conferences in Dhaka, inviting diplomats, UN representatives, and NGO coalitions to align national and international strategies. These initiatives reveal that embassies and multilateral conferences served not only as communication platforms but also as mechanisms of strategic persuasion to uphold Bangladesh's moral legitimacy and attract continued global support.

Documentary evidence and interviews confirm that formal diplomatic notes and letters were periodically dispatched by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to key governments and organizations including the UN Secretary-General, ASEAN Chair, and the OIC Secretariat to emphasize Myanmar's non-compliance with bilateral agreements and appeal for intensified international mediation. These written communications, often shared publicly through MOFA press releases, were instrumental in maintaining visibility of the Rohingya crisis amid competing global priorities. Such correspondence represents an institutionalized form of humanitarian advocacy, where written diplomacy complemented Bangladesh's multilateral engagement to transform normative appeals into sustained international dialogue.

Over time, Bangladesh's reliance on external assistance covering more than 80 percent of the humanitarian budget created an element of aid dependency that directly incentivized proactive diplomacy. To secure predictable donor flows, Dhaka intensified visibility in UN fora and cultivated bilateral goodwill, effectively turning humanitarian advocacy into a strategic instrument for sustaining international financial support.

### 4.3 External Systemic Pressures

The interviews and document review highlight significant systemic pressures that shaped Dhaka's policy options since Bangladesh has been highlighting before the world community that the present circumstances are in no way the fault of Rohingya and Bangladesh. Bangladesh is advised to remain extra vigilant against the anti-rhetoric over the lack of progress of repatriation. Major-power competition in the Indo-Pacific particularly the differing positions of China, India, the United States, and Russia created both opportunities and constraints. China's strategic investments under the Belt and Road Initiative and its defense of Myanmar at the UN Security Council limited Bangladesh's coercive leverage. Conversely, Western countries and regional organizations offered humanitarian support but avoided direct confrontation with Naypyidaw, Myanmar resulting in limited progress toward repatriation as State Counselor Aung Sun Suky urged Western nations not to impose sanctions and allowed time to deepen democracy. Bangladesh thus pursued a balancing strategy: sustaining Chinese economic cooperation while expanding defense and development partnerships with the United States, Japan, and the European Union. This pragmatic balancing illustrates the neo-classical realist logic of constrained autonomy, where weaker states navigate external structures through selective alignment (Anwar et al., 2022) [9].

#### 4.3.1 Defense Diplomacy Dimension

While the Rohingya crisis is primarily humanitarian, it has also intersected with Bangladesh's defense diplomacy. Dhaka has utilized its peacekeeping record and military-to-military engagements to reinforce international trust and widen diplomatic space. Collaboration with India on border security coordination, joint training programs with the United States Indo-Pacific Command, and defense procurement dialogues with China and Turkey reflect a calibrated approach to preserving strategic partnerships without direct militarization of the refugee issue. Interviews with senior officers indicated that the Armed Forces Division and Ministry of Defense contributed to foreign-policy consultations, particularly on regional security and counter-trafficking measures along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border with especial

emphasis on the negative consequences of protracted Rohingya/ FDMNs staying in Bangladesh. These initiatives underscore how defense diplomacy complements humanitarian engagement by projecting Bangladesh as a capable and responsible security actor in the Bay of Bengal region.

#### 4.3.2 Domestic Constraints and Political Considerations

Domestic political and socio-economic pressures remained central to policy evolution. Hosting over one million displaced persons generated fiscal strain, security challenges, and host-community grievances, particularly in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char. Government officials faced mounting political costs as donor funding declined and refugee fatigue increased (Kaium, 2023). And, the absence of a formal refugee-protection law and Bangladesh's non-signatory status to the 1951 Convention constrained legal frameworks for managing rights and obligations. Nonetheless, Dhaka repeatedly underscored adherence to international human-rights standards in coordination with UNHCR and IOM. Rising social tensions and the economic burden of hosting communities further required careful messaging abroad to secure understanding that Bangladesh's capacity, not its commitment, limited policy flexibility. These internal dynamics limited Dhaka's willingness to accept permanent integration or third-country resettlement, reinforcing a repatriation-first stance despite dwindling prospects for return (One RRRC officials, 2025). The findings demonstrate that domestic legitimacy concerns—especially electoral politics, economic stability, and social cohesion—acted as intervening variables filtering external incentives into cautious policy responses. These policy responses were not crafted by MOFA alone but emerged from an inter-agency network linking the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR), the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), and the National Task Force (NTF) chaired by the Foreign Secretary. Inputs from NGO Affairs Bureau, humanitarian agencies, and civil-society advocacy groups further influenced official postures, particularly on relocation and camp management. This institutional interplay demonstrates that Bangladesh's external strategies were simultaneously a bureaucratic consensus and a product of domestic administrative negotiation.

However, from a national-security perspective, the government perceived the concentration of over one million displaced persons near a porous border as a potential vector for cross-border crime, extremism, and trafficking. These concerns monitored jointly by the Armed Forces Division and the National Security Intelligence (NSI) encouraged Dhaka to treat refugee management as a matter of state security as well as humanitarian duty. Consequently, security imperatives reinforced the foreign-policy objective of rapid, safe repatriation and justified sustained international engagement to prevent regional destabilization. And Periodic critical assessments by international NGOs and donor agencies highlighting governance gaps, camp restrictions, and human-rights concerns also shaped the tone of Bangladesh's diplomacy. Officials interviewed noted that such reports prompted MOFA to intensify public-relations outreach and emphasize transparency in coordination mechanisms. In this way, reputational management became part of Dhaka's external strategy, linking domestic implementation with the quest for sustained global credibility.

#### 4.4 Thematic Summary of Findings

The qualitative data obtained from key informant interviews and documentary analysis were synthesized through thematic coding and interpretation. The analysis revealed six major themes that collectively explain Bangladesh's evolving foreign-policy behaviour in response to the Rohingya crisis. Each theme captures a distinct but interconnected dimension of the country's diplomatic, political, and humanitarian engagement. As summarized in Table 2, these themes include: the transformation of Bangladesh's foreign policy from bilateral engagement to multilateral humanitarian diplomacy; the influence of external systemic pressures; the role of domestic constraints; the expansion of humanitarian diplomacy; strategic balancing among competing powers; and the resultant policy outcomes. Together, these findings illustrate how Bangladesh's foreign policy has adapted under simultaneous internal and external pressures while pursuing legitimacy, stability, and strategic flexibility. Table 2 presents the core findings, aligning the major themes with their key factors and corresponding implications. It highlights that the failure of bilateral repatriation and Myanmar's intransigence prompted Dhaka to internationalize the crisis through multilateral and legal channels. Great-power rivalry and regional inaction limited coercive leverage, compelling Bangladesh to adopt a balancing strategy. Domestically, fiscal burdens and host-community fatigue constrained policy options, reinforcing a pragmatic rather than confrontational stance. Meanwhile, humanitarian diplomacy enhanced Bangladesh's moral legitimacy, even as strategic partnerships diversified its external engagements. These thematic outcomes collectively suggest that Bangladesh's foreign-policy trajectory is defined by adaptive pragmatism an effort to navigate between moral imperatives and strategic necessity. The results confirm that small-state diplomacy operates within tight structural boundaries but retains meaningful agency through selective alignment and normative positioning.

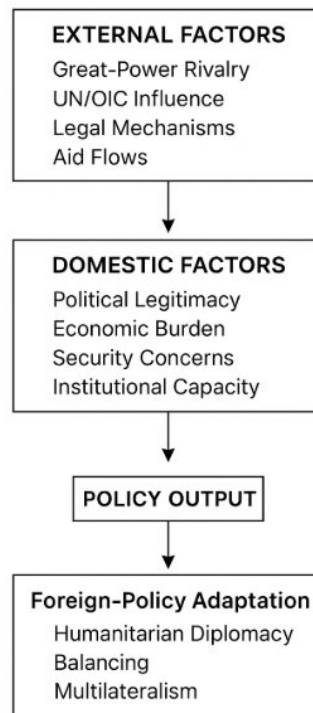
**Table 2.** Core Findings

Theme	Key Factors / Evidence	Main Findings / Implications
<b>Transformation of Foreign Policy</b>	Failure of bilateral repatriation, Myanmar's military dominance, need for international legitimacy	Bangladesh shifted from bilateral negotiations to multilateral humanitarian diplomacy to sustain global attention
<b>External Systemic Pressures</b>	Great-power rivalry (China, India, U.S.), UNSC divisions, ASEAN inaction	Limited coercive leverage compelled Dhaka to adopt strategic balancing between competing powers
<b>Domestic Constraints</b>	Fiscal strain, host-community fatigue, political sensitivity of refugee management	Domestic legitimacy and socio-economic stability shaped cautious foreign-policy positions
<b>Humanitarian Diplomacy</b>	Engagement with UN, OIC, ICJ; alignment with global humanitarian norms	Enhanced Bangladesh's moral and diplomatic legitimacy while ensuring donor support

<b>Strategic Balancing</b>	Simultaneous cooperation with China, India, Japan, and Western partners	Illustrates small-state pragmatism and adaptive diplomacy under external constraints
<b>Policy Outcomes</b>	Multilateral advocacy, sustained aid inflow, stalled repatriation efforts	Partial success in international agenda-setting, limited outcome in actual Rohingya/FDMNs return

**4.5 Integration of Themes: A Neoclassical Realist Interpretation**

The interplay of domestic and external factors reflects the neoclassical realist premise that foreign-policy outcomes are not determined solely by systemic pressures but are filtered through internal variables leadership perception, institutional capability, and political constraints(Hudson, 2005; Rose, 1998) [5], [13]. This dynamic interaction is illustrated in Figure 2, which maps how external systemic forces and domestic determinants converge to produce Bangladesh’s adaptive foreign-policy behaviour. As shown in Figure 2, external influences such as great-power rivalry, UN and OIC interventions, legal mechanisms, and international aid flows intersect with domestic considerations including political legitimacy, economic strain, security concerns, and institutional capacity. The synthesis of these variables generates the policy output, expressed through humanitarian diplomacy, strategic balancing, and multilateral engagement. This model captures the recursive relationship between structure and agency that defines small-state foreign-policy conduct under crisis conditions, reaffirming the explanatory value of the neoclassical realist lens in understanding Bangladesh’s diplomatic evolution.



**NEOCLASSICAL REALIST LENS**

**Figure 2.** Interaction of Domestic and External Factors in Bangladesh’s Foreign Policy (Neoclassical Realist Lens)

#### 4.6 Policy and Theoretical Implications

Empirically, the study underscores that Bangladesh's response to the Rohingya crisis cannot be understood solely through humanitarian or bilateral lenses. Instead, it exemplifies the interactive causal logic of neoclassical realism systemic forces establish constraints, but state-level perceptions and capacities determine the scope of adaptation. For IR theory, these findings contribute to debates on small-state agency, humanitarian diplomacy, and the role of middlepowers in the Global South. For policy, they highlight the need for sustained multilateral engagement, long-term burden-sharing mechanisms, and stronger domestic institutions capable of managing protracted refugee situations without eroding national cohesion.

#### 4.7 Limitations of the Study and Future Research

Although this study offers a comprehensive and contextually grounded analysis of Bangladesh's foreign policy responses to the Rohingya crisis, it is not without limitations. As a qualitative and exploratory study, the research primarily relies on KIIs and documentary analysis, which while rich in depth and interpretive nuance are inherently constrained by the perspectives of selected respondents and the availability of secondary sources. The purposive and snowball sampling strategies ensured expert insights, yet they may not fully capture the diversity of bureaucratic, political, and civil-society perspectives involved in Bangladesh's policy processes. Moreover, access to certain classified diplomatic communications and official policy documents was limited, which constrained the ability to verify certain claims or reconstruct complete decision-making sequences.

Another limitation lies in the scope and geographic focus of the research. Concentrating solely on Bangladesh provides an in-depth national perspective but limits broader generalizability across comparable small and middle powers in South Asia or Southeast Asia. A comparative cross-country framework examining, for instance, how Malaysia, Thailand, or Indonesia manage similar refugee and humanitarian crises could offer a richer theoretical validation of the neoclassical realist approach in explaining regional foreign-policy adaptations.

For future research, several promising directions emerge. First, scholars may employ mixed-methods designs, combining elite interviews with survey-based perception data or computational content analysis of diplomatic statements to map evolving discursive trends. Second, longitudinal research could trace how Bangladesh's foreign-policy behaviour evolves beyond 2025, especially in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and renewed regional security alignments. Finally, further exploration of non-state actors including NGOs, advocacy networks, and epistemic communities would help unpack how internal and transnational forces jointly shape the foreign-policy behaviour of small states under crisis conditions.

### 5. Recommendations and Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several policy-oriented recommendations and practical implications for Bangladesh, the regional community, and international stakeholders engaged in addressing the Rohingya crisis. Rooted in the theoretical lens of neoclassical realism, these recommendations emphasize how both systemic constraints and domestic capacities interact to determine feasible policy options. Accordingly, the policy suggestions presented below are not merely prescriptive but analytically grounded, balancing humanitarian imperatives with strategic realities.

### 5.1 Strengthening Multilateral Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation

Bangladesh should continue to internationalize the Rohingya issue through sustained engagement in multilateral platforms such as the United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, and International Court of Justice. Continued coordination with The Gambia in the ICJ case underlines the importance of legal diplomacy in maintaining pressure on Myanmar to uphold accountability under the *Genocide Convention*. Furthermore, Bangladesh could strengthen alliances within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and ASEAN dialogue frameworks to mobilize a broader coalition advocating for durable repatriation and accountability mechanisms. At the regional level, Bangladesh should pursue issue-based cooperation with ASEAN members, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, which share humanitarian and migration challenges. A regional working group on refugee management possibly facilitated by the BIMSTEC framework could offer structured dialogue on humanitarian responses, security coordination, and sustainable repatriation pathways.

### 5.2 Enhancing Domestic Institutional Capacity

The report emphasizes how Bangladesh's foreign policy decisions are still influenced by internal factors such as economic distress, a lack of bureaucratic competence, and host-community weariness. Strengthening domestic institutions in charge of managing refugees and implementing foreign policy is therefore a key proposal. Through focused capacity-building initiatives, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR), and the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) office should all have improved technical, diplomatic, and negotiating abilities. Policy coherence would also be enhanced by the creation of a National Refugee Management Framework with explicit inter-ministerial coordination procedures. By avoiding duplication and misuse and enhancing communication between government and humanitarian organizations, the integration of cutting-edge data systems and digital monitoring technologies might further improve assistance distribution's transparency and efficiency.

### 5.3 Advancing Humanitarian Diplomacy

Bangladesh's reputation as a responsible humanitarian actor offers a valuable diplomatic asset. The government can capitalize on this soft-power advantage by institutionalizing humanitarian diplomacy through specialized training for diplomats and foreign-service officers.

This may include formal modules on international humanitarian law, refugee protection norms, and negotiation techniques with multilateral agencies. Furthermore, the establishment of a Humanitarian Policy and Diplomacy Unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would enable Bangladesh to design comprehensive outreach strategies linking humanitarian concerns with long-term foreign-policy objectives. Engagement in global humanitarian forums such as the Global Refugee Forum and Geneva Dialogue on Migrations should be prioritized to secure greater visibility, donor commitment, and technical partnerships.

### 5.4 Managing Domestic Pressures and Community Resilience

The prolonged presence of Rohingya refugees continues to generate economic and social challenges in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char. To mitigate host-community resentment and safeguard domestic stability, policies should prioritize inclusive development and resilience-building programs for both refugees and locals. International donors could be encouraged to align funding mechanisms with local development priorities rather than solely focusing on refugee assistance. Promoting local employment, investing in infrastructure, and integrating community-based conflict-resolution mechanisms can help reduce tensions. Public communication strategies should also emphasize shared security and humanitarian responsibilities to prevent politicization of refugee issues within domestic discourse.

### **5.5 Strategic Balancing and Foreign-Policy Realignment**

In light of the complex geopolitical environment, Bangladesh must maintain a strategic balancing approach preserving its economic partnerships with China while deepening defense and development cooperation with India, Japan, and Western countries. This requires an agile diplomatic posture capable of issue-specific alignments rather than rigid bloc politics. Leveraging platforms such as the Indo-Pacific Outlook and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) can expand Bangladesh's strategic space while safeguarding national interests. At the same time, Bangladesh's policymakers should ensure that humanitarian engagement does not become hostage to great-power competition, which could undermine the normative legitimacy Dhaka has built since 2017.

### **5.6 Practical Implications for Policy and Scholarship**

Practically, this study reinforces the idea that small states can leverage humanitarian and moral capital as strategic resources in global politics. Bangladesh's foreign-policy adaptation demonstrates how humanitarian diplomacy can coexist with realist calculations of security and survival. For policymakers, the implication is to institutionalize flexible foreign-policy mechanisms that combine normative commitments with pragmatic statecraft. For scholars, the study contributes to the growing literature on small-state foreign policy by applying neoclassical realism to a humanitarian crisis, illustrating how state-level factors mediate external constraints. Future studies can extend this approach to other small states in the Global South, refining theoretical models of agency, vulnerability, and resilience.

### **5.7 Deepening Legal and Diplomatic Coordination**

Bangladesh should enhance bilateral and multilateral legal cooperation to operationalize the International Court of Justice's provisional measures and to promote compliance through sustained diplomatic follow-up. Integrating legal advocacy with diplomatic negotiation would help transform normative commitments into enforceable accountability.

### **5.8 Institutionalizing Defense and Security Dialogue**

A dedicated Defense-Security Coordination Cell jointly managed by MOFA and the Ministry of Defense could harmonize humanitarian response with border-management and maritime-security priorities. This mechanism would allow Bangladesh to employ defense diplomacy as a stabilizing tool while maintaining its humanitarian image.

### **5.9 Enhancing Strategic Communication and Evidence-Based Advocacy**

Establishing a unified data and communication platform linking MOFA, MoDMR, and RRRC would facilitate timely information-sharing with embassies, donors, and media. Such a system would strengthen Bangladesh's capacity to counter misinformation, document progress, and project a consistent narrative that aligns humanitarian achievements with national-interest objectives. Rohingya/FDMNs victim narratives could be one of the prime strategies to augment strategic communication.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study examined Bangladesh's foreign policy toward the Rohingya crisis through the lens of neoclassical realism, emphasizing the interaction between external pressures and domestic political and institutional factors. The research aimed to uncover how a small state like Bangladesh adapts its foreign-policy strategies when confronted with a protracted humanitarian crisis that carries deep regional and international implications.

Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative and explanatory approach, drawing on Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), document analysis, and thematic interpretation. Data triangulation enhanced validity, ensuring that insights from primary and secondary sources were consistently verified and interpreted within theoretical and empirical boundaries. This methodological rigor allowed the research to capture both the structural and actor-specific dimensions of Bangladesh's policy behaviour.

The findings indicate a significant shift in Bangladesh's foreign-policy orientation from a bilateral negotiation model to a multilateral and humanitarian diplomacy framework. This transformation has been shaped by systemic constraints such as great-power rivalry, regional inaction, and limited coercive leverage, as well as by internal challenges including political legitimacy, economic strain, and security pressures. The results demonstrate that while Dhaka achieved considerable normative legitimacy in global forums, its material success particularly in achieving refugee repatriation remains limited.

The analysis also reveals that Bangladesh's foreign-policy adaptation reflects the neoclassical realist balance between external constraints and domestic imperatives. By employing humanitarian diplomacy, Dhaka has managed to sustain international attention, secure aid flows, and preserve strategic flexibility within a competitive Indo-Pacific environment. This approach underscores the state's pragmatic ability to blend moral responsibility with strategic calculation.

In conclusion, Bangladesh's response to the Rohingya crisis exemplifies how small states exercise constrained agency in global politics. The country's evolving diplomacy demonstrates the necessity of aligning domestic stability, institutional strength, and strategic partnerships to maintain foreign-policy effectiveness. The study's insights hold broader relevance for scholars and policymakers analyzing small-state behavior under humanitarian and geopolitical pressure, highlighting that, even amid limited power, adaptability and normative engagement can serve as meaningful instruments of statecraft.

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