

India's Approach to Humanitarian Interventions: An Analysis Through Epistemologies of The Global South

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Abstract: *This study aims to identify similarities between India's current approach to humanitarian interventions and the epistemologies of humanitarian interventionism in the Global South. While rejecting the Responsibility to Protect norm, it has clearly expressed its stance on external interventions in a civil war-hit country. This study employs normative analysis within a postcolonial theoretical framework, drawing on Global South epistemologies of humanitarian interventionism. This study used a qualitative method with an interpretative approach. To comparatively evaluate India's response pattern to humanitarian crises, case study reports, UN voting patterns and foreign policy developments are analysed. India's current non-interventionist stance aligns with the epistemologies of humanitarian intervention in the Global South, as its postcolonial tradition has shaped its approach.*

Keywords: Colonial History, Global South Epistemologies, Humanitarian Intervention, Post-colonialism, Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

There is little indication that unilateral humanitarian interventions have been replaced, considering the emergence of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm. The R2P norm framework depicts the intervening state as a redeemer, without considering its role in the crisis, and portrays victims as passive spectators in need of redemption (Dunford, 2025). The prioritisation of military intervention over the R2P diplomatic tool and the failure to include post-construction efforts within the R2P norm are serious flaws. India's approach to humanitarian interventions has changed drastically since the independence era. It is important to analyse India's approach to civil wars in South Asia and elsewhere by examining its strategies for coping with the issue and ending the atrocities.

HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTIONS AND THE BACKGROUND OF THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT (R2P) NORM

Humanitarian Interventionism is defined as military action by an outsider with the main purpose of averting, reducing, or stopping an ongoing or approaching atrocity crime (Abbas, 2012). Unauthorised one-sided interventions have given rise to numerous criticisms posed against the resolve of humanitarian interventions. It has always been a part of history. The Cold War era witnessed several unilateral interventions in the name of humanitarianism by both power blocs. Such interventions have been internationally recognised as neo-imperialist and have been severely criticised. The international community, which had been closely monitoring the aggression, decided to create an alternate mechanism to curb such acts of aggression. It was during the 1999 Kosovo intervention led by NATO that discussions intensified about preventing such arbitrary interference in a civil war-hit state, often resulting in regime change and immeasurable destruction. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) developed the concept of the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) as a substitute for humanitarian intervention in 2001. It was adopted by the United Nations World Summit document in 2005, where it was legitimised for invocation during instances of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2010). The proponents of the norm assume that the evolution of the concept was demand-driven rather than supply-driven and that the mandate for such a norm is unlikely to disappear in the prevailing global order (Thakur, 2018). The Global South collectively disclosed its hesitancy to accept the norm in its entirety. They opposed pillar three because they believed it would legitimise unwarranted military interventions, in line with neo-imperialism. While the ICISS document had preparatory

members from the Global South, it did not lose its Eurocentrism. The norm has its own issues. Roland Paris identified several inherent structural issues with the R2P norm, including the 'mixed motives problem, end state problem, and inconsistency issue' (Paris, 2014). The inconsistency problem refers to the inability to apply the norm everywhere due to interveners' lack of interest in the issue, an absence of ulterior motive, or a prediction of the intervention's failure if implemented, which may lead to more harm than good. Self-interest is essential for an R2P intervention. This delegitimises the entire norm as it shows the same old traits of unilateral humanitarian interventions. The invocation of R2P to Libyan intervention in Libya was severely criticised globally for having ulterior motives in 2011. Alongside the inaction of R2P, the Chinese and Russian veto during the civil war in Syria, added fuel to the fire. Case studies of NATO interventions in Kosovo and Libya, before and after R2P's formation, undoubtedly recognise the predominance of realism on the world stage as it settles on the fact that, regardless of humanitarian interests, national interests are constantly at stake whenever a state tries to intervene in another state for humanitarian motives (Yoshida, 2013). The R2P norm has not changed the Eurocentric imperialist agenda hidden under the cloak of humanitarianism.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, critical approach informed by postcolonial theory. Global South epistemologies of humanitarian interventionism are analysed to understand how India's approach resembles that of the Global South. This study uses document analysis of the ICISS document, UN reports, and diplomatic statements, as well as secondary data analysis from journals, books, and articles.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To analyse whether India's approach to humanitarian crises aligns with the epistemologies of humanitarian interventionism in the Global South.

India's Approach to Humanitarian Interventions before the Advent of R2P

India's post-independence foreign policy was guided by decolonisation, the preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity, and nonalignment (NAM). India's history of anti-colonial struggles has made it deeply conscious of preserving sovereignty. Nehru's formulation of Panchsheel in 1954 also laid down these goals. India supported the Congo's civil war to secure its independence and deployed the Indian Peacekeeping Force to stabilise the region. India's reaction to the Spanish Civil War was similar when the Indian National Congress voted against non-interventionism in Spain, thereby supporting the humanitarian intervention. India did not prioritise Congolese sovereignty but supported intervention at the time (Bommakanti, 2017). Initially, India viewed the United Nations as a legitimising body capable of maintaining global peace and security. The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War signifies an important case of intervention by the Indira Gandhi government, with the USSR Friendship treaty in place. After the UN failed to accede to a multilateral intervention, India unilaterally intervened in Pakistan. This violates Article 2 of the UN Charter, which affirms the principle of sovereign equality. However, there are several differing opinions on this issue. Subramaniam supported an early intervention, stating that Pakistan was an apartheid government, while postcolonial scholars preach that it was an imperialist move by India (Bommakanti, 2017). Some opine that humanitarian Intervention in Bangladesh was not legitimate, stating that India's national interests were at

stake. During the Rajiv Gandhi era, the Sri Lankan intervention (1987) was a notable case study. Although the Sri Lankan government requested assistance, the IPKF intervention from 1987 to 1990 is classified as a bilateral intervention under the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord rather than UN authorisation. Therefore, India's initial focus on interventionism was evident through the case studies until the 1990s. With the Gujral doctrine in place, India's foreign policy stance began to shift to strict non-interference in the South Asian region, focusing on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.

R2P Norm with the Epistemologies of Humanitarian Intervention in the Global North

Yoshida opines that the case studies of NATO interventions in Kosovo and Libya, before and after R2P's formation, evaluate this norm. By identifying the predominance of realism, it is concluded that, regardless of humanitarian interests, national interests were at stake (Yoshida, 2013). Realism explains the Libyan intervention better than liberalism. Realism explains why selective interventions occur. She cited three strong reasons for NATO's intervention in Libya.

- A) Libya's oil reserves are a potential resource for European states.
- B) Western states feared that Libya could become a terrorist-sponsoring state under Gaddafi.
- C) Fear of Chemical weapons exploitation (Yoshida, 2013).

Peak opines that the idea of humanitarian interventions is undermined as it is tied to the concept of liberal interventions, the chief imperialist policy of the United States and its allies since the Cold War, which validates their military interventions to liberate a state from tyranny or anarchy through their principles of endorsing democracy and universalising Western conceptions of human rights and sovereignty. He opines that the West's constant goal of attaining liberal hegemony in the world has led to numerous illegitimised unilateral interventions, and the Iraq intervention in 2003 by the United States, without the United Nations authorisation, was claimed to be a case of 'humanitarian intervention'. However, this cannot be attributed to humanitarianism in any sense. He states that, among the issues arising from the entanglement of humanitarian and liberal interventions, the 'responsibility bias' emerges, whereby interventions are considered genuine only when they are led by liberal states or the West (Peak, 2020). It also burdens Western Interveners with socio-economic recovery and modernisation, which is expected to be implemented under the liberal hegemony development plan; therefore, they will obviously be forced to selectively intervene wherever their interests are at stake. Hesam Rahmani opines that the selectivity issue in humanitarian intervention must be analysed by investigating the great powers' active complicity in civil wars rather than their bystander complicity, thereby revealing the colonial nature it embodies once more. The Global North drives specific humanitarian interventions by showing active complicity in civil wars, modifying its foreign policy, and not simply choosing inaction during a crisis, as represented by 'bystander complicity' (Rahmani, 2023).

The report also specifies the North's involvement in civil wars with contributions of arms and finance to the civil wars in the Global South, admitting the North's significant role in exacerbating crises in the South. The ICISS commission's funding also predominantly came from

governments in the Global North, symbolising that the North controlled the agenda and that the agency tasked with implementing the norm was handed over to the international community, which is also being represented by the North. Members of the Global South were involved in formulating the ICISS document, with the primary aim of achieving a consensus among developing states. Abbas opines that R2P did not provide a new definition of sovereignty as 'responsibility'. At the same time, Hehir argues that the pre-R2P concept of sovereignty did not entail absolute sovereignty with the license to kill, as Gareth Evans argues (Abbas, 2012). He also states that norms to prevent all four categories of atrocity crimes under R2P have been endorsed in international law. The only dilemma was the implementation of the norm against atrocity crimes in the case of a UNSC deadlock, and this was not resolved through R2P, even though the ICISS had mentioned the use of 'constructive abstention' in the event of veto power dominance, thereby strengthening the northern control over any intervention. It certainly questions the legitimacy of the UNSC, given its underrepresentation, but fails to highlight the structural disparity that will lead to the dominance of the global North in implementing the norm. As Abbas points out, the authorisers of the intervention under R2P are designated as the 'international community', a term that is vague and ill-defined (Abbas, 2012).

Global South Epistemologies of Humanitarian Interventions

The Global South's negative perception of global norms through the UN stems from the West's neo-colonial aspirations within the humanitarian intervention paradigm. The ICISS document justified selective interventions in humanitarian crisis deterrence on the grounds of the Global North's unfamiliarity with conflicts in the Global South. The report clearly mentions the North's arms and financial contributions as contributing to the civil wars in the South, recognising the North's significant role in these crises. 'Responsible military action' is moulded solely by Western military norms, with Western coalitions using force however they see fit, without any guidelines on its limits. Therefore, the R2P is well-founded within Eurocentric intervention models. Liberalist and capitalist practices are entrenched in humanitarianism, urging the re-evaluation of Eurocentric epistemological norm formation processes that determine agency and counterhegemonic humanitarianism grounded in justice, which critiques the codified legal regime masked with colonial heirloom (Ivanoic, 2019). There is a need to resist and criticise the knowledge framework to fight the imperialist notions of humanitarian intervention. Most existing discussions on humanitarian interventions and the R2P norm are from a Western perspective, prioritising the universal definition of human rights and the right to intervene when states fail to fulfil their 'sovereignty as responsibility'. However, few studies have examined the international humanitarian interventions directed by neo-colonial great powers in the present geopolitical landscape. Global South epistemologies were sidelined in the norm's formation and implementation. The Global South voices, with their colonial history, therefore, fear the norm as an imperial tool. The double standards of European humanitarianism, as Aimé Césaire noted, call into question the legality of such interventions. There are many queries regarding the meaning of protection. The portrayal of the

West as the 'saviour' is an issue here. However, another issue arises. Whether such interventions are recurrently legitimate. An intervention against the Global North, which stands at the pinnacle of international order, is highly unlikely. This is because the international community, often the UN's intervening actors, is always led by the West. This is to continue in the coming years, as the Global North clearly enjoys immunity from the concept of 'sovereignty as responsibility' through its veto power. Quinton Brown develops a postcolonial and anti-colonial discourse of the 'responsibility to liberate', in contrast to the definition of the 'responsibility to protect', focusing on Global South perspectives (Quinton-Brown, 2020). Richemond opines that, even if debates evolve over the acceptability and legality of unilateral humanitarian interventions, they remain Eurocentric because of the epistemological break between 'strict normativity' and 'normative ambiguity' (Richemond, 2003). She opines that 'strict normativity,' stating that a strict, codified law outline would lead to legitimacy, and that an effective pre-emptive act will eventually be led alone by Western legal models. Similarly, 'normative ambiguity,' alongside Unilateral humanitarian interventions, denoted a deviation from strict laws and the freedom to use force, through a case-by-case analysis, originally intended to benefit the victims, but later used to replicate the hierarchies of Eurocentrism (Richemond, 2003). This explains how the Global North uses the ambiguity in the normative framework of the norm as a loophole to arbitrarily decide and intervene as they want, in line with their neo-imperialist ambitions.

CONCLUSION

Even when the ICISS document highlights the Global South's apprehensions and its strict adherence to sovereignty as the sole defence against foreign intervention, it does not grant the South any agency while reaffirming the Global North's power to intervene as 'protectors,' thereby reinforcing existing Northern dominance and doing nothing to change it. The Commission stated that discussions were held in selected locations in the Global South to understand regional concerns and analyse the experiences of affected populations, thereby gaining credibility. However, it failed to incorporate the South's perspective. India supports the first two of the responsibility to Protect Norm. However, it does not support pillar three, which authorises military intervention during intra-state rivalry, as this would compromise a state's sovereignty (Hall, 2018). India has been hesitant to accept R2P as a legitimising norm since 2005, as it understands the normative ambiguity associated with R2P, which can perpetuate neo-imperialist notions of the typical interveners representing the international community. Ganguly mentions India's note to the UN, where India showed its hesitancy to accept the R2P norm because of its association with colonialism and imperialism (Ganguly, 2016). However, the norm began to gain support from many states, including the UN Secretary-General's involvement in the matter. Although India's current stance on R2P was made clear by its rejection of discussions on implementing R2P during the 2009 civil war in Sri Lanka, it was made explicitly clear during the Libyan case. The United Nations' first full implementation of the R2P norm in Libya drew global attention, and scholars have had mixed opinions about its success. India abstained from voting on resolution 1973 to invoke military intervention

in Libya to stabilise the civil war and stop state-led atrocities against its citizens. However, India voted in favour of applying Resolution 1970 in Libya, which authorised a moderate level of UN intervention without resorting to direct military intervention. As India initially doubted the norm's neo-imperialist nature, its hesitance to invoke it was understood as a collective concern of the Global South. Bass states that India used humanitarianism within the sovereignty framework in the Bangladesh intervention, but its stance then changed, related to the nonalignment movement, and it abstained from R2P resolutions because it was sceptical of Western interventions. It stands strong in resisting neo-imperialism and opines that the failure of multilateralism will inevitably lead to unilateralism (Bass, 2015). Discussions of an R2P invocation in Myanmar in 2017 were also unwelcome in India. However, critics argue that India's rejection of the norm is due to its fear of intervention, with the Kashmir issue being noted (Chandra, 2021). S. Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister, has opined that India's foreign policy has advanced from nonalignment to the policy of 'Vishwa Mitra,' challenging the existing power structure in which a few states set the agenda, while the rest are expected to follow (Louis, 2023). India resists humanitarian interventions through military force and prefers diplomacy. India's focus is mainly on the prevention pillar of R2P, emphasising capacity building, mediation, and even developmental assistance. India prefers regional solutions over external interventions in South Asia, as the R2P norm has been localised within the Indian state and tailored to its regional needs. States can unilaterally decide on global norms, tailoring them to regional needs and implementing their positions. India's current approach aligns with the ICISS report's vision, focusing on providing tailored support with regional-level conflict prevention and capacity building with the assistance of regional organisations. It also suggests debt relief, institutional support, and financial aid. However, the efficiency of regional organisations like SAARC is questionable, as they lack the capacity to respond in a coordinated manner to such crises. As the document mentions the concerns of the Global South, it has revealed internal conflicts, weak governance, and post-Cold War instability as reasons to resist such interventions. It mentions focusing on building curated provisions for regional-level conflict deterrence and capacity building, with assistance from regional organisations, and proposes debt relief, institutional support, and financial aid. The Global South's negative perception of global norms through the UN stems from the West's neo-colonial aspirations. Even the United Nations' authorised interventions are entrenched in colonial authoritarianism and repeat colonial subtleties under the cloak of humanitarianism, often violating Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter and thereby international law (Marcus, 2002). The alternative strategies India has implemented in South Asia to avoid foreign intervention include rejecting the international norm of humanitarian intervention, emphasising state capacity-building, and addressing the root causes of the conflict.

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