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Reconstructing R2P: India, Strategic Autonomy, and the Multipolar Humanitarian Order

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Abstract
The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has been increasingly challenged as the global system shifts from unipolarity to multipolarity. This study explores how India's foreign policy discourse between 2005 and 2025 redefined R2P through the principle of strategic autonomy. Using Critical Constructivism, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Process Tracing, the study examines official diplomatic documents, UN actions, and communications by India's Ministry of External Affairs. Findings reveal consistent discursive patterns emphasizing sovereignty, dialogue, prevention, and non-coercion, indicating that India has embedded humanitarian responsibility within its foreign policy identity. The study argues that norm contestation functions as an adaptive mechanism for R2P rather than a rejection of it. Ultimately, R2P will remain viable only if it successfully adapts to the emergence of a more plural, increasingly multipolar, and evolving global humanitarian world order.

Keywords
Responsibility to Protect (R2P); Strategic Autonomy; India; Multipolarity; Norm Contestation; Humanitarian Protection; Foreign Policy

UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions; SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals; SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) illustrates evolving changes in the international system from unipolarity to multipolarity, with the rise of multiple interpretations of humanitarian responsibilities as an increasing factor in shaping global governance (Bellamy, 2015; Thakur, 2016). The initial basis for R2P was premised on the existence of a liberal international order able to enforce humanitarian norms. Therefore, R2P evolved into a political and moral framework for the prevention of mass atrocities (Thakur, 2011; Evans, 2008). As Western influence began to wane in conjunction with the increased influence of emerging states, the ability to implement humanitarian intervention based upon a hegemonically derived normative framework was increasingly challenged (Acharya, 2013; Wiener, 2014). In a multipolar system, humanitarian intervention is no longer viewed through a single normative lens; thus, as described by Chandler (2023), there exists a paradox surrounding R2P: although the principle remains widely accepted at the level of norms, its applicability in practice continues to decrease due to the reality of geopolitics.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict intensified existing fault lines and demonstrated the inability of the UN Security Council to impose enforcement mechanisms despite extensive harm to civilians collectively (UNSC, 2022). Rather than adopting interventionist approaches to interpreting the concept of responsibility, India emphasized sovereignty, diplomacy and

negotiated settlements as being the primary mechanisms of engagement in the area of humanitarian affairs (MEA, 2022). The response of India represents that norms of responsibility can be interpreted through alternative discursive frameworks that are determined by historical experience, political identity and strategic priorities.

This article will examine the ways in which India's diplomatic discourse recasts the conceptualization of humanitarian responsibility through the principles of strategic autonomy. Rather than viewing India's position as opposition to humanitarian norms, the study views it as a type of normative engagement in which discourse is used as a means of negotiating, reinterpreting and adapting norms. Based on this view, communicative, legalistic and proportional forms of agency represent alternative expressions of humanitarian responsibility (Wiener, 2014).

The research addresses three central objectives:

- To assess how India's diplomatic language between 2005 and 2025 reshapes the meaning and scope of R2P.
- To examine strategic autonomy as a mechanism for localizing humanitarian norms.
- To analyze how India interprets humanitarian responsibility within an emerging multipolar international order.

The following section outlines the theoretical constructs and methodological approaches employed in this study to examine how norms evolve in a non-hegemonic world. The author draws on two major theories of international relations. The first is critical constructivism, which is an approach that treats norms as being historically embedded and discursively constructed. The second is critical international theory, which considers the ways that rising powers shape the development of humanitarian norms through their participation in the co-creation of those norms.

The author uses two primary methodological tools to analyze how India's diplomatic discourse has evolved. The first tool is process tracing, which analyzes the relationship between specific geopolitical events (the emergence of the Responsibility to Protect in 2005, the Libya intervention in 2011 and the Ukraine conflict since 2022) and the changes in language used in India's foreign policy statements about sovereignty, responsibility and restraint. The second tool is critical discourse analysis, which examines the language and structures used in these statements for recurring themes. The primary purpose of using both of these tools is to link normative theory to the actual practice of diplomacy in order to contribute to the field of international relations by focusing on how the norm of humanitarian responsibility develops in a non-hegemonic world rather than whether it succeeds or fails.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Development of R2P: From a Moral Ideal to a Politically Contested Idea

Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was introduced as a new international norm to resolve the conflict between state sovereignty and the protection of humanity (ICISS, 2001; Evans, 2008; Bellamy, 2009). Most of the early work on R2P focused on the moral and institutional

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innovations brought about by the new international norm within the Liberal International Order (Thakur, 2011), focusing on the collective obligation to prevent mass atrocities.

However, since the Libyan crisis in 2011, the world has seen a major shift in the geopolitical environment in which R2P operates. In particular, the Libyan crisis was a significant turning point because it exposed a divergence of interest within the international community regarding the relationship between protecting civilians and regime change, and ultimately damaged the consensus that had been achieved during the 2005 World Summit (Bellamy & Williams, 2012; Paris, 2014).

More recent scholarship has seen a growing debate on whether R2P represents a development in terms of normative progress, or if it is simply a tool of geopolitics (Chandler, 2023). Critics argue that R2P's selective use and asymmetric application make it vulnerable to exploitation (Orford, 2011), while supporters argue that R2P embodies the ethical justification of humanitarian intervention (Evans, 2008). Ultimately, these differing opinions reflect a larger epistemological divide in the field of R2P research - most notably, there is very little research exploring humanitarian responsibility from a non-Western perspective.

From Norm Diffusion to Norm Contestation

Constructivism has dramatically altered our understanding of international norms by demonstrating that norms develop and evolve through interactions among actors (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Acharya's concept of "norm localization" (2004; 2009) and Wiener's theory of "contestations" (2014) have demonstrated that global norms can only be understood in the context in which they are applied and contested. Instead of undermining norms, conflict and disagreement often lead to changes in them (Wiener, 2007; 2014).

Although constructivism has made great strides in this area, several limitations exist in the study of localization and contestation. Studies of localization generally focus on institutional adaptations and compliance behaviors (Acharya, 2009). In contrast, studies of contestation generally focus on abstract debates over R2P rather than the linguistic processes by which states create alternative interpretations (Wiener, 2018). Therefore, there is a lack of examination of the discursive roles that rising powers play in creating humanitarian norms (Nuruzzaman, 2023; Pethiyagoda, 2013).

The Global South and Humanitarian Norm Fragmentation

Research on the Global South has challenged the assumption that humanitarian norms emerge from Western political traditions (Ayoob, 2002; Acharya, 2009). Post-colonial views emphasize how the history of intervention and colonialism influences current views of sovereignty and protection (Jackson, 1990; Orford, 2011). Recent research has shown that humanitarian legitimacy is becoming dispersed among multiple normative centers as opposed to being centralized in Western institutions (Richmond, 2010).

While this body of research acknowledges normative pluralism, it often examines the Global South's engagement with humanitarian norms as primarily a reflection of geopolitical preference for non-intervention and sovereignty protection (Pant, 2016). There has been less emphasis on the discursive mechanisms through which alternative humanitarian reasoning is

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articulated. Specifically, India's case is still underresearched. Most analyses of Indian foreign policy have emphasized India's hedging strategies, its pursuit of balance-of-power politics, and strategic ambiguity (Bapat, 2017; Bhatia, 2018). These analyses have left the normative aspects of humanitarian discourse unexamined.

India and Humanitarian Responsibility

India's approach to humanitarian intervention combines elements of its post-colonial identity and its commitment to sovereignty and strategic autonomy (Rajagopalan, 2017; Pant, 2016). Some researchers have suggested that strategic consideration is often cited as a reason why India is reluctant to support coercive intervention; however, other researchers suggest that India uses different discursive frameworks based on restraint, dialogue and consensus building when engaging with humanitarian responsibility (Pethiyagoda, 2013). This view further supports the notion that strategic autonomy serves as both a geopolitical strategy and a normative lens through which humanitarian responsibility is viewed.

Strategic Autonomy as Normative Agency

Despite a growing body of literature on R2P and Global South agency, India's contribution to the creation of humanitarian norms remains largely undertheorized. Many scholars view Global South involvement in R2P as reactive to Western interventionism (Thakur, 2016; Paris, 2014), and constructivist theories of localization and contestation rarely link normative interpretation to a country's foreign policy doctrine (Hurrell, 2006).

Strategic autonomy has traditionally been studied through realist lenses as a way for states to manage geopolitical pressure (Pant, 2016). However, this type of analysis does not account for the possibility that strategic autonomy could operate as a normative function. Additionally, prior research has failed to fully examine how strategic doctrine can act as a discursive mechanism to facilitate the reinterpretation of humanitarian responsibility.

Additionally, much of the research on Indian foreign policy often relies on materialist explanations such as balancing behavior and strategic hedging (Jacob, 2020), thus excluding the normative aspects of Indian foreign policy discourse. As a result, the literature has not provided a sufficient explanation of how India is contributing to the redefinition of humanitarian responsibility within a multipolar international system. This paper addresses this gap by investigating how India's discourse on strategic autonomy functions as a normative agency to reinterpret humanitarian norms. Unlike many other countries that respond to existing international humanitarian norms, India actively takes part in the reinterpretation and reconstruction of those norms.

The scholarly development of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has evolved through the lens of debates on liberal humanitarian intervention to those of norm contestation and localizing perspectives. Through this transformation, India's debate regarding its role within strategic autonomy can be viewed as a form of normative agency which provides input into the reconstruction of humanitarian responsibilities in a new multipolar world order. This connection is shown in Figure 1.

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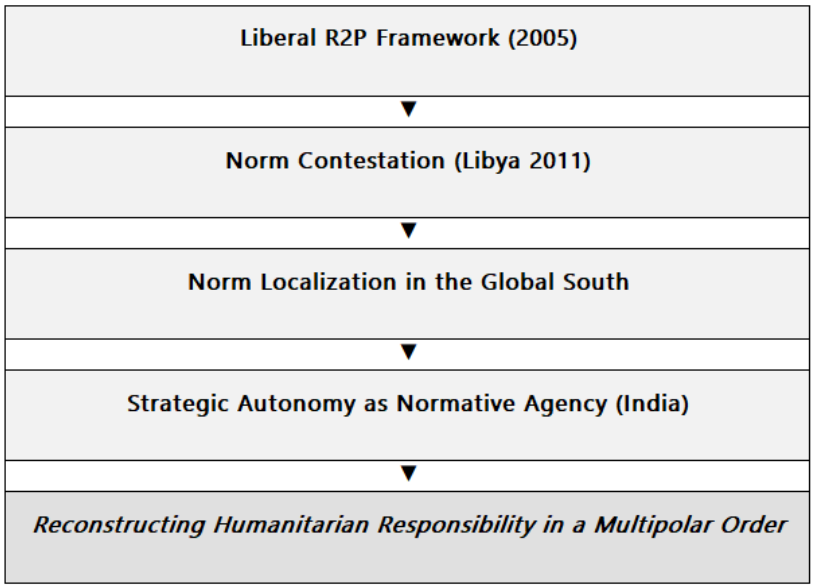


Figure 1: Conceptual Relationship Between R2P Norm Evolution and India's Strategic Autonomy Discourse (Source: Prepared by the author)

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This research uses a qualitative interpretive research approach grounded in Critical Constructivism to investigate how humanitarian norms develop using diplomatic discourse. The research will use a combination of critical constructivist theories of norm development (norm contestation and norm localization) and Critical Discourse Analysis and Process Tracing to understand how India's foreign policy discourse transforms the Responsibility to Protect in an evolving international environment characterized by a shift from unipolarity to multipolarity (Acharya, 2013; Wiener, 2014).

Instead of treating norms as static rule-based behavior, this study considers R2P as a social construction of a norm with a history that is continuously being negotiated through state actions and communications. Thus, the goal of the methodology used is to demonstrate how India's diplomatic language has been transforming the way humanitarian responsibility has been interpreted, articulated and reinterpreted over time.

Norm Contestation and Localization

Critical Constructivist theory provides the basis for the study's theoretical framework using the theories of norm contestation and localization. Norm contestation is defined as the manner in which states discuss and reinterpret the meaning and application of international norms (Wiener, 2014). Contestation does not necessarily mean that states reject international norms, but rather it is one of the mechanisms through which they can contribute to the development and sustainability of those same norms.

States' reactions to humanitarian emergencies in terms of their diplomatic activities exemplify this process. For example, India's decision to abstain from the Libya intervention in

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2011, its preference for negotiated political solutions in Syria, and its emphasis on humanitarian assistance and diplomacy in Ukraine represent different ways in which states have contested the implementation of humanitarian norms while preserving their underlying humanitarian principles (Bellamy, 2015; Thakur, 2016).

In addition, norm localization describes how global norms are translated into national political and cultural traditions (Acharya, 2004; 2009). In India's context, sovereignty, non-alignment, consensus diplomacy and adherence to the UN Charter constitute the frames of reference through which India interprets and redefines its humanitarian obligations (Pethiyagoda, 2013). Therefore, together, norm contestation and localization provide the theoretical perspective necessary to comprehend how India plays a role in the reinterpretation of humanitarian norms in a new multipolar world order.

Strategic Autonomy as Discursive Mechanism

Strategic autonomy is also viewed in this research as a mechanism of discursive linkages between foreign policy identity and humanitarian obligation. Traditionally studied as a realist security strategy (Pant, 2016; Rajagopalan, 2017), strategic autonomy is conceptualized in this study as a normative framework which emphasizes independent judgment, proportionate response, dialogue and restraint.

The language of India's Ministry of External Affairs increasingly represents the framework of strategic autonomy in terms of diplomatic communication regarding humanitarian emergencies, including the Russia-Ukraine crisis (MEA, 2022; Jaishankar, 2023). Therefore, strategic autonomy serves as a bridge connecting the sovereignty of India and its humanitarian responsibilities, providing India with the means of articulating new interpretations of responsibility that emphasize dialogue and consensus rather than coercion. This interpretation of strategic autonomy views strategic autonomy as a form of normative agency in the area of global governance.

Research Design: Critical Discourse Analysis

This research applies critical discourse analysis for the purpose of examining how humanitarian responsibility is defined/constructed using diplomatic language. This research will follow a three-level analysis framework established by Fairclough (the textual level, the level of discursive practice, and the level of social practice) and a discourse historical approach developed by Wodak (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 2001). The textual level of this analysis focuses on identifying the recurring vocabulary and rhetorical framing associated with sovereignty, legality, restraint, prevention, and multipolarity.

The level of discursive practice for this research analyzes how diplomatic statements are created and disseminated across various institutional formats, including UN debates, Ministry of External Affairs press conferences, and multilateral summit declarations.

The level of social practice for this research interprets the diplomatic discourse in light of the broader geopolitical events that have occurred since the introduction of R2P in 2005.

This multi-level approach allows this research to identify how language is contributing to the development of humanitarian norms in international relations.

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Process Tracing

Process Tracing is used to examine how major geopolitical events relate to changes in India's diplomatic discourse on humanitarian responsibility (George and Bennett, 2005). The analysis is organized into four periods: the formative phase of R2P discourse (2005–2011), the contestation phase following the Libya intervention (2011–2015), the consolidation of strategic autonomy as a mechanism of norm localization (2016–2021), and the consolidation of multipolar humanitarianism during the Russia–Ukraine conflict (2022–2025).

Diplomatic statements from each period are examined sequentially to identify shifts in vocabulary and framing related to sovereignty, humanitarian responsibility, and international legitimacy. While Critical Discourse Analysis interprets the meaning of diplomatic language, Process Tracing situates these discursive changes within their historical and geopolitical context. To operationalize causal inference, this study draws on Collier's (2011) typology of process-tracing tests. A discursive shift is treated as evidence of a causal response to a geopolitical shock only if it passes a hoop test: its emergence is temporally proximate to the triggering event. It is absent from India's diplomatic statements on comparable matters prior to that event. Where available, corroborating smoking-gun evidence is also sought, in the form of explicit textual reference within the diplomatic statement itself to the triggering event, such as direct reference to the Libya intervention or the Ukraine conflict. Shifts that fail the hoop test, or that recur independently in Indian domestic political discourse during the same period without reference to the relevant international event, are considered insufficiently supported and are therefore excluded from the process-tracing narrative presented in the Results section.

Data Sources and Corpus

The empirical corpus consists of sixty-seven official diplomatic documents produced between 2005 and 2025, organized into three archival repositories: thirty United Nations records (Repository I), twenty-two Ministry of External Affairs and executive speeches (Repository II), and fifteen multilateral declarations (Repository III).

Table 1: Distribution of Primary Source Documents Across Archival Repositories, 2005–2025 (Source: Prepared by the author based on the Archival Source Index in Appendix I)

UN Records (Repository I)	30
MEA and Executive Speeches (Repository II)	22
Multilateral Declarations (Repository III)	15

The distribution of documents across these three repositories is presented in Table 1. Primary sources were selected based on their explicit relevance to humanitarian protection, R2P, and strategic autonomy. A comprehensive inventory of these texts, categorized across three functional repositories, is provided in Appendix I (Archival Primary Data Corpus). Media commentary, partisan political material, and secondary interpretations were excluded to ensure analytical consistency with official diplomatic language.

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RESULTS

The analysis of India's diplomatic discourse between 2005 and 2025 reveals a gradual but identifiable transformation in the interpretation of humanitarian responsibility within the Responsibility to Protect framework. Rather than demonstrating a linear pattern of acceptance or rejection, India's engagement with R2P reflects a cumulative process of reinterpretation shaped by sovereignty discourse, strategic autonomy, and multipolar humanitarian practice. Three major discursive shifts emerge from the empirical material: the anchoring of humanitarian responsibility in sovereignty, the contestation of interventionist legitimacy following the Libya intervention, and the consolidation of strategic autonomy as a normative framework during the Ukraine conflict.

These findings indicate that India's diplomatic language contributes to the discursive reconstruction of humanitarian responsibility within a changing global order (Acharya, 2013; Wiener, 2014; Bellamy, 2015).

Sovereignty as the Normative Anchor (2005–2011)

During the formative phase of the dataset, India's diplomatic discourse consistently framed humanitarian protection within a sovereignty-centered interpretation of responsibility. Statements delivered during the 2005 World Summit and subsequent United Nations General Assembly debates endorsed the preventive and capacity-building pillars of R2P while emphasizing the primacy of national authority (UNGA, 2005; 2009).

The founding text of R2P itself signaled the sovereignty-preserving reading India would later adopt. The 2005 World Summit Outcome Document states that "each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity... The international community should, as appropriate, encourage and help States to exercise this responsibility and support the United Nations in establishing an early warning capability" (UNGA, 2005, paras. 138–139). India's subsequent diplomatic language consistently anchored itself to this state-centered formulation of responsibility.

Diplomatic language during this period frequently invoked sovereignty, territorial integrity, and state consent. These lexical patterns performed two functions. First, they limited the legitimacy of unilateral intervention. Second, they redefined sovereignty as a facilitator of humanitarian responsibility rather than an obstacle to it (Acharya, 2009).

The findings suggest that India did not reject R2P in this period but interpreted responsibility as being generated through state capacity and prevention rather than external enforcement. This sovereignty-centered discourse established the baseline interpretive framework against which later contestation occurred.

Contestation After Libya (2011–2015)

Processes and methods were used to show that the Libya intervention in 2011 marked a key turning point in how India has understood humanitarian issues. The fact that India abstained on UNSC Resolution 1973 at the time was a significant shift in the way diplomats spoke about caution when it came to intervening in other countries' affairs (UNSC, 2011). While prior to 2011

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the focus was on preventing violence, after 2011 there was a greater emphasis placed upon the risks associated with overstepping one's mandate, changing governments, and the unintended effects of intervening (MEA, 2011; Thakur, 2016). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) identified that the manner in which India interpreted the concept of sovereignty had changed. Prior to 2011, India viewed sovereignty as something to enable; however, since then, the focus has been upon ensuring that sovereignty is exercised legitimately and that intervention is proportional (Thakur, 2016; MEA, 2013; UNGA, 2014).

India's own explanation of vote illustrates this shift directly. Deputy Permanent Representative Manjeev Singh Puri told the Security Council that the resolution "authorizes far-reaching measures under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, with relatively little credible information on the situation on the ground in Libya," adding that India lacked "clarity about details of enforcement measures... and how these measures will exactly be carried out" (MEA, 2011). This statement marks the empirical point at which procedural and evidentiary caution, rather than opposition to the underlying norm, became the dominant idiom of Indian contestation.

In addition to this, in the context of discussing Syria, India referred to "a peaceful and inclusive Syrian-led political process" in reference to a "process" that would provide both humanitarian relief and legitimacy and to whom the sovereignty belonged (MEA, 2013; UNGA, 2014). Overall, these findings suggest that India did not dispute the need to protect civilians, but rather, it disputed the means by which this was being implemented. In essence, India engaged in norm contestation as a defensive mechanism in order to preserve humanitarian principles, while also protecting against the potential coercive nature of implementing those same principles.

This position was echoed the following year multilaterally. The BRICS grouping's Delhi Declaration stated that "global interests would best be served by dealing with the crisis through peaceful means that encourage broad national dialogues that reflect the legitimate aspirations of all sections of Syrian society and respect Syrian independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty" (BRICS, 2012). The coalitional framing of sovereignty-based restraint that India helped articulate bilaterally at the Security Council was thus reinforced through a multilateral Global South platform within a year of the Libya vote.

Strategic Autonomy as a Mechanism of Norm Localization (2016-2021)

Since the mid-2010s, India has increasingly incorporated the concepts of "strategic autonomy" into its own humanitarian discourse. Reports and statements from India's Ministry of External Affairs and India's diplomats have framed international crises in terms of finding the right balance, exercising independent judgment, and responding appropriately based on the specific context (MEA, 2017; MEA, 2019).

These findings illustrate that strategic autonomy has served as a mechanism for the localization of norms. India did not reject its responsibilities under humanitarian law; rather, it redefined them in the context of dialogue, restraint, and multilateral cooperation. The use of the term "strategic autonomy" also connects India's historic commitment to sovereignty with its increasing role in the global governance structure (Pant, 2016; Rajagopalan, 2017).

Furthermore, the process tracing demonstrates that the discursive solidification of strategic autonomy occurred simultaneously with structural changes in the international system,

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such as the establishment of new multilateral forums such as BRICS and the Quad (MEA, 2018; BRICS, 2019). As of the early 2020s, India's strategic autonomy discourse had become a normative framework that emphasizes the collective responsibility for humanitarian issues and the importance of process-oriented diplomacy.

Multipolar Humanitarianism and the Ukraine Crisis (2022-2025)

The Ukraine crisis represents the clearest illustration of India's humanitarian discourse after reconstruction. For the majority of the conflict, official diplomatic statements made by the Indian government rarely referenced the term Responsibility to Protect. Instead, they emphasized the cessation of hostilities, dialogue, humanitarian assistance, and the observance of the United Nations Charter (MEA, 2022; UNGA, 2022).

India's Permanent Representative to the UN captured this reorientation directly in the Council's Explanation of Vote on 25 February 2022: "India is deeply disturbed by the recent turn of developments in Ukraine. We urge that all efforts are made for the immediate cessation of violence and hostilities... The contemporary global order has been built on the UN Charter, international law, and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states" (MEA, 2022). Language of enforcement or blame is notably absent; the statement instead reasserts the same Charter-based sovereignty grammar established during the 2005–2011 period.

Overall, the data illustrated a shift from a moral form of humanitarian rhetoric to what could be called a material humanitarianism, as evidenced by evacuation operations, provision of medical aid, and food security programs. Responsibility to Protect was framed as a relational and practical issue, rather than as a coercive or punitive measure.

Some recurring lexical themes included restraint, peace, sovereignty, and dialogue. These themes represent neither the language of humanitarian interventionists of the West nor the language of the revisionists who rejected humanitarian norms. Instead, they represent the beginning of a pluralistic understanding of humanitarian responsibility in a multipolar world (Wiener, 2014; Nuruzzaman, 2023).

Senior officials made this rejection of externally imposed normative hierarchies explicit. At the GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum in June 2022, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar remarked that "somewhere Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems" (Jaishankar, 2022). The remark encapsulates the discursive move at the center of this period: recasting humanitarian responsibility as a plural, multipolar undertaking rather than one framed by a single regional or civilizational vantage point.

Therefore, the data illustrates a reallocation of normative agency in the governance of global issues. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that rising powers, such as India, are actively involved in defining humanitarian responsibility in the context of the emerging multipolar international system.

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DISCUSSION

The research presented here shows that India's relationship with the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is better understood as a discursively reinterpreted one, grounded in sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and multipolar humanitarianism. Based on an examination of Indian diplomatic speech and action over a period of two decades, the research demonstrated that norm contestation serves as a means by which humanitarian responsibility is adapted to new and evolving geopolitical circumstances.

As such, these results will help contribute to several ongoing debates within International Relations regarding the evolution of R2P as a contested liberal norm within a multipolar international system (Bellamy, 2015; Thakur, 2016; Wiener, 2014). Rather than signifying a decline in the normative content of R2P, the data collected in the research suggest that contestation can increase the adaptability and resiliency of humanitarian norms.

Contestation as Normative Resilience

The research provided a demonstration of how India's post-Libya diplomatic language did not reject the principle of protecting people from harm, but rather attempted to define when and how that principle could be used legitimately. By stressing the need to protect prior to intervening, obtaining consent, and ensuring that any interventions were proportional to the problem being addressed, India helped preserve the core principles of R2P while rejecting coercive interpretations associated with regime change.

Thus, the findings support Wiener's thesis that contestation is part of norm development rather than indicative of normative failure (Wiener, 2014) and expand upon Bellamy's early concern that the Libyan intervention undermined R2P altogether (Bellamy, 2015). In this regard, the language of India's diplomats illustrates the way in which contestation can serve as a stabilizing force, reducing the risk of eroding humanitarian norms by reaffirming the legitimacy of those norms within diverse national contexts.

From Localization to Norm Reconstruction

The findings expand upon Acharya's idea of norm localization by illustrating that rising powers, like India, can go further than adapting R2P for domestic use and actively work toward reconstructing humanitarian responsibility in global governance (Acharya, 2009).

India's language of humanitarian engagement is grounded in sovereignty, dialogue, and multilateral legitimacy, reflecting a transition from diffusion models of norm development to plural and negotiated forms of legitimacy (Acharya, 2013). Thus, the Global South is shown to operate not merely as a recipient of international norms, but as an active site of normative production.

Strategic Autonomy as Normative Agency

A major theoretical contribution of this study was the reinterpretation of strategic autonomy as a form of normative agency. Traditionally, strategic autonomy has been seen as a

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geopolitical strategy (Pant, 2016; Rajagopalan, 2017); however, the findings of this research indicate that strategic autonomy is also a discursive framework for understanding humanitarian responsibility.

Through providing a language of balance, restraint, and independent judgment, strategic autonomy allows India to reconcile its commitment to sovereignty with its commitment to humanitarian engagement. As such, strategic autonomy serves as a bridge between realist foreign policy identity and normative humanitarian discourse. This understanding challenges the conventional distinction between strategic behavior and ethical responsibility in International Relations theory.

Multipolar Humanitarianism

India's diplomatic responses to the Ukraine crisis represent a movement toward what may be referred to as multipolar humanitarianism. Rather than invoke R2P as the basis of its actions, India chose to emphasize humanitarian assistance, dialogue, and adherence to the UN Charter. This represents a transition in priorities in global governance from moral rhetoric to practical humanitarian engagement.

The findings suggest that humanitarian responsibility is moving away from a unipolar model where one actor defines the terms of the humanitarian agenda toward a polycentric model in which multiple actors play a role in defining the terms of the humanitarian agenda (Wiener, 2014; Nuruzzaman, 2023). In this emerging model of humanitarian responsibility, legitimacy is negotiated among a diversity of national histories rather than determined by a singular normative authority.

Implications

The research has implications for both International Relations theory and global governance practice. Theoretically, the research indicates that the process of norm development cannot be explained by diffusion models based primarily on Western institutions. Rather, conflict and contestation should be viewed as integral aspects of normative development.

Methodologically, the research emphasizes the importance of examining diplomatic language in order to gain insight into how states define and act on humanitarian responsibility. The concepts of strategic autonomy provide examples of how foreign policy language can serve as a site of normative innovation.

Practically, the research implies that the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention in a multipolar world is dependent on cross-cultural dialogue and consensus-building. Methods for intervening that rely solely on coercion are unlikely to succeed against rising powers. Strategies that include multiple voices and accept diverse normative languages have greater potential for creating sustainable humanitarian norms.

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CONCLUSION

The overall objective of the research is to explore how India uses diplomacy to express its views (i.e., how India uses diplomacy to discuss issues) and how it affects our perception of the responsibility of nations to protect civilians when they have failed to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity according to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, during the time frame of 2005 to 2025.

The findings of the study demonstrate that India neither accepts nor rejects the R2P doctrine. Rather, through its use of "strategic autonomy" (i.e., the capacity of states to conduct their own foreign policy in a manner independent of external constraints) based on concepts of sovereignty, prevention, dialogue, and strategic autonomy, India reconstructs the meaning of R2P.

Utilizing two methodologies, critical discourse analysis and process tracing, the study demonstrates that strategic autonomy is a form of normative agency utilized by states to determine what humanitarian responsibility entails in a multipolar world. Additionally, the study demonstrates that the language of Indian diplomacy represents a shift toward a more legitimate, negotiable, and humanitarian-oriented approach to protecting people than is reflected in a protection-centered view of intervention.

Moreover, the study demonstrates that humanitarian norms evolve through a plural and negotiated process of interpretation. Thus, emerging powers will likely be key players in determining what humanitarian responsibility signifies for global governance.

Consequently, the long-term viability of R2P as a global governance regime will depend on its capacity to produce norms that can accommodate multiple normative viewpoints within an increasingly dynamic international environment.

A limitation of this study includes the fact that it only examines the relationship between official diplomatic discourse and the extent to which such discourse results in actual practice. Therefore, additional research may involve comparative studies of other Global South actors, or compare the translation of humanitarian discourse into operational practices. In summary, the study demonstrates that humanitarian responsibility in the 21st century is a developing and negotiated principle of global governance shaped by the rapidly evolving nature of geopolitics.

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CONTRIBUTOR

The author contributed solely to the intellectual discourse that forms the foundation of this article, as well as its writing and editing, and assumes full responsibility for its content and interpretation.

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APPENDIX I: ARCHIVAL PRIMARY DATA CORPUS

The empirical conclusions of this study are based on a systematic analysis of 67 primary diplomatic texts produced between 2005 and 2025 and organized across three archival repositories.

Repository I: United Nations Records (UNGA, UNSC, UNHRC) — 30 Documents

- **Doc #01:** United Nations General Assembly. 2005. *UNGA Resolution A/RES/60/1 (2005 World Summit Outcome)*, paras. 138–139. 16 September, 2005.
- **Doc #02:** United Nations General Assembly. 2005. *UNGA 60th Session Plenary Record (A/60/PV.8)*. Indian Representative Speech. 17 September, 2005.
- **Doc #03:** United Nations Security Council. 2006. *UN Security Council Debate Record (S/PV.5519) on Protection of Civilians*. 9 December, 2006.
- **Doc #04:** Sen, Nirupam. 2009. "Statement by Amb. Nirupam Sen." *UNGA Interactive Debate on R2P Record (A/63/PV.97)*. 23 July, 2009.
- **Doc #05:** United Nations Secretary-General. 2009. *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect: Report of the Secretary-General (A/63/677)*. 12 January, 2009.
- **Doc #06:** United Nations General Assembly. 2009. *UNGA Debate Record (A/64/PV.98)*. Indian Delegation Intervention. 24 July, 2009.
- **Doc #07:**Puri, Hardeep Singh. 2010. "UNGA 65th Session Plenary Speech (A/65/PV.11)." 2 October, 2010.
- **Doc #08:** United Nations Security Council. 2011. *UNSC Meeting Record (S/PV.6491) on the Situation in Libya (UNSCR 1970)*. 26 February, 2011.
- **Doc #09:** United Nations Security Council. 2011. *UNSC Press Statement on Libya (SC/10180)*. 22 February, 2011.
- **Doc #10:** United Nations Security Council. 2011. *UNSC Draft Resolution S/2011/137 on Libya, Voting Protocol*. 17 March, 2011.
- **Doc #11:**Puri, Hardeep Singh. 2011. "Explanation of Vote on UNSCR 1973." *UNSC Meeting Record (S/PV.6498)*. 17 March, 2011.
- **Doc #12:** United Nations Human Rights Council. 2011. *UNHRC Special Session Statement on Syria (A/HRC/S-16/1)*. Indian Representative. 29 April, 2011.

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- **Doc #13:** United Nations Security Council. 2011. *UNSC Open Debate Record (S/PV.6650) on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*. 9 November, 2011.

- **Doc #14:** United Nations General Assembly. 2011. *UNGA Informal Interactive Dialogue on R2P (A/66/874)*. Indian Statement. 25 July, 2011.

- **Doc #15:** United Nations Security Council. 2011. *UNSC Draft Resolution S/2011/612 on Syria (Vetoed)*. Indian Explanation of Vote. 4 October, 2011.

- **Doc #16:** United Nations Security Council. 2012. *UNSC Meeting Record (S/PV.6711) on the Syrian Arab Republic*. 4 February, 2012.

- **Doc #17:** United Nations General Assembly. 2012. *UNGA Plenary Statement on the Situation in Syria (A/66/PV.91)*. 16 February, 2012.

- **Doc #18:** United Nations Security Council. 2013. *UN Security Council Statement on R2P and Capacity Building (S/PRST/2013/19)*. 20 September, 2013.

- **Doc #19:** United Nations General Assembly. 2014. *UNGA Informal Dialogue on R2P: Pillar II State Responsibility*. Indian Intervention. 8 September, 2014.

- **Doc #20:** United Nations General Assembly. 2017. *UNGA Debate on the Report of the Secretary-General on R2P (A/71/1015)*. 6 September, 2017.

- **Doc #21:** United Nations Security Council. 2018. *UN Security Council Debate Record (S/PV.8262) on Maintenance of International Peace*. 17 May, 2018.

- **Doc #22:**Tirumurti, T. S. 2021. "Statement by Amb. T.S. Tirumurti." *UNGA Formal Debate on R2P (A/75/PV.63)*. 17 May, 2021.

- **Doc #23:**Tirumurti, T. S. 2022. "Statement by Amb. T.S. Tirumurti." *UNSC Emergency Session Record (S/PV.8979) on Ukraine*. 25 February, 2022.

- **Doc #24:** United Nations General Assembly. 2022. *UNGA 11th Emergency Special Session Record (A/ES-11/PV.5)*. Vote Abstention Speech. 2 March, 2022.

- **Doc #25:** United Nations Security Council. 2022. *UNSC Briefing Record (S/PV.9011) on the Humanitarian Situation in Ukraine*. 5 April, 2022.

- **Doc #26:** United Nations General Assembly. 2022. *UNGA Debate on R2P and the Prevention of Genocide (A/76/PV.87)*. 23 June, 2022.

- **Doc #27:** Jaishankar, S. 2022. "Statement by EAM S. Jaishankar." *UNSC Open Debate Record (S/PV.9238) on Effective Multilateralism*. 14 December, 2022.

- **Doc #28:** United Nations General Assembly. 2023. *UNGA Plenary Record (A/77/PV.81) on the Conflict in Ukraine*. 23 February, 2023.

- **Doc #29:** United Nations General Assembly. 2024. *UNGA Plenary Debate on R2P (A/78/PV.72)*. Indian Representative Statement. 26 June, 2024.

- **Doc #30:** United Nations Security Council. 2025. *UNSC High-Level Debate on Global Governance Reform (S/PV.9680)*. 15 January, 2025.

Repository II: Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and Executive Speeches — 22 Documents

- **Doc #31:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2006. *MEA Annual Report 2005–2006*. Chapter 1: "Strategic Overview." New Delhi, March 2006.

- **Doc #32:** Singh, Manmohan. 2005. "Speech by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the 60th UN General Assembly." New York, 15 September, 2005.

- **Doc #33:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2011. *MEA Official Transcript: Media Briefing on UNSC Resolution 1973*. New Delhi, 18 March, 2011.

- **Doc #34:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2012. *MEA Annual Report 2011–2012*. Chapter 4: "United Nations and International Organizations." April 2012.

- **Doc #35:** Mathai, Ranjan. 2012. "Address at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA): 'India and Global Governance'." 28 November, 2012.

- **Doc #36:** Menon, Shivshankar. 2013. "Keynote Speech by National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon at the Munich Security Conference." 2 February, 2013.

- **Doc #37:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2015. *MEA Policy Document: "India's Approach to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)"*. New Delhi, 2015.

- **Doc #38:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2017. *MEA Annual Report 2016–2017*. Chapter 1: "Principles of Strategic Autonomy." April 2017.

- **Doc #39:** Swaraj, Sushma. 2017. "Speech by EAM Sushma Swaraj at the 72nd Session of the UN General Assembly." 23 September, 2017.

- **Doc #40:** Gokhale, Vijay. 2019. "Keynote Address by Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale at the Raisina Dialogue: 'India's Foreign Policy Alignment'." 9 January, 2019.

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- **Doc #41:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2020. *MEA Annual Report 2019–2020*. "Multilateral Diplomacy in a Fragmented World." March 2020.

- **Doc #42:** Shringla, Harsh Vardhan. 2020. "Address by Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla at the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum." 2 September, 2020.

- **Doc #43:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2022. *MEA Media Briefing Transcript on Operation Ganga (Ukraine Evacuation)*. New Delhi, 27 February, 2022.

- **Doc #44:** Jaishankar, S. 2022. "Address by EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar at the 4th Globsec Bratislava Forum: 'The Indian Way in Global Politics'." 3 June, 2022.

- **Doc #45:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2022. *MEA Statement on Prime Minister Modi's Bilateral Meeting with President Putin at Samarkand (SCO Summit)*. 16 September, 2022.

- **Doc #46:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2023. *MEA Annual Report 2022–2023*. "Navigating Multipolarity." March 2023.

- **Doc #47:** Jaishankar, S. 2023. "Address by EAM S. Jaishankar at the Voice of the Global South Summit." New Delhi, 12 January, 2023.

- **Doc #48:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2023. *MEA Press Statement on Humanitarian Assistance Shipments to Ukraine*. 10 August, 2023.

- **Doc #49:** Jaishankar, S. 2023. "Keynote Speech by EAM S. Jaishankar at the Council on Foreign Relations: 'India and the Changing World Order'." 26 September 2023.

- **Doc #50:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2023. *MEA Policy Address on Global South Leadership and Non-Coercive Protection*. New Delhi, 18 November, 2023.

- **Doc #51:** Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India). 2024. *MEA Annual Report 2023–2024*. "Sovereignty and Multilateral Engagement." April 2024.

- **Doc #52:** Modi, Narendra. 2024. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Address at the Summit of the Future." United Nations, New York, 22 September, 2024.

Repository III: Multilateral Declarations (BRICS, IBSA, NAM, G20) — 15 Documents

- **Doc #53:** IBSA. 2007. *2nd IBSA Summit Joint Declaration*. Tshwane, South Africa, 17 October, 2007.

- **Doc #54:** BRIC. 2009. *1st BRIC Summit Joint Statement*. Yekaterinburg, Russia, 16 June, 2009.

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- **Doc #55:** Non-Aligned Movement. 2009. *15th NAM Summit Final Document (NAM2009/FD)*. Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, 16 July, 2009.
- **Doc #56:** BRICS. 2011. *3rd BRICS Summit Sanya Declaration*. Hainan, China, 14 April, 2011.
- **Doc #57:** BRICS. 2012. *4th BRICS Summit Delhi Declaration*. New Delhi, India, 29 March, 2012.
- **Doc #58:** BRICS. 2013. *5th BRICS Summit eThekwini Declaration*. Durban, South Africa, 27 March, 2013.
- **Doc #59:** Non-Aligned Movement. 2016. *17th NAM Summit Ministerial Declaration*. Island of Margarita, Venezuela, 18 September, 2016.
- **Doc #60:** BRICS. 2018. *10th BRICS Summit Johannesburg Declaration*. South Africa, 27 July, 2018.
- **Doc #61:** BRICS. 2021. *13th BRICS Summit New Delhi Declaration* (Virtual). India, 9 September, 2021.
- **Doc #62:** BRICS. 2022. *14th BRICS Summit Beijing Declaration*. 23 June, 2022.
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- **Doc #65:** G20. 2023. *G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration*. Section 1: "Peace, Progress, and Prosperity." India, 10 September, 2023.
- **Doc #66:** BRICS. 2024. *16th BRICS Summit Kazan Declaration: "Strengthening Multilateralism for Just Global Security"*. Russia, 23 October, 2024.
- **Doc #67:** Non-Aligned Movement. 2024. *19th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement Final Outcome Document*. Kampala, Uganda, 20 January, 2024.