Reading Humanitarian Diplomacy through Cultural Intertexts: Indonesia, the Rohingya, and the Uyghur Narratives

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Abstract
This study analyses humanitarian diplomacy as a cultural and intertextual practice. Taking Indonesia's divergent humanitarian responses to the Rohingya crisis and the Uyghur issue as its core research object, it challenges the understanding, common in existing scholarship, that treats humanitarian norms as fixed, universal principles, and argues that in practice, these norms circulate through a variety of competing texts, including human rights reports, ASEAN statements, sovereignty claims, and geopolitical discourse. Indonesia's response to the Rohingya crisis transforms humanitarian norms into diplomatic language that aligns with ASEAN's requirements and fits its domestic context, while its cautious stance on the Uyghur issue shows that these same norms are suppressed when they encounter China's sovereignty discourse and the strategic competition between China and the United States. This study proposes an original concept, "norm arbitrage", which refers to the practice of middle powers selectively citing, reshaping, or silencing humanitarian norms based on cultural compatibility and diplomatic costs. Through qualitative discourse analysis of multiple diplomatic texts, this study finds that Indonesia's divergent responses are not evidence of inconsistent norm adherence, but rather evidence that humanitarian norms are culturally mediated.

Key words: *humanitarian diplomacy; norm arbitrage; middle power; ethnic narratives*

Introduction

This study argues that interpretations of humanitarian crises have never relied solely on facts; they also depend on language, through narrative construction, framing, and public debate. Core terms including protection, genocide, humanitarian access, sovereignty, terrorism, non-interference, and solidarity do not merely describe events; they also shape their moral and political connotations. Humanitarian diplomacy thus operates on two tracks: it encompasses traditional practices of aid provision, negotiation, and institutional participation, as well as the circulation of texts that define what is at stake. Existing research supports the claim

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that diplomacy is both a state practice and a cultural practice (Grincheva, 2024; Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022; Møller et al., 2024).

This study selects two human rights cases, the Rohingya issue in Myanmar and the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang, China. Using a paired comparison of similar cases, this paper demonstrates that similar human rights issues can generate drastically divergent international diplomatic discourses and responses. Both cases involve Muslim ethnic minority groups and face serious allegations of human rights violations. The Rohingya crisis has been constructed as a regional humanitarian tragedy requiring intervention from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations, with all relevant parties calling for the implementation of civilian protection, humanitarian access, and political dialogue. The Xinjiang issue, by contrast, is mired in a polarised discourse space: the United States and other Western countries define the issue using labels of genocide, mass detention, and religious persecution, while China responds with framing centred on counterterrorism, deradicalisation, and national sovereignty. Existing studies on U.S.–China human rights narratives show that both powers use human rights discourse not only as moral language but also as a diplomatic instrument to contest political legitimacy and international reputation. Chen and Hsu (2021) describe China's human rights diplomacy as normative revisionism, Rahman and Tan (2022) highlight contradictions in China's human rights discourse on the Uyghur issue, and Glanz (2025) shows how U.S. and Chinese human rights reports construct competing narratives of legitimacy. These two cases have pulled Indonesia into a complex diplomatic dilemma. As a Southeast Asian country, the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, a G20 member, an influential ASEAN member, and an emerging middle power, Indonesia's foreign policy has long upheld moderation, multilateralism, peaceful conflict resolution, and humanitarian engagement. Studies by Putra (2024a) and Teo (2022) note that the country has long served as a norm advocate and bridge-builder within the ASEAN-centered regional order, while Boon and Teo (2022) and de Silva (2024) argue that amid the strategic competition between China and the United States, middle powers must safeguard both normative credibility and strategic autonomy. This constraint becomes particularly prominent when humanitarian demands are bound up with major power rivalry.

Indonesia has taken a series of proactive diplomatic actions on the Rohingya issue: it has provided humanitarian aid, promoted ASEAN's engagement in the matter, and put forward the "4+1 Formula" proposed by Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi in 2017, which comprises five demands, including restoring stability in Rakhine State, rejecting violence, ensuring protection for all communities regardless of ethnicity and religion, opening humanitarian access, and implementing the recommendations of the Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission. These elements allowed Indonesia to frame its response as humanitarian while still avoiding direct interventionist language. However, during the 2022 United Nations Human Rights Council vote, Indonesia voted against a draft decision to hold a debate on the human rights situation in Xinjiang, adopting a cautious position justified by

principles such as objectivity. This study thus poses its core research question: Against the backdrop of differing cultural and geopolitical contexts, why does Indonesia, as a middle power, exhibit such a striking contrast in its logic for interpreting and mobilizing humanitarian norms?

Existing studies generally explain Indonesia's divergent stances on the Rohingya and Uyghur issues, both its active involvement in the former and its cautious handling of the latter, in terms of strategic and material factors. However, these explanations have a core limitation: they neglect the cultural and textual dimensions of humanitarian diplomacy. This study fills this research gap.

This study adopts an unconventional approach to humanitarian diplomacy, breaking with the widespread understanding that frames humanitarian norms as fixed universal rules capable of automatically guiding state behavior. This study defines humanitarian diplomacy as a cultural intertextual practice: humanitarian norms are collections of meanings that circulate across multiple types of texts, and in the process of dissemination, they can generate distinct meanings depending on the texts they interact with. Calls to protect civilians can be framed as a humanitarian responsibility, but they can also be used as a pretext for political interference; claims of religious persecution can unify groups in solidarity, yet they may also trigger diplomatic hesitation. This study both builds on the core constructivist insights of Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) and responds to recent arguments in norm research put forward by scholars including Wiener (2021), Fehl (2023), and Rosert (2024).

The authors propose "norm arbitrage" as a core analytical tool. This concept differs from simple hypocrisy or a mismatch between a state's stated positions and its actual actions; its aims are to safeguard a state's legitimacy and avoid excessive diplomatic costs, and it encompasses four operational approaches: citation, retranslation, reconstruction, and suppression. Indonesia's practice illustrates this concept: during the Rohingya crisis, it retranslated humanitarian discourse to align with ASEAN's requirements and its own domestic logic, whereas on the Uyghur issue it suppressed the same type of discourse amid the U.S.-China narrative contest.

This article contributes to three academic debates in international relations. First, it extends existing discussions in constructivist norm studies, proposing that beyond the diffusion and localization of humanitarian norms, these norms can also be selectively mobilized as intertextual resources; second, it adds a cultural and discursive dimension to scholarship on how middle powers maintain normative legitimacy; third, it advances dialogue between international relations and cultural studies, positing that diplomatic texts are sites where meanings such as global power and identity are negotiated. Building on Putra (2024b), these interdisciplinary contributions also speak to non-Western IR scholarship.

This study uses qualitative discourse analysis and intertextual analysis, drawing on Indonesian diplomatic statements, ASEAN documents, United Nations voting records, U.S. human rights texts, and official Chinese statements. Focusing on the Rohingya issue and the Uyghur issue, this study does not measure

Indonesia's moral consistency; it analyzes how humanitarian significance is constructed differently in the two cases. The following sections present the normative framework and the narrative analysis, and apply the concept of norm arbitrage to explain Indonesia's diplomatic logic as a middle power.

Methodological Note

This study draws on qualitative discourse analysis and intertextual analysis to examine how Indonesia articulates humanitarian norms in relation to the Rohingya crisis and the Uyghur issue. The analysis focuses on official diplomatic texts produced mainly between 2017 and 2024, a period that captures Indonesia's active engagement with the Rohingya crisis and its more cautious position on the proposed UN Human Rights Council debate on Xinjiang. The corpus includes statements from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesian explanations of vote in multilateral forums, ASEAN documents on Myanmar, United Nations voting records and human rights documents, U.S. human rights reports and official statements on Myanmar and Xinjiang, as well as Chinese official statements concerning Xinjiang.

These texts were selected because they directly address the key themes examined in this article: humanitarian protection, human rights, sovereignty, non-interference, religious minority issues, and geopolitical contestation. Rather than treating the documents as neutral records of state policy, the analysis reads them as diplomatic texts through which humanitarian meaning is produced, negotiated, and sometimes withheld. The procedure involved three stages. First, recurrent terms such as protection, humanitarian access, genocide, dialogue, sovereignty, non-politicisation, terrorism, and development were identified across the corpus. Second, these terms were read intertextually to trace how their meanings shift across Indonesian, ASEAN, UN, U.S., and Chinese texts. Third, Indonesia's diplomatic language in the Rohingya and Uyghur cases was compared to identify the mechanisms of norm arbitrage, particularly translation, reframing, selective adoption, and strategic silence.

Humanitarian Norms as Cultural Intertexts

Norms are a core research category in international relations theory. Constructivism holds that national interests are not determined solely by material power, but are also shaped jointly by ideas, identities, and shared behavioral expectations. Finnemore and Sikkink proposed an influential linear model of norm dynamics, which frames norm development as a pathway of emergence, diffusion, and internalization. However, subsequent studies have revised this framework, pointing out that norms are not transmitted unidirectionally from global institutions to local contexts; instead, they are interpreted, adapted, and even resisted at the local level. Recent research by Rosert (2024) and Fehl (2023) further argues that for norms to take effect, three conditions must be met: activation, linkage to other norms, and embedding in institutional practices.

Acharya's (2004) norm localisation theory is highly valuable for understanding how global norms take root in Asia. This theory rejects the

assumption that global norms are passively accepted and argues that local actors reconstruct them to align with preexisting local beliefs, institutions, and practices. In the ASEAN context, three global norms—human rights, humanitarian intervention, and the responsibility to protect—are filtered through ASEAN's core principles of consultation, consensus, sovereignty, and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs. Far from disappearing, these norms exist in a regionally mediated form. ASEAN's humanitarian discourse also avoids language that implies coercion, instead adopting gradual, interactive phrasing centred on concepts such as dialogue and access.

This study finds that Indonesia's differentiated application of humanitarian discourse in the Rohingya and Uyghur issues demonstrates that localisation alone is insufficient to explain the implementation logic of global humanitarian norms. Indonesia does not merely adapt these norms to local contexts; instead, it proactively chooses to either activate or restrict them: this discourse is deployed in the Rohingya issue, as it aligns with Islamic solidarity, ASEAN-related responsibilities, and Indonesia's own national positioning, while it is restricted in the Uyghur issue, as embedding this discourse into the global contestation between China and the United States over sovereignty and human rights would create avoidable diplomatic risks. Wiener (2021) corroborates this logic of selective activation.

This study introduces cultural intertextuality as a core tool for analysing diplomatic discourse. It first lays out the framework's core principle: no text exists in isolation, and meaning is generated through connections between texts such as references and echoes. Diplomatic statements are thus embedded in a broad network of meanings. Taking Indonesia's diplomatic statements on the Rohingya and Uyghur issues as case studies, the analysis traces these intertextual connections, grounding the abstract theory in specific diplomatic contexts.

This paper argues that humanitarian norms can serve as cultural intertexts, carrying stratified meanings across different interpretive communities. Depending on the context, the same norm may carry distinct connotations, such as protection, intervention, solidarity, condemnation, and geopolitical alliance-building. This polysemy is particularly prominent in issues concerning Muslim minority groups. Diplomatic expressions of religious solidarity are highly contingent on the accused country's political position. Indonesia's differing positioning of Myanmar—an ASEAN neighbour mired in deep crisis—and China, its core economic and geopolitical partner, vividly highlights the stark divergences in interpretations of humanitarianism.

Strategic narrative research explains how states actively construct the meaning of public events to serve their geostrategic interests. Classic studies established this analytical framework (Miskimmon et al., 2013), while recent literature has further supplemented the framework with the dimension of narrative competition and cooperation among multiple actors (Hedling, 2025). At present, China, the United States, and ASEAN have developed three distinct types of narrative practices around Xinjiang-related issues. On this basis, this paper argues

that Indonesia must position its own stance and public communication amid these overlapping layers of narrative competition and cooperation.

This study proposes that norm arbitrage is a core mechanism of middle powers' diplomatic positioning. It neither rejects norms nor abides by them completely; it is essentially a form of selective movement across normative systems. For example, Indonesia invokes discourses centred on human rights or sovereignty-based dialogue as needed, which allows it to balance normative credibility and strategic flexibility.

This study treats diplomatic texts as the object of an agency-focused inquiry, drawing on the discourse analysis tools of Fairclough (2013) and Hansen (2006) and analysing three dimensions: subject naming practices, logics of responsibility allocation, and the speakability of suffering discourse. Drawing on recent research by Adler-Nissen and other scholars (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022; Cornut et al., 2022; Møller et al., 2024; Sakamoto et al., 2024), this study revises the traditional perception that "diplomacy is merely the formal exchange of national positions" and treats it as a composite practice shaped by multiple media. The study does not carry out visual analysis in the narrow sense, but responds to Austin and Bramsen's (2024) call to attend to the interpretive functions of representation.

Indonesia and the Rohingya Narrative

The Rohingya crisis has been constructed in Indonesia as a dual narrative that frames it as both a human rights violation incident and a tragedy of Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia. This narrative became a central pillar of Indonesia's diplomatic discourse owing to three forms of proximity: religious, regional, and humanitarian. The Rohingya's identity as victims of state violence elicits broad resonance among the Indonesian public, Islamic organisations, and humanitarian NGOs, and aligns with the discourse framework of ASEAN's responsibilities. Smith and Williams (2021) note that Indonesia's preference for quiet diplomacy over the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) amid this crisis was shaped by Islamic humanitarianism, civil–military relations, and ASEAN. Zahed (2021) argues that limitations of international protection mechanisms have spawned regional humanitarian initiatives, but these efforts have not resolved deep-seated underlying political issues.

This study argues that Indonesia has adjusted its humanitarian foreign policy discourse to align with ASEAN's political and cultural context. The 4+1 Formula put forward by Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi in 2017 contains five demands that conform to international humanitarian norms, yet it deliberately avoids interventionist language, refrains from challenging Myanmar's sovereignty, and frames Indonesia's stance as constructive and inclusive, focused on pragmatically advancing humanitarian access.

The Rohingya issue reveals the intertextual nature of humanitarian diplomacy. The analysis identifies four sources of Indonesia's diplomatic discourse on this issue: liberal humanitarian norms, ASEAN's non-confrontation tradition, Islamic solidarity, and its positioning as a responsible middle power. Indonesia did not simply adopt Western human rights discourse; it converted its concerns into

expressions acceptable to regional cultures. While maintaining an active diplomatic stance, it also strictly abided by ASEAN's principle of restraint in dialogue, consolidating its identity as an advocate for regional norms (Putra, 2024a; Teo, 2022).

This paper argues that the Rohingya crisis has given Indonesia an opportunity to uphold its middle-power legitimacy: through humanitarian aid and diplomatic engagement with Myanmar, Indonesia cultivates an image as a bridge-builder and humanitarian actor. This approach allows the country both to respond to appeals from its domestic Muslim community and to honour its ASEAN commitments. This dual legitimacy underpins the political feasibility of its actions, while the associated cultural narratives also prevent these efforts from being interpreted as aligning with the agendas of major powers.

From the perspective of international norm diffusion, "normative translation" helps interpret Indonesia's diplomatic practices in response to the Rohingya crisis: Indonesia transforms global humanitarian discourse into a diplomatic grammar that balances protection and restraint. This framework aligns with Indonesia's own diplomatic identity, eliminating the need to adhere to major powers' agendas. It gives Indonesia far more space to articulate its position on Myanmar-related issues than on issues involving China, while keeping the costs of its diplomatic participation manageable. This case serves as a concrete site for the activation, implementation, and institutionalisation of humanitarian norms.

However, Indonesia's proactive humanitarian diplomacy targeting the Rohingya crisis still has clear limitations and has failed to fundamentally resolve the crisis. This has exposed a range of problems: unclear prospects for the repatriation of Rohingya people, persistent violence across the crisis region, and ASEAN's limited influence over Myanmar. While norm adaptation can confer legitimacy, it is difficult to drive structural transformation. Despite these constraints, the Rohingya issue remains a relatively favourable arena for Indonesian humanitarian action.

Indonesia and the Uyghur Narrative

The Uyghur issue entered Indonesia's diplomatic agenda through a specific intertextual field. Though both the Uyghur community and the Rohingya are Muslim minority groups alleged to face systemic oppression, Indonesian officials have not categorised the Uyghur issue as a comparable humanitarian issue. Instead, it has become entangled in the competing narratives of China, the United States, the United Nations, Muslim-majority countries, and transnational advocacy networks.

The United States and multiple Western governments, relying on liberal human rights discourse and international law, have accused China of committing grave crimes in Xinjiang, including genocide, forced labour, and religious oppression. China has fully rejected these allegations, stating that its policies are centred on counter-terrorism, poverty reduction, and maintaining social stability. In turn, China accuses Western countries of politicising human rights to interfere in its internal affairs. Chen and Hsu (2021) note that China's narrative constitutes normative revisionism, as the country actively promotes a state-centric,

development-oriented view of human rights. Rahman and Tan (2022) find that while China's human rights diplomacy claims to uphold a consistent stance, it exhibits notable contradictions in the Uyghur-related case.

Indonesia's 2022 vote at the United Nations Human Rights Council on the Xinjiang-related issue reflects the complexity of middle power diplomacy: its vote opposing the proposed debate on Xinjiang did not amount to a rejection of humanitarian concerns. Instead, it reframed the narrative by drawing on four officially stated principles—dialogue, objectivity, non-politicisation, and cooperation with the country concerned—shifting the logic of human rights accountability to a logic centred on procedural fairness and sovereignty protection. This approach allowed Indonesia neither to align with the U.S.-led narrative nor to publicly endorse China's position. As Boon and Teo (2022) and Glanz (2025) note, this cautious strategy is common among middle powers drawn into great-power competition.

Indonesia's "strategic silence" should not be read as meaningless; it is a diplomatic practice in its own right: Indonesia refrains from using definitional labels such as genocide or religious persecution to release cautious signals; it invokes the proposition of "non-politicisation" to echo the Global South's criticism of powerful states that exploit human rights mechanisms for self-serving gains; it emphasises the principle of dialogue to reserve sufficient space for communication. This is not a passive failure to speak out, but an active act of position-building. De Silva (2024) also points out that in a polarised environment; the core of diplomacy is to reduce the communication costs of disagreements.

Taking Indonesia as an example, during the Rohingya crisis, Islamic solidarity strengthened the country's regional and humanitarian role. On the Uyghur issue, however, that same form of solidarity risked triggering confrontation with China. Indonesian officials only translated the concerns of its domestic Muslim population into cautious statements, and did not issue any open criticism.

A common misconception holds that Indonesia has completely abandoned humanitarian norms; in reality, the country has only adjusted the combination of norms it employs: it replaces human rights discourse with dialogue, replaces the narrative of religious solidarity with the principle of sovereignty, and reframes accountability as a depoliticised formulation. This is precisely what the concept of "norm arbitrage" describes: a practice of selecting terminology that maintains legitimacy and reduces diplomatic costs, allowing it to neither align with China nor join the U.S.-led human rights framework.

This study proposes that humanitarian norms are difficult to activate when embedded in the landscape of major-power competition. Comparing the two cases, Myanmar is an isolated and weak state, whereas China is a major global economic partner, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and a core actor in the Asian order. The far greater costs of criticising China have led to constrained humanitarian discourse, making strategic silence a much more appealing option.

Norm Arbitrage in Middle-Power Humanitarian Diplomacy

This paper points out that framing the Rohingya and Uyghur cases—both of which involve the suffering of Muslim minority groups—merely as proof of inconsistencies in Indonesia's foreign policy is a superficial understanding. The comparison reveals that humanitarian norms are mediated by cultural strategies, and the core difference between the two cases lies in their distinct intertextual contexts.

A comparison of how Indonesia adjusts its human rights diplomacy in the Rohingya and Uyghur issues is revealing. In the Rohingya crisis, factors including Islamic solidarity and ASEAN responsibilities underpinned humanitarian norms, which were successfully transformed into diplomatic language consistent with ASEAN's rules; in the Uyghur issue, conflicting factors such as the strategic competition between China and the United States and sovereignty-focused discourse forced Indonesia to restructure and tone down its relevant humanitarian statements.

This paper argues that norm arbitrage can explain the logic of middle powers' international actions, and this mechanism fits the current fragmented international normative environment: the liberal order advocates human rights accountability, ASEAN prioritises dialogue and non-interference, discourses of Islamic solidarity emphasise moral empathy, and China prioritises sovereignty, development and stability; Indonesia therefore flexibly switches between these multiple sets of discourses, rather than rigidly adhering to a single framework.

Indonesia's recent diplomatic conduct serves three core purposes: it engages with the Rohingya issue to uphold its image as a humanitarian, Muslim democratic actor, thereby retaining normative legitimacy; it refrains from taking a publicly confrontational stance on the Uyghur issue to avoid being drawn into the major-power competition between the United States and China, and preserve its strategic autonomy; it advances its humanitarian engagement through discourse that aligns with ASEAN norms to avoid being labeled an external intervener, while shaping its identity as a constructive regional actor to sustain its regional leadership. This practice aligns with recent scholarship that frames diplomacy as symbolic positioning and identity management (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022; Møller et al., 2024).

Norm arbitrage carries inherent limitations. While it can preserve diplomatic flexibility and sustain middle-power engagement, it undermines the consistency of humanitarian commitments, placing crisis-affected populations in political calculations entirely beyond their control. Indonesia's translation practices during the Rohingya crisis and the strategic silence surrounding the Uyghur issue both demonstrate this concept's explanatory power for middle-power agency, while also exposing the core moral boundaries of this form of agency.

This study defines humanitarian diplomacy as a cultural practice through which countries negotiate the meaning of suffering. Moving beyond the superficial approach that only compares the intensity of Indonesia's responses to different crises, this study examines differences in discursive inclusion and proposes the concept of "norm arbitrage" – the set of practices of articulating, translating,

concealing, and repositioning humanitarian discourse under a fragmented global order.

Conclusions

This study challenges the traditional view that humanitarian norms are fixed, universal principles. Adopting a cultural intertextuality perspective, it analyses Indonesia's divergent responses to the Rohingya crisis and the Uyghur crisis and demonstrates that humanitarian discourse is generated through narrative interactions, including geocultural ones. It further argues that the same set of terms can be reinterpreted or neutralised in different contexts.

In the Rohingya refugee crisis, Indonesia translated humanitarian norms into a framing that aligned with ASEAN norms and could secure domestic consensus, a framework underpinned by the logic centred on the suffering of a Muslim minority. On the Xinjiang issue, these same humanitarian norms could not be mobilised, as they had become entangled with China's sovereignty claims and the U.S.-China strategic competition. Its 2022 vote at the UN Human Rights Council against a debate on Xinjiang was not mere indifference, but a form of strategic silence.

This paper proposes the analytical concept of "norm arbitrage" to explain the behaviour of middle powers that selectively cite and reconstruct humanitarian norms based on norms' symbolic value and diplomatic costs. Moving beyond outdated frameworks that only focus on material interests or strategic hedging, this paper points out that such behaviour requires managing various types of competing normative texts.

This study makes an original contribution to international relations and cultural analysis. It defines diplomacy as having a dual nature: it is both state conduct and a cultural practice centred on meaning-making. It argues that a humanitarian crisis can gain political actionability only when integrated into a legitimate narrative framework. Drawing on Indonesia's differentiated diplomatic responses to the Rohingya and Uyghur issues, this study reveals the unevenness of humanitarian diplomacy, as well as the operational logics that govern how narratives of suffering are made visible, translated, or silenced within the contemporary global order.

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