Explanatory Variables for United Nations' Intervention in Humanitarian Crises

What matters (3)

Since the wake of the Cold War, there have been many humanitarian crises around the world calling on the United Nations (UN) to intervene. However, in responding to the crises, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has employed different degrees of intervention to the different humanitarian crises. While UNSC responded with strong actions in some cases, the Council intervened only with limited measures in some others. This variation in the actions of the UN raises an important question of what factors motivate the UN interventions.

As human rights violation has been worsening and the numbers of causalities resulted from the brutal crackdown of security forces against the peaceful protesters have kept increasing in Myanmar, discourse and speculations over the potential of UN intervention under the title of 'humanitarian protection' have spread widely among the public. Moreover, the speculations have become more widespread after Dr Sa Sa, the Special Envoy newly appointed by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) to the United Nations, formally sent a request letter to the UN Secretary General urging for R2P (Responsibility to Protect) and calling for UN intervention in Myanmar crisis on March 4, 2021.

Therefore, the following study will cover the circumstances under which the UN used to endorse humanitarian intervention measures.

Executive Summary

A research study conducted by Norway based Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) in 2015 identifies five main explanatory conditions for the UN responses in humanitarian crises. These include: (1) the extent of a humanitarian crisis (number of casualties and internally displaced persons); (2) the level of international media attention; (3) the strength of spillover effects (ranging from refugees to political and economic issues); (4) the strength of countervailing power (the military strength of the host country); and (5) the level of previous institutional involvement in a crisis (measured by the resources committed to a crisis in terms of financial and reputational costs of UN agencies).

The research study tested the relationships between these explanatory conditions and whether the UN took strong actions or not in response to the humanitarian crises. Strong UN actions could include (1) launching a military humanitarian intervention, (2) imposing economic sanctions, and (3) deploying robust peacekeeping operations (authorized to use force) to protect the civilians. On the other hand, limited UN

actions used to involve (1) deploying traditional peacekeeping operations (non-use of force except in self-defense and defense of the mandate), (2) sending observer missions, and (3) providing humanitarian assistance. (The original research does not state the weight of diplomatic interventions clearly. However, as it does not carry binding power, the diplomatic intervention could also be categorized under the measures of limited UN actions.)

The PRIO research conducted a comparative study of the UN responses to 31 different humanitarian crises that took place from 1991 to 2004. The study comes out with two major findings. Firstly, the study found that, among the 31 humanitarian crises, the UN took strong action only in 13 countries. In all the 13 crises, the number of human causalities was very high. Moreover, UN agencies have committed substantial financial and reputational costs in these countries before the crises. Besides, the study also points out that the spillover effects of the crises to the other countries were strong enough for the UN to call for strong actions. However, secondly, the study found that even when the above-mentioned explanatory factors were present in the crises, the UN usually chooses the limited actions in responses if the host country possesses strong countervailing military strength.

Why does it matter?

It is important to study this research work as it provides a deeper understanding of the differences in the varying UN responses to the humanitarian crises. UN is an intergovernmental organization comprised of virtually all the countries over the world and its five powerful member countries are the permanent members of the UNSC, the major decision-making body of the UN, and hold veto power. Therefore, there have been debates on whether the UN interventions are decided on the humanitarian norms or depend on the political, economic, and geopolitical interests of UNSC member countries. Some argue that the possibility for a UN intervention could rest not only on the standards and procedures set on the paper but also on the global political factors. Hence, the findings from this kind of research studies could be useful for the decision-makers in formulating and implementing political decisions.

Is it relevant to Myanmar?

This research is relevant to Myanmar as it can contribute to the current Myanmar anti-coup d'état mass movement. Moreover, Myanmar was also among the countries of humanitarian crises this research study

examined. It scrutinized the UN responses towards the humanitarian crises in Myanmar that resulted from the civil war from 1991 through 2004 and after the violent suppressions of pro-democracy activists in the 1988 mass uprising. The study describes the humanitarian crises of Myanmar during these periods with a high number of casualties and high spillover effects on the regional neighboring countries. On the other hand, the study points out that there were low prior UN commitments in Myanmar. The study also shows a high countervailing power of the Myanmar military regime. As a result, the study concluded that the UN responses to the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar were among the weakest.

The potential of the UN responses can be expected based on the analysis of the above-mentioned explanatory conditions. It can be deduced that strong UN actions may take more time. However, it should be noted that every research study is subjected to exceptions and flaws: it is impossible to draw an absolute conclusion from a single study or those of a few. In particular, this research study examined the crisis events from 1991 to 2004 and did not consider the new contextual situation and new variables. For example, are there any changes in international norms regarding human rights, humanitarian values, and standards in the last 20 years? Moreover, another key variable needed to be considered is the evolution of accessible information technology. Compared with the late 20th century, the current changes in technology speed up the flow of information, which, in turn, contributes to the sensitivity of people's perception to the violations of human rights and dignities. These factors exist as various factors that can still change the outcome of this research.

All in all, while this article does not suggest accepting the research finding in the absolute term, considering these in the perspective of the current political context can still be beneficial in finding better tactical options and strategy to pursue the desired outcomes.

❙ Further Readings

Binder, Martin. (2015). "Paths to Intervention: What explains the UN's selective response to humanitarian crisis?" *Journal of Peace Research*, November 2015, Vol.52, No 6.

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WHAT MATTERS

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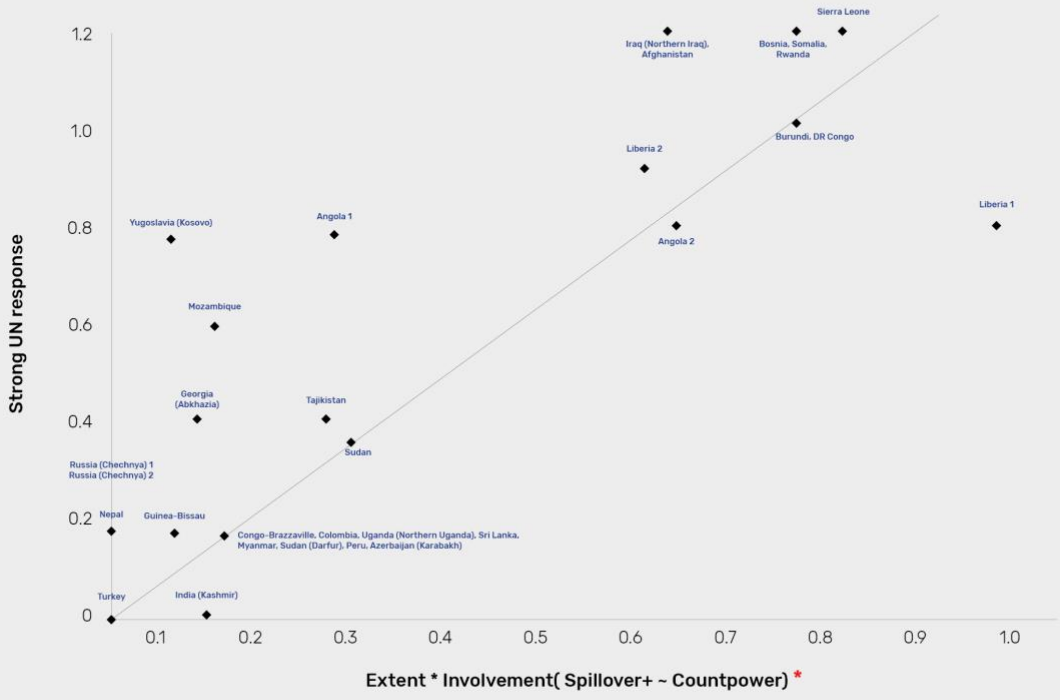
■ **Case covered by the causal combination**



* The two conditional variables can be more impactful if there are high spillover effects, or weak countervailing power or weak allies.