

Broken Shields And Silent Allies: How National Interest Is Undermining The United Nations And Multilateralism

Patrick Kofi Adu*¹, Maxwell Boateng²

¹Department of Political Science, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. Email: jaypatgh@gmail.com

²Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. Email: boaten36@uwm.edu / bmaxwell072@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Maxwell Boateng. Email: boaten36@uwm.edu / bmaxwell072@gmail.com



Abstract: This paper explores how the persistent dominance of realism, the pursuit of state interest and strategic power, has contributed to the erosion of multilateralism in the post-Cold War global order, with a particular focus on the role of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Through case studies of the Syrian conflict, the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, and the Russia-Ukraine war, the paper critically examines how the repeated and strategic use of the veto power by permanent members (P5) has paralyzed the Council's capacity to respond to humanitarian crises and security threats. The study shows how geopolitical rivalries and national interests have undermined collective action, rendering the UNSC increasingly ineffective and damaging the credibility of the broader UN system. Furthermore, the paper explores the failure of international institutions to anticipate or address underlying tensions and the shifting reliance on bilateral and regional blocs. It concludes with recommendations for national self-reliance, strengthened regional cooperation, investment in early warning mechanisms, and a cautious yet necessary reform of the Security Council. Ultimately, the paper argues that unless the logic of realism is tempered by genuine commitment to international cooperation and institutional reform, multilateralism will continue its decline in relevance and effectiveness.

Keywords: Realism, Multilateralism, Veto Power, International Security, Sovereignty, Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, multilateralism emerged as a central mechanism to foster international peace and security, embodied most prominently by the United Nations, established in 1945. At the forefront of the United Nations' responsibility to maintain global peace is the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), vested with the primary responsibility of maintaining international peace and security. According to Allen and Yuen [1], the Council was envisioned as a cornerstone of multilateralism, where the international community could converge to address common security threats through dialogue,

consensus, collective action, and shared commitments to international law. As a cornerstone of the global multilateral framework, the UNSC has played a pivotal role over decades in addressing global crises and mitigating conflicts, albeit with varying degrees of success, in the viewpoints of Beardsley et al [2]. However, in practice, the UNSC has often grappled with internal contradictions that have undermined its efficacy and have also ensured that the Council's effectiveness will be compromised. This is primarily due to the persistent pursuit of national interests by its permanent members (P5): China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, often at the expense of global interests and the principles of multilateralism, according to Weiss [3] and Luck [4]

Multilateralism, defined as the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states to achieve common objectives, has been a defining principle of the international order since the mid-20th century (Fontaine-Skronski et al., [5]; Lavelle, [6]). It underpins institutions such as the UN and its Security Council, which rely on cooperative engagement among states to address transnational issues. Yet, this principle has faced significant erosion, with the UNSC's functioning increasingly marred by national interest, unilateralism, geopolitical rivalries, and the strategic use of veto powers by the P5 (Lavelle, [6]). This has contributed to paralyzing the decision-making processes and has subsequently diminished the Council's legitimacy and credibility in addressing critical global security challenges.

A notable manifestation of this trend is the disproportionate emphasis on the P5's national interests, which often overshadow the broader objectives of international peace and security. The inherent structural imbalance within the UNSC, where the P5 possess disproportionate influence through their use of the veto powers, has exacerbated this issue. A news report by the UN in April 2024 indicated that the veto power has been exercised 323 times by the P5s (United Nations, [7]). It's worth noting that the use of the veto power has gone through several distinct phases, reflecting the shifting political balance of the Security Council. The Soviet Union/Russia was responsible for almost all of the vetoes in the early days of the United Nations and currently has a total of 153 vetoes representing 49% of total vetoes in the UNSC, while the United States has been a more frequent user of the veto power since the 1970s with a current total of 93 representing 29% of the UNSC's total vetoes (Security Council Report, [8]; United Nations, [7]).

Most of China's 21 vetoes have been used since 2011, of which most are in conjunction with that of Russia. Since 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine, veto power has been exercised 13 times as of April 2024, whilst since 2020, the US has exercised the same 14 times (Ibid). Moreover, over 47 of the US vetoes have been to protect Israel (due to Israel and Palestine's old age standoff), with about 12 of these occurring from 2020 (Security Council Report, [8]). Also, 6 vetoes were exercised between October 2023 and April 2024 regarding the war in Gaza. All these signify a rise in the exercise of veto in recent times by the P5 members.

Speaking on these vetoes and published in a news report by the UN, the President of the UN's General Assembly, Dennis Francis stressed that:

If we do nothing, questions on continued relevance of the United Nations will escalate, and public confidence in this institution will increasingly dwindle, with each veto cast perceived as our collective failure to act (Francis, 2024, cited in United Nations, [7]).

The statement recognizes the role of each veto as an act of failure of the UN, which will further compound the already existing criticism against the organisation and its relevance if it cannot act on urgent matters. This illustrates how the pursuit of national interests through the exercise of veto by P5 members has consistently thwarted efforts to uphold the principles of multilateralism and collective security.

This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on UNSC reform by critically examining the intersection of national interests and the use of veto in the UNSC and how that affects the principle of multilateralism. Through an analysis of the Syrian conflict, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the Russia-Ukraine war, this study seeks to illuminate the structural and political factors that have hindered the UNSC's effectiveness. Ultimately, the paper argues that addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive reimagining of the UNSC's role and functions which should be grounded in a renewed commitment to the principles of multilateralism and collective security.

In the context of this study, multilateralism refers to international organisations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organizations (WTO) and the Bretton Woods institutions. The focus in this study is mainly the UN, however relevant examples from other international cooperation and regional bodies will be used to reinforce arguments made.

The next section provides a theoretical discussion of some theories of international relations, notably, realism and liberalism. We then move on to discuss the role of veto powers, its advantages and disadvantages, and its role as envisaged when adopted by the UN's General Assembly in 1946. The three selected cases are subsequently analyzed to find out how veto has been exercised and the implications thereof. The discussion is then turned to how this seeming abuse of veto further erodes the taste of multilateralism and contradicts the principles of the same. The paper then concludes with the reforms needed in the UNSC and why the reform is necessary at this time.

2. Theoretical Discussion

The significance of multilateral agreements and organizations in international relations is evolving quickly in the context of globalization. International engagement now includes various aspects beyond just cooperation between countries, each with its values and goals. First, multilateral cooperation refers to countries working together mainly to promote their national interests. Second, multinational corporations play a significant role in shaping global economic and political rules, motivated by profit and self-interest. Lastly, civil society movements and NGOs are becoming more influential as they push back against market-driven globalization, focusing on social justice and environmental issues (Newman et al., [9]). The traditional view of multilateralism involves several sovereign nations collaborating and reaching agreements that benefit all parties. However, "within the framework of globalization along with its different interpretations, this concept has taken on new meanings based on who is defining it and their specific objectives." (Ibid. p. 423).

Currently, in the realm of international relations, especially within U.S. discussions, the term multilateralism is more often understood as having a prescriptive meaning rather than a purely descriptive one. “It refers to a specific form of international cooperation that promotes the liberalization of global markets and aligns with the broader objectives of neoliberal economic and political ideologies within the framework of globalization” (Ibid. 424). The United States, as a leader in neoliberalism, tends to interpret multilateralism exclusively through its perspective. This approach undermines Rawls’ principle of difference, which advocates for treating individuals in ways that benefit the least advantage and promote equality of opportunity (Scanlon [10]). Multilateral agreements function like social contracts on a global scale. To avoid conflicts, echoing Hobbes’ perspective, these treaties set guidelines that restrict state behavior and encourage collaboration among nations. Their goal is to establish a basis for international justice that all parties involved can support. In this view, all parties at the negotiation table are considered equal, independent, and self-interested, creating laws that serve their interests (Newman et al., [9]). However, in practice, developing countries often have less influence in these agreements, which challenges the idea of equality among all negotiating parties.

Theories in International Relations, such as realism and liberalism, propose distinct strategies for achieving their objectives. In the context of contemporary multiculturalism, these two theories are examined to determine which one more effectively explains the dynamics of multilateralism. Realism is a collection of theories in international relations that highlight the importance of the state, national interests, and military power in global affairs. This perspective is further supported by the notion that states operate in an anarchic environment, meaning there is no overarching international authority to govern them (Mathe [11]). Together, these views illustrate how realism underscores the competitive nature of international relations, where states prioritize their own interests in the absence of a higher governing body.

Realism theory suggests that countries act out of self-interest and that institutions often promote their own goals. In contrast, multilateralism focuses on cooperation and unity among countries in their efforts (Mathe [11]). Current developments within the political landscape indicate that multilateral development institutions often exhibit self-serving tendencies in their engagements and behaviors. This observation supports the relevance of realism theory, as it is evident in the formulation of policies and development agendas that align with their own objectives. These institutions co-fund anything that the other so-called stronger and developed nations want. Alternatively, there are also some forms of “multilateralism in the multilateral institutions as there is togetherness when it comes to dealing with other development impediments that affect the globe” (Mathe [11]). The business of laws is not to provide for the truth of opinions, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth, and of every particular man’s goods and person (Larmore [12]). Since the sixteenth century, liberal thought has aimed to establish moral limits on government power. Unlike theories that justify state actions for political gain, liberal thinkers believe there are certain actions that governments should not take. These limits are not just practical rules for staying in power; they emphasize that governments should recognize and promote the common good for everyone.

The relevance of realism theory is evident in the daily operations of multilateral development agencies, which often prioritize their self-interests (Mathe [11]). While realism dominates their approach, elements of institutionalism or liberalism are also present, as these institutions advocate for cooperation, equity, justice, and harmony in their development efforts.

One key characteristic of realism is the concept of state sovereignty, which influences the behavior of multilateral development institutions. These organizations typically refrain from interfering in the domestic affairs of their member states, reflecting a commitment to state sovereignty (Ibid). For instance, critiques of the United Nations' response to the Rwandan genocide highlight a lack of political will among Security Council members, particularly the United States, to undertake significant peacekeeping efforts (Winfield [13]). This reluctance illustrates how realism's emphasis on sovereignty shapes the actions of these institutions, as they prefer that nations address their issues independently.

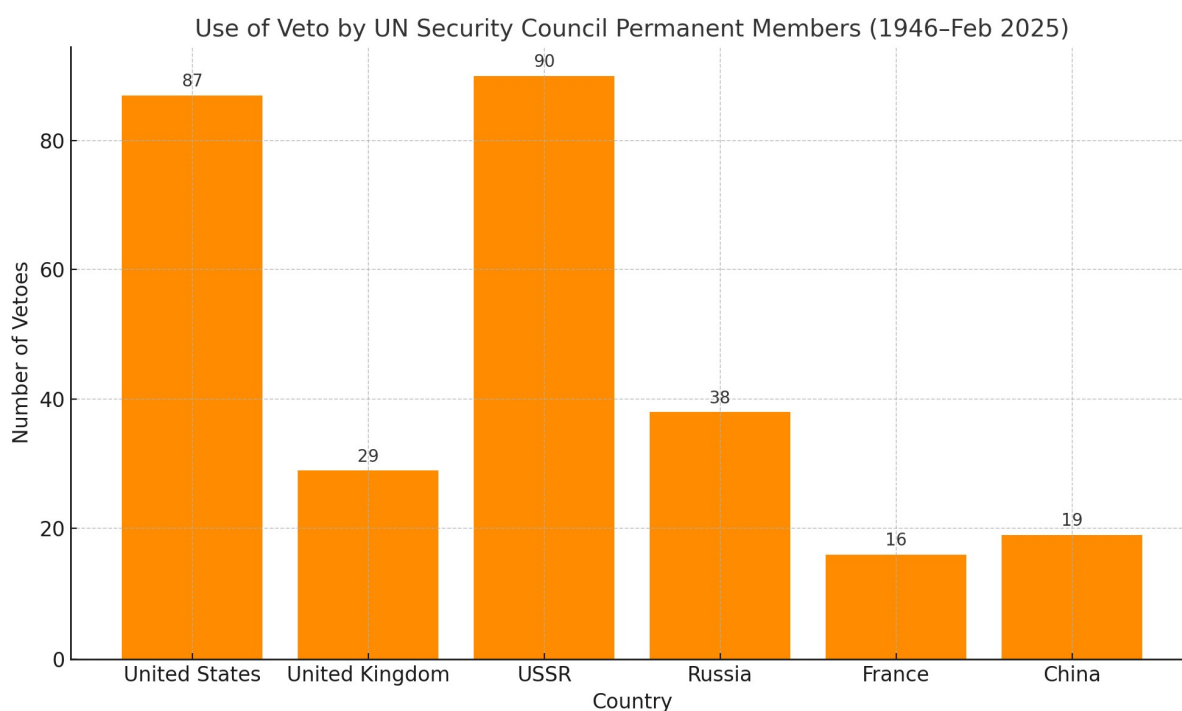
Furthermore, realists argue that the international landscape is inherently anarchic, meaning that no entity, including international organizations like the United Nations, can effectively regulate the behavior of sovereign states (Bello, [14]). This perspective is evident in how powerful nations operate within these institutions, exercising their authority without significant checks or balances. The autonomy of states to act according to their interests underscores the persistence of realism in international relations. An example of this defensive realism can be seen in the African Union's rejection of the need for non-African troops in the fight against Boko Haram in Nigeria. African Union leaders have expressed that they are capable of addressing their own challenges, leading to significant tensions regarding the potential for a United Nations mandate. This stance reinforces the notion that these institutions believe in their ability to manage their own affairs without external intervention. The African Union's refusal to seek assistance from the United Nations exemplifies their confidence in self-management, reflecting a broader skepticism towards the idea of a unified international community (Mathe [11]). This attitude indicates a continued reliance on realism within multilateral institutions, where states prioritize their sovereignty over collective action.

Some argue that realism, alongside liberalism and institutionalism, cannot fully explain the behaviors of contemporary international development organizations. This is because of how these institutions collaborate to address current challenges. Multilateral development institutions are not solely based on realism because their member countries view themselves as part of a community. They work together to solve problems that affect them. For example, as Tuck [15] notes, the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) sent troops to Liberia to help end the fighting and ensure peace by enforcing a cease-fire and disarming combatants, with support from the African Union and the United Nations. This shows that these organizations are not just chaotic; they address people's issues to promote peace. Therefore, because these countries collaborate to manage challenges within their regions, the idea of realism, which suggests that institutions shouldn't interfere in a country's internal matters, becomes less relevant.

As highlighted, both realism and liberalism offer distinct perspectives on the behavior of multilateral development institutions. Realism emphasizes the self-interest of states, asserting that nations act primarily to advance their own goals and maintain sovereignty. Actions of multilateral institutions, which often prioritize their objectives and exhibit self-serving behaviors are clear examples. The theory highlights that these institutions refrain from interfering in the domestic affairs of member states. On the other hand, liberalism introduces the idea of cooperation among states, advocating for collective action and shared goals. While realism dominates the approach of many multilateral organizations, elements of liberalism are also present, as these institutions work together to address global challenges and promote equity, justice, and harmony in development efforts (Mathe [11]).

The Role of Veto Power

Between 1945 and February 2025, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (P5) collectively exercised the veto power 279 times. The USSR leads with 90 vetoes, closely followed by the United States with 87. After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia continued to use the veto actively, contributing another 38. This combined total of 128 vetoes by the USSR/Russia highlights their consistent use of the veto to safeguard national interests, particularly during and after the Cold War. In contrast, the United Kingdom (29), China (19), and France (16) have used the veto more sparingly, often opting for abstentions or diplomatic negotiations instead. The diagram below illustrates this.



Source: Glostat, 2025 [53]

Not to recount the history of the UNSC, the veto power stems from Article 27(3) of the UN Charter. According to Wenaweser and Alavi [16], the power of veto in the UNSC was controversial from the onset, even at the time of its creation during the 1945 San Francisco Conference. However, it was accepted as a necessary compromise to secure the commitment of the most powerful nations to the United Nations. This provision was seen as a necessary step to secure the participation of these global powers in the then newly created United Nations (Iyase & Folarin [17]). The idea was that if the major powers were guaranteed influence, and their superiority recognised in that manner, they would remain committed to working within the UN framework, rather than acting unilaterally and risking another global conflict. Iyase and Folarin [17] note that the veto was intended to halt tensions that could escalate into global conflicts, particularly in a nuclear age. In this regard, Ogbu et al [18] argues that the power of veto has succeeded in preventing conflicts between the major powers. However, Iyase and Folarin [17] and Ogbu et al [18] stress that over time, this

system has become more about protecting the self-interests of the P5 nations than maintaining global peace and security and has also hindered the UNSC's ability to respond effectively to crises.

The power of veto in and of itself is not bad, as it appeared to be a pragmatic decision to avoid the failures of the League of Nations which lacked such a mechanism, causing unilateral actions by powerful states and leading to WW II. The power of veto has, at times, been instrumental in averting broader conflicts. One notable example is its role during the 1956 Suez Crisis. This crisis occurred when Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal, a major trade route to Europe and the Middle East, causing Israel, Britain and France to attack Egypt. The Soviet Union at the time played a key role in vetoing multiple resolutions that sought to legitimize the actions of Britain, France, and Israel in the UNSC, condemning the military intervention as imperialist aggression and exercising its veto to block any resolution that would justify or support the military actions of the Western powers (Dickson & Gabriel, [19]). The United States, interestingly, sided with the Soviet Union in opposing the intervention. The veto allowed diplomatic negotiations to continue, ultimately resulting in a peaceful resolution brokered by the United Nations. This was a clear instance where the veto helped de-escalate a tense situation that could have evolved into a broader regional conflict.

Another successful example is the 2013 Syrian Chemical Weapons Crisis. In August 2013, a sarin gas chemical attack resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths in Syria. The United States, the United Kingdom, and France blamed the Syrian government for the attack and pushed for strong action, including the possibility of military intervention. Russia and China, however, repeatedly vetoed UNSC resolutions that sought to impose sanctions or authorize the use of force against Syria. Although the use of the veto in this case has been widely criticized, it also contributed to a diplomatic resolution that avoided immediate military escalation (Imam [20]). Under immense diplomatic pressure, the U.S. and Russia reached an agreement that avoided military intervention. Syria agreed to join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and surrender its chemical weapons stockpile for destruction under international supervision. The UN Security Council Resolution 2118 was passed unanimously on September 27, 2013, endorsing the U.S.-Russia deal and establishing a framework for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons. This marked a rare moment of consensus in an otherwise divided Security Council showing how the veto can sometimes force prolonged negotiation processes that ultimately reduce violence (Ibid).

Notwithstanding the seeming success of the veto, Iyase and Folarin [17] argue that the veto has become an instrument of injustice, especially for developing countries, as it allows P5 members to block resolutions that could resolve conflicts. Citing the Syrian Civil War as a prime example, the authors stressed that Russia and China's repeated veto against resolutions aimed at ending the violence further prolonged the crisis and worsened the humanitarian situation. According to Wenaweser and Alavi [16], using the veto in the Syrian Civil War prevented the UNSC from addressing an impending threat to international peace and security. Trivedi (2021) emphasizes that the veto power has led to unequal representation and the concentration of power in the hands of the P5, effectively undermining the principle of sovereign equality. Power has therefore been misused to further national agendas, such as the U.S. blocking resolutions critical of Israel and Russia vetoing resolutions on the Syrian conflict and Ukraine.

Similarly, the U.S. has frequently used its veto to block resolutions critical of Israel's policies in the occupied Palestinian territories. Critics argue that this has prevented the UNSC from holding Israel accountable for actions that violate international law,

undermining the credibility of the council (Lounaouci [51]). The U.S. vetoes are often justified on the grounds of protecting an important regional ally, but they are seen by many as a blatant exercise of geopolitical interest, rather than a genuine effort to promote peace. Lastly, the veto has been used as a tool for self-interest, often at the expense of global peace and security. One of the most prominent examples is the Russia-Ukraine conflict, where Russia repeatedly used its veto to block resolutions condemning its actions and interventions in Ukraine. This has led to widespread criticism of the UNSC for its inability to address one of the most serious security threats in Europe since World War II (Dickson & Gabriel,[19]).

The role of veto, even though being successful in contributing to preventing global conflict, has failed to prevent unilateral actions by powerful countries as seen in the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, and Russia's invasion of Georgia and Ukraine. The veto power, in recent years, has become a symbol of the UNSC's inability to act decisively in the face of global crises, sparking debates over its reform. Many countries, particularly in Africa and Asia have argued that the current structure of the UNSC is outdated and does not reflect the geopolitical realities of the 21st century. They have therefore called for an expansion of permanent membership to include new powers like India, Brazil, and South Africa (Imam [20]).

3. Case Studies

Three cases (The Syrian Conflict, Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine) were selected to highlight how veto has been used to the interest of the powerful states, as against their quest and desire to promote peace and stability in the global system, and also how the realist assumption of self-interest have played out in these cases. According to Park [21], the Syrian crisis and the Israel-Palestine issue ranks among the top five issues that have attracted more vetoes from the P5. Between 2022 and 2025, most of the devastating conflicts have been the Sudan conflict, Russia-Ukraine war, the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Israel-Palestine war. Among these four, Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine have been described as war by international press due to the invasion of one 'country' on the other. Therefore, the three cases selected provide a strong justification into institutional silence and its subsequent loss of relevance, as will be shown in the cases.

3.1 Syrian Conflict

Labeled as the greatest disaster of the century, the Syrian conflict, which began in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring, quickly evolved from peaceful protests into a brutal civil war involving domestic factions, regional powers, and global actors (Phillips [22]). Initially triggered by anti-government demonstrations against President Bashar al-Assad's regime, the conflict escalated into widespread violence following the regime's heavy-handed crackdown. Over time, the war became a complex proxy battleground involving the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and various non-state actors including ISIS (Daadou [23]). The humanitarian toll has been staggering: over 350,000 people were confirmed dead by the UN in 2021, though actual numbers are believed to be much higher, with over 13 million Syrians displaced internally or as refugees (Daadou [23]; Pitt [24]; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR [25]). The uprising that began in 2011 faced brutal repression, igniting widespread protests and escalating violence (Phillips [22]), until the impending yet unexpected overthrow of the Assaad regime late in 2024.

The UNSC was largely paralyzed in addressing the Syrian crisis due to repeated use of the veto power by Russia, often backed by China. Since 2011, Russia has used its veto at least 17 times to block resolutions aimed at holding the Assad regime accountable,

facilitating humanitarian access, or referring the situation to the International Criminal Court (United Nations [26]). For instance, in 2014, Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution that would have referred war crimes in Syria to the ICC, despite overwhelming support from other Council members (Human Rights Watch [27]). In 2020, Russia also vetoed a resolution to maintain cross-border humanitarian aid delivery routes, reducing access to vital assistance for millions in northern Syria. These vetoes have significantly undermined international efforts to respond to atrocities and have exemplified how the veto mechanism can obstruct multilateral action in the face of mass human suffering.

The Syrian conflict reveals the erosion of multilateralism and the dichotomy of state sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The Assad regime has consistently invoked sovereignty to evade international intervention despite escalating humanitarian crises, revealing a conflict between sovereignty and R2P (Botchway [28]). The UNSC's inability to reach a consensus on effective action - largely due to the vetoes from major powers like the U.S. and Russia - illustrates how geopolitical rivalries hinder multilateral efforts (Botchway [28]). Additionally, the rise of nonstate actors complicates traditional notions of sovereignty, challenging the authority of states and eroding international law (Botchway [28]). Turkey's role as a transit country for Syrian refugees, particularly under the EU-Turkey deal of 2016, further complicates humanitarian obligations, raising ethical concerns about the commodification of refugees (Boateng & Akoeda [29]). The UN's quest for peace in Syria faces significant challenges, marked by polarization among external actors from the outset. The permanent members of the UNSC remain divided, with Russia and China opposing regime change, while the P3 (France, the UK, and the U.S.) advocate for political transitions. On October 4, 2011, the UNSC failed to pass a resolution condemning "grave and systematic human rights violations" in Syria, primarily due to vetoes from Russia and China. Thus, the Syrian conflict illustrates how realism not only elucidates the motivations of state actors but also highlights the limitations of international institutions in addressing complex geopolitical crises.

3.1.1 Israel-Palestine Conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a complicated geopolitical issue that began in the early 20th century. It was highlighted by the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, which led to the creation of Israel and the displacement of about 750,000 Palestinians, known as al-Nakba (Smith [30]). Key events like the 1956 Suez War and the 1967 Six-Day War intensified territorial disputes, with Israel gaining significant land (Morris [31]; Shlaim [32]). The Yom Kippur War in 1973 increased U.S. support for Israel and spurred peace efforts like the Camp David Accords of 1979 (Kissinger [33]). The First Intifada in 1987 brought international attention to the Palestinian cause, while the Second Intifada in 2000 marked a return to violence (Arafat [34]; Hass [35]). Ongoing conflicts in the 21st century, including the 2008 and 2014 Gaza Wars, have shown the urgent need for a resolution, as the struggle over land, identity, and rights continues to affect the region (United Nations [36]). Yet, multilateralism has failed to deal with this conflict, and in 2023, it was rekindled when Hamas launched its attacks on Israel, killing around 1,140 people and taking an additional 240 people hostage. Through retaliation attacks by the Israeli armed forces against Hamas in Gaza, 47,540 Palestinians have been killed, and 111,618 are injured as of March 31, 2025 (Statista Research Department [37]).

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has played a crucial role in addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through various resolutions and peacekeeping efforts. It has passed numerous resolutions aimed at promoting peace, including calls for ceasefires

and the recognition of Palestinian rights. However, the effectiveness of these resolutions has often been undermined by the complex political realities on the ground and the lack of cooperation from both parties. This situation has contributed to the erosion of multilateralism, as many countries have become disillusioned with the UN's ability to resolve the conflict, leading them to favor unilateral or bilateral approaches instead. The influence of superpowers, particularly the United States, further complicates the UNSC's role, as the U.S. has historically provided strong support for Israel and has used its veto power to block resolutions perceived as unfavorable to Israeli interests.

On Wednesday, November 20, 2024, the US vetoed a draft UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, making it the 49th time the US has used its veto power against Israel-related UN Security Council draft resolutions (Middle East Eye [38]), and hindering the UNSC to take a bold decision to intervene. Between October 2024 and November 2024 alone, the US blocked four different resolutions calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. This dynamic has raised concerns about bias and has hindered the UNSC's ability to act, making them irrelevant in serious matters such as this. The selective use of vetoes has adversely impacted the perception of the UNSC's legitimacy. Many view the Council as catering to the interests of powerful nations rather than acting in favor of global peace and security. This perception has led to widespread criticism of the Council's effectiveness and impartiality (Human Rights Watch [39]).

3.1.2 Russia-Ukraine War

The roots of this war can be traced back to post-Cold War security assurances and strategic missteps. Following the 'hibernation' of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia repeatedly warned NATO and Western powers against the eastward expansion of the alliance, which it perceived as an existential threat, a direct threat to its national security. Yet, despite verbal assurances reportedly made to Soviet leadership during reunification talks in the early 1990s (National Security Archives, 2017), NATO continued to enlarge, incorporating former Warsaw Pact states and even parts of the former USSR. Ukraine's increasing tilt toward the West, including its aspirations for NATO and EU membership, further inflamed Russian anxieties. The West, while championing sovereignty and democratic choice, failed to adequately address Russia's persistent warnings, and Ukraine, for its part, underestimated the seriousness of Russia's threats. The United Nations, and particularly the Security Council, remained conspicuously silent on NATO's expansion, failing to mediate or address the growing geopolitical divide. This institutional relapse, coupled with strategic miscalculations on all sides, created a combustible environment that exploded first in 2014 and again, more ferociously, in 2022.

The war began in earnest in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea following Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution and the ouster of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. That same year, fighting erupted in the Donbas region between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists. The Minsk Agreements of 2014 and 2015, mediated by France and Germany, were attempts to de-escalate the conflict but were never fully implemented. Tensions simmered for years, marked by sporadic clashes, diplomatic breakdowns, and military build-ups. Then, in February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, citing the need to "denazify" the Ukrainian government and prevent NATO encroachment. The invasion marked one of the largest military offensives in Europe since World War II and triggered a humanitarian catastrophe, mass displacement, and unprecedented global sanctions.

Yet, despite the international outcry, the United Nations system struggled to mount an effective response, hamstrung by the very structure intended to preserve peace - the Security Council.

Since the escalation in 2022, Russia's repeated use of its veto has effectively crippled the UNSC's ability to act decisively. On February 25, 2022, Russia vetoed a draft resolution that condemned its invasion and demanded troop withdrawal. China, India, and the UAE abstained, signaling global divisions and the paralysis of the Council (UN News [40]). In total, Russia has vetoed at least five UNSC resolutions related to its actions in Ukraine-blocking initiatives related to humanitarian aid, war crimes investigations, and condemnations of territorial annexations such as those in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. China's strategy of abstention in these cases has underscored its desire to maintain a diplomatic balance while avoiding confrontation with the West (Siong [41]). Although the UN General Assembly passed a historic resolution with 141 countries condemning Russia's invasion in March 2022 (Siong [41]), the resolution was non-binding and lacked enforcement mechanisms. Meanwhile, the conflict continues to extract a devastating human toll: as of December 2024, thousands of Ukrainians (both civilians and military) had died (including similar but less numbers for Russian troops) and 6.7 million have become refugees, including 400,000 who crossed into Europe seeking safety between January and August (UNHCR [42]), with actual numbers likely much higher due to the difficulties of verifying casualties in active combat zones. Despite symbolic steps by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) holding the P5 accountable for their use of veto in the Russia-Ukraine war (UNGA [40]), the persistent failure of the Security Council to fulfill its mandate has laid bare the limitations of the post-WWII multilateral order and the urgent need for institutional reform.

4. Realism At Play

Mearsheimer [43] suggests that states are "black boxes," focused on maximizing influence, a sentiment echoed by Zakaria's assertion that states prioritize influence over resource accumulation (Dück et al., [44]). The recurring paralysis of the United Nations in the face of protracted and devastating conflicts such as those in Syria, Israel-Palestine, and Ukraine is not coincidental. It is a direct consequence of the realist paradigm that governs the behavior of powerful states within the international system. Realism, with its core emphasis on national interest, strategic dominance, and power preservation, continues to override the cooperative ideals upon which the UN was founded. The Security Council, designed to be the guarantor of peace, has instead become a theatre where geopolitical rivalries are entrenched and protected by the veto shield of the P5. This has not only undermined the credibility of the UN as a neutral arbiter but has also eroded the broader concept of multilateralism. In an age where humanitarian crises, regional instability, and global insecurity demand collective action, the persistence of realism among dominant states has turned the UN's most powerful organ into a tool for strategic manipulation rather than peace enforcement. Until institutional reforms address the unchecked power of the veto and the dominance of state self-interest, the UN will remain a bystander to the very conflicts it was created to resolve.

4.1 The Evolution of Multilateralism

There have been several stages and transformations of multilateralism throughout history. Its modern framework, however, emerged after World War II, when established institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the Bretton Woods Institutions and later the

transformation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to be succeeded by the World Trade Organization (WTO) were designed to stabilize international relations and facilitate post-war recovery through collective action (Acharya [45]; Bello [14]). Multilateralism during this era became a response to the challenges of decolonization. Newly independent states joined global institutions and demanded greater inclusivity and representation (Cohen, [46]; Linn [47]). Over the decades, the system has not only focused on the promotion of peace by contributing to resolving inter/intra-state conflicts and addressing issues of global terrorism and humanitarian concerns, but it has also evolved to address emerging global challenges such as environmental sustainability, exemplified by agreements like the Paris Climate Accord (Acharya [45]).

4.1.1 Sovereign Equality, Collective Action and Diffuse Reciprocity

Multilateralism thrives on three main principles. First is sovereign equality. The principle espouses that states even though are independent of each other and have different levels of power, they are all equal in terms of votes in the UN General Assembly, where each member state has one vote (Acharya [45]). Secondly, multilateral institutions make collective decisions and embark on collective action. When issues needing the attention of an institution, like the UN, arise, the votes that are cast show the collective ideas out of which a decision or action follows (Scott, 2024). No “right-standing” member state is forced out of the decision, making the action one of which all views were taken. Collective response does not mean that all states agree to a decision, but that all “right-standing” member states take part in a decision that leads to an action or inaction as the situation may be.

Third is the principle of diffuse reciprocity. This is in line with the indivisibility of interest when it comes to multilateral relations. That is, member states all benefit from the arrangements and agreements of the organisation (Cohen [46]). Closely linked to collective action is the issue of indivisibility of interest where for instance in security arrangements, peace is treated as being indivisible, such that no participating member can be at war while others are at peace (Scott, 2024). Diffuse reciprocity relies on indivisibility of interest and collective response to argue that there will not be equal obligations in exchanges, however, a balance is expected throughout a potentially indefinite series of exchanges with a group of partners (Ibid). For instance, in a collective response, when state A is attacked and the other states pull their resources to support, state A is not required to compensate for the military resources expended by the other states. What the other states will count on is that in the long run of the mutual relationship, they will receive such support when under attack.

However, despite these principles, international cooperation has often struggled to balance the principles of sovereign equality, collective action and diffuse reciprocity with the realities of power dynamics. As stressed by Bello [14], Botchway [28] and Linn [47], the veto power held by the UN Security Council's permanent members typifies this tension, enabling powerful nations to bypass collective decision-making in favor of unilateral action. This questions the existence of sovereign equality in the UN. A similar argument is extended to other international organizations such as the WTO and the Bretton Woods establishments where the voices of some countries like the US carry more weight than African countries combined. Also, there has been criticism from emerging powers like China and India, which have advocated for reforms within the UN to reflect their growing influence in global governance (Bello, [14]). As international cooperation adapts to new power dynamics, the principles of sovereign equality,

collective action and diffuse reciprocity remain critical, albeit challenged, as states navigate the balance between cooperation and self-interest (Acharya [45]; Linn [47]).

4.1.2 Decline of International Cooperation and the Rise of Nationalism and Multipolarity

Article 24 of the UN charter which came in to force on October 24 1945 provides that:

In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations its members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, and agreed that in carrying out its duties under this responsibility the Security Council acts on their behalf.

Nonetheless, the conferment seems to be partially done with powerful states retaining enormous powers to act arbitrarily. According to Surdej [52], international cooperation still maintains its attractiveness because of its procedural qualities, including the creation of norms assuring a faithful adherence to transparency of actions and the care for fair burden sharing. Nonetheless, Linn [47] observes that the concept has increasingly come under strain due to geopolitical shifts and internal weaknesses. Acharya [45] and Cohen [46] agree on the argument that while these institutions were created to address global challenges through collective action, they have often failed to adapt to the changing dynamics of power and influence. Major powers have consistently exploited structural imbalances within these international institutions, such as the veto power in the UN Security Council, to advance their national agendas at the expense of global interests (Linn [47]).

As has already been pointed out in the selected cases discussed on the Syrian conflict, the Israele-Palestine conflict and the Russia-Ukraine war, these illustrate how such mechanisms have hindered unified action, reducing trust in multilateral frameworks (Fontaine-Skranski et al., [5]). On the issue of trust, a study conducted by GlobeScan in 2020 on citizens' trust in national government, the UN and professional bodies in 27 member-states of the UN, revealed that the UN (26%) and national governments (15%) are trusted less than professional bodies (Jacobs et al., [50]). This further supports the assertion that international cooperation is losing its relevance and trust due to powerful states' consistently inconsistent use of the veto.

Nationalism and the emergence of multipolarity have significantly contributed to the erosion of the principles of international cooperation. The rise of nationalist policies, as typified by Brexit and the "America First" policies of the Trump administration reflect a growing skepticism toward multilateralism among member-states (Cohen [46]; Linn [47]). Also, the retreat of the United States from the Paris Climate Accord in 2017 under President Donald Trump due to economic concerns, signalled a growing disinterest in global cooperation in favor of unilateral or bilateral approaches (Bello, [14]). However, President Biden reversed the decision, and the US rejoined in 2021. Notwithstanding, this highlights how the issue of national interest greatly affects international cooperation.

Bello [14] notes that these nationalist policies often frame multilateral agreements as threats to state sovereignty, reducing public support for collective action. The lack of trust and the rise of regionalism has led emerging economies like China, India, and Brazil to challenge the dominance of Western-led institutions, advocating for reforms to better reflect their interests (de Lima &

Albuquerque, n.d. [48]). Also, multipolarity has shifted the focus from global solutions to regional alliances. This has led to a rise of powerful and competitive initiatives and institutions such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), further fragmenting the global governance landscape (Acharya [45]) and crippling the desire for international cooperation.

These realist-led actions employed by powerful states prioritize state sovereignty and power, contributing to the rise of nationalism and multipolarity in international relations. Fontaine-Skronski et al. [5] note that states increasingly pursue policies rooted in self-interest, often bypassing or undermining multilateral mechanisms when they conflict with national objectives. For instance, the use of the veto by permanent members of the UNSC often has a geopolitical rivalry undertone rather than collective security considerations (Botchway [28]; Cohen [46]). Additionally, regional disputes have escalated as states circumvent multilateral mechanisms in favor of unilateral or regional approaches, as seen in the South China Sea conflict, where China has largely ignored international arbitration rulings (Linn [47]).

Similarly, the shift toward bilateral trade deals rather than multilateral engagements, as seen in the U.S.'s abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership under the Trump administration in 2017, reflects a preference for agreements that maximize relative gains over collective benefits (Bello [14]). Linn [47] stresses that this realist-driven fragmentation of the international system undermines the capability of global institutions to effectively address transnational challenges like climate change, economic inequality, and security threats. It is important to note that as states increasingly prioritize national interests, the principles of sovereign equality, collective action and reciprocity that underpin multilateralism are further eroded, leaving the global system vulnerable to instability and inefficiency. The lack of cohesive multilateral responses to such crises undermines trust in global institutions and emboldens states to act unilaterally, increasing the risk of conflict escalation (Botchway [28]; Jacobs et al.,[50]).

Aside from the issue of trust and global insecurity, the broader risks posed by the erosion of multilateralism include increased polarization and reduced capacity to address transnational challenges. Issues like climate change, pandemics, terrorism and cybersecurity require coordinated global responses, however, the waning interest in the principles of multilateral frameworks has led to disjointed and often contradictory actions by states (de Lima & Albuquerque, n.d. [48]). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the limitations of multilateral health governance, as countries prioritized national interests over collective regional and international interests (Botchway & Hlovor [49]). Furthermore, the rise of multipolarity with its accompanied national interest has created a competitive global environment, reducing the willingness of states to compromise or collaborate (Botchway [28]; Bello [14]). If this shift is not properly addressed, the principles of international cooperation will be undermined, leaving the international system ill-equipped to manage contemporary threats. A balanced approach to promoting national interest while maintaining and adhering to the principles of international cooperation is paramount to ensuring sustainable development and global peace, while also booting trust in multilateral organizations (Botchway & Hlovor, [49]).

5 Conclusion

The persistent failure of the United Nations, particularly its Security Council, to respond effectively to some of the world's most catastrophic conflicts such as those in Syria, Ukraine, and the Israeli-Palestinian territories highlights a sobering reality: realism, not multilateralism borne out of the principles of liberalism, defines the modern international order. While the UN was founded on ideals of collective security, cooperation, and universal justice, its operational structure, dominated by the veto power of the permanent five (P5), has repeatedly enabled powerful states to shield allies, deflect accountability, and prioritize national interests over global peace. These case studies illustrate how state behavior continues to be driven by strategic self-preservation, rendering international institutions increasingly ineffective in the face of geopolitical rivalries and humanitarian crises.

The erosion of multilateralism is not just a procedural failure; it is a crisis of credibility. When the Security Council becomes a stage for power plays rather than principled diplomacy, it delegitimizes not only its authority but the very notion of a rules-based global order. As states retreat into spheres of influence, forge regional alliances, and rely on unilateral action, the world moves further from the cooperative framework envisioned in 1945. Without urgent reform and a willingness by dominant powers to curtail their instrumental use of the veto, the UN risks becoming a relic of diplomatic idealism: present in form but absent in function. In a world shaped by competing interests, the future of international peace and security will depend not merely on institutional reform, but on a fundamental shift in how power is exercised and constrained.

6 Recommendations

In an increasingly unstable and interest-driven international system, states must acknowledge a fundamental truth: no nation is your friend; only interests are permanent. While the global community often offers rhetorical support or limited assistance during times of crisis, help rarely arrives in the form or scale one expects. The Syrian and Ukrainian cases demonstrate that international aid is selective, delayed, and shaped by geopolitical calculations. Therefore, states must assess both their actions and inactions through the lens of their internal capacities, national resilience, and strategic preparedness. This requires investing in robust domestic infrastructure, self-reliant defense systems, and cohesive national security strategies. Dependency on external saviors in moments of existential threat is a gamble and often a costly one.

Given the limitations of global multilateralism, regional and sub-regional blocs offer more viable avenues for cooperation and security. Organizations such as the African Union, ASEAN, ECOWAS, and CARICOM have demonstrated varying degrees of success in conflict mediation, economic integration, and collective response mechanisms (howbeit challenging). States sharing geographic proximity also share common histories, security interests, and socio-political contexts, making their incentive to act stronger, as threats to one often pose spillover risks to others. In such settings, bilateral partnerships and regional coalitions can be more responsive, agile, and context-aware, offering practical alternatives when global forums like the UN falter. Regional solidarity must therefore be viewed not as supplementary, but as foundational to national survival and sustainable diplomacy.

States must build their capacities not only to respond to crises but to anticipate and preempt them through early warning systems and strategic foresight. Many of the world's most devastating conflicts (including those in Syria and Ukraine) escalated not

suddenly, but after a long buildup of ignored tensions, unmet security warnings, and dismissals of adversarial intentions. National governments should invest in real-time intelligence, conflict monitoring, and scenario planning capacities, ensuring they are not caught off guard by unfolding threats. Strategic foresight also includes strengthening civil-military relations, resilient governance systems, and diversified foreign policy engagements. Being blindsided is not an excuse in a realist world where survival depends on anticipation, not sympathy.

The United Nations Security Council requires urgent reform to restore its legitimacy and effectiveness. One potential approach is the adoption of a weighted quota or ratio-based voting mechanism, where decisions reflect not just the will of five permanent members, but the broader consensus of the global community. This could involve a hybrid model that considers population size, regional balance, and collective majority thresholds. However, such reforms must be approached cautiously; poorly implemented changes risk replacing the current paralysis with a new form of gridlock or manipulation by regional blocs. Furthermore, the real obstacle lies in whether powerful states are willing to relinquish or dilute their veto privileges, which have long served as instruments of geopolitical leverage. The path forward will require not only institutional restructuring but also a reckoning with the self-serving logic of great powers, whose commitment to reform will define whether the UN remains relevant in the 21st century.

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