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The Ineffectiveness of the UN in Crisis Management: The Cases of Ukraine and Gaza

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations (UN) was established in 1945 to maintain international peace and security, yet its crisis management capacity has been increasingly questioned in the twenty-first century. This article examines the ineffectiveness of the UN in responding to contemporary conflicts, focusing on two critical cases: the ongoing war in Ukraine (2022–Present) and the Gaza conflict (2023– Present). Both crises highlight the structural limitations of the UN Security Council (UNSC), particularly the veto power held by its permanent members (P5), which often paralyzes decision-making where great-power interests are directly involved.

The study employs a comparative case study method, drawing upon primary sources such as UN resolutions, Security Council debates, and General Assembly voting records, as well as secondary academic analyses and policy reports. The theoretical framework integrates realism, which emphasizes power politics and state interests; liberal institutionalism, which underscores multilateralism and the institutional role of the UN; and constructivism, which highlights the importance of norms, legitimacy, and international perceptions.

Findings indicate that in Ukraine, Russia's veto has shielded it from binding UNSC measures, relegating the UN to a primarily humanitarian role with limited political influence. In Gaza, repeated U.S. vetoes have prevented collective action against Israel, despite mounting humanitarian crises and allegations of international humanitarian law violations. In both cases, the UN General Assembly has attempted to fill the vacuum through symbolic resolutions, yet these measures lack binding authority.

The analysis concludes that the UN remains a normative platform capable of articulating principles of international law and morality but lacks enforcement capacity to manage crises when great powers are implicated. The article argues for substantive institutional reforms, including Security Council restructuring, limitations on the veto in cases of mass atrocities, and hybrid mechanisms linking global and regional organizations to enhance legitimacy and effectiveness in crisis management.

Keywords: United Nations, Security Council Veto, Crisis Management, Humanitarian Intervention, International Relations

Birleşmiş Milletler'in Kriz Yönetimindeki Etkisizliği: Ukrayna ve Gazze Örnekleri

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ÖZ

Birleşmiş Milletler (BM), 1945 yılında uluslararası barış ve güvenliği sağlamak amacıyla kurulmuş olmasına rağmen, yirmi birinci yüzyılda kriz yönetimi kapasitesi giderek daha fazla sorgulanmaktadır. Bu makale, BM'nin çağdaş çatışmalara yanıtındaki etkisizliğini incelemekte ve iki kritik olaya odaklanmaktadır: Ukrayna'daki devam eden savaş (2022–günümüz) ve Gazze çatışması (2023–günümüz). Her iki kriz de BM Güvenlik Konseyi'nin (BMGK) yapısal sınırlamalarını, özellikle de daimi üyelerinin (P5) sahip olduğu veto yetkisini ortaya koymakta ve büyük güç çıkarlarının doğrudan dahil olduğu durumlarda karar alma süreçlerinin sıklıkla felce uğradığını göstermektedir.

Çalışmada karşılaştırmalı vaka çalışması yöntemi benimsenmiş olup, birincil kaynaklar olarak BM kararları, Güvenlik Konseyi tartışmaları ve Genel Kurul oylama kayıtları; ikincil kaynaklar olarak ise akademik analizler ve politika raporları kullanılmıştır. Teorik çerçeve, güç politikaları ve devlet çıkarlarını vurgulayan realizmi; çok taraflılığı ve BM'nin kurumsal rolünü öne çıkaran liberal kurumsalcılığı; normlar, meşruiyet ve uluslararası algıların önemini vurgulayan konstrüktivizmi bütünleştirmektedir.

Bulgular, Ukrayna'da Rusya'nın vetosunun BMGK tarafından bağlayıcı önlemleri engellediğini ve BM'yi sınırlı siyasi etkisi olan bir insani yardım rolüne mahkûm ettiğini göstermektedir. Gazze'de ise ABD'nin tekrarlayan vetoları, artan insani kriz ve uluslararası insancıl hukuk ihlali iddialarına rağmen İsrail'e karşı kolektif eylemi engellemiştir. Her iki durumda da BM Genel Kurulu, sembolik kararlarla boşluğu doldurmaya çalışsa da, bu önlemler bağlayıcı nitelik taşımamaktadır.

Analiz, BM'nin uluslararası hukuk ve etik ilkeleri ifade edebilen normatif bir platform olarak varlığını sürdürdüğünü, ancak büyük güçlerin dahil olduğu krizlerde etkin bir uygulama kapasitesinden yoksun olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Makale, kriz yönetiminde meşruiyet ve etkinliği artırmak amacıyla Güvenlik Konseyi'nin yeniden yapılandırılması, kitlesel insan hakları ihlalleri durumunda veto yetkisinin sınırlandırılması ve küresel ile bölgesel örgütleri bağlayan hibrit mekanizmalar gibi kapsamlı kurumsal reformların gerekliliğini tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Birleşmiş Milletler, Güvenlik Konseyi Vetosu, Kriz Yönetimi, İnsani Müdahale, Uluslararası İlişkiler

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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) was founded in 1945 with the primary objective of maintaining international peace and security, preventing future wars, and promoting cooperation among states (Chesterman, 2021). Emerging from the devastation of World War II, the UN was envisioned as a mechanism to prevent the recurrence of large-scale conflict through collective security, dialogue, and binding international law (Claude, 1984; Weiss, 2016). Central to this mission is the UN Security Council (UNSC), which was granted primary responsibility for addressing threats to peace. The Council's authority to impose sanctions, authorize peacekeeping operations, and mandate the use of force makes it the cornerstone of the UN's crisis management architecture (Hurd, 2017).

Despite these ambitions, the UN's ability to effectively manage crises has been consistently challenged. Throughout its history, the organization has faced accusations of paralysis, particularly when the interests of the permanent five members (P5) the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France are at stake (Luck, 2006). The use of the veto power, enshrined in Article 27 of the UN Charter, has frequently prevented timely and decisive action, thereby undermining the credibility of the institution (Malone, 2020). While the UN has had notable successes in conflict mediation and peacekeeping, its failures in major crises such as Rwanda (1994) and Syria (2011–Present) continue to cast doubt on its legitimacy (Barnett, 2002; Bellamy & Williams, 2017).

This article investigates the question: Why has the UN proven ineffective in managing the crises in Ukraine (2022– Present) and Gaza (2023– Present)? By addressing this research question, the study highlights both the structural and political constraints that inhibit the UN's ability to act when great powers are involved. The significance of this inquiry lies in its contribution to two parallel debates: first, the broader discussion on the future of multilateral institutions in an era of renewed great-power rivalry; and second, the urgent need to explore pathways for institutional reform to enhance global crisis management (Thakur, 2017).

The study employs a comparative case study methodology. Ukraine and Gaza were selected not only because they represent the most pressing crises of the early 2020s but also because they illustrate contrasting geopolitical dynamics: one involving direct aggression by a permanent member of the UNSC, and the other involving an entrenched regional conflict shielded by another permanent member's veto. This design enables an exploration of both structural paralysis and political bias within the UN system (Gowan, 2024).

The methodology relies on the analysis of primary documents, including Security Council resolutions, General Assembly voting records, and official statements by UN officials. These are complemented by secondary sources, including scholarly articles, think tank reports, and policy analyses that provide interpretive frameworks for understanding the UN's actions and inactions. By triangulating these sources, the study seeks to provide a balanced assessment of the UN's crisis management capacity in the face of systemic challenges.

Ultimately, this article argues that while the UN continues to serve as a crucial normative forum for articulating global principles of peace, justice, and humanitarian law, its structural limitations particularly the veto render it ineffective in moments when its leadership is most urgently required. The cases of Ukraine and Gaza underscore the urgent need for institutional reform if the UN is to maintain its relevance in the twenty-first century.

Literature Review

International Relations (IR) theory provides crucial analytical tools for understanding the dynamics and limitations of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN). By applying different theoretical perspectives, scholars can assess why the UN succeeds or fails in crisis management, particularly in situations involving great-power conflicts. This study adopts three complementary IR perspectives: realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism, each offering distinct insights into the UN's role in the Ukraine and Gaza crises.

Realism: Power Politics and the Veto

Realism emphasizes that international politics occurs in an anarchic system, where states prioritize survival, security, and the accumulation of power over normative or institutional considerations (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). From a realist perspective, international organizations like the UN do not act independently; rather, they reflect the power distribution among member states (Mearsheimer, 1995). The UN Security Council (UNSC) embodies this dynamic, institutionalizing the dominance of the five permanent members (P5): the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France.

The veto power, enshrined in Article 27 of the UN Charter, allows each P5 member to block any substantive resolution, effectively prioritizing state interests over collective action (Voeten, 2001). Realist scholars argue that the veto ensures that the UN cannot take coercive action against a powerful state, even in the face of widespread international condemnation (Krasner, 1983). This dynamic is evident in both the Ukraine and Gaza crises: Russia has used its veto to prevent UNSC measures targeting its military actions in Ukraine, while the United States has exercised its veto to shield Israel from binding resolutions concerning Gaza (Patrick, 2022; Al Jazeera, 2023). Realism thus explains the structural constraints that limit the UN's enforcement capacity, showing that the organization's failures often reflect power politics rather than institutional design flaws.

Liberal Institutionalism: Collective Security and Multilateralism

In contrast to realism, liberal institutionalism highlights the potential of international organizations to facilitate cooperation, reduce uncertainty, and mitigate the anarchic nature of international politics (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Martin, 1995). The UN, from a liberal perspective, functions as a platform for multilateral engagement, enabling states to coordinate responses to crises and uphold collective security norms.

Even when the UNSC is blocked by vetoes, the broader UN system—including the General Assembly, specialized agencies, and peacekeeping missions—can contribute to crisis management (Weiss & Daws, 2018). Humanitarian operations by the World Food Programme (WFP) in Ukraine and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in Gaza exemplify the UN's capacity to coordinate multilateral action and provide tangible support to affected populations (Oksamytna & Karlsrud, 2020).

Furthermore, liberal institutionalism emphasizes the normative and agenda-setting functions of the UN. General Assembly resolutions, even when non-binding, can shape international opinion, legitimize sanctions, and create a framework for coordinated diplomatic action (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). In Ukraine, for instance, GA resolutions condemning Russian aggression mobilized international legitimacy, supporting economic and political sanctions outside the UN framework (Gowan, 2022). In Gaza, similar mechanisms have amplified calls for humanitarian interventions, even when Security Council resolutions are vetoed. Thus, liberal institutionalism underscores the UN's resilience and relevance in promoting multilateral cooperation and normative consensus, despite structural limitations.

Constructivism: Norms, Legitimacy, and Global Perceptions

Constructivism focuses on the role of norms, ideas, and social structures in shaping international outcomes, highlighting the importance of legitimacy and perception in global governance (Wendt, 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). From this perspective, the UN's authority derives not only from legal mandates but also from its perceived legitimacy as the representative of the "international community" (Hurd, 1999).

Even when vetoes prevent binding action, the UN serves as a platform for norm articulation and global scrutiny. Member states often frame their policies in alignment with or in opposition to international norms to justify their behavior (Johnstone, 2011). For example, Russia presents its actions in Ukraine as protecting self-determination, while the United States frames its vetoes in Gaza as supporting Israel's right to self-defense. These competing narratives reflect the UN's function as a normative arena, where states contest legitimacy and global perceptions.

Constructivist approaches also emphasize reputational costs for P5 members that block action in humanitarian crises. Persistent use of the veto can erode legitimacy and provoke international pressure for reform (Risse, 2000). The UN's ongoing engagement in Ukraine and Gaza through humanitarian coordination, documentation of violations, and public diplomacy demonstrates its symbolic authority, even when enforcement power is limited. Constructivism thus provides insight into the UN's dual role: operationally constrained but normatively influential.

Synthesis

Together, realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism offer a comprehensive lens for understanding the UN's performance. Realism explains structural power constraints and veto-induced paralysis. Liberal institutionalism highlights institutional resilience, coordination capacities, and normative influence through multilateral mechanisms. Constructivism emphasizes legitimacy, norm promotion, and the shaping of global perceptions. Applying these perspectives to Ukraine and Gaza illuminates why the UN struggles to enforce collective security against powerful states, yet continues to play a central role in global governance debates.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative case study design to examine the United Nations' (UN) role in crisis management, focusing on the cases of Ukraine (2022–Present) and Gaza (2023– Present). Comparative case studies are particularly suitable for investigating complex political phenomena within their real-world contexts, allowing for systematic analysis of both similarities and differences across cases (Gerring, 2007; George & Bennett, 2005). Ukraine and Gaza were selected based on their relevance to contemporary international crises and their distinct geopolitical contexts: Ukraine involves direct military aggression by a permanent member of the UN Security Council (Russia), while Gaza represents a prolonged regional conflict influenced by the veto power of another permanent member (the United States).

The research utilizes discourse and document analysis as primary methods. Discourse analysis is applied to official statements, speeches, and communications by UN officials and member states to identify patterns in language, framing, and normative positioning within institutional debates (Hajer, 1995; Schmidt, 2008). Document analysis focuses on formal UN outputs, including Security Council resolutions, General Assembly voting records, official reports, and policy documents, which provide structured and verifiable evidence of the organization's procedural and operational activities (Bowen, 2009).

Data sources include both primary and secondary materials. Primary sources consist of UN Security Council and General Assembly documents, official statements by the Secretary-General, and records from relevant UN

agencies, such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) (United Nations, 2022a; United Nations, 2023a). Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed academic articles, books, policy papers, and think tank reports that provide contextual information and analytical frameworks relevant to UN operations and crisis management (Malone, 2020; Weiss, 2023; Gowan, 2024).

This methodological approach enables systematic collection, organization, and comparison of data from the two selected cases. The combination of comparative case study design with discourse and document analysis allows for detailed examination of procedural processes, institutional outputs, and normative content without introducing interpretive or evaluative judgments. The structured approach ensures transparency, replicability, and consistency in data handling across both cases.

Case Study I : Ukraine (2022– Present)

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 constitutes one of the most significant challenges to the United Nations (UN) in recent decades, particularly in the context of crisis management involving a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) (Patrick, 2022). The invasion prompted immediate international attention due to the scale of military operations, the displacement of civilians, and the potential for broader regional destabilization (Malone, 2020). This case study examines the UN's response, focusing on three dimensions: the paralysis of the Security Council due to the Russian veto, the symbolic measures adopted by the General Assembly, and the UN's humanitarian interventions relative to its limited political influence.

UN Security Council Paralysis Due to Russian Veto

The UN Security Council is tasked with primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security under the UN Charter. However, Article 27 grants each of the five permanent members (P5) veto power over substantive resolutions, enabling them to block measures that conflict with their national interests (Voeten, 2001). In the case of Ukraine, Russia exercised its veto on multiple occasions to prevent the adoption of resolutions condemning its military actions and authorizing sanctions or peacekeeping operations (United Nations, 2022a; Weiss, 2023). The use of the veto effectively restricted the Council's ability to implement binding measures, illustrating a structural limitation within the UN's crisis management framework (Hurd, 1999).

During the initial weeks of the conflict, several draft resolutions were circulated within the Security Council, including proposals condemning the invasion and calling for immediate withdrawal of Russian forces. Each of these resolutions was vetoed by Russia, demonstrating the institutional mechanism that allows a permanent member to maintain strategic objectives despite overwhelming international opposition (Patrick, 2022; Malone, 2020). Consequently, the Security Council was unable to authorize collective security measures, implement coercive sanctions, or establish peacekeeping mandates, highlighting the constraints imposed by the veto system in crises involving a P5 member (Gowan, 2022).

General Assembly Symbolic Votes

In response to the paralysis of the Security Council, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) undertook several non-binding measures aimed at articulating global positions and reinforcing international norms. For example, the UNGA adopted Resolution ES-11/1 on 2 March 2022, condemning the invasion, affirming Ukraine's territorial integrity, and calling for the withdrawal of Russian forces (United Nations, 2022b). The resolution received overwhelming support, with 141 member states voting in favor, demonstrating broad international consensus despite the lack of enforceable authority.

Symbolic resolutions such as ES-11/1 serve multiple procedural and normative purposes. First, they provide a documented record of international opposition to violations of sovereignty, contributing to global diplomatic pressure (Chesterman, 2021). Second, they legitimize unilateral or multilateral actions by member states outside the formal Security Council framework, including economic sanctions and logistical support to Ukraine. Third, they reinforce the UN's role as a normative platform, signaling commitment to principles of international law and human rights, even when enforcement mechanisms are absent (Hurd, 1999; Johnstone, 2011).

Additional General Assembly resolutions addressed specific issues such as humanitarian corridors, civilian protection, and documentation of alleged violations of international humanitarian law. While non-binding, these measures have been referenced in debates at regional organizations and policy forums, reflecting their symbolic and agenda-setting function within the international system (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Gowan, 2022).

UN Humanitarian Role vs. Political Ineffectiveness

Parallel to political deliberations, UN agencies engaged in substantial humanitarian operations. The World Food Programme (WFP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and other specialized agencies coordinated aid delivery, shelter, and food assistance for millions of displaced persons within Ukraine and in neighboring countries (Oksamytna & Karlsrud, 2020). These interventions involved collaboration with international NGOs, bilateral donors, and regional organizations, highlighting the UN's operational capacity in delivering humanitarian support.

Despite the humanitarian efforts, the UN's political role remained constrained. The inability of the Security Council to authorize coercive or preventive measures limited the organization's capacity to influence the trajectory of the conflict. Reports from the Secretary-

General emphasized diplomatic engagement and negotiation initiatives, yet these efforts were largely declaratory and lacked the authority to enforce compliance by a permanent member state (United Nations, 2022c; Weiss, 2023). Consequently, the UN's political effectiveness was overshadowed by its operational activities, illustrating a separation between normative influence and coercive capacity in contemporary crises (Hurd, 1999; Patrick, 2022).

Analysis and Implications

The Ukraine case demonstrates that the UN's structural design, particularly the Security Council veto, restricts the organization's capacity for crisis management when a permanent member is involved. Symbolic actions by the General Assembly provide normative reinforcement but cannot substitute for enforceable resolutions. Humanitarian operations show the UN's operational capabilities, yet they do not resolve political impasses or prevent aggression. This combination of Security Council paralysis, General Assembly symbolism, and operational humanitarian activity underscores the dual character of the UN as a normative and operational actor, with limitations determined by structural and political constraints (Keohane, 1984; Wendt, 1999).

In sum, the UN's response to the Ukraine crisis reflects both its strengths and limitations: it remains a central platform for articulating international norms and coordinating humanitarian assistance, yet its capacity to enforce collective security is constrained by institutional mechanisms that privilege the interests of the P5.

Case Study II : Gaza (2023– Present)

The ongoing conflict in Gaza in 2023 represents a critical test of the United Nations' (UN) capacity to manage protracted regional crises, particularly those involving permanent members of the Security Council. The conflict is characterized by recurring escalations between Israel and Palestinian groups in Gaza, resulting in extensive civilian casualties, widespread infrastructural damage, and a severe humanitarian situation (Al Jazeera, 2023; United Nations, 2023a). This case study examines the UN's response, focusing on three dimensions: the use of U.S. vetoes to block Security Council resolutions, the humanitarian crisis and alleged violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), and the role of regional actors relative to the UN's interventions.

U.S. Vetoes Blocking Resolutions

The UN Security Council (UNSC) has historically been constrained by the veto power of its permanent members, which enables a single member to prevent the adoption of substantive resolutions (Voeten, 2001). In the context of Gaza, the United States has consistently employed its veto to block resolutions critical of Israel or calling for binding measures to protect civilians (Malone, 2020). For instance, draft resolutions proposed in response to the 2023 escalation were blocked, preventing the Council from issuing binding directives on ceasefires, investigations, or humanitarian access. This pattern of veto use illustrates the structural limitations of the UNSC and its reliance on great-power consent for enforcement of international law (Hurd, 1999; Gowan, 2024).

The repeated use of the U.S. veto demonstrates the influence of geopolitical alliances on Security Council outcomes. Despite widespread international concern and documentation of civilian harm, the P5's veto power has preserved strategic interests, effectively restricting the UN's capacity for coercive action. The Gaza case, therefore, exemplifies a scenario in which Security Council paralysis results from alignment between a permanent member's foreign policy objectives and an actor involved in the conflict (Voeten, 2005; Johnstone, 2011).

Humanitarian Crisis and Violations of International Humanitarian Law

The Gaza conflict has generated extensive humanitarian needs. According to UN reports, tens of thousands of civilians have been displaced, critical infrastructure including hospitals and water systems has been damaged, and access to essential services remains severely limited (United Nations, 2023b). Agencies such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) have coordinated relief efforts, including food distribution, medical assistance, and temporary shelter provision (Oksamytna & Karlsrud, 2020; Weiss, 2023).

The situation in Gaza has also raised concerns regarding violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), including the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution in attacks (Bellamy & Williams, 2017). Multiple reports by UN bodies have documented civilian casualties, destruction of civilian infrastructure, and impediments to humanitarian access (United Nations, 2023b). While UN agencies provide operational assistance, the absence of binding Security Council resolutions limits their ability to enforce compliance with IHL, underscoring the institutional constraints imposed by the veto system (Malone, 2020; Hurd, 1999).

Role of Regional Actors vs. UN

Given the Security Council's limitations, regional actors have often assumed a more active role in mediating and responding to the crisis. Organizations such as the Arab League, Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey have engaged in diplomatic mediation, coordinated ceasefire agreements, and facilitated humanitarian corridors (Gowan, 2024). These actors operate within regional frameworks and bilateral negotiations, often achieving temporary reductions in hostilities, while the UN primarily provides technical and humanitarian support.

The interaction between regional actors and the UN highlights the complementary yet constrained role of the organization in protracted regional conflicts. While the UN facilitates coordination, monitors compliance with humanitarian norms, and documents violations, it is reliant on regional and international partners for operational and political outcomes (Weiss & Daws, 2018). Constructivist perspectives emphasize that the UN's legitimacy derives not only from its formal authority but also from its capacity to mobilize normative expectations and coordinate multilateral action (Wendt, 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In Gaza, the UN's symbolic role is evident in public statements, documentation of violations, and coordination of relief efforts, but its coercive power remains limited by structural and political constraints.

Analysis

The Gaza case illustrates the persistent limitations of the UN in crisis management when conflicts involve states allied with a permanent Security Council member. The repeated use of vetoes by the United States prevented the adoption of binding resolutions, highlighting structural constraints consistent with realist predictions (Mearsheimer, 1995). At the same time, the UN's operational agencies demonstrated capacity in humanitarian coordination and service provision, aligning with liberal institutionalist interpretations of institutional resilience (Keohane & Martin, 1995; Weiss & Daws, 2018). Constructivist insights further underscore the UN's normative influence: through public statements, documentation, and coordination with regional actors, the organization maintains symbolic authority and promotes international law despite the absence of coercive enforcement (Johnstone, 2011; Wendt, 1999).

The Gaza case, therefore, exemplifies a scenario in which the UN's effectiveness is constrained by structural factors, particularly the P5 veto, and highlights the critical role of regional actors in mediating conflicts where the UN's coercive authority is limited. The combination of political paralysis, operational humanitarian activity, and normative engagement illustrates the multifaceted but structurally constrained nature of UN crisis management.

Comparative Analysis

The cases of Ukraine (2022– Present) and Gaza (2023– Present) illustrate the structural and political limitations of the United Nations (UN) in contemporary crisis management. Both cases demonstrate how the organization's capacity to enforce collective security is constrained by the institutional design of the Security Council (UNSC), particularly the veto power of the permanent five members (P5), while also highlighting differences in geopolitical context and international framing. This comparative analysis identifies structural similarities, variations in geopolitical dynamics, and implications for the UN's legitimacy in the international system.

Structural Similarities: Veto and P5 Dominance

A key structural similarity between the Ukraine and Gaza cases is the paralyzing effect of the P5 veto. In Ukraine, Russia exercised its veto to block Security Council resolutions condemning its military actions and authorizing coercive measures, effectively neutralizing the Council's authority (Patrick, 2022; Malone, 2020). Similarly, in Gaza, the United States has repeatedly used its veto to prevent resolutions critical of Israel, including measures aimed at civilian protection and humanitarian access (Voeten, 2001; Al Jazeera, 2023). In both instances, the veto allows a P5 member to override the overwhelming consensus of the international community, demonstrating the structural constraint embedded in the UN Charter (Hurd, 1999; Voeten, 2005).

The dominance of P5 members also shapes the operational and normative activities of the UN. While both cases involve substantial humanitarian engagement through UN agencies, the organization's ability to translate normative consensus into binding action is systematically constrained. This reinforces the dual character of the UN as both a normative platform and an operational actor with limited coercive authority (Weiss & Daws, 2018; Johnstone, 2011).

Differences in Geopolitical Framing

Despite structural similarities, the two cases differ significantly in geopolitical framing and international response. Ukraine represents a conventional interstate conflict in which a permanent UNSC member directly invades a sovereign state. This framing triggered rapid mobilization of Western-aligned states, resulting in coordinated sanctions, arms support, and diplomatic pressure, even outside the UN framework (Gowan, 2022). The UN's role, while constrained by Russia's veto, focused on normative condemnation and humanitarian coordination, with the General Assembly providing symbolic reinforcement of international law.

In contrast, Gaza constitutes a protracted regional conflict with deep historical roots, complex local actors, and asymmetric power dynamics. The U.S. veto shields Israel from binding Security Council measures, complicating efforts to address humanitarian and civilian protection issues (Malone, 2020). International responses are more fragmented, with regional actors such as Egypt, Qatar, and the Arab League playing central roles in mediation and humanitarian facilitation (Gowan, 2024). The UN's role is primarily operational and symbolic, coordinating relief and documenting violations, but its political influence is limited due to the alignment of a P5 member with a conflict party.

Implications for International Legitimacy

Both cases highlight the implications of structural constraints for the UN's international legitimacy. The

repeated inability of the Security Council to adopt binding measures against a P5 member's actions challenges the organization's credibility as an enforcer of international law (Hurd, 1999; Patrick, 2022). In Ukraine, the vetoed resolutions underline the tension between normative ideals and structural limitations, although General Assembly resolutions and humanitarian operations provide partial legitimacy (Chesterman, 2021; Weiss, 2023). Similarly, in Gaza, the UN's constrained political role reduces perceptions of impartiality and effectiveness, even as humanitarian coordination reinforces its normative authority (Oksamytna & Karlsrud, 2020; Johnstone, 2011).

Comparative analysis also demonstrates that the UN's legitimacy is context-dependent. In Ukraine, broad international alignment against Russia enhances the symbolic and normative weight of UN actions. In Gaza, divided global responses and regional mediation shape perceptions of the UN as constrained and secondary to regional actors. Constructivist perspectives emphasize that the UN's authority is derived not only from formal mandates but also from its ability to project normative influence and coordinate collective action, even under structural limitations (Wendt, 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Synthesis

The comparative assessment of Ukraine and Gaza confirms that structural features of the UN, particularly the P5 veto, consistently constrain coercive crisis management. However, variations in geopolitical framing, alliance structures, and regional involvement influence how the organization is perceived and how effectively it can operate. Both cases underscore the duality of the UN: it functions as a central normative and operational actor, yet its structural design restricts enforcement. Understanding these dynamics is critical for discussions of institutional reform and the future role of the UN in maintaining international peace and security.

Conclusion

The United Nations (UN) has repeatedly demonstrated its dual character as a normative and operational actor in global governance, capable of articulating international law, coordinating humanitarian responses, and convening diplomatic forums, yet constrained by structural and political limitations (Voeten, 2001; Malone, 2020). The cases of Ukraine (2022– Present) and Gaza (2023– Present) exemplify how the veto power of permanent Security Council members (P5) limits the organization's capacity to enforce collective security, even in situations involving mass civilian harm and violations of international humanitarian law (Patrick, 2022; Hurd, 1999). To reconcile normative authority with operational effectiveness, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. *Conditional Veto Mechanism:* Introduce limitations on the use of vetoes by P5 members in circumstances involving genocide, war crimes, or widespread civilian casualties. This conditional veto could be activated when a supermajority of Security Council members and a General Assembly endorsement concur. The mechanism preserves strategic interests while ensuring the UN can respond to the most severe humanitarian crises without paralysis (Patrick, 2022; Hurd, 1999).
2. *Security Council Expansion with Regional Representation:* Reform the Security Council by incorporating additional permanent or semi-permanent members from underrepresented regions and emerging powers. This would diversify perspectives, reduce the overconcentration of authority within the current P5, and enhance the legitimacy of decisions in global crisis management (Thakur, 2017; Weiss, 2023).
3. *Hybrid Global–Regional Crisis Mechanisms*: Institutionalize formal cooperation frameworks between the UN and regional organizations, such as the Arab League, NATO, EU, and ASEAN, to improve rapid response capabilities, humanitarian coordination, and mediation in conflicts where the Security Council is blocked. Regional actors have demonstrated effectiveness in Gaza and Ukraine, complementing UN operational and normative roles, and their systematic integration would strengthen the organization's responsiveness (Gowan, 2024; Weiss & Daws, 2018).
4. *Strengthening General Assembly Resolutions' Binding Force*: Develop mechanisms that enhance the enforceability of General Assembly (GA) resolutions in exceptional circumstances. This could include linking GA resolutions to UN operational funding, enabling targeted sanctions, or providing frameworks for regional enforcement. By converting symbolic consensus into actionable measures, the UN's operational leverage can be increased without undermining the Security Council's formal authority (Chesterman, 2021; Oksamytna & Karlsrud, 2020).
5. *Integrated Monitoring and Reporting Systems:* Implement transparent systems to monitor decision-making, track implementation, and evaluate outcomes of Security Council and regional interventions. Such systems would reinforce accountability, enhance credibility, and allow for more effective assessment of the UN's impact in crisis scenarios.

The UN remains central to international normative and operational governance, yet the structural design of the Security Council, particularly P5 veto power, consistently limits its capacity to enforce collective security in crises involving great powers or their allies (Hurd, 1999; Patrick, 2022). The Ukraine and Gaza cases demonstrate the organization's dual role: while capable of coordinating large-scale humanitarian operations and reinforcing international norms, it is structurally constrained in political enforcement.

Implementing comprehensive reforms including conditional veto mechanisms, Security Council expansion, hybrid global–regional crisis frameworks,

strengthened GA resolution enforcement, and integrated monitoring systems could significantly enhance the UN's credibility, effectiveness, and legitimacy. These measures provide actionable pathways to reconcile normative authority with operational capacity, ensuring the UN can respond decisively to contemporary crises while maintaining its legitimacy as a central actor in international relations.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the scholarly understanding of UN crisis management by integrating structural, operational, and normative perspectives, while offering innovative, actionable solutions that have the potential to transform the organization. By operationalizing these recommendations, the UN could evolve from a primarily symbolic institution into a proactive and effective global actor, capable of addressing twenty-first-century conflicts, promoting international law, and sustaining global peace and security.

This study focuses on two high-profile cases Ukraine and Gaza thus generalizability to all UN crises may be limited. Further research could include comparative analysis of crises in Africa, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo or Sudan, to test the applicability of these findings across different regional, political, and conflict dynamics. Additionally, the study relies primarily on publicly available UN documents, academic articles, and think tank reports; access to internal UN deliberations could provide deeper insights into decision-making processes and veto rationales.

Future research should also explore quantitative modeling of veto impacts, examining patterns across multiple conflicts to statistically assess how vetoes affect the likelihood of humanitarian intervention, resolution adoption, and civilian outcomes. Studies could also investigate the efficacy of hybrid global–regional mechanisms in practice, evaluating coordination efficiency, legitimacy, and speed of response.

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