


From Selective Multilateralism to Institutional Paralysis: The United States' Impact on United Nations Performance vis-à-vis the War on Gaza (2023–2024)

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Abstract

This article examines how the United States' selective multilateralism contributed to the institutional paralysis of the United Nations in responding to the Zionist regime's 2023–2024 war on Gaza. Selective multilateralism refers to Washington's practice of engaging with, or bypassing, multilateral mechanisms depending on whether institutional outcomes advance its strategic interests. This behavior aligns with the assumptions of structural realism and the instrumentalist interpretation of international institutions (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001), whereas liberal institutionalism and constructivism emphasize sustained multilateral cooperation and adherence to international norms (Keohane, 1984; Finnemore, 1996).

The case study of the Gaza war demonstrates that the United States' unconditional support for the Israeli regime significantly constrained the functionality of the Security Council, repeatedly blocking ceasefire and condemnation resolutions through the use of the veto. As a result, the United Nations' response was largely limited to initiatives within the General Assembly and non-binding expressions of concern, which had minimal impact on curbing the violence.

Employing an analytical–theoretical approach, this article conceptualizes selective multilateralism and institutional paralysis, evaluates the role of the United States in undermining the effectiveness of the United Nations during the Gaza crisis, and assesses the broader implications of this behavior for the future of the global multilateral order.

Keywords: Selective multilateralism, institutional paralysis, United Nations, U.S., Zionist regime, war on Gaza.

Introduction

The United Nations was established as the emblem of the post–Second World War multilateral order, designed to prevent the recurrence of catastrophic wars through collective cooperation among states. Nevertheless, the institution's performance over the past eight decades demonstrates that its effectiveness has been strongly conditioned by the preferences and practices of the great powers (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2011). One of the most fundamental challenges confronting the United Nations is institutional paralysis in situations where the interests or allies of veto-wielding powers are implicated. In such circumstances, whenever one of the permanent members of the Security Council (P5) opposes collective action, the organization's decision-making mechanisms are effectively incapacitated.

Contemporary manifestations of this dilemma include the Security Council's inability to resolve the war in Ukraine and the 2023–2024 war on Gaza. In both cases, entrenched disagreements among the permanent members and the major powers' support for opposing parties to the conflicts prevented consensus and undermined the United Nations' capacity for effective action.

The central problem addressed in this study concerns how the United States' selective multilateralism produced institutional paralysis within the United Nations during the Gaza war. Selective multilateralism refers to an approach in which a major power—in this case, the United States—determines, on the basis of its strategic preferences, when to engage multilateral institutions and when to neutralize them through the exercise of its power. During the Gaza war, the United States simultaneously emphasized the necessity of direct and unilateral diplomacy while systematically vetoing collective initiatives within the Security Council aimed at halting hostilities. This pattern of behavior constitutes a clear manifestation of selective multilateralism, the consequence of which was the functional paralysis of the principal UN body responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security.

The purpose of this article is to elucidate, drawing on international relations theory and empirical evidence from the Gaza war, the relationship between the United States' selective approach to multilateralism and the incapacitation of international institutions. The significance of this inquiry is twofold. Theoretically, it contributes to the literature on the role of great powers in international institutions and the future of multilateralism. Practically, it offers insights relevant to debates on reforming UN

mechanisms and reducing their structural dependence on the will of major powers.

Accordingly, the principal research question is as follows: how and why did the United States, during the Gaza war, prevent effective UN action by adopting a selective multilateralist approach, and what implications did this behavior have for the legitimacy and credibility of the multilateral order? To address this question, the article first conceptualizes selective multilateralism and traces its antecedents in U.S. foreign policy (Section I). It then examines the mechanisms of institutional paralysis within the United Nations, alongside comparable historical cases (Section II). Finally, it analyzes the performance of the United Nations during the 2023–2024 Gaza war and the role of the United States therein as a focused case study (Section III).

The research employs a descriptive–analytical methodology grounded in a qualitative case study design. Data are drawn from library sources, official United Nations documents, and credible news reports. Through a theoretical–applied perspective, the study demonstrates how abstract theoretical concepts—particularly realist interpretations of international institutions—manifest in practice and contribute to the persistent gap between the expressed will of the international community and the outcomes ultimately produced by multilateral institutions.

1. The United States' Selective Multilateralism: Theoretical Framework and Background

Multilateralism generally refers to cooperation among three or more states within a framework of agreed-upon principles and institutions designed to address common problems. As John Ruggie has emphasized, this concept entails adherence to generalized rules and the absence of discrimination in reciprocal behavior (Ruggie, 1992). In the liberal international order established after 1945, the United States played a central role in creating multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (later the World Trade Organization), whose purpose was to align state interests within a system of shared rules (Ikenberry, 2011). Nevertheless, U.S. foreign policy has consistently combined elements of multilateralism and unilateralism, and scholars have long pointed to American exceptionalism in relation to international institutions (Nau, 2002, as cited in Owen, 2003). In practice, Washington has supported international institutions when they reflect its power and strategic

interests, but when it perceives them as constraining its freedom of action or contradicting its objectives, it adopts an independent or confrontational posture (Patrick, 2017). This pattern of behavior may be described as selective multilateralism.

Within international relations theory, the United States' selective multilateralism can be explained through a synthesis of structural realism and liberal institutionalism. From a realist perspective, international institutions reflect the distribution of power in an anarchic system, and great powers retain the ability to shape, redirect, or disrupt their functioning whenever they choose (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 1994). Mearsheimer argues that institutions possess limited capacity to compel states to act against their interests unless they align with the preferences of major powers (Mearsheimer, 2001). From this standpoint, the United States—as the dominant power in the post-Cold War era—tends to view multilateral institutions as instruments for advancing its interests; when these instruments become ineffective or conflict with U.S. objectives, Washington refrains from employing them. Numerous historical examples support this view. The decision to bypass the Security Council and form an ad hoc coalition for the 2003 invasion of Iraq exemplified the prioritization of unilateral action, or multilateralism outside the UN framework, over formal collective mechanisms (Brown, 2003). Similarly, the United States' withdrawal from UNESCO in the 1980s and again in the 2010s—when it judged the organization's policies to be contrary to its interests and those of the Zionist regime—demonstrated its willingness to abandon international institutions that fail to conform to its strategic preferences (Valensise, 2025).

From the perspective of liberal institutionalism, however, the United States—despite its preponderant power—continues to rely on multilateral cooperation to secure its long-term interests (Keohane, 1984). Robert Keohane's theory posits that international institutions facilitate cooperation even in an anarchic system by reducing transaction costs and generating stable expectations among states. Accordingly, U.S. interests remain tied to the maintenance of a rules-based order; yet Washington prefers to engage selectively, taking the lead where cooperation serves its advantage while avoiding commitments in areas where institutions are perceived as restrictive. For instance, the United States has actively supported institutions governing free trade and international finance, while refraining from or opposing initiatives such as the International Criminal Court and global environmental agreements, including the

Kyoto Protocol, which it regarded as limiting its autonomy. This dual approach reflects cost–benefit calculations by U.S. policymakers, who prefer that “multilateralism be a choice, not an obligation” (Haass, 1999). As Kurtzer and Miller have emphasized, a calibrated combination of unilateralism and selective multilateralism can function as a more effective instrument of U.S. diplomacy and power projection.

In other words, U.S. policymakers advocate a multilateral approach when issues cannot be resolved without broad participation, while resisting multilateral constraints when independent action is deemed more effective or when institutions fail to adequately represent U.S. interests (Kurtzer & Miller, 2020). In practice, this recommendation reflects the very pattern that has characterized U.S. behavior in recent decades. Moreover, constructivist approaches further illuminate the normative and ideational dimensions of selective multilateralism. From this perspective, the identities, values, and internal belief systems of American elites significantly influence the degree to which the United States adheres to multilateral norms (Finnemore, 1996).

American exceptionalism—the belief that the United States occupies a unique moral position as a guardian of liberty—has historically generated skepticism toward external constraints on its behavior (Nau, 2002; Owen, 2003). Additionally, ideological and value-based affinities between the United States and certain close allies—such as the Zionist regime, which is portrayed by itself and its supporters as a liberal democracy in the Middle East—have led Washington to justify unwavering support even at the cost of international isolation. From a constructivist standpoint, domestic norms and networks of political influence, including pro-Zionist regime lobbying groups, exert significant influence over U.S. foreign policy decision-making. These dynamics have produced a distinct form of selective multilateralism, in which Washington prefers to oppose global consensus rather than risk undermining its perceived commitment to the Zionist regime's security (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). The interaction between material power considerations and deeply embedded norms and identities has thus generated oscillatory patterns in U.S. engagement with the United Nations and other international institutions.

In summary, selective multilateralism constitutes an entrenched feature of the United States' international strategy, with roots extending back to the Cold War and its aftermath. On the one hand, the United States has been a principal architect of the United

Nations system and the post-1945 multilateral order, supporting and strengthening international institutions when they have aligned with its interests. On the other hand, when multilateral rules have been perceived as constraining, Washington has resorted to unilateral action or obstructed collective decision-making. This enduring tension is aptly captured by Héctor Cárdenas, who observes: “The decline of multilateralism did not begin with the Trump era alone; the United States’ record—from withholding contributions during the Reagan and Clinton administrations to internal divisions over the 2003 Iraq invasion under Bush—reveals a persistent ambivalence toward the very system it helped build” (Cárdenas, 2025). Accordingly, the theoretical premise of this discussion is that great powers such as the United States treat multilateralism as an instrument of choice rather than a binding obligation; when such powers choose to undermine or bypass this instrument, the result is paralysis in the functioning of international institutions. The following section examines this phenomenon of institutional paralysis within the United Nations.

2. Institutional Paralysis in the United Nations and the Role of the Great Powers

Institutional paralysis arises when the formal mechanisms of an international organization—here, the United Nations—become incapable of decision-making or effective action due to the opposition or noncooperation of influential members. The institutional design of the United Nations, particularly the veto power vested in the five permanent members of the Security Council, renders the organization vulnerable to paralysis under conditions of great-power discord. When the UN was established in 1945, granting veto authority to the victorious powers of the Second World War was regarded as a necessary compromise to ensure their participation in the emerging postwar order. However, this structural privilege has repeatedly prevented the Security Council from responding effectively to crises involving a permanent member or its close allies. As a senior official of the Council on Foreign Relations has observed, the United Nations played only a marginal role in both the Ukraine and Gaza wars, as deep divisions among the permanent members effectively precluded consensus or collective action. In such circumstances, when great powers perceive their vital interests to be at stake, they tend to sideline the multilateral order—either acting unilaterally or allowing conflicts to persist without meaningful international intervention (Patrick, 2020).

The mechanisms of institutional paralysis are evident in the historical record of the Security Council's performance. During the Cold War period (1945–1990), rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union frequently resulted in the blockage of draft resolutions through the use of the veto. Prior to the 1970s, the Soviet Union was the most frequent user of the veto, while the United States exercised this power relatively rarely—only twice by 1970. However, following the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, and especially from the 1970s onward, the United States emerged as the most prolific user of the veto in the Security Council. A majority of these vetoes were cast in defense of the Israeli regime. Statistical evidence indicates that between 1972 and December 2023, the United States vetoed 45 resolutions critical of the regime, accounting for more than half of all U.S. vetoes in the Council's history. Consequently, the Israel–Palestine issue has become a paradigmatic case of enduring institutional paralysis within the Security Council.

In nearly every escalation or armed confrontation between the Zionist regime and the Palestinians, a majority of Security Council members have sought to adopt resolutions calling for ceasefires or condemning violence against civilians. Yet the United States has consistently used its veto power to block any resolution that would impose binding obligations on the regime. This pattern of behavior has been so persistent that even some Western diplomats have described Washington as serving as a diplomatic shield for the Zionists. As reported by Reuters, “the United States has traditionally played the role of diplomatic shield for its ally Israel at the United Nations.” As a result, the Security Council has, with regard to the Palestinian issue, largely lost both functionality and credibility among Arab publics and within the Non-Aligned Movement. Consequently, the UN General Assembly has increasingly become the primary forum for expressing international opinion on the conflict. However, because General Assembly resolutions are non-binding and largely symbolic, they cannot compensate for the absence of effective Security Council action.

Institutional paralysis within the United Nations is not confined to the Palestinian case. In recent decades, whenever a permanent member or one of its close allies has been directly involved in a conflict, the Security Council has often descended into deadlock. During the Syrian civil war after 2011, for instance, Russia and China repeatedly vetoed Western-backed draft resolutions aimed at condemning the Syrian government or imposing sanctions, thereby

preventing the adoption of coercive international measures against the Assad regime. Similarly, since 2014, Russia has blocked all Security Council resolutions condemning or exerting pressure on Moscow in relation to the Ukraine crisis. As a result, the United Nations has been unable to invoke its most powerful legal instruments, including those under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Even in cases where some degree of consensus has existed, great-power calculations have constrained the UN's capacity to implement decisions effectively. In the Yemen conflict, despite the adoption of multiple resolutions, the organization lacked the influence and enforcement capacity necessary to halt hostilities or hold human rights violators accountable, largely due to U.S. and British support for the Saudi-led military coalition. These cases illustrate how great-power rivalries permeate the functioning of the United Nations and reduce it, in moments of acute disagreement, to a forum for declaratory politics rather than effective collective action (Neelam, 2023).

Within this broader context, the United States—as the world's leading military and economic power and the host country of the UN headquarters—has played a particularly decisive role in shaping the trajectory of multilateralism. As discussed earlier, Washington has repeatedly employed its veto power in the post-Cold War era to obstruct Security Council action. Beyond vetoes, the United States has also used its financial leverage as a means of influencing UN behavior. A notable example is the 2018 decision to cut funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), undertaken during the Trump administration as part of a broader pressure campaign against the Palestinian leadership. This decision precipitated a severe budgetary crisis for the agency and disrupted its humanitarian operations (Reuters, 2018). Similarly, the United States' periodic delays or failures in paying its assessed contributions to the UN regular budget have caused funding shortfalls and programmatic disruptions. On several occasions, Washington has employed this tactic to signal dissatisfaction with specific UN policies or initiatives. Accordingly, institutional paralysis is not limited to decision-making deadlock in the Security Council; it also manifests in the gradual erosion of the organization's financial and administrative capacity.

The decline in U.S. engagement with UN activities—whether due to shifting strategic priorities, such as intensifying competition with China, or domestic political dynamics, including the Trump administration's withdrawal-oriented approach to international institutions—has further weakened the multilateral system. At the

same time, the responsibility for institutional paralysis cannot be attributed exclusively to the United States. The Security Council's structure empowers all five permanent members to obstruct collective action when their interests are threatened. Absent meaningful institutional reform—such as limitations on the use of the veto or an expansion of permanent membership to reflect contemporary power distributions—the likelihood of paralysis in moments of major crisis will persist (Hurd, 2019).

Nevertheless, the present study focuses specifically on the role of the United States during the Gaza war, where Washington emerged as the central actor either shaping or obstructing the UN response. The following section examines the events of 2023–2024 in the occupied Palestinian territories to demonstrate how the United States' selective multilateralism effectively immobilized the United Nations in the face of large-scale violence in Gaza.

3. The Gaza War (2023–2024) and United Nations Paralysis: U.S. Selective Multilateralism in Practice

In response to the October 7 operation, the Israeli regime launched an unprecedented series of airstrikes, followed by a large-scale ground offensive against the Gaza Strip. The Israeli authorities stated that their objective was to dismantle Hamas's infrastructure and secure the release of hostages; however, the intensity of the attacks and the comprehensive siege of Gaza within the first weeks precipitated a severe humanitarian crisis. The United Nations and other humanitarian agencies warned that Gaza faced acute shortages of food, water, medicine, and fuel, placing the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians at risk. According to figures from the Gaza Ministry of Health (affiliated with the Palestinian Authority) by late 2023, tens of thousands of Palestinians—mostly civilians, including thousands of women and children—had been killed. The scale of destruction rendered certain areas of Gaza effectively uninhabitable, and human rights organizations raised concerns regarding the potential commission of war crimes by both parties, particularly in light of the Israeli regime's indiscriminate attacks in densely populated urban areas.

Under these circumstances, the United Nations, as an international legal authority and potential mediator, was expected to intervene to halt the hostilities and alleviate civilian suffering. However, the UN's response during this crisis was limited to several non-binding statements and a single, minimal resolution. The following section examines the engagement—or lack thereof—of

various UN bodies during the Gaza war, as well as the direct influence exerted by the United States on this trajectory.

3-1. The Security Council: Veto Power versus the Majority

From the outset of the war, the Security Council became the primary arena of diplomatic contestation among the world's powers over the Gaza crisis. The Council's first emergency meeting was held in mid-October 2023, during which two competing draft resolutions were introduced: one by Brazil, representing the humanitarian-oriented non-permanent members, and the other by Russia. Brazil's draft called for humanitarian pauses in the fighting to allow the delivery of urgent aid to Gaza, responding to the severe plight of civilians and to UN Secretary-General António Guterres's appeal for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.

In the vote of 18 October 2023, twelve Council members supported Brazil's resolution, with only the United States vetoing it; the United Kingdom and Russia abstained. U.S. representative Linda Thomas-Greenfield explained that the United States was engaged in "hard diplomacy on the ground" and that time should be allowed for Washington's efforts to bear fruit. She also expressed dissatisfaction that the Brazilian draft made no reference to the Israeli regime's so-called right of self-defense. In parallel, China's representative criticized the U.S. action as "unbelievable," noting that Washington had not explicitly opposed the text during earlier negotiations. Russia's representative similarly described the U.S. veto as evidence of Western "hypocrisy and double standards." Russia's own draft, which called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, had been put to a vote two days earlier but failed due to insufficient affirmative votes, blocked by opposition from Western states. Following this deadlock, Russia requested an emergency special session of the UN General Assembly to express the will of the international community, bypassing the Security Council's paralysis.

In the days that followed, U.S. diplomatic efforts shifted away from the Security Council toward direct negotiations with Israel, Egypt, and other regional actors to open the Rafah crossing and secure temporary pauses in the fighting for hostage releases and humanitarian access. The White House was evidently unwilling to allow the Council to take initiative or adopt any binding measures without Washington's consent. As the crisis persisted, the United States prepared its own draft resolution, submitted on 25 October 2023, aligned with U.S. and Israeli preferences. The draft primarily

condemned Hamas and called for the immediate release of hostages, while only generally referencing humanitarian assistance and omitting any demand for a ceasefire or halt to Israeli military operations. This draft failed due to vetoes by Russia and China, who argued that humanitarian access alone was insufficient without stopping the fighting.

By the end of October 2023, the Security Council had failed to adopt any resolution on the Gaza war—twice due to U.S. vetoes and once due to Russian and Chinese vetoes. The mutual neutralization of these initiatives left the body charged with maintaining international peace effectively observing the conflict unfold. During this period, the Council agreed only on a weak presidential statement condemning attacks on civilians, which, under U.S. pressure, did not even name Israel as responsible for the strike on Gaza's Al-Ahli Hospital. Journalists reported that the United States had imposed explicit red lines even on this non-binding statement to ensure Israel would not be referenced.

As civilian casualties mounted, global public pressure for an immediate ceasefire grew. Arab states and the Non-Aligned Movement mobilized within the General Assembly to amplify the voice of the majority of UN member states. On 27 October 2023, the General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza and the protection of civilians. The resolution passed with 120 votes in favor and 14 against, including the United States and Israel, while 45 states abstained. Though lacking enforcement power, it politically underscored U.S. isolation and highlighted the few states supporting continued hostilities. Israel's representative condemned the resolution as a “shameful spectacle,” while Libya's representative countered that states voting against it had “blood on their hands.” The United States maintained that the resolution had no practical effect on hostages or hostilities.

Efforts to secure a Security Council resolution continued in November and December 2023, amid worsening humanitarian conditions in Gaza. The United Arab Emirates, as a non-permanent member representing Arab states, introduced a new draft emphasizing immediate, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access and calling for “creating the conditions necessary for a sustained cessation of hostilities.” The term “ceasefire” was deliberately avoided to circumvent U.S. objections. After negotiations, on 22 December 2023, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2723 with thirteen votes in favor and two abstentions (the United States and Russia). The U.S. abstention, rather than a veto, allowed the

resolution to pass, as it contained no demand for an immediate ceasefire and focused solely on humanitarian aid. Russia abstained due to dilution of the ceasefire language. Sections that might have constrained Israeli control over aid distribution and UN monitoring provisions were removed under U.S. and Israeli pressure.

Despite the adoption of Resolution 2723, criticism persisted. Russia, China, and members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation considered it overly passive, arguing that the Council should have explicitly demanded an immediate ceasefire. Russia accused the United States of inserting language that effectively granted Israel “a license to kill more civilians” under the guise of facilitating humanitarian relief. The Palestinian representative welcomed the resolution only conditionally, emphasizing the need for immediate follow-up action. The U.S. ambassador, however, portrayed it as “a glimmer of hope in a sea of human suffering.”

The United States remained decisive even after Resolution 2723. It used its veto against subsequent Russian proposals to restore the original call for an “immediate cessation of hostilities,” marking the sixth U.S. veto related to the Gaza war by September 2025, each time opposing the near-unanimous majority of Council members.

Thus, by the end of 2024, after more than fifty thousand Palestinian deaths, the Security Council was effectively unable to take meaningful action, issuing only a single neutral humanitarian resolution. Throughout the 2023–2024 Gaza war, the Council was paralyzed by great-power confrontations, particularly the U.S. insistence on preserving Israeli operational freedom. Only when a resolution aligned with U.S. preferences—and stripped of any ceasefire language—could it be adopted. Humanitarian needs were minimally addressed, and the credibility of both the Security Council and the UN suffered severe damage, with many observers describing the UN as a “powerless bystander” or even a “silent accomplice.” Multilateralism within the Security Council thus became a casualty of the great powers' unilateralism, especially that of the United States, which prevented the body from fulfilling its legal mandate to maintain international peace and security.

3-2. The General Assembly and Other UN Bodies: Circumventing the Deadlock

With the Security Council gridlocked, states turned to the General Assembly to ensure that, at a minimum, a global condemnation of the violence could be expressed. As noted earlier, the Assembly's first resolution in late October 2023 called for a humanitarian

ceasefire and was adopted by an overwhelming majority. Thereafter, in December 2023—coinciding with the Council's failure to adopt a ceasefire—the General Assembly passed another resolution, this time with 153 votes in favor, reaffirming the demand for an immediate ceasefire. Again, in December 2024, a decisive majority of UN member states (158 countries) called for a full and unconditional ceasefire. Finally, in June 2025, when the war persisted, albeit at lower intensity, the General Assembly once more demanded a permanent ceasefire, with 149 votes in favor and 11 against (including the United States and Israel). Although these resolutions carried no binding effect on the regime, they politically demonstrated that the United States and Israel remained in a small minority, while the collective conscience of the international community favored halting the carnage in Gaza. Even some Western governments that typically align with the United States—such as Canada, Australia, and Germany—either joined the majority or abstained rather than oppose the resolutions outright.

Other UN organs also attempted, to varying degrees, to compensate for the Security Council's inaction. UN Secretary-General António Guterres repeatedly called explicitly for a humanitarian ceasefire or, at a minimum, temporary pauses to facilitate aid delivery. On 24 October 2023, in remarks before the Security Council, he stated that Hamas's retaliation “did not occur in a vacuum,” invoking decades of occupation and deprivation experienced by Palestinians. These comments provoked intense anger from Israel, which demanded Guterres's resignation; its representative even declared that “the blood of our people is on the Secretary-General's hands.” Nevertheless, Guterres continued articulating humanitarian concerns and ultimately welcomed the adoption of Resolution 2723, though he deemed it insufficient.

Specialized UN agencies—such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Food Programme—also issued statements and reports warning of the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) repeatedly emphasized in Council briefings that effective humanitarian delivery was impossible without a halt to the fighting. Yet all these efforts were limited in the face of relentless bombardment. Even as UNRWA (the Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees) announced that its fuel and supplies were nearly depleted, threatening suspension of certain activities, the Security Council remained preoccupied with negotiating the wording of its

draft resolution.

Analytically, the UN General Assembly functioned as a kind of global public conscience, capable of articulating the moral and political position of the majority of states but lacking enforcement power. Even so, the Assembly's role should not be dismissed: its decisive resolutions in October and December 2023 strengthened public pressure and mobilized civil society groups in Western countries to push their governments to reconsider their positions. For instance, after France and Japan voted in favor of the Assembly's October 2023 resolution, a signal was sent to Washington that even some of its close allies supported halting the war. Although this shift in sentiment ultimately did not overcome the U.S. veto in the Security Council, it highlighted America's growing isolation.

The role of the International Criminal Court (ICC) was also notable. The Court had already opened investigations regarding the situation in Palestine years earlier, and during the 2023 war, the ICC Prosecutor warned of potential war crimes. Israel argued that the Court lacked jurisdiction, and the United States likewise opposed any international legal action against the regime, as it is not a party to the Rome Statute and rejects such proceedings. Consequently, in the realm of international criminal justice as well, the convergence of U.S. and Israeli positions hindered the ability of international mechanisms to exert meaningful deterrence.

Beyond the United Nations, regional actors such as Egypt and Qatar eventually succeeded—through mediation efforts—in arranging a temporary ceasefire in late November 2023 (lasting roughly one week) to facilitate the exchange of some hostages for detainees. During this pause, greater humanitarian aid reached Gaza. However, once the exchange concluded, the war resumed and even intensified. Throughout this period, parallel U.S. diplomacy continued outside the UN framework: the Biden administration managed the crisis through direct negotiations with Qatar, Israel, and Egypt rather than allowing the Security Council to assume an independent role. This reflected the same selective approach described earlier; in other words, Washington preferred to manage the crisis through bilateral or limited multilateral channels rather than allow global mechanisms to take the lead.

A synthesis of the UN's performance during the Gaza war reveals that the institution became a casualty of great-power competition, particularly the United States' support for Israel. Institutional paralysis first became evident in the Security Council,

where—despite the near-unanimous demand of the majority for halting the fighting—the United States blocked action. Thereafter, the paralysis extended into other domains: UN humanitarian operations remained insufficient due to Israeli-imposed restrictions backed by the United States; the diplomatic initiatives of the Secretary-General and his envoys failed to secure Washington's approval; and legal efforts and public advocacy were effectively stymied by the protective shield extended to Israel. This situation clearly illustrates the link between selective multilateralism and institutional paralysis: wherever a major power such as the United States does not perceive a multilateral institution as serving its interests, it leverages special privileges or political influence to disable it, resulting in the crippling of collective responses to crises that, by their nature, require international cooperative action.

Conclusion

The 2023–2024 Gaza war constituted a severe test for multilateralism and the rules-based international order. This crisis demonstrated the extent to which, despite growing interdependence among states and the need for collective responses to humanitarian challenges, existing multilateral mechanisms remain vulnerable to power politics. The United Nations Security Council—which ought to be the core decision-making body for peace—failed in this war to discharge its mandate due to the great powers' selective multilateralism, particularly that of the United States. As the strategic ally of Israel, the United States, from the outset of the war, employed its veto power selectively to nullify any binding resolution calling for a ceasefire or condemning Israeli actions. Yet the same United States, in other cases (such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict), has emphasized the Security Council's authority to condemn aggression and portrayed itself as a defender of a Charter-based order. This contradiction in U.S. behavior reflects a structural reality that realist theories underscore: dominant powers respect the order when it serves their interests, and whenever they perceive a conflict with their interests, they prefer to suspend the order rather than allow it to constrain them (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001).

The consequences for the United Nations were nothing short of a weakening of its legitimacy and effectiveness. In the eyes of the world's peoples—especially in the Middle East—the UN proved unable to adopt even a single resolution to halt the killing of children in Gaza, an act that humanity's conscience regarded as a minimal expectation. Many observers asked: if the United Nations

cannot take effective action in such an evident and urgent situation, then what is its real function? (Guterres, 2023). The answer lies not only in the UN's performance but also in the structure of the international order itself—an order in which veto power in the hands of five states is tantamount to the authority to switch the collective system on or off. As long as this structure remains unchanged, or the great powers do not accept self-restraint in their use of the veto, episodes of institutional paralysis will recur (Hurd, 2019). Although debate on Security Council reform has been ongoing for decades, conflicting great-power interests have blocked progress, and under present conditions, there is no clear prospect for meaningful change.

At the same time, the Gaza war showed that the General Assembly and other alternative multilateral mechanisms can, to some extent, reflect the voice of the international community, but they cannot substitute for Security Council action. Israel and its enablers ignored the numerous General Assembly resolutions on this issue, and despite their considerable political weight, these resolutions did not, in practice, reduce the level of killing on the ground. This illustrates the UN's fundamental limitations: the primacy of state sovereignty and the non-delegation of sovereign authority to a supranational body weaken its practical capacity (Howard, 2021). Nonetheless, it should not be overlooked that the more frequent these instances of institutional paralysis become, the stronger global public demands for reform of the world order will grow. One might say that the 2023–2024 Gaza war functioned as a mirror, exposing the unequal reality of the existing order: on one side stood the overwhelming majority of states and the global public conscience calling for an end to human suffering; on the other, a powerful minority blocked this demand.

In the long term, this situation benefits no one. Selective multilateralism, though it may secure short-term gains for a major power, erodes international trust over time and generates deep fissures in the global order (Finnemore, 2009). When states observe that rules are respected only insofar as the powerful so wish, they lose the incentive to adhere to those rules themselves. In the case of the Gaza war, UN inaction may have a dangerous consequence: radical groups may invoke this experience to argue that only the language of force is heard in the international system, not international law or morality. Such a dynamic could further undermine collective security. Therefore, even from the standpoint of great-power interests, the time may have come to reconsider

selective approaches. The United States, as a state that styles itself the leader of the liberal international order, by acting selectively toward multilateralism, in effect weakens the very order it claims to defend (Valensise, 2025).

In conclusion, the findings of the present study underscore the need to rethink global mechanisms for the maintenance of peace. Although changing the Security Council's structure is difficult, initiatives such as suspending the veto in cases of mass atrocities (a proposal advanced by France and Mexico) or enhancing the mediating role of the Secretary-General and regional organizations could, to some extent, prevent future institutional paralysis. Likewise, clarifying the criteria for veto use and increasing the permanent members' accountability to the General Assembly may raise the political cost of selective behavior. At the theoretical level, the Gaza war case once again highlighted the importance of understanding the nexus among power, institutions, and norms. International relations theories each illuminate part of this reality: realism affirms the centrality of power in shaping outcomes (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001); liberal institutionalism points to the need for better-designed incentives and more effective frameworks to curb unilateralism (Keohane, 1984); and constructivism reminds us that changing norms and discourses can, over the long term, moderate state behavior (Finnemore, 1996).

For Iran and other states seeking a more equitable multipolar order, the Gaza experience reinforced the demand for structural reform of the UN system and for abandoning reliance on the goodwill of the great powers. Perhaps the 2023–2024 Gaza war posed once more the question: “Is the United Nations truly united for the nations?” Whatever the answer, it is clear that without curbing selective multilateralism and preventing institutional paralysis, achieving collective peace and security will remain an exceedingly elusive goal.

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