
The Israel-Gaza, Iran and Afghanistan Crises: How UN Mechanisms Fail/Succeed in Managing Conflicts Involving Great Powers: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

The United Nations was established as the principal multilateral institution for the maintenance of international peace and security; yet its conflict management mechanisms have demonstrated persistent and systemic limitations when the strategic interests of permanent Security Council members are at stake. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of three contemporary conflict cases Israel-Gaza, Iran and Afghanistan to examine the conditions under which UN mechanisms succeed or fail in environments shaped by great-power competition. Employing a qualitative research design with a doctrinal approach and relying exclusively on secondary sources, the research traces how veto politics, selective multilateralism and great-power rivalry have paralysed Security Council action, undermined multilateral agreements such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and constrained UN engagement in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The study finds that the structural architecture of the Security Council, particularly the veto mechanism, systematically privileges the geopolitical interests of permanent members over the collective security mandate of the institution. By identifying common patterns across three distinct conflict contexts, the research contributes to theoretical debates on institutional effectiveness and provides a scholarly basis for ongoing discussions regarding UN reform.

Keywords: UN Security Council; Great-Power Competition; Veto Politics; Multilateral Conflict Management; Institutional Effectiveness

1. Introduction / Background of the Study

The United Nations, established in the aftermath of the Second World War, was conceived as the foremost multilateral institution for the preservation of international peace and security. Anchored in the principles of sovereign equality, non-interference and collective security, the UN Charter entrusted the Security Council with primary responsibility for responding to threats to peace, breaches of peace and acts of aggression. For over seven decades, this institutional architecture has been tested repeatedly by regional conflicts, civil wars and inter-state disputes. Yet few eras in modern history have simultaneously exposed the organisation's systemic limitations as acutely as the contemporary convergence of crises in Israel-Gaza, Iran and Afghanistan three conflicts that, in different but interrelated ways, bring great-power competition into direct collision with

the UN's multilateral mandate (Kucici & BOYE, 2024).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one of the most protracted disputes in modern history, entered a catastrophic new phase with the Hamas-led attack of October 7, 2023 and the subsequent large-scale Israeli military campaign in Gaza. The humanitarian toll has been staggering, with civilian casualties, mass displacement and widespread infrastructural destruction drawing condemnation from international bodies, human rights organisations and member states. The UN General Assembly passed multiple resolutions calling for ceasefires and humanitarian corridors, yet every binding resolution proposed in the Security Council was rendered ineffective through the exercise of the veto most notably by the United States, a permanent member and close ally of Israel. This pattern laid bare a foundational contradiction within the UN system: the very mechanism designed to authorise collective action can be immobilised by the geopolitical loyalties of those wielding veto power (Rigi, 2026).

The Iran dimension adds another layer of complexity. Iran's nuclear programme, its support for non-state armed actors across the Middle East and the broader question of sanctions enforcement have been recurring subjects of UN deliberation for decades. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a landmark diplomatic achievement, demonstrated the potential for multilateral frameworks to manage nuclear proliferation concerns. However, the unilateral withdrawal of the United States in 2018 and the ensuing erosion of the agreement illustrated how great-power unilateralism can undermine carefully constructed multilateral arrangements. The snapback mechanism invoked by the United States in 2020 further revealed how procedural tools within the UN framework could be weaponised for political ends, generating sharp disagreement among P5 members and eroding confidence in the impartiality of multilateral institutions.

Afghanistan presents yet a different dimension of UN engagement with conflict. Following two decades of international military presence under NATO command authorised in part through UN Security Council resolutions the Taliban's swift return to power in August 2021 created a profound governance vacuum. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) continued to operate under extremely challenging conditions, navigating the tension between humanitarian imperatives and political non-recognition of the Taliban regime. The international community's fragmented response shaped by divergent interests among the United States, Russia, China, Pakistan and regional actors demonstrated how great-power disagreements translate directly into institutional paralysis and inconsistent policy responses (Ben-Israel, 2025).

Across all three cases, a common thread emerges: the structural inability of the UN to act decisively when the interests of permanent Security Council members are directly or indirectly at stake. This study situates these three contemporary crises within a comparative analytical framework, examining the conditions under which UN mechanisms succeed or fail and drawing broader theoretical conclusions about the relationship between great-power politics and multilateral conflict management. The research engages with existing scholarship on institutional design, realist critiques of international organisations and the evolving discourse on UN reform, while grounding its analysis in the documentary evidence produced by UN bodies, governmental statements and credible secondary literature.

2. Problem Statement

Despite the UN's foundational mandate to maintain international peace and security, its mechanisms have demonstrated persistent structural limitations when conflicts involve the strategic interests of great powers. The Israel-Gaza, Iran and Afghanistan crises collectively expose how veto politics, selective multilateralism and great-power rivalry systematically undermine the effectiveness of UN-led conflict management. This study critically examines why UN mechanisms succeed or fail in these contexts and what this reveals about the institutional design of the international peace and security architecture.

3. Literature Review

The scholarly literature on the United Nations and conflict management is vast and multidisciplinary, spanning international relations theory, international law, peace and conflict studies and foreign policy

analysis. This literature review situates the present study within key theoretical and empirical debates, identifying critical gaps that this research seeks to address.

The foundational tension between great-power politics and multilateral institutions has been a central preoccupation of international relations scholarship since the establishment of the UN itself. Realist theorists have long argued that international organisations are fundamentally epiphenomenal that is, they reflect and reproduce the power distributions of the states that create them rather than constraining state behaviour in any meaningful sense. From this perspective, the UN Security Council is best understood as a forum for great-power coordination rather than a genuine instrument of collective security. The veto mechanism, in particular, has been analysed as a structural guarantee to the five permanent members that the UN will not be used against their core interests. This realist critique gains empirical traction when applied to the Israel-Gaza situation, where the consistent use of the veto to block ceasefire resolutions has effectively insulated Israeli military operations from formal UN censure (Peter, 2025).

Liberal institutionalist perspectives offer a contrasting reading. Scholars working within this tradition argue that international organisations generate their own normative frameworks, create focal points for cooperation and develop institutional logics that shape state behaviour over time. From this view, the UN's continued engagement with conflicts even in highly constrained environments carries legitimising force and contributes to the gradual development of international norms around civilian protection, humanitarian access and accountability. The repeated invocation of International Humanitarian Law in UN resolutions on Gaza, for instance, is seen within this framework not as empty rhetoric but as a contribution to the slow consolidation of legal norms that may over time raise the reputational costs of civilian harm (Hallward, 2026).

A substantial body of work examines the Security Council's decision-making dynamics, with particular attention to the role of the veto. Empirical studies have documented the historical patterns of veto use, noting that its frequency has fluctuated across different phases of international relations. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States used the veto extensively to prevent each other's preferred resolutions from passing. In the post-Cold War period, veto use declined but did not disappear and subsequent decades have seen a partial resurgence, particularly in relation to conflicts in the Middle East and, more recently, the war in Ukraine. The Israel-Gaza conflict has become one of the most prominent contemporary illustrations of this dynamic, with the United States having blocked multiple draft resolutions calling for immediate ceasefires.

The literature on Iran's nuclear programme and its relationship with UN mechanisms is particularly rich. Detailed analyses of the negotiation processes that led to the JCPOA illuminate the conditions under which multilateral diplomacy can succeed even in highly adversarial environments. The agreement is frequently cited as a demonstration that patient, interest-based bargaining, supported by the institutional legitimacy of the P5+1 framework, can produce durable outcomes even in the absence of trust between the principal parties. Conversely, the analysis of the agreement's collapse following the United States' withdrawal in 2018 has generated a significant literature on the fragility of multilateral agreements when they lack robust compliance mechanisms and when key parties are not bound by domestic legal obligations to maintain them. The snapback mechanism controversy has been examined as a case study in how procedural tools designed to enforce compliance can be contested and politically weaponized (Batool & Riaz, 2025).

Afghanistan has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in relation to the relationship between UN-authorized military operations and post-conflict reconstruction. The mandate and performance of UNAMA has been examined in detail, with scholars noting both its successes in coordinating humanitarian assistance and its limitations in influencing the political trajectory of the Afghan state. The literature on statebuilding in Afghanistan is extensive and largely critical, documenting the gap between the ambitious liberal peacebuilding objectives of the international community and the political realities on the ground. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has prompted a reassessment of the entire international engagement, with scholars analysing the UN's options in a context where the de facto governing authority is internationally

unrecognised and accused of systematic human rights violations.

Comparative studies of UN effectiveness across different conflict contexts represent an important strand of the existing literature. Several researchers have developed typologies of UN interventions, categorising cases by the nature of the conflict, the presence or absence of great-power involvement, the mandates given to UN bodies and the outcomes achieved. These comparative frameworks have identified great-power involvement as one of the most significant predictors of UN ineffectiveness, lending empirical support to the realist critique while also identifying cases such as certain peacekeeping operations in Africa where UN mechanisms have performed relatively well in the absence of direct great-power contestation (Antai et al., 2025).

The concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has generated a voluminous literature in relation to UN conflict management. Adopted at the 2005 World Summit, R2P was intended to establish a norm of international responsibility to protect civilian populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. However, subsequent scholarship has documented significant contestation over its application, with many states particularly Russia and China resisting what they characterise as the instrumentalisation of humanitarian norms to justify regime change. The application (or non-application) of R2P language to the Gaza conflict has been particularly contested, with some scholars arguing that the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure and the humanitarian blockade constitute circumstances in which the norm should be invoked, while others emphasise the contested political context and the absence of Security Council consensus (Horinuki, 2025).

A growing body of critical literature examines the selective application of international norms and UN mechanisms, arguing that the existing system operates with a double standard that disadvantages non-Western populations and shields Western-aligned states and their partners from accountability. This critique, advanced from post-colonial and global justice perspectives, challenges the normative legitimacy of UN mechanisms and argues that the institution's credibility has been severely damaged by its inability to respond consistently to equivalent situations. The comparative dimension of the present study examining Israeli-Gaza, Iran and Afghanistan simultaneously is partly motivated by the need to engage with this critique and to assess whether patterns of selectivity are discernible across these three cases.

Notwithstanding the extensive literature, several important gaps remain. First, there is a relative scarcity of systematic comparative analyses that examine multiple contemporary crisis cases simultaneously through the lens of great-power dynamics and institutional performance. Most existing studies focus on individual case studies or address the UN's performance at a high level of generality. Second, the period since 2021 encompassing the Taliban takeover, the escalation of Iran's nuclear programme and particularly the post-October 2023 Gaza conflict has not yet been subjected to comprehensive comparative scholarly analysis. This study seeks to address both gaps by offering a structured comparative analysis grounded in primary UN documents and credible secondary sources (Gümüş & Bardakcı, 2025).

4. Research Questions

- i. In what ways do great-power rivalries and veto politics within the UN Security Council undermine the effectiveness of UN conflict management mechanisms in the Israel-Gaza, Iran and Afghanistan crises?
- ii. How do the structural and procedural features of the UN system enable or constrain multilateral responses to conflicts involving the strategic interests of permanent Security Council members?
- iii. What comparative lessons can be drawn from the Israel-Gaza, Iran and Afghanistan cases regarding the conditions under which UN mechanisms succeed or fail in managing conflicts shaped by great-power competition?

5. Research Objectives

- I. To critically analyse the impact of great-power rivalries and veto politics on the effectiveness of UN Security Council mechanisms in the Israel-Gaza, Iran and Afghanistan conflicts.
- II. To examine the structural and procedural features of the UN system that either facilitate or impede multilateral conflict management when the strategic interests of permanent members are involved.
- III. To develop a comparative analytical framework that identifies the conditions under which UN mechanisms succeed or fail across the three selected conflict cases, thereby generating broader conclusions about institutional performance in great-power-contested environments.

6. Significance of the Study

This study makes a timely and substantive contribution to the fields of international relations, peace and conflict studies and international law at a moment when the credibility and effectiveness of the United Nations as a conflict management institution is under unprecedented scrutiny. The simultaneous occurrence of the Israel-Gaza humanitarian catastrophe, the Iran nuclear impasse and the post-Taliban reconfiguration in Afghanistan presents a rare analytical opportunity to examine great-power obstruction of UN mechanisms across three distinct but thematically connected cases, offering insights that no single-case study could provide (A. S. M. A. Ullah, 2025).

From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to ongoing debates between realist, liberal institutionalist and critical perspectives on international organisations. By systematically tracing the relationship between great-power interests and institutional outcomes across three cases, the research provides empirically grounded evidence that can be used to refine existing theoretical frameworks and challenge or confirm prevailing assumptions about when and why multilateral institutions succeed or fail. The comparative methodology strengthens the analytical rigour of the conclusions and ensures that findings are not merely artefacts of a single exceptional case.

From a policy perspective, the study's significance lies in its potential to inform ongoing debates about UN reform. There is growing consensus among international relations scholars, diplomats and civil society actors that the Security Council's structure particularly the veto mechanism is increasingly misaligned with the geopolitical realities of the twenty-first century. By documenting in detail the ways in which veto politics have paralysed the UN's response to the Gaza crisis, limited its leverage over Iran's nuclear programme and complicated its engagement in Afghanistan, this study provides concrete evidence for the reform discourse, lending scholarly rigour to arguments about the need for institutional redesign (A. Ullah & Xinlei, 2024).

The study is also significant from a normative standpoint. The protection of civilian populations, the upholding of international humanitarian law and the maintenance of a rules-based international order are not merely academic concerns they are issues of fundamental human consequence. By examining why the UN has been unable to enforce ceasefires, protect civilians, or hold parties to account in the three selected crises, this research contributes to a broader normative conversation about the responsibilities of the international community and the conditions under which those responsibilities can be meaningfully discharged.

For scholars and students in the Global South and particularly for academics in Pakistan and the broader Muslim world who are deeply invested in the outcomes of the Gaza and Afghanistan situations, this study provides a rigorous scholarly framework for understanding the structural underpinnings of what many perceive as the UN's failure of moral and institutional responsibility. It contextualises these perceptions within a broader analytical framework, moving beyond polemics to identify the precise institutional mechanisms through which great-power politics translates into institutional paralysis. Finally, the study makes a methodological contribution by demonstrating the value of qualitative comparative analysis grounded in documentary evidence for the study of international institutional performance (Monshipouri & Motameni, 2024).

7. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design with a doctrinal analytical approach, relying exclusively on

secondary sources to investigate the institutional performance of UN mechanisms across the three selected conflict cases. The methodology is deliberately straightforward, prioritising analytical depth and interpretive rigour over empirical complexity. The following sub-sections elaborate the key methodological choices made in this research.

7.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative research design, utilising a comparative case study method. Three conflict cases Israel-Gaza, Iran and Afghanistan are selected as units of analysis because they collectively illustrate the relationship between great-power competition and UN institutional performance across varied political and geographic contexts. The doctrinal approach is employed to examine the legal instruments, institutional frameworks and procedural mechanisms of the UN system, interpreting these in light of their actual application in each case and drawing comparative conclusions about patterns of success and failure.

7.2 Research Scope

The temporal scope of this study spans from 2001 to the present, encompassing the post-9/11 international security environment that shaped UN engagement in Afghanistan, the successive phases of Iran's nuclear negotiations and the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict culminating in the post-October 2023 crisis. The geographic scope is limited to the three conflict arenas identified in the research questions. The thematic scope is confined to the performance of UN mechanisms including the Security Council, General Assembly and relevant special bodies in the context of conflicts involving great-power strategic interests.

7.3 Types of Data

This research relies exclusively on secondary data. The data sources include official UN documents such as Security Council resolutions, General Assembly resolutions, Secretary-General reports and UNAMA reports; peer-reviewed academic journal articles and book chapters; policy papers and reports produced by established think tanks and research institutions; and credible journalistic documentation of key events. No primary fieldwork, interviews, or surveys are conducted. All data used are publicly available and documentary in nature, making the research transparent and replicable.

7.4 Data Collection Methods

Data is collected through systematic review of relevant documentary sources. Official UN documents are accessed through the UN's digital archives and official website. Academic literature is sourced from established databases including JSTOR, Google Scholar and institutional library repositories. Think tank reports are obtained from the websites of credible organisations. A thematic framework is used to organise the collected material around the core research questions, ensuring that data collection is purposive and aligned with the analytical objectives of the study. Snowball referencing is also employed to identify additional relevant scholarly sources from within the bibliographies of key texts.

7.5 Analysis of Data

Data is analysed using qualitative thematic analysis and comparative institutional analysis. The thematic analysis involves identifying recurring patterns, arguments and normative claims across the documentary sources related to each case. The comparative institutional analysis involves placing the three cases side by side to identify similarities and differences in the ways UN mechanisms have operated, been obstructed, or achieved partial success. The doctrinal approach is applied to assess the alignment between the formal legal and procedural provisions of the UN Charter and Security Council practice, identifying gaps between normative prescription and institutional reality.

8. Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, as it relies exclusively on secondary sources, the research is dependent on the accuracy, completeness and analytical balance of existing documentation and scholarship. Any biases present in the source material may be reproduced in the analysis. Second, the rapidly evolving nature of all three conflicts particularly the Israel-Gaza situation means that some developments may occur after the research period that could affect the study's conclusions. Third, the comparative case study method, while providing analytical breadth, may not capture the full contextual complexity of each individual case. Fourth, the exclusion of primary data collection limits the study's ability to incorporate perspectives from directly affected populations or policymakers. These limitations are acknowledged transparently and the study's conclusions are calibrated accordingly.

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