

The United Nations in Multipolar Security Governance: Veto Politics, Norm Contestation, and Regional Substitution

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Abstract

This paper critically reassesses the role of the United Nations (UN) in international security governance amid the ongoing transition from a unipolar to a multipolar global order. As power becomes increasingly dispersed and strategic competition intensifies, multilateral institutions face mounting challenges related to effectiveness, legitimacy, and operational relevance. Using the UN as a case study, the article examines how structural rigidity, paralysis in decision-making within the Security Council, and contested interpretations of international law constrain the organisation's capacity to respond to contemporary security crises. The study employs a qualitative case-based approach, focusing on the Black Sea region as a strategic space where great-power rivalry, regional instability, and hybrid threats intersect. Analysing UN engagement in the conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, and the former Yugoslavia, the article identifies recurring patterns of veto-induced inaction, normative fragmentation, and limited crisis-management capacity, alongside an increasing reliance on regional and ad hoc security arrangements. The analysis argues that while the UN remains an indispensable forum for diplomatic engagement and normative coordination, its continued relevance in global security governance depends on pragmatic institutional adaptation. For defence and security policymakers, the findings highlight the importance of complementing UN-based multilateralism with flexible regional mechanisms in security environments shaped by multipolar rivalry and hybrid conflict dynamics.

Keywords: *International security governance, multipolarity, institutional adaptation, Black Sea Region, hybrid threats*

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Introduction

International organisations today operate in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment characterised by intensifying strategic competition, financial pressures, and growing political polarisation among major powers (International Crisis Group, 2024). As the global distribution of power shifts toward a more multipolar configuration, institutions created under earlier systemic conditions face increasing scrutiny regarding their ability to remain effective and legitimate. Within this evolving international order, the United Nations (UN) remains the most universal structure of global governance. Established in the aftermath of World War II following the failure of the League of Nations (Yakar, 2019), the UN was designed to maintain international peace and foster cooperation among sovereign states. However, the organisation's institutional architecture largely reflects the geopolitical realities of the mid-twentieth century, raising questions about its capacity to operate effectively under contemporary multipolar conditions.

Existing scholarship widely recognises the UN as a central forum for diplomacy, norm articulation, and international coordination. At the same time, a substantial body of research emphasizes the organization's structural limitations, particularly the role of veto politics, geopolitical rivalry among major powers, and institutional inertia in constraining collective action. While these studies highlight the tensions between institutional legitimacy and operational effectiveness, less attention has been paid to how these constraints manifest across different regional crises and how the UN's responses compare across multiple geopolitical contexts.

This paper argues that although the UN remains an indispensable forum for diplomacy and global norm-setting, its operational effectiveness in managing contemporary security crises is increasingly constrained by geopolitical competition and veto politics within the Security Council. As a result, crisis management and enforcement functions are frequently displaced toward regional organisations and ad hoc coalitions, contributing to a more fragmented architecture of global security governance.

Literature Review

To examine these dynamics, the study conducts a structured, focused comparison of the decision records, resolutions, and diplomatic debates of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the General Assembly (UNGA) across three conflicts: Ukraine, Georgia, and the Yugoslav wars. These cases, located in Southeastern Europe and the Black Sea region, provide a useful empirical lens for analysing how institutional structures, power politics, and normative disagreements interact to shape the UN's responses to contemporary security crises. The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on international organisations and multipolarity. The following section outlines the methodological approach and theoretical framework. Subsequent sections analyse the UN's institutional performance across the selected case studies. The final section summarizes the findings and discusses policy implications for the future role of international organizations in a multipolar security order.

The role of the UN in contemporary global governance has attracted substantial scholarly attention, particularly amid the international system's gradual shift toward multipolarity. As geopolitical competition intensifies and power becomes more widely distributed across regional and global actors, scholars increasingly debate whether international organisations

designed under earlier systemic conditions can remain effective instruments of global governance. Existing literature broadly converges on several interconnected debates concerning institutional effectiveness, normative legitimacy, and the ability of international organisations to operate amid growing geopolitical fragmentation.

One major strand of scholarship focuses on the UN's institutional effectiveness in managing international conflicts. Doyle and Sambanis (2006) provide a foundational analysis of UN peace operations, demonstrating how institutional design, mandate ambiguity, and resource constraints frequently limit the effectiveness of post-conflict interventions. Their research highlights a persistent gap between the formal mandates of international institutions and their practical capacity to implement peacebuilding initiatives in complex political environments. Similar concerns emerge in General Roméo Dallaire's account of the Rwandan genocide (2003), which portrays the UN as an organisation constrained by limited operational resources, unclear mandates, and the absence of political will among major powers. From this perspective, institutional design and political constraints interact to limit the UN's ability to prevent or respond effectively to major humanitarian crises.

A second debate in the literature focuses on the UN's normative role in the international system. Ian Hurd (2021) conceptualises the organisation as a site of "normative contestation," where fundamental principles of international order, including sovereignty, humanitarian intervention, and human rights, are continuously negotiated and challenged. This perspective is consistent with constructivist scholarship, particularly the work of Barnett and Finnemore (2004) and Barnett (2011), which emphasises that international organisations do not merely administer global governance but also shape the development, interpretation, and diffusion of international norms. From this viewpoint, the UN functions not only as a bureaucratic institution but also as a political arena in which competing interpretations of legitimacy, authority, and international law are articulated and contested.

A third strand of literature highlights the structural limitations of the UN system in a changing international order. Thomas Weiss (2020) argues that the institutional architecture of the UNSC increasingly reflects outdated power structures that no longer correspond to contemporary geopolitical realities. The strategic use of veto power by permanent members frequently produces institutional paralysis, particularly in crises involving major powers or their regional allies. From this perspective, the persistence of veto politics illustrates the continued influence of power politics within international institutions. It raises fundamental questions about the UN's capacity to function effectively in an international system characterised by decentralised authority and intensifying geopolitical rivalry. In addition to these structural and normative debates, recent scholarship has examined how emerging forms of conflict challenge the operational frameworks of international organisations. Hybrid warfare, combining conventional military operations with cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and irregular tactics, has become a defining feature of many contemporary conflicts. Scholars such as Hoffman (2007), Galeotti (2019), and Rid (2020) emphasise that hybrid strategies blur the traditional boundaries between war and peace, complicating institutional responses designed primarily for conventional interstate conflicts. Because the mandates and operational frameworks of organisations such as the UN were largely developed in an earlier security environment, hybrid threats pose significant challenges for institutional adaptation and crisis management.

Policy-oriented scholarship similarly emphasises the need for institutional reform and adaptation within the UN system. Scholars and practitioners such as Volkan Bozkır (UN News,

2021) and Walter Dorn have advocated reforms to strengthen peacekeeping capabilities, modernise institutional procedures, and enhance cooperation between the UN and regional security organisations. The International Crisis Group (2024) echoes these concerns, identifying multiple structural challenges confronting the organization, including financial dependency, bureaucratic complexity, and deepening geopolitical divisions among major powers.

Taken together, these debates reveal a central tension within the literature. While the UN continues to serve as an essential forum for diplomatic coordination and global norm articulation, its operational effectiveness is increasingly constrained by geopolitical rivalry, institutional design limitations, and the evolving character of contemporary conflicts. These tensions are particularly visible in regions where great-power competition, hybrid threats, and legal ambiguity intersect. Building on these theoretical debates, the literature generates several expectations about the UN's behaviour and performance in major international crises. From a realist perspective, intensified rivalry among major powers, particularly within the UNSC, should produce veto threats and strategic obstruction, significantly limiting the organisation's capacity to undertake coercive action or enforce collective security decisions.

Institutionalist perspectives propose that even when the UNSC is hampered by great-power rivalry, other parts of the UN system, especially the UNGA and specialised agencies, can partly make up for this by offering diplomatic legitimacy, supporting multilateral cooperation, and fostering normative frameworks for international collaboration. Constructivist approaches highlight that major international crises often lead to differing interpretations of international norms, including sovereignty, intervention, and the legitimate use of force. From this viewpoint, conflicts tend to cause fragmented authority and competing narratives within international institutions, mirroring broader normative disputes within the international system. The comparative analysis of conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, and the former Yugoslavia explores how these theoretical expectations are reflected in the UN's institutional behaviour across various geopolitical contexts.

Theoretical Basis

The contemporary international order has undergone a significant transformation since the end of the Cold War. While the post-1945 system was initially shaped by Western institutional leadership and later characterised by U.S. unipolarity, the 21st century has witnessed the gradual emergence of a more multipolar distribution of power. The rise of new global and regional actors, including China, India, Brazil, and a more assertive Russia, has contributed to an international environment marked by fragmented authority, competing norms, and intensified geopolitical rivalry. Within this evolving systemic context, the role of international organizations such as the UN has become increasingly contested.

To analyse these dynamics, this study draws on three major theoretical traditions in international relations: neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism. Rather than treating these approaches as mutually exclusive explanations, the article uses them as complementary analytical lenses to interpret the UN's institutional behaviour across different crisis contexts. From a neorealist perspective, international organizations are constrained by the distribution of material power within the international system. Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues that states remain the primary actors in international politics and that institutions largely reflect the interests of dominant powers. Within the UN system, this perspective suggests that the

UNSC's structure, particularly the veto privilege of the five permanent members, mirrors underlying power hierarchies rather than the normative principles of institutional equality. As a result, when major powers become directly involved in international crises, UNSC decision-making is likely to be constrained by veto politics and strategic rivalry. Empirically, this perspective implies that conflicts involving major powers, such as the wars in Ukraine and Georgia, are likely to generate institutional paralysis within the UNSC.

Neoliberal institutionalism offers a different perspective by emphasising the role of international organisations in facilitating cooperation amid international anarchy (Keohane, 1984). According to this view, institutions help reduce uncertainty, provide information, and create frameworks for diplomatic coordination among states. Even when major powers disagree, international organisations may still contribute to crisis management by providing forums for negotiation, coordination, and the articulation of collective positions. In the context of the UN, this perspective suggests that institutional responses to crises may extend beyond the UNSC, with other organs, particularly the UNGA and specialised agencies, playing a compensatory role when formal enforcement mechanisms are blocked. Constructivist approaches emphasise the social construction of international norms and the role of institutions in shaping state identities and interests (Wendt, 1999; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). From this perspective, international organizations do not merely reflect existing power structures but also participate in the construction and diffusion of international norms. The UN, therefore, serves as an arena in which competing interpretations of sovereignty, humanitarian intervention, and international law are debated and contested. In empirical terms, this perspective suggests that international crises often generate normative disputes within UN institutions, as states advance competing legal and political interpretations of events.

By combining these theoretical perspectives, the study develops a multidimensional analytical framework to examine the UN's behaviour in contemporary international crises. Neorealism helps explain the structural constraints imposed by great-power rivalry and veto politics. Neoliberal institutionalism highlights the potential for institutional coordination and diplomatic engagement even when UNSC action is limited. Constructivism provides analytical tools for examining how competing interpretations of international norms shape debates within UN institutions. Together, these perspectives guide the empirical analysis of conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, and the former Yugoslavia, allowing the study to examine how power politics, institutional dynamics, and normative contestation interact to shape the UN's responses to major international crises.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case-study methodology to examine the evolving role and institutional limitations of the UN in managing international security crises within an increasingly multipolar international system. The methodological approach is based on the understanding that the UN should not be treated merely as a formal legal-bureaucratic structure but as a historically embedded and politically contested institution operating within a complex geopolitical environment. Accordingly, the research prioritises contextual interpretation and institutional analysis rather than formal modelling or quantitative hypothesis testing.

The primary unit of analysis is the UN as an institutional actor within the broader architecture of international security governance. The choice of a qualitative case-study design is justified by the interpretive nature of the research question and the need to examine institutional

behaviour within broader structural, legal, and geopolitical contexts (Yin, 2014). Empirically, the study focuses on crises located within the broader European security complex, with particular attention to Southeastern Europe and the Black Sea region. These regions have repeatedly served as arenas in which great-power rivalry, regional security dynamics, and international institutional involvement intersect. This broader regional framing allows the study to incorporate both Black Sea conflicts and the Yugoslav wars within a coherent analytical framework, as all three cases represent crises occurring on the eastern and southeastern periphery of the European security order. The empirical analysis centres on the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and the Russia–Ukraine conflict (2014–present, particularly after 2022). These cases were selected because they represent situations in which the UN was formally involved in crisis management but faced significant institutional constraints. Each case illustrates key institutional challenges, including UNSC veto politics, legal ambiguities in interpreting the UN Charter, particularly Articles 2(4) and 51, and divergent international responses to questions of sovereignty, intervention, and territorial integrity.

To examine these dynamics systematically, the study conducts a structured, focused comparison of UNSC and UNGA decision records across the three crises. Each case is analysed using a common set of guiding analytical questions:

How did veto politics influence UNSC decision-making?

What legal arguments were invoked by different actors in interpreting the UN Charter?

How did other UN organs, especially the UNGA, respond when the UNSC was obstructed?

To what extent did regional organisations or coalitions substitute for UN action?

Primary sources include official UN documentation, such as UNSC and UNGA resolutions, verbatim records of UNSC meetings, Secretary-General reports, and transcripts of diplomatic debates. These materials are supplemented by official voting records, national statements, and emergency session documents related to the conflicts examined. To strengthen empirical reliability, the research employs source triangulation, combining primary UN documentation with secondary academic literature and policy analysis. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic publications, historical analyses, and policy reports produced by international research institutions such as the International Crisis Group, Chatham House, and the Security Council Report. This triangulated approach allows the study to connect institutional decisions with broader geopolitical dynamics and interpret how power politics, legal norms, and diplomatic strategies interact in shaping UN responses to international crises.

The interpretation of empirical findings is informed by three major theoretical traditions in international relations: neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism. Neorealism highlights how power asymmetries and geopolitical competition influence the behaviour of major powers within international institutions. Neoliberal institutionalism emphasises the role of international organisations in facilitating cooperation and reducing uncertainty within an anarchic international system (Keohane, 1984). Constructivist approaches focus on the social construction of norms, legitimacy, and shared expectations within international institutions (Wendt, 1999; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). By integrating these theoretical perspectives with comparative empirical analysis, the study develops a multidimensional analytical framework capable of explaining both the structural constraints and the normative dynamics that shape the UN's performance in contemporary international crises.

Analysis of Findings

The UN in a Multipolar World

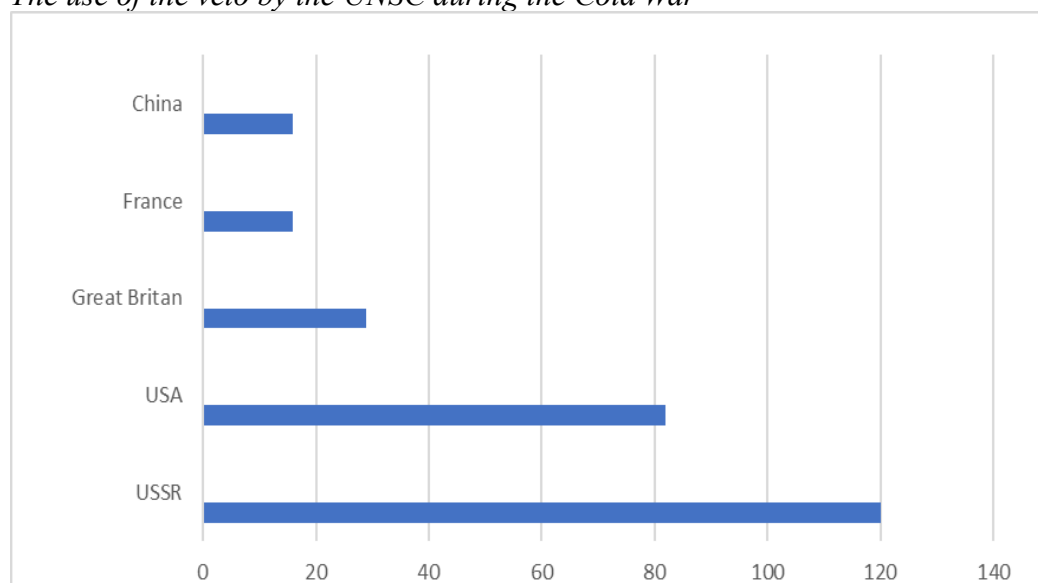
The institutional architecture of the UN was crafted in an era defined by the Cold War's bipolarity and, later, the unipolar moment of U.S. dominance. Rooted in the UN Charter's original mission to promote international peace and cooperation, several structural factors have increasingly constrained the organisation's effectiveness. These constraints include financial dependence on major contributors, slow and procedurally complex decision-making processes, and persistent difficulties in implementing mandates in politically contested environments. Together, these factors limit the UN's ability to respond rapidly and effectively to contemporary security crises. The UN's inability to fulfil its mandate effectively has become particularly visible in recent crises. The escalation of violence following the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 and the subsequent military operations in Gaza, alongside continuing conflicts such as the Russia–Ukraine war and the civil conflict in Sudan, has intensified debates about the organisation's capacity to respond effectively to contemporary geopolitical crises (International Crisis Group, 2024).

UNSC Gridlock and Power Politics

The UNSC, composed of five permanent members (P5) with veto power and ten non-permanent rotating members, is the UN's primary organ for maintaining international peace and security. However, in a multipolar environment marked by heightened geopolitical rivalry, particularly among the P5, the UNSC has often failed to act decisively. The structural imbalance in the UNSC's decision-making process is especially evident when examining the historical distribution of veto use among permanent members.

Figure 1

The use of the veto by the UNSC during the Cold War



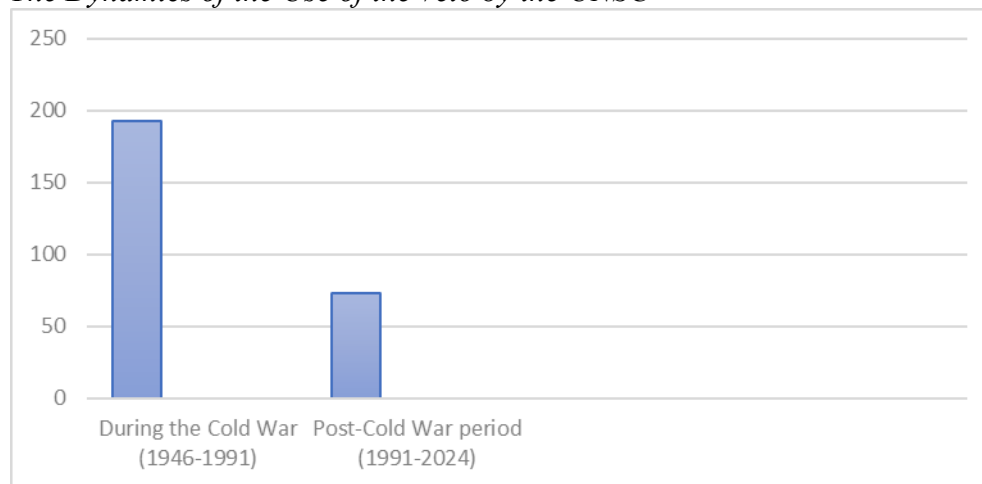
Source: Security Council Report (2024)

Figure 1 shows the number of vetoes used by each of the five permanent members since the creation of the UN. The picture shows that the use of the veto power was extremely uneven. The Soviet Union (and later Russia) has the largest share of veto power, followed by the United States. At the same time, Great Britain, France, and China used their veto power relatively infrequently. This distribution reflects the geopolitical dynamics of various historical periods, in particular, the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, during which the veto was often used to block opposing political initiatives. Even in the post-conflict period, the right of veto remained an important instrument, enabling the major powers to defend their strategic interests. As a result, the veto system often limits the UNSC’s ability to make collective decisions, especially when the interests of the permanent members diverge. In the modern multipolar environment, characterised by renewed competition among great powers, this institutional feature continues to limit the UNSC’s effectiveness in resolving international security crises.

During the Cold War, the right of veto was exercised most often amid the geopolitical and ideological conflicts between the USSR and the West in a bipolar world order. The USSR imposed the overwhelming majority of vetoes in that period.

Figure 2

The Dynamics of the Use of the Veto by the UNSC



Source: Security Council Report (2024)

Figure 2 demonstrates the changing dynamics of veto usage in the UNSC across two historical periods. During the Cold War (1946–1991), the veto was exercised approximately 195 times, reflecting the intense bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, which often paralysed the Council’s decision-making process. In contrast, the post-Cold War period (1991-2024) witnessed a notable decline to around 75 vetoes, suggesting a temporary easing of systemic confrontation. However, the persistence of veto use in recent decades, particularly in conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, and Palestine, indicates that geopolitical competition among major powers continues to constrain the UNSC’s effectiveness.

Figure 3

The Development of the Use of the Veto in the UNSC

Stage	The main countries using the veto	The main reasons
The Cold War period (1946-1991)	USSR, USA	Blocking the admission of new members and regional conflicts
Post-war period (1992-2024)	USA, Russia, China	Middle East, Ukraine, Syria, Israeli-Palestinian conflicts

Source: Security Council Report (2024)

Figure 3 reflects the frequency and reasons for the use of vetoes by permanent members of the UNSC during and after the Cold War. According to Figure 3, in recent years, amid escalating conflicts in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, Russia's and China's use of the veto has increased significantly. In contrast, over the same period, the United States has mostly used the veto on resolutions related to Israel.

Within the current institutional structure of the UNSC, the veto power held by permanent members frequently obstructs collective decision-making. This problem is particularly significant given that many issues on the UNSC's agenda concern regions, such as Africa, that remain unrepresented among the permanent members. Geopolitical tensions among the P5 have intensified in recent years, particularly in relation to conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, and Gaza, leading to repeated institutional deadlocks. To address this paralysis, France once proposed a mechanism whereby permanent members would voluntarily limit their use of the veto in cases involving mass atrocities or humanitarian crises.

However, this initiative required consensus among the P5 and thus remained at the proposal stage and was never implemented. Volkan Bozkır, President of the 76th session of the UNGA in 2021-2022, emphasised during the opening of the intergovernmental negotiations on UNSC reform (on January 2, 2021) that such reforms had been on the agenda for far too long. He called for concrete action, urging all member states to actively participate in the negotiations to ensure that the UNSC reflects the realities of the modern world and can respond effectively to global challenges (UN, 2021). Canadian scholar Walter Dorn (2015) shares a similar view, emphasising the UN as a vital platform for development, peace, security, and the protection of human rights in the 21st century. He contends that the organisation must adapt to modern geopolitical shifts, such as multipolarity, technological progress, and new forms of international cooperation, to remain effective.

The paralysis of the UNSC in the face of crises such as Syria, Ukraine, and Gaza underscores the limitations of the current veto-based structure. The rise of regional blocs has further polarised decision-making. The UNSC, as the principal organ responsible for maintaining international peace and security, has increasingly found itself at an impasse due to the strategic vetoes exercised by permanent members. This dysfunction, most visible in prolonged conflicts such as Syria and, more recently, Ukraine, exemplifies the systemic limitations of an institution whose structure reflects the geopolitical realities of 1945 rather than those of today's pluralistic world. These deadlocks are not merely procedural; they reflect deeper transformations in international politics. As emerging powers assert their interests more forcefully, the UNSC increasingly functions as a stage for geopolitical rivalry rather than a forum for collective consensus-building. In this sense, multipolarity manifests not only as a redistribution of material power but also as a fragmentation of global governance norms.

Recent conflicts, including the Syrian civil war, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, illustrate how strategic vetoes by major powers can block collective action. Russia and China have frequently used vetoes to shield allies, while the United States has used its veto in resolutions concerning Israel. This pattern reinforces the realist interpretation that international institutions often reflect the strategic interests of powerful states rather than functioning as neutral mechanisms of conflict resolution (Weiss, 2020). Beyond veto-induced gridlock, the UNSC's legitimacy is increasingly questioned because of its representational imbalance. The privileges of permanent membership and veto rights granted to the five victors of World War II continue to marginalise emerging and developing powers. States such as India, Brazil, Germany, and South Africa have therefore advocated institutional reform to expand representation and improve the UNSC's legitimacy. As Bouchard et al. (2013) note, the P5's veto privilege is widely perceived as anachronistic in a global system where economic and political influence is far more widely distributed. Although reform initiatives proposed by the G4, the African Union, and the L.69 group have sought to address these imbalances, progress has remained limited due to resistance from existing permanent members (Ian Hurd, 2021).

General Assembly as a Platform for Global South Assertion

The UNGA, which includes all 193 member states, offers a more inclusive institutional forum for articulating normative preferences and building political coalitions. Although its resolutions are non-binding, the Assembly has increasingly served as a platform for states from the Global South to articulate critiques of the existing international order. During the Ukraine crisis, for example, the UNGA adopted several resolutions condemning Russia's actions despite the UNSC's paralysis. These votes also revealed important geopolitical patterns: while Western states overwhelmingly supported the resolutions, several influential non-Western powers, including India, South Africa, and China, abstained. Such voting behaviour reflects the more complex, interest-driven diplomacy characteristic of a multipolar international system.

The United Nations and the Black Sea Region: The Case of Ukraine and Historical Precedents

The Black Sea region functions as a geopolitical fault line testing the structural resilience and normative coherence of the UN. Against a backdrop of intensifying multipolar dynamics, Russia's maneuvers, rooted in the concept of the "near abroad" and its strategic dependence on Black Sea dominance, have repeatedly tested the UN's institutional design and effectiveness (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006; Security Council Report, 2024). This section explores how the UN has performed across three major crises: Ukraine, Georgia, and Yugoslavia, illuminating systemic challenges and normative dilemmas.

Ukraine: Veto Paralysis and Normative Drift

Since Russia's initial intervention in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022, the UNSC has experienced significant institutional paralysis. As a permanent member of the UNSC, Russia has repeatedly exercised its veto to block draft resolutions condemning its actions or proposing stronger collective measures. According to the Security Council Report (2024), this veto practice has prevented the UNSC from adopting binding decisions addressing the conflict. This situation highlights a structural contradiction within the UN system: a permanent member of the UNSC can effectively obstruct collective action even when it is directly involved in the conflict under consideration. Under such conditions, the UNSC's ability to function as a neutral mechanism for maintaining international peace and security becomes severely constrained. In response to this paralysis, the UNGA adopted several emergency resolutions under the "Uniting

for Peace” procedure during the Ukraine crisis, most notably Resolution ES-11/1, which condemned the aggression against Ukraine (United Nations General Assembly, 2022). Although these resolutions demonstrated strong political support for Ukraine among a majority of member states, they remain advisory and lack binding enforcement mechanisms. Consequently, the UNGA has functioned primarily as a platform for diplomatic signalling and normative legitimacy rather than an institution capable of enforcing collective security decisions (Security Council Report, 2024).

Scholars and policy analysts argue that such veto-induced deadlock has renewed calls for structural reform of the UNSC. Maluwa (2023), for example, notes that African states and other actors from the Global South have increasingly advocated expanding representation and reconsidering veto privileges to improve the UNSC’s legitimacy. Finland’s president raised similar concerns during the UNGA debates in 2024, when he called for reconsidering the veto system and expanding permanent membership to better reflect contemporary geopolitical realities (Reuters, September 18, 2024). The Ukrainian case, therefore, illustrates how the interplay among veto politics, geopolitical rivalry, and legal contestation can significantly constrain the UN’s ability to respond effectively to large-scale interstate conflicts.

Georgia: Hybrid Threats and Strategic Inertia

The 2008 Russo-Georgian war revealed similar structural and operational limitations within the UN system. Despite escalating violence and the humanitarian consequences of the conflict, the UN was unable to adopt decisive measures capable of preventing escalation or enforcing a durable peace agreement. Reports from the period documented incidents of ethnic cleansing in South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well as the occupation of key strategic locations, including the Georgian port of Poti. However, the UN response remained largely limited to diplomatic statements and delayed humanitarian assistance (Security Council Report, 2004). One of the main obstacles to more decisive action was the geopolitical divide within the UNSC. Russia’s position as a permanent member of the UNSC greatly limited the potential for passing binding resolutions to address the conflict.

In practice, crisis management increasingly shifted towards regional and ad hoc mechanisms. The United States launched Operation Assured Delivery, providing humanitarian aid and logistical support to Georgia (Lantz, 2008; Clark, 2008). Simultaneously, regional organisations, particularly the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the European Union (EU), and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), took on a more prominent role in mediation and monitoring efforts. Russia’s employment of hybrid warfare tactics, such as borderisation, cyber pressure, and maritime incidents in the Black Sea, further revealed the challenges faced by international institutions created to handle conventional interstate conflicts. Therefore, the Georgian case illustrates how new forms of hybrid conflict can surpass the institutional capacities of organisations whose decision-making processes remain slow and politically limited.

Yugoslavia: The Birth of Norms Amid Failure

The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s represented one of the most significant tests of the UN’s peacekeeping and crisis-management capacities in the post-Cold War period. Despite the deployment of peacekeeping missions and the adoption of numerous UNSC resolutions, the UN failed to prevent large-scale atrocities, including the Srebrenica genocide in 1995. These failures exposed serious weaknesses in mandate design, command structures, and political coordination among major powers (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006). At the same time, the Yugoslav

crisis contributed to broader debates within the international community concerning humanitarian intervention and civilian protection. The experience of the Balkans, together with other crises such as Rwanda, highlighted the limitations of traditional peacekeeping and intensified discussions about how the international community should respond to mass atrocity situations.

In the following decade, these debates contributed to the development of new normative and legal frameworks, including the strengthening of international criminal justice mechanisms and the emergence of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine through the work of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (2001) and its subsequent endorsement by the UN in the 2005 World Summit Outcome. These developments sought to redefine the relationship between state sovereignty and international responsibility in situations involving mass atrocities. Nevertheless, the inconsistent application of these norms in subsequent crises suggests that institutional learning within the UN system has been uneven. Later conflicts, including those in Syria and Ukraine, demonstrate that political divisions among major powers continue to limit the practical implementation of humanitarian intervention principles. The analysis reveals a consistent pattern across the three crises examined: veto politics within the UNSC significantly constrained the UN's coercive capacity. In contrast, crisis management increasingly shifted toward regional organizations and ad hoc coalitions.

Patterns Across Crises

Connecting these crises reveals enduring institutional weaknesses. A comparative examination of conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, and the former Yugoslavia reveals several recurring structural and normative weaknesses in the UN system's functioning. Although these crises differ in their geopolitical contexts and historical trajectories, they share consistent institutional constraints that limit the UN's ability to respond effectively to contemporary security challenges. First, veto-derived inaction remains one of the most visible institutional obstacles within the UNSC. Russia's repeated use of the veto in relation to the Ukraine conflict, as well as its ability to block resolutions addressing the consequences of the 2008 war in Georgia, illustrates how permanent members can employ institutional privileges to prevent collective action when their strategic interests are directly involved. This dynamic reflects a broader structural feature of the UNSC: the veto mechanism enables major powers to shield themselves or their allies from international accountability. As a result, the UNSC frequently becomes a forum for geopolitical contestation rather than an effective instrument of collective security (Reuters, 2024). Second, these crises highlight a growing problem of normative fragmentation within international law and diplomacy. Divergent interpretations of key provisions of the UN Charter, particularly Article 51 on the right of self-defense, have increasingly been used by states to justify contested uses of force. Russia's invocation of self-defense arguments in the context of the Ukraine conflict illustrates how legal language can be strategically interpreted to legitimize controversial military actions. At the same time, Western states and many other UN members have emphasised the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the prohibition of the use of force. The coexistence of these competing legal narratives demonstrates how the erosion of normative consensus complicates international institutions' ability to enforce shared rules of conduct (Weiss, 2020). Thirdly, the crises examined in this study highlight the increasing complexity of hybrid and multi-domain conflicts.

Modern security challenges now go beyond traditional military confrontations and include cyber operations, information warfare, economic coercion, and disinformation campaigns.

These hybrid tactics blur the lines between war and peace, making it difficult to identify clear acts of aggression or to hold anyone accountable. Traditional UN mechanisms, such as peacekeeping missions, ceasefire monitoring, and diplomatic mediation, were mainly designed for conventional interstate or civil conflicts and thus often struggle to deal effectively with these changing forms of warfare. Finally, these cases demonstrate the growing role of regional security arrangements as alternatives or complements to UN action. In situations where the UNSC has been unable to act decisively, regional organizations such as the EU, NATO, and the OSCE have increasingly assumed responsibility for mediation, monitoring, and security coordination. In the Black Sea region, in particular, these institutions have often served as the primary mechanisms for crisis management and conflict stabilization. While such developments may strengthen regional security frameworks, they also indicate a gradual shift away from the UN as the central platform for addressing international security challenges (Security Council Report, 2024).

Normative Reform Imperatives

These structural limitations have intensified debates over institutional reform and the development of alternative mechanisms designed to mitigate UNSC paralysis. One such mechanism is the “Uniting for Peace” procedure, originally established by the UNGA in 1950. This framework allows the UNGA to address threats to international peace when the UNSC is unable to act due to veto-induced deadlock. The mechanism was reactivated in 2022 in response to the war in Ukraine, demonstrating its continued relevance as an institutional workaround. However, because UNGA resolutions remain non-binding, their practical capacity to enforce collective decisions remains limited (UNGA, 1950).

At the same time, calls for broader institutional reform have intensified, particularly among states from the Global South. Scholars and policymakers have increasingly emphasised that the legitimacy of the UN system depends on addressing long-standing representational imbalances within the UNSC. African Union initiatives and proposals articulated through the Ezulwini Consensus highlight the demand for greater regional representation and a more equitable distribution of decision-making authority. According to Maluwa (2023), these debates reflect a growing perception that without meaningful reform, the UN risks losing legitimacy among emerging and developing states (Maluwa, 2023; Reuters, 2024).

More ambitious reform proposals have also entered international debate, including calls to limit or abolish the veto power of the permanent members. Political leaders such as Finland’s President Alexander Stubb have publicly advocated reconsidering the veto as part of broader efforts to modernise global governance institutions and adapt them to the realities of a multipolar world (Reuters, 2024). Nevertheless, despite the growing frequency of such proposals, meaningful institutional reform has remained slow and politically difficult to achieve. Initiatives such as the Ezulwini Consensus continue to serve as important normative benchmarks. Yet, the composition and voting structure of the UNSC have remained unchanged, reflecting the enduring resistance of the existing permanent members to structural transformation (Maluwa, 2023).

Implications and Pathways for Reform

The Black Sea region functions as a geopolitical fault line that tests both the structural resilience and normative coherence of the UN. Against the backdrop of intensifying multipolar dynamics, Russia’s strategic behavior, often framed within the doctrine of the “near abroad” and its geopolitical interest in maintaining dominance over the Black Sea basin, has repeatedly

exposed institutional limitations in the UN's crisis-management mechanisms (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006; Security Council Report, 2024). The region, therefore, provides an analytically valuable setting for examining how global institutions operate amid great-power rivalry, competing legal interpretations, and fragmented security governance. This section examines three conflicts, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Yugoslav wars, to illustrate how structural constraints, geopolitical interests, and normative contestation shape the UN's performance in contemporary crises.

Restricting the Veto Power in Situations of Mass Atrocity and Aggression

The most urgent and politically divisive reform issue concerns the veto power of the five permanent members (P5) of the UNSC. The repeated use of vetoes by major powers, notably by Russia during the Ukraine conflict and by the United States in resolutions concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has reignited calls for limiting veto use, especially in cases involving mass atrocities, violations of sovereignty or the use of force without UN approval. These instances show how the veto mechanism can enable permanent members to shield their strategic interests or those of their allies, often at the cost of collective decision-making within the UNSC. As a result, debates over restricting the veto in situations of clear breaches of international law have gained renewed prominence in both academic and policy discussions on UN reform. Initiatives such as the French-Mexican proposal and the "Responsibility Not to Veto" campaign, supported by various middle powers and civil society organisations, argue that the UN's credibility is at risk when paralysis occurs in the face of atrocities. Finland's 2024 UNGA address reiterated the necessity of reaching a new consensus to limit vetoes in flagrant violations of international law (UN News, 2021). Although politically challenging, establishing a procedural or voluntary code of conduct among P5 members could serve as an intermediate step towards institutional accountability.

Enhancing Institutional Capacity for Hybrid and Asymmetric Threats

Conflicts in the Black Sea region are not confined to conventional battlefields. They encompass a wide spectrum of hybrid warfare tactics, including cyberattacks on infrastructure, disinformation campaigns across digital platforms, manipulation of diaspora groups, and coercive economic instruments. These threats increasingly bypass or overwhelm traditional peacekeeping and conflict-prevention mechanisms designed during the Cold War. A reformed UN must invest in capabilities to recognise and respond to hybrid conflicts early and effectively. This includes building digital intelligence units, upgrading peacekeeping mandates to include cyber defence, enhancing cooperation with international cybersecurity agencies, and developing rapid response teams for disinformation crises. Proposals have also included a UN Hybrid Threat Observatory, supported by regional security experts and integrated into the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (Dorn, 2015).

Institutionalised Cooperation with Regional Organisations

The Black Sea experience shows that when the UN fails to act, regional organisations such as NATO, the EU, and the OSCE step in to fill the vacuum. These organisations often possess stronger logistical capabilities, deeper situational knowledge, and more flexible mandates than the UN bureaucracy. However, this ad hoc substitution risks fragmentation and incoherence in global governance. A more systematic and institutionalised form of cooperation is needed, through formal liaison structures, shared early-warning systems, and co-deployment agreements. For example, the UN could consider hybrid missions jointly managed with the

OSCE or EU, leveraging their field presence and expertise in the post-Soviet region. Establishing regional UN liaison offices and implementing rotating secondments between organisations can promote knowledge sharing and build trust. Think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and Chatham House have called for such operational alignment to reduce redundancies and enhance early response in conflict-prone areas (Weiss, 2020).

Normative Clarification and Legal Precision in UN Charter Interpretation

The conflicting interpretations of Articles 2(4) and 51 of the UN Charter, especially regarding the legality of preventive self-defense and the scope of sovereignty violations, have severely undermined the organization's moral and legal authority. The Russian justification for the 2014 and 2022 actions in Ukraine, framed under the right to protect ethnic Russians or as anticipatory self-defense, revealed deep normative ambiguity. To restore its legal coherence, the UN could establish an independent interpretive advisory body under the International Law Commission or request more frequent advisory opinions from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on contested uses of force. This would help curtail abuse of legal gray zones and reinforce international accountability norms.

Operational Effectiveness: Capacity, Bureaucracy, and Fragmentation. The UN continues to serve as a principal custodian of international norms, ranging from human rights and sustainable development to peacekeeping and humanitarian law. However, the organization faces a persistent paradox: while its normative agenda has expanded, its operational and enforcement capacities have often stagnated or declined. Earlier international crises provide important precedents illustrating the structural constraints that continue to shape the UN's performance in more recent conflicts. Although the UN conducted peacekeeping missions in the conflict zones that emerged following the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, it failed to prevent large-scale atrocities, including the massacre of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica in 1995. Despite its presence, UN forces remained unable to intervene effectively as Bosnian Serb forces carried out attacks against civilian populations (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006).

Another prominent example was the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The UN peacekeeping mission lacked both the mandate and the resources necessary to intervene militarily, while key member states were reluctant to become involved. Under President Clinton, the United States initially viewed the crisis as lacking strategic importance and avoided formally recognizing the events as genocide, thereby limiting potential international obligations. France, meanwhile, maintained longstanding political ties with the Hutu government before the genocide and pursued its own strategic interests in the region (Dallaire, 2003). In both cases, the UNSC demonstrated limited responsiveness. Rather than strengthening the peacekeeping mission as violence escalated in Rwanda, the UNSC reduced the number of deployed personnel. These decisions underscored how the absence of political consensus among major powers can significantly constrain the capacity of international organizations to prevent mass atrocities. A further example of institutional limitation was the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and the United Kingdom, which proceeded without explicit authorization from the UNSC. The conflict illustrated the difficulties the UN faces when major powers bypass multilateral decision-making mechanisms.

During the subsequent occupation period, the UN's role remained largely confined to humanitarian coordination and reconstruction assistance (Dallaire, 2003). These earlier crises reveal recurring institutional challenges, political fragmentation within the UNSC, limited

operational mandates, and dependence on member-state support, all of which continue to shape the UN's ability to respond to contemporary conflicts. Similar dynamics can be observed in more recent crises in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, where geopolitical rivalry among major powers has again constrained the organization's capacity to act decisively. More broadly, peacekeeping missions often suffer from underfunding, inconsistent mandates, and overreliance on regional contributions. The UNSC's inability to authorize collective measures in recent crises, such as those in Myanmar and Sudan, further illustrates institutional stagnation. Moreover, bureaucratic layering and inter-agency competition frequently dilute the coherence of UN responses (Chesterman, 2019).

The fragmentation of multilateral cooperation is also evident in development governance. With the emergence of parallel institutions, such as the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and various regional development initiatives, the UN's role in shaping the global development agenda faces growing competition. Although the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remain a central normative framework, their implementation relies heavily on voluntary national commitments, leaving coordination fragmented. While the UN remains central to many dimensions of global governance, bureaucratic inertia, budgetary limitations, and fragmented mandates across agencies often constrain its operational effectiveness. Peacekeeping operations in particular face a triple challenge of limited resources, ambiguous mandates, and growing exposure to asymmetric threats (Paris, 2014). At the same time, the rise of regional organizations, including the African Union, ASEAN, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, has increasingly shifted aspects of crisis management away from the UN system. In an increasingly multipolar international environment, this diffusion of authority has produced a more complex and multi-layered system of global governance, creating both constraints and opportunities for the UN to redefine its institutional role.

Normative Fragmentation: Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and Multipolarity

In a unipolar or bipolar world, even adversarial states often shared basic beliefs about sovereignty, intervention, and development. As Ian Hurd (2021) argues, the UN is increasingly a forum not only for negotiating interests but also for challenging what defines legitimate international behaviour. Multipolarity, therefore, reveals epistemic divides in the global order, making it harder to create norms and achieve consensus. Beyond institutional form and function, the UN also faces a growing crisis of normative alignment. Competing visions of sovereignty, human rights, and global justice have eroded the consensus that once underpinned UN-led multilateralism. Western liberal states continue to emphasize norms such as democracy promotion and gender equality. Conversely, alternative governance models advanced by China, Russia, and others stress non-interference, state-led development, and cultural pluralism.

Against this broader backdrop of ideological divergence within the international system, these cleavages became particularly visible in debates surrounding the UN's responses to crises in Syria, Myanmar, and Ukraine. Among these cases, the Russian-Ukrainian war has most clearly exposed the structural and normative constraints under which the organization currently operates. While paralysis within the UNSC was widely anticipated, given Russia's veto power, the UNSC's inability to respond decisively nonetheless underscored enduring flaws in its institutional design. At the same time, the UNGA adopted multiple resolutions condemning Russia's actions, reaffirming its relevance as a forum for articulating collective international sentiment, even if such expressions remain largely symbolic in their practical effects.

The conflict has also been marked by pronounced normative contestation. Russia sought to justify its actions through an expansive reinterpretation of Article 51 of the UN Charter. At the same time, Western states emphasized principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the prohibition on the use of force. These competing interpretations unfolded across official statements, resolutions, and voting behaviour within UN bodies. The ambivalence displayed by several Global South states was particularly revealing, reflecting both the absence of normative consensus and the strategic caution characteristic of an increasingly polarized and multipolar international environment. Viewed in this light, the war in Ukraine illustrates not only the operational limitations of the UN in a divided international system, but also its continued indispensability as a venue for multilateral engagement. Even amid deep political fragmentation, the organization remains a central arena for contestation, dialogue, and normative positioning. It is precisely this function that underscores the UN's enduring strengths, including its universal membership, accumulated institutional experience, and symbolic legitimacy. The extent to which these assets can be translated into sustained influence, however, will depend on the organization's ability to demonstrate greater inclusiveness, institutional responsiveness, and moral authority in practice.

Conclusion

This study has examined the evolving role of international organizations in a multipolar international system, using the UN as a central case for assessing the adaptability of global governance institutions. The analysis demonstrates that while international organizations continue to provide important platforms for diplomatic coordination, legitimacy, and norm articulation, their capacity to influence concrete security outcomes has become increasingly constrained by geopolitical rivalry and limitations in institutional design. The empirical analysis of conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, and the former Yugoslavia highlights several recurring patterns that illustrate the structural constraints facing the UN. First, the veto power of permanent members frequently prevents the UNSC from taking decisive action in situations involving major power interests. Second, competing interpretations of sovereignty, intervention, and self-defense complicate efforts to establish consistent legal responses to international crises. Third, when institutional paralysis occurs, crisis management often shifts toward regional organizations or ad hoc coalitions, resulting in a more decentralized and fragmented global security architecture.

These developments do not imply that international organizations have lost their relevance. Rather, they suggest that the authority of such institutions has become increasingly conditional in a multipolar environment. The UN continues to serve as an indispensable forum for diplomatic negotiation, a source of normative guidance, and a mechanism for maintaining political dialogue among states. However, its ability to translate institutional legitimacy into effective action increasingly depends on the willingness of major powers to cooperate within its framework. Addressing these challenges requires pragmatic institutional adaptation. One important priority concern reforming the UNSC, particularly regarding representational legitimacy and decision-making procedures. Although comprehensive structural reform remains politically difficult, incremental measures, such as voluntary restraint in the use of veto power in situations involving mass atrocities or clear violations of the UN Charter, could improve the UNSC's credibility and responsiveness.

Institutional adaptation is also necessary at the operational level. Contemporary conflicts increasingly involve hybrid threats, cyber operations, and information warfare that traditional

peacekeeping mechanisms were not designed to address. Strengthening coordination among UN agencies, clarifying mandates, and investing in analytical and technological capacities would enhance the organization's ability to respond more effectively to evolving conflict dynamics. Another important direction is to expand structured cooperation between the UN and regional organizations. Regional institutions often possess greater political leverage and contextual expertise within their respective regions, while the UN provides global legitimacy and normative authority. Developing more systematic partnerships between these levels of governance could improve early warning mechanisms, crisis response, and post-conflict stabilization.

The findings of this study also contribute to broader theoretical debates concerning the role of international organizations in a multipolar international system. The comparative analysis supports realist expectations that intensified rivalry among major powers, particularly within the UNSC, can significantly constrain the organization's capacity to take coercive or enforcement-oriented action. At the same time, the evidence also confirms institutionalist arguments that international organizations may retain relevance even when formal decision-making mechanisms are blocked, as alternative institutional arenas such as the UNGA or specialized agencies continue to facilitate diplomatic coordination and normative signalling. Finally, the cases examined demonstrate the importance of constructivist perspectives, as disputes over sovereignty, intervention, and the interpretation of international law frequently shape diplomatic behavior within UN institutions. Taken together, these findings suggest that the performance of international organizations in a multipolar system reflects the interaction between power politics, institutional mechanisms, and competing normative frameworks.

Recommendations

The analysis of this study highlights the conditions under which the UN is most likely to retain operational relevance in contemporary international crises. The organization tends to function most effectively when major powers are not directly involved in the conflict or when their strategic interests do not fundamentally diverge. In such circumstances, the UNSC remains capable of authorizing peacekeeping operations, sanctions regimes, or mediation initiatives. Conversely, when conflicts involve direct geopolitical competition among the permanent members of the UNSC, the UN's operational capacity is significantly constrained by veto politics and strategic rivalry. Under these conditions, the organization often assumes a more limited role as a forum for diplomatic negotiation, normative articulation, and symbolic legitimacy. At the same time, operational crisis management is increasingly undertaken by regional organizations or ad hoc coalitions.

Overall, the findings suggest that the relevance of international organizations in a multipolar world will depend less on their formal authority and more on their institutional adaptability and political credibility. The UN remains a unique and indispensable component of the global governance system, yet its long-term effectiveness will depend on its capacity to reconcile institutional legitimacy with operational responsiveness. In a global order characterised by power diffusion and contested norms, the future role of the UN will ultimately depend on its ability to adapt its structures and practices to the realities of a more fragmented and competitive international environment.

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