THE CALABAR HISTORICAL JOURNAL
Vol. 12, No. 1, June 2023 p1-22 ISSN: 2315-8816
https://thecalabarhistoricaljournal.com/

SELECTIVE MULTILATERALISM IN THE FOREIGN POLICIES OF MAJOR POWERS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL GOVERNANCE, 1990 - 2024

IROM, Irom Ayami
Department of History and International Studies
University of Calabar
iromite@yahoo.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8650-6508?lang=en

Abstract

This study explores selective multilateralism in the foreign policies of major powers, focusing on the United States (US), China, Russia, the United Kingdom and France in their engagement with the United Nations (UN) from 1990 to 2024. The end of the Cold War raised expectations of a strengthened rules-based international order anchored by the UN, with significant powers publicly committing to collective security and cooperative global governance. Over time, however, these commitments have remained uneven and largely interest-driven, often weakened by unilateral actions. Key examples include NATO's intervention in Kosovo without UN Security Council (UNSC) authorisation, the US's invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the repeated use of vetoes by China and Russia on resolutions related to Syria and Ukraine. These cases reflect a recurring pattern in which the UN is utilised to legitimise action when it aligns with national interests and is sidelined when it constrains strategic autonomy. The study adopts a realist-institutionalist framework, acknowledging that while international institutions can shape state behaviour, powerful states frequently manipulate or bypass rules to advance geopolitical goals. Using qualitative case studies, the research reveals that selective engagement has eroded the UN's legitimacy, authority and consistency, particularly in the areas of collective security and peacekeeping. The findings highlight declining trust among small and medium-sized states, the erosion of sovereign equality, and growing global governance fatigue. The study recommends that emerging powers enhance their capacity and that financial reforms be pursued, including expanding the UNSC to improve multilateralism in line with the UN Charter.

Keywords: Selective multilateralism, unilateralism, collective security, veto power, legitimacy.

Introduction

The end of the Cold War in 1990 heralded an era of renewed optimism for multilateralism, with the establishment of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 envisioned as the cornerstone of a liberal international order anchored on cooperation, collective security and the rule of international law. As ideological rivalry between the United States (US) and the Soviet Union gave way to a unipolar world dominated by the West, the expectation was that major powers would rally behind the UN system to uphold peace, security and development. Indeed, in the early 1990s, the Gulf War (1990-1991), waged

under a UN mandate, appeared to have signalled the dawn of a "New World Order" in which global governance institutions would act decisively with the backing of powerful states.[1]

However, the ensuing decades have demonstrated that the engagements of major powers, notably the Permanent 5 (P5) members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), the US, China, Russia, France and the United Kingdom, have been marked by inconsistency and contradiction. Far from being the architects of a principled and impartial multilateral system, these states have frequently resorted to selective multilateralism, a practice whereby multilateral institutions, such as the UN, are used instrumentally when they serve national interests and ignored or circumvented when they do not. The result is a pattern of engagement in which major powers invoke the UN's legitimacy to authorise military or diplomatic actions when convenient, but are equally quick to act unilaterally or to block multilateral initiatives that conflict with their geopolitical strategies.[2]

This contradiction has been visible in numerous critical episodes. For instance, while the US sought multilateral cover through UN resolutions for its intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, it bypassed the UN entirely in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, provoking widespread criticism about double standards and the erosion of international law.[3] Russia has similarly wielded its veto power to shield the Assad regime in Syria from international sanctions, and its unilateral annexation of Crimea in 2014 defied both the UN Charter and international norms on sovereignty.[4] China also continues to selectively endorse multilateralism in areas such as peacekeeping and development financing, while resisting resolutions on democratic governance in Hong Kong, often invoking non-interference as a shield.[5] Moreover, the preference of major powers for ad hoc coalitions and plurilateral arrangements such as the G7, G20,

[1] C.W. Kegley and A.R. Gregory, *The Global Future: A Brief Introduction to World Politics*. Cengage Learning, 2009.
[2] S. Patrick, *The Sovereignty Wars: Reconciling America with the World*. Brookings Institution Press, 2017.
[3] R. Thakur, *The United Nations, Peace and Security: From Collective Security to the Responsibility to Protect*. Cambridge UP, 2006.
[4] R. Menon and R. Eugene, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order*. MIT Press, 2015.
[5] R. Foot, *China, the UN and Human Protection: Beliefs, Power, Image*. Oxford UP, 2020.

BRICS, the Quad and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation signals a shift away from universal multilateralism towards narrower strategic alignments, reflecting a realpolitik approach to foreign policy in which flexibility and control are prioritised over inclusivity and collective decision-making. As Richard Haass argues, 'we are living in a world of multilateralism à la carte, where states pick and choose which institutions to support and which to ignore'.[6] This inconsistent behaviour, evident in the actions of the United States, Russia and China, has undermined sovereign equality, weakened institutional consistency and eroded trust in the UN's credibility and impartiality.

The paper examines the foreign policy behaviour of major powers toward the UN through the lens of selective multilateralism between 1990 and 2024, with particular attention to how power, interests, and institutional constraints shape multilateral diplomacy. It clarifies selective multilateralism as it applies to the UN and its organs, traces the historical evolution of significant power engagement from the post-Cold War period to the contemporary global system through key crises, interventions and reform efforts and identifies emerging patterns influencing international cooperation, including the growing reliance on plurilateral arrangements and regional alliances. In doing so, it recommends strengthening the UN's institutional framework in ways that other emerging states in the world order could enhance their capacities to foster better multilateral engagement in an increasingly multipolar international system. The paper adopts a qualitative research methodology to provide a comprehensive analysis of major powers' selective multilateralism in their foreign policy engagements with the UN from 1990 to 2024, drawing on existing academic literature, including books, reports, journal articles, and newspaper publications.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework drawing on Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Constructivism to explain the selective multilateralism of major powers within the UN system. From

[6] R. Haass, *The World: A Brief Introduction*. Penguin Press, 2020.

a realist perspective, the behaviour of states is shaped primarily by power, security and survival in an anarchic international system, with multilateral institutions viewed as instruments to be used when they align with national interests and bypassed when they constrain strategic objectives.[7] This lens helps explain practices such as unilateral interventions, the strategic use of veto power and the preference for ad hoc coalitions, as seen in cases involving the US, Russia and China. Realism accounts for the calculated, interest-driven nature of major powers' engagement with the UN, particularly in moments when security or geopolitical influence is perceived to be at stake.

Liberal institutionalism and constructivism complement this analysis by highlighting the institutional and normative consequences of selective engagement. Liberal institutionalism underscores the role of the UN in fostering cooperation, building trust and managing collective problems, while viewing selective multilateralism as corrosive to institutional legitimacy and global governance.[8] Constructivism adds a normative dimension by focusing on how ideas, identity and legitimacy shape state behaviour, showing how major powers invoke legal and moral narratives to justify selective compliance with UN norms.[9] Together, these perspectives enable a more comprehensive understanding of why major powers alternate between support for and withdrawal from the UN system and how such behaviour affects collective security, international cooperation and the authority of multilateral institutions between 1990 and 2024.

The UN System and Major Powers

The United Nations system is the most prominent multilateral institutional framework for regulating international security, economic development, human rights and global cooperation, having emerged after the Second World War as a forum for global governance, diplomacy and power projection, particularly by major powers. At the centre of this system is the United Nations Security Council, which

[7] J.J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions." *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1994, pp. 23.
[8] R.O. Keohane and S.N. Joseph, *Power and Interdependence*. 3rd ed., Longman, 2001.
[9] A. Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organisation*, vol. 46, no. 2, 1992, pp. 397.

holds primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security and whose decisions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter are binding on all member states, unlike those of the General Assembly. The Security Council is composed of 15 members: 5 permanent members with veto power and 10 non-permanent members elected for 2-year terms, a structure reflecting the geopolitical influence of the major powers at the end of World War II. While the General Assembly lacks binding authority, it serves as a representative forum in which all 193 member states have equal voting rights and plays a central role in norm-setting, agenda formation, and the authorisation of budgets and peacekeeping operations, supported administratively by the Secretariat under the leadership of the Secretary-General.[10] Although the veto power was initially intended to preserve remarkable power consensus and prevent renewed global conflict, its frequent use, such as by the US to shield Israel and by Russia and China to block resolutions on Syria, Myanmar and Ukraine, has profoundly shaped UN action and become closely associated with selective multilateralism, where national interests often override global consensus.[11]

The post-Cold War period witnessed a divergence in how major powers engaged with the UN system, often reflecting a balance between cooperation and obstruction that varied with national interests, leading to distinct patterns of selective multilateralism. The US, as the principal architect and the UN's most significant financial contributor, has been both its chief patron and its primary critic. While playing leading roles in peacekeeping mandates (e.g., Haiti and Sudan) and supporting UN-led sanctions (e.g., North Korea and Iran), it has frequently acted unilaterally or bypassed the UN when it deemed multilateralism constraining. The 2003 invasion of Iraq is a typical example of selective engagement.[12] Furthermore, her withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord and the UN Human Rights Council under the Trump administration underscored the fragility of the United States' multilateral commitments.

---

[10] T.G. Weiss et al, *The United Nations and Changing World Politics*. 7th ed., Westview Press, 2017.
[11] E.C. Luck, *UN Security Council: Practice and Promise*. Routledge, 2006.
[12] S. Patrick, *The Best Laid Plans: The Origins of American Multilateralism and the Dawn of the Cold War*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia re-emerged as a reassertive power within the UN system, often opposing what it perceives as Western overreach, reflected in its consistent use of the veto to block resolutions on Syria and Ukraine, as well as NATO-aligned policies. Russia also views the UN as a strategic platform for projecting influence while defending a Westphalian view of sovereignty.[13] On the other hand, China's engagement with the UN has evolved from passivity to activism; with its growing global ambitions, especially under President Xi Jinping, it now champions the "UN-centred international order" while promoting non-interference and state sovereignty with increased peacekeeping contributions and development funding through UN platforms. However, China has also used its veto to block interventions and resolutions perceived to infringe on its core interests, such as those involving Taiwan, Hong Kong or Uyghur human rights abuses.[14] As traditional Western powers and founding members of the UN, France and the UK generally align with liberal multilateral norms while actively promoting humanitarian interventions, climate action and international law. Nevertheless, these countries within the coalition have occasionally pursued their interests beyond UN mandates (e.g., Libya 2011 and Mali 2013), and have supported UNSC reforms and deeper cooperation with regional blocs, reflecting both liberal values and pragmatic interests.

Case Studies of Selective Multilateralism

Selective multilateralism refers to the strategic and inconsistent participation of states, especially major powers, in multilateral institutions like the UN. Instead of engaging universally with UN mechanisms, these powers often support or bypass the system depending on how well its processes align with their national interests, ideological inclinations or geopolitical calculations. Below are case studies that explore the P5's application of this approach between 1990 and 2024.

[13] J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
[14] R. Foot and G. Evelyn, *China, the US and Global Order*. Cambridge UP, 2017.

The US exemplifies the paradox of being the UN's most significant financial contributor and its most frequent unilateral actor. Following the 11 September 2001 attacks, the US launched a global "War on Terror," seeking UN backing for military action against regimes it labelled as threats and in 2003, the Bush administration accused Iraq of possessing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) and sought UNSC authorisation for intervention. Despite extensive lobbying, she failed to secure a second resolution authorising the use of force, primarily due to opposition from France, Russia and China. The US, supported by the UK, invaded Iraq anyway, undermining the legitimacy of the UNSC and signalling the limits of multilateralism.[15] Conversely, in Libya (2011), the US, under President Obama, worked through multilateral institutions under the UNSC Resolution 1973 authorising a no-fly zone and the use of "all necessary measures" to protect civilians from Gaddafi's forces. The resolution passed because Russia and China abstained rather than vetoing, and the NATO-led intervention, initially framed as humanitarian, eventually resulted in regime change, leading Russia and China to accuse the West of abusing UN mandates and increasing scepticism toward future humanitarian interventions.[16]

Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy has evolved to actively use the UN as a tool of resistance against Western interventionism. It has increasingly relied on its veto power to protect allied regimes and safeguard its strategic interests. In the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, Russia vetoed over 17 resolutions, including those that condemned the Assad regime for chemical weapon use and proposed humanitarian corridors, which she viewed as precursors to regime change, similar to Libya and sought to prevent a repeat of what she perceived as a betrayal of UNSC processes.[17] In the case of Ukraine, following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion, Russia faced intense international condemnation. However, as a permanent member, she blocked resolutions that condemned or sanctioned

[15] T.G. Weiss and D. Sam, editors. *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*. Oxford UP, 2007.
[16] A.J. Bellamy and D.W. Paul, "The New Politics of Protection? Côte d'Ivoire, Libya and the Responsibility to Protect." *International Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2011, pp. 833.
[17] B. Charbonneau and S. Andy, "Russia and China's Vetoes in the UN Security Council: The Politics of Responsibility and Sovereignty in Syria." *Global Governance*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2016, pp. 225.

her actions, effectively paralysing the UNSC on the matter and revealing a structural flaw in the UN system: an aggressor state can block action against itself.[18]

China's multilateralism is characterised by selective participation aligned with sovereignty norms. While she has increased peacekeeping participation and development aid through the UN, she resists actions that challenge state authority, territorial integrity or internal affairs. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled against China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, in favour of the Philippines. China dismissed the ruling, declaring it null and void, despite being a party to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This refusal to abide by a multilateral legal outcome demonstrated China's preference for bilateralism and state-centric sovereignty.[19] In Myanmar, following the 2021 military coup and the subsequent repression of protesters, Western powers pushed for UNSC sanctions, China and Russia either blocked or watered down resolutions, invoking non-interference and calling for dialogue, reflecting their deep economic and security ties to Myanmar and its broader resistance to setting precedents for international intervention in domestic matters.[20]

France has used the UN system both to legitimise interventions and reinforce its influence in Francophone Africa. In Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, following a disputed election and civil unrest, France collaborated with the UN to support Alassane Ouattara's internationally recognised government. The UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) and French troops worked together to oust President Laurent Gbagbo with the UNSC's backing, prompting criticism that they had exceeded the UN mandate to achieve political objectives.[21] Also in Mali, France intervened militarily in 2013 through Operation Serval to combat Islamist insurgents threatening Bamako and was later supported by UNSC Resolution 2085, which authorised an African-led support mission. France continued to operate under MINUSMA until its

[18] R. Gowan, *Can the United Nations Unite the World?* Polity Press, 2022.
[19] S. Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*. Stanford UP, 2023.
[20] J. Haacke, "Myanmar, the United Nations and China: Dealing with the Aftermath of the Coup." *Asian Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2021, pp. 82.
[21] A. Adebajo, *UN Peacekeeping in Africa: From the Suez Crisis to the Sudan Conflicts*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011.

withdrawal in 2022, which signalled disillusionment with both local governments and UN frameworks, demonstrating a case of pragmatic multilateralism.[22]

The UK has generally aligned with the US in foreign policy but maintains an independent tradition of humanitarian multilateralism. In Sierra Leone (2000), during the civil war, Britain deployed troops in support of the UN peacekeeping mission. The intervention, under then-Prime Minister Tony Blair, was widely praised as a model for "responsibility to protect" and showed constructive UN-state cooperation.[23] However, in Iraq (2003), the UK supported the US invasion without UNSC authorisation, undermining multilateral legitimacy. The Chilcot Inquiry (2016) later found that the case for war had been exaggerated and that diplomatic options had not been exhausted, reinforcing critiques of selective engagement.

Analysis and Discussion of Trends and Patterns

The analysis and discussion of trends and patterns explore veto usage and jurisdictional control, funding and political support, drivers of selective multilateralism, and its implications.

Veto Usage and Justification

The veto power granted to the P5 of the UNSC remains the most visible expression of selective multilateralism, which enables these powers to block resolutions that contradict their geopolitical interests, effectively neutralising collective action even in the face of global consensus. From 1990 to 2024, Russia and China have increasingly used the veto to prevent interventions they perceive as Western overreach. Notably, Russia vetoed more than 17 resolutions on Syria between 2011 and 2023, blocking humanitarian aid corridors, ceasefire efforts and accountability mechanisms for chemical weapon use.[24] Similarly, China

[22] C. Gegout, *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa: Security, Prestige and the Legacy of Colonialism*. Oxford UP, 2018.
[23] P.D. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM)*. Oxford UP, 2018.
[24] B. Charbonneau and S. Andy, "Russia and China's Vetoes in the UN Security Council: The Politics of Responsibility and Sovereignty in Syria." *Global Governance*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2016, pp. 219–238.

joined Russia in blocking resolutions that challenge its principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, such as during the Myanmar military coup in 2021.[25]

The US, while not prolific in veto usage, has exercised the power mainly to shield Israel from international scrutiny, vetoing over 40 draft resolutions related to Israeli settlements and human rights violations since 1972.[26] These patterns highlight the entrenchment of selective engagement based on ideological alignments and strategic alliances, rather than international norms. The P5's jurisdictional control also extends to shaping the mandates of peacekeeping operations. For example, France designed several missions in Francophone Africa, often reinforcing its sphere of influence rather than enabling African agency, suggesting that while the P5 rhetorically commit to multilateralism, they often operationalise it through power-centric frameworks.[27]

Funding and Political Support for UN Missions

Funding is a core dimension of the power politics within the UN, and the US remains the most significant financial contributor, providing 22 per cent of the UN's regular budget and over 25 per cent of peacekeeping funds, despite threats of withdrawal under administrations like Trump's.[28] However, this funding has often come with conditionalities, such as demands for reform, alignment with US foreign policy or even the defunding of organisations like UNRWA and UNESCO, when they challenge American policies or allies. China, on the other hand, has strategically increased its UN funding and visibility, becoming the second-largest contributor to the peacekeeping budget and actively deploying troops, especially in Africa. Yet Beijing maintains tight control over how these deployments reflect its non-interventionist, sovereignty-focused ideology.[29] Meanwhile, Russia and France, while contributing far less

[25] J. Haacke, "Myanmar, the United Nations and China: Dealing with the Aftermath of the Coup." *Asian Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2021, pp. 72–92.
[26] T.G. Weiss and D. Sam, editors. *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*. Oxford UP, 2007.
[27] C. Gegout, *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa: Security, Prestige and the Legacy of Colonialism*. Oxford UP, 2018.
[28] R. Gowan, *Can the United Nations Unite the World?* Polity Press, 2022.
[29] S. Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*. Stanford UP, 2023.

financially than the US and China, have shown greater tactical support for select missions in regions of interest. Russia, for example, actively supports UN-backed mandates in Central Asia and opposes those in Eastern Europe. France has used MINUSMA in Mali and UNOCI in Côte d'Ivoire to legitimise its military operations, though often retaining strategic autonomy.[30] These patterns demonstrate that funding is more about strategic investment in influence within the global landscape.

Drivers of Selective Multilateralism

Rather than acting in line with shared global norms, the 5 central states often pursue multilateral cooperation when it aligns with their national interests and undermine it when it contradicts their strategic objectives. Several interlocking drivers underpin this pattern, including national strategic interests, sovereignty doctrines, geopolitical rivalries, ideological preferences, domestic politics and institutional design flaws of the UN system. The foremost driver of selective multilateralism is the primacy of national interest in foreign policy formulation. Major powers choose to engage multilaterally only when doing so enhances their strategic, military or economic goals. For example, the US bypassed the UN Security Council (UNSC) when invading Iraq in 2003, citing a unilateral "coalition of the willing" after failing to secure multilateral authorisation.[31] Conversely, Washington actively used the UNSC in 2011 to intervene in Libya under Resolution 1973, which aligned with NATO's strategic goals (Bellamy and Williams 833).[32] Russia, on her part, championed multilateralism when it provided a platform to assert her global stature, but had rejected it when it threatened her sphere of influence, demonstrated in her annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent vetoes on Syria-related resolutions, a calculated use of the UN as a platform to project power and limit Western interventions.[33]

---

[30] A. Adebajo, *UN Peacekeeping in Africa: From the Suez Crisis to the Sudan Conflicts*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011.
[31] S. Tharoor, *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cell Phone: Reflections on India, the Emerging 21st-Century Power*. Arcade Publishing, 2007.
[32] A.J. Bellamy and D.W. Paul, "The New Politics of Protection? Côte d'Ivoire, Libya and the Responsibility to Protect." *International Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2011, p. 482.
[33] B. Charbonneau and S. Andy, "Russia and China's Vetoes in the UN Security Council: The Politics of Responsibility and Sovereignty in Syria." *Global Governance*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2016, p. 226.

China and Russia consistently invoke the principle of sovereignty and non-interference as justifications for opposing multilateral interventions, especially in countries with domestic unrest. This defensive posture stems from both countries' internal vulnerabilities-ethnic separatism in China (Xinjiang, Tibet) and political dissent in Russia and a desire to maintain a state-centric international order.[34] China's resistance to UN criticism of its treatment of Uyghurs or its refusal to endorse intervention in Myanmar post-coup reflects its prioritisation of internal control over international norms.[35] This doctrine often leads to the selective blocking of humanitarian or peacekeeping missions that would otherwise be universally supported. By doing so, these powers preserve a Westphalian model of sovereignty while advancing their foreign policy narratives through multilateralism.

The post-Cold War era has witnessed a re-emergence of great-power rivalry, especially among the US, China, and Russia. This rivalry has fueled a contest over the legitimacy and structure of global governance institutions, including the UN. China's growing international influence and strategic investment in multilateral diplomacy, including leadership roles in the UN Peacekeeping and the WHO, are part of its broader attempt to reshape global norms and counterbalance US dominance.[36] Similarly, Russia's actions in Ukraine, Syria and Libya have often aimed at disrupting Western-led multilateralism. At the same time, France and the UK have sought to retain post-colonial influence in Africa via UN-mandated missions.[37]

Selective multilateralism is also driven by diverging ideological orientations among major powers; Western states often promote liberal internationalist ideals, including democracy, human rights and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). In contrast, non-Western powers like China and Russia advocate for state

[34] R. Foot and G. Evelyn, *China, the US and Global Order*. Cambridge UP, 2017.
[35] J. Haacke, "Myanmar, the United Nations and China: Dealing with the Aftermath of the Coup." *Asian Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2021, p. 77.
[36] S. Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*. Stanford UP, 2023.
[37] C. Gegout, *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa: Security, Prestige and the Legacy of Colonialism*. Oxford UP, 2018.

sovereignty, political stability and regime survival.[38] This divergence has been evident in UN debates on intervention in Libya, Syria, Sudan and Venezuela. While France and the UK supported humanitarian interventions, China and Russia viewed them as cover for regime change. Thus, ideological conflict fuels the instrumental use of the UN, in which each significant power seeks to shape resolutions, missions, and norms in line with its worldview.

Domestic political pressures also influence multilateral behaviour. In democratic states like the US, decisions to engage or disengage from multilateralism are often shaped by congressional politics, electoral cycles or public opinion. For instance, under President Trump, the US disengagement from UNESCO, the Human Rights Council and the WHO reflected nationalist and anti-globalist sentiments among domestic constituencies.[39] Conversely, President Biden's administration re-engaged with these institutions to restore US credibility and leadership in global governance. In authoritarian regimes, domestic political legitimacy is tied to regime security and image projection. For China, participation in peacekeeping missions and international development programs burnishes her image as a "responsible great power" while diverting attention from her domestic human rights record.[40]

Finally, selective multilateralism is encouraged by the structural flaws of the UN system, particularly the concentration of power in the Security Council. The P5's veto privilege enables them to evade accountability and dictate the UN's agenda, thereby institutionalising inequality. This structural dominance disincentivises consensus and emboldens unilateral or ad-hoc coalitions outside the UN framework. Moreover, the lack of reform in the Security Council's composition, which has remained unchanged since 1945, further alienates rising powers like India, Brazil and South Africa, whose marginalisation often translates to low commitment to UN enforcement decisions.[41] Thus, the institutional

[38] T.G. Weiss and D. Sam, editors. *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*. Oxford UP, 2007.
[39] R. Gowan, *Can the United Nations Unite the World?* Polity Press, 2022.
[40] S. Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*. Stanford UP, 2023.
[41] T. Murithi, "Reforming the United Nations Security Council: Promoting the African Agenda." *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2015, p. 44.

inertia within the UN makes it vulnerable to instrumentalisation by the powerful and dismissive indifference by the underrepresented.

Implications of UN Selective Multilateralism

The concept of selective multilateralism, in which major powers participate in multilateral arrangements such as the UN only when it serves their strategic interests, poses significant challenges for global governance. While multilateral institutions like the UN were designed to foster cooperation, uphold international law, and prevent unilateral aggression, selective engagement by powerful states undermines these principles, with both immediate and long-term implications for the organisation's effectiveness, credibility, and relevance. A profound consequence of selective multilateralism is the erosion of the UN's normative authority. When major powers disregard the UN framework, bypass the Security Council or manipulate institutions for parochial gain, they send a message that multilateral rules are optional. The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, despite lacking explicit Security Council authorisation, was a landmark case where unilateral action severely undermined the legitimacy of the UN Charter system.[42] Also, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 violated the principle of territorial integrity, showcasing selective adherence to international law.[43] This pattern of behaviour weakens the UN's ability to serve as an impartial arbiter for conflict resolution. As a result, smaller states may question the fairness of the system and pursue survival strategies, potentially escalating regional conflicts and undermining global order.

Selective multilateralism contributes to the fragmentation of international cooperation. Instead of relying on inclusive institutions like the UN, major powers often form ad hoc coalitions, regional alliances or "minilateral" arrangements such as the G7, G20, QUAD or BRICS. These arrangements, while sometimes effective, are exclusive by nature and often marginalise global consensus.[44] For example, China

[42] S. Tharoor, *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cell Phone: Reflections on India, the Emerging 21st-Century Power*. Arcade Publishing, 2007.
[43] B. Charbonneau and S. Andy, "Russia and China's Vetoes in the UN Security Council: The Politics of Responsibility and Sovereignty in Syria." *Global Governance*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2016, pp. 226.
[44] S. Patrick, *The Sovereignty Wars: Reconciling America with the World*. Brookings Institution Press, 2017.

and Russia have increasingly promoted the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS as counterweights to Western-dominated institutions. At the same time, the US has relied on NATO or coalitions of the willing to circumvent UN roadblocks, undermining universal mechanisms and creating parallel regimes of cooperation, often with conflicting standards and agendas.[45]

The inconsistent support for UN peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention also affects the credibility and efficacy of collective security. When major powers obstruct consensus, typically through veto power in the Security Council, crises worsen due to delayed or denied interventions. For example, Russia and China have repeatedly vetoed resolutions addressing the Syrian Civil War, blocking investigations into chemical weapons and humanitarian access.[46] This not only prolongs suffering but also diminishes member states' confidence in the UN's capacity to act promptly in humanitarian crises. Furthermore, the overreliance on a few major powers for peacekeeping funding and troop contributions, especially from countries like the US, China and France, makes the system vulnerable to political blackmail and withdrawal threats because when these countries disengage, peace operations falter, leaving conflict zones unstable.[47]

Selective engagement has also damaged the global human rights regime. Major powers often block or dilute UN Human Rights Council resolutions to protect strategic allies or shield themselves from scrutiny. For instance, China has used its influence to prevent investigations into its policies in Xinjiang. At the same time, the US, under various administrations, has either withdrawn from or rejoined the Council based on domestic political calculations.[48] This instrumentalisation of human rights undermines the idea that human dignity is a universal concern and fuels accusations of double standards. If powerful states can opt out of human rights commitments or shield violators for political gain, smaller states may

[45] S. Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*. Stanford UP, 2023.
[46] T.G. Weiss and D. Sam, editors. *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*. Oxford UP, 2007.
[47] R. Gowan, *Can the United Nations Unite the World?* Polity Press, 2022.
[48] R. Foot and G. Evelyn, *China, the US and Global Order*. Cambridge UP, 2017.

see no incentive to uphold their obligations. The long-standing call for UN Security Council reform, primarily to address the inequities of the P5 veto system, has made little progress, mainly due to the vested interests of current permanent members. Selective multilateralism reinforces this inertia, as major powers have little incentive to democratise the system they control.[49] This stagnation contributes to the growing perception that the UN is outdated, unrepresentative and ineffective, particularly among emerging powers like India, Brazil, Nigeria and South Africa. The longer reform is delayed, the more legitimacy the institution risks losing and the more fragmented the global order becomes.

Multilateralism fosters predictability in state behaviour, but selective engagement reduces strategic trust. When powerful states pick and choose when to follow rules, rivals and allies alike become uncertain about future commitments. For example, the US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement under President Trump and its rejoining under President Biden created a yo-yo effect that destabilised climate governance.[50] Finally, selective multilateralism can embolden authoritarian regimes and prolong regional conflicts. Without consistent enforcement of international norms, regimes in Syria, Myanmar, Venezuela and elsewhere have learned to manipulate great power divisions for survival. For example, the Assad regime in Syria survived mainly because of Russian and Iranian backing and Chinese diplomatic shielding, despite widespread human rights violations.[51] This empowerment of authoritarian states erodes democratic norms and human security, creating cycles of violence and displacement that spill over into regional and international crises.

Challenges of Legitimacy and Reform

The dominant role of P5 has led to mounting criticism regarding the legitimacy, representativeness and efficacy of the UN Security Council. There have been increasing calls for reform, especially from

[49] T. Murithi, "Reforming the United Nations Security Council: Promoting the African Agenda." *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2015, p. 41.
[50] R. Gowan, *Can the United Nations Unite the World?* Polity Press, 2022.
[51] A.J. Bellamy and D.W. Paul, "The New Politics of Protection? Côte d'Ivoire, Libya and the Responsibility to Protect." *International Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2011, p. 838.

emerging powers such as India, Brazil, Germany, South Africa and Nigeria, who argue that the current structure no longer reflects 21st-century geopolitical realities.[52] Despite numerous proposals, such as expanding permanent membership, limiting veto use in humanitarian crises or enhancing transparency, entrenched interests among the P5 have stalled meaningful reforms, contributing to the erosion of trust in the UN system, especially in the Global South. The Security Council's structure is outdated and heavily skewed in favour of the P5, which wield disproportionate influence compared to the rest of the 193 UN member states. Although the Council expanded in 1965 from 11 to 15 members, with 10 rotating non-permanent members, it has not undergone any structural transformation since then. This static configuration has failed to accommodate new power centres. As Luck observes, "the existing structure ignores the political and demographic transformations of the post-colonial and post-Cold War era."[53] For instance, Africa, a continent of 54 countries, has no permanent representation, despite being one of the most active subjects of Security Council resolutions.

Perhaps, the most contentious issue surrounding the Security Council is the veto power of the permanent members and the ability of a single P5 member to block any substantive resolution, which has often paralysed the Council's ability to act decisively, especially in the face of genocide, war crimes and humanitarian crises. This has been evident in cases such as Syria, Myanmar and Palestine. According to Fassbender, "the veto system runs counter to the principle of sovereign equality enshrined in the UN Charter and has often led to selective justice and double standards."[54] The frequent use of vetoes by Russia and China in protecting allies and by the US shielding Israel has undermined the moral authority of the Security Council and eroded trust among the global South. Despite widespread agreement on the need for reform, efforts have been stimulated mainly by institutional inertia and political deadlock. The Inter-

[52] T.G. Weiss and D. Sam, editors. *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*. Oxford UP, 2007.
[53] E.C. Luck, *UN Security Council: Practice and Promise*. Routledge, 2006.
[54] B. Fassbender, *UN Security Council Reform and the Right of Veto: A Constitutional Perspective*. Kluwer Law International, 1998.

Governmental Negotiations (IGN) process, initiated in 2008, made little progress, and the primary hurdle to reform is the lack of consensus among member states on key questions, such as who should be included as new permanent members. Should new members have veto rights? What regional balance should be adopted? As Mahbubani aptly puts it, "reform of the Security Council is a Sisyphean task, blocked by entrenched interests that benefit from the status quo, as the P5 have little incentive to dilute their privileged status.[55] The lack of transparency in the Council's working methods further complicates reform efforts, as many decisions are made behind closed doors.

Another challenge of legitimacy stems from inadequate regional representation. The under-representation of Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia undermines the principle of equitable participation. The African Union (AU) has been vocal about the historical injustices inflicted on Africa, calling for at least 2 permanent seats with veto power as part of any reform package. The Ezulwini Consensus and Sirte Declaration articulate Africa's unified position on Security Council reform. However, the lack of consensus within regions, such as between Nigeria, South Africa and Egypt in Africa or India and Pakistan in South Asia, further complicates reform negotiations. The Security Council has also been criticised for practising "selective multilateralism"-intervening selectively based on the strategic interests of its powerful members rather than objective criteria, eroding the credibility of the Council and creating perceptions of neo-imperialism or global apartheid. Cases such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which bypassed UNSC authorisation and the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011 have further undermined the legitimacy of the Council. Overreach or inaction in different situations reinforces the perception that the UN is a tool of great-power politics rather than a neutral arbiter of peace and security.

Various models have been proposed to reform the Security Council which include, G4 Proposal (Germany, Japan, India and Brazil) for 6 new permanent members (without veto initially) and 4 additional

[55] K. Mahbubani, *The UN and Global Order: Making the UN Work*. Routledge, 2005.

non-permanent members, Uniting for Consensus (UfC) opposition for new permanent members, advocating instead for more non-permanent seats and African Union (AU) advocacy for 2 permanent and 5 non-permanent seats for Africa. However, none of these proposals has gained universal support. Some scholars advocate a "sunset clause" for the veto or its eventual abolition, while others propose a more pragmatic approach of incremental reform that enhances transparency and regional rotation.[56]

Conclusion

Selective multilateralism by the 5 major powers has significantly shaped the evolution of the UN and the wider international system from 1990 to 2024. Although the UN was created to advance peace, security and cooperation, it has increasingly become a site of geopolitical contestation where engagement is driven by convenience rather than obligation. Major powers have alternated between invoking the UN to legitimise action and bypassing it through unilateral measures, ad hoc coalitions, or vetoes that block responses to humanitarian crises. Motivated by strategic interests, alliance politics and domestic considerations, this behaviour has weakened collective responsibility, eroded trust in the UN's impartiality and raised doubts among smaller states and civil society actors about the organisation's credibility.

At the institutional level, selective multilateralism has contributed to persistent paralysis, especially in the Security Council, where reform efforts to address P5 dominance have yielded little progress. This has reinforced an unequal global order that marginalises most UN members while concentrating authority in a few states. Yet despite these challenges, the UN remains indispensable, continuing to deliver humanitarian assistance, manage peace operations, coordinate global health responses and shape norms on development, climate and human rights. The task ahead is therefore not abandonment but renewal,

[56] S. Zifcak, *United Nations Reform: Heading North or South?* Routledge, 2009.

grounded in collective accountability, meaningful institutional reform and a recommitment to the principles of equity and cooperation envisioned in the UN Charter.

Accordingly, it is recommended that structural and normative reforms be undertaken to reduce selective multilateralism and strengthen the UN system's legitimacy. Hence, emerging powers such as Brazil, Germany, India, South Africa and Nigeria should build greater economic, technological and security autonomy to enhance their credibility and influence within the UN. Financial reforms should also include innovative measures to reduce reliance on a small group of donors to ensure inclusivity in UN decision-making. Also, there should be deeper cooperation between the UN and regional bodies to improve responses to security issues. Also, there should be a stronger representation of troop-contributing countries in strategic planning for UN operations. Collectively, these steps would shift global governance away from power-centric diplomacy toward legitimacy, inclusivity and justice.

Bibliography

Adebajo, Adekeye. *UN Peacekeeping in Africa: From the Suez Crisis to the Sudan Conflicts*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011.

Bellamy, Alex J. and Paul D. Williams. "The New Politics of Protection? Côte d'Ivoire, Libya and the Responsibility to Protect." *International Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2011, pp. 833.

Charbonneau, Bruno and Andy Sears. "Russia and China's Vetoes in the UN Security Council: The Politics of Responsibility and Sovereignty in Syria." *Global Governance*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2016, pp. 219–238.

Fassbender, Bardo. *UN Security Council Reform and the Right of Veto: A Constitutional Perspective*. Kluwer Law International, 1998.

Foot, Rosemary. *China, the UN and Human Protection: Beliefs, Power, Image*. Oxford UP, 2020.

Foot, Rosemary and Evelyn Goh. *China, the US and Global Order*. Cambridge UP, 2017.

Gegout, Catherine. *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa: Security, Prestige and the Legacy of Colonialism*. Oxford UP, 2018.

Gowan, Richard. *Can the United Nations Unite the World?* Polity Press, 2022.

Haacke, Jürgen. "Myanmar, the United Nations and China: Dealing with the Aftermath of the Coup." *Asian Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2021, pp. 72–92.

Haass, Richard. *The World: A Brief Introduction*. Penguin Press, 2020.

House of Commons. *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry (Chilcot Report)*. HMSO, 2016.

Kegley, Charles W. and Gregory A. Raymond. *The Global Future: A Brief Introduction to World Politics*. Cengage Learning, 2009.

Keohane, Robert O. and Joseph S. Nye. *Power and Interdependence*. 3rd ed., Longman, 2001.

Krauthammer, Charles. "The Unipolar Moment." *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 1, 1990, pp. 23–33.

Luck, Edward C. *UN Security Council: Practice and Promise*. Routledge, 2006.

Mahbubani, Kishore. *The UN and Global Order: Making the UN Work*. Routledge, 2005.

Mearsheimer, John J. "The False Promise of International Institutions." *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1994, pp. 23.

Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Menon, Rajan and Eugene Rumer. *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order*. MIT Press, 2015.

Murithi, Tim. "Reforming the United Nations Security Council: Promoting the African Agenda." *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2015, pp. 35–55.

Patrick, Stewart. *The Best Laid Plans: The Origins of American Multilateralism and the Dawn of the Cold War*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.

Patrick, Stewart. *The Sovereignty Wars: Reconciling America with the World*. Brookings Institution Press, 2017.

Thakur, Ramesh. *The United Nations, Peace and Security: From Collective Security to the Responsibility to Protect*. Cambridge UP, 2006.

Tharoor, Shashi. *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cell Phone: Reflections on India, the Emerging 21st-Century Power*. Arcade Publishing, 2007.

United Nations. *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice*. United Nations Publications, 1945.

Walt, Stephen M. "The End of the American Era." *The National Interest*, no. 116, 2011, pp. 6–16.

Weiss, Thomas G. and Sam Daws, editors. *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*. Oxford UP, 2007.

Weiss, Thomas G., et al. *The United Nations and Changing World Politics*. 7th ed., Westview Press, 2017.

Weiss, Thomas G. *What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It*. Polity Press, 2009.

Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organisation*, vol. 46, no. 2, 1992, pp. 397.

Williams, Paul D. *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM)*. Oxford UP, 2018.

Zhao, Suisheng. *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*. Stanford UP, 2023.

Zifcak, Spencer. *United Nations Reform: Heading North or South?* Routledge, 2009.

Zweifel, Thomas D. *International Organisations and Democracy: Accountability, Politics and Power*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006.