

Why Do Powerful States Continue to Undermine International Institutions?

Ojas Dubey

Student, MA International Relations

Anglia Ruskin University

Cambridge, England

ojasdubey.raipur@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8400-4061>

Abstract: This essay examines if powerful nation-states continue to undermine the role of international institutions, arguing they do through two different but interconnected ways: unilateral action in violation of international law and strategic manipulation of institutional governance structures from within. Adopting defensive neorealism as its theoretical lens, the essay argues that in an anarchic international system where no higher authority can guarantee state security, powerful states indulge in institutional compliance as conditional based on strategic interests rather than as a principled duty. Two case studies are examined with empirical evidence to support the argument, United States' repeated use of veto power with regards to Israel, and Russia's use of veto after its invasion of Ukraine. Both case studies reveal that powerful states remain active members while preventing those institutions from acting against their core interest. The essay concludes that without meaningful structural reform, states will continue to undermine international institutions.

Keywords: Defensive neorealism, international institutions, institutional undermining, sovereignty, strategic compliance, veto power.

INTRODUCTION

“The reality is that international institutions like the UN can only be as effective as its members allow it to be.”

Former Prime Minister of India Atal Behari Vajpayee's address

At the 58th United Nations General Assembly session

“International institutions are a central focus of international relations scholarship as well as of policymaking efforts around the world” (Duffield, 2007: p.1). Among these institutions, the United Nations has a unique authoritative position especially through the United Nations Security Council, which has the primary responsibility of maintenance of international peace and security. Since the UN's establishment, it has expanded its scope, membership and institutional reach. As of 2025, the UN comprises of 193 member states and 11 peacekeeping and political missions worldwide showing aspiration of the contemporary global governance (UNDPO, 2025).

Despite with these efforts, the number of global conflicts has increased a growing non cooperation between institutional norms and state interests. 2022-2023 saw the highest number of active armed conflicts since 1946, reported by The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Uppsala University, 2024). This figure while not particularly shows institutional failure, but highlight the limited capacity of these international organisations to prevent and manage the large-scale crisis in par with state interests. There has been a sharp rise in civilian casualties and forced displacement with the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees, estimating that over 114 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide by end of 2023 (UNHCR, 2024). During this period the UNSC was unable to take any decisive action in response to the major crises such as Israel and Palestine and Russia's war in Ukraine. This was majorly due to the use of veto power by permanent members. This gap between the authority of international institutions and their limited capacity to limit state behaviour raises questions about the role and effectiveness of international institutions in a system dominated by powerful states.

This essay argues that powerful nation-states continue to undermine the role of international institutions when their core national interests are at stake as the anarchic international system compels them to prioritize power preservation and strategic autonomy over compliance with institutional norms to maintain their security.

Powerful nations do this in two interconnected ways. First, institutional capture through governance structure, they undermine international institutions such as the UNSC to protect their interests through tools such as veto power, which allows these nations to block any action harming their interests. Second, unilateral action in violation of international law, they act in a manner which violates international norms using their material power that international institution cannot constraint. They selectively raise international law and norms to gain favoured outcomes and resist if those same laws are applied to themselves or their allies. From this perspective, International institutions do not limit state behaviour rather they reflect the existing power relation among different nation-states.

This essay uses defensive neorealist framework which explains that the international system is characterised by anarchy. It means there is no higher authority that is capable to guarantee the security of states. This theory best explains why powerful states do not reject institutions but engage with them in a manner that benefits them and serve their interests and undermining

them when it does not fulfil their interests, as an imperative of power preservation to maintain security.

The essay focuses on two empirical case studies: the United States repeated use of veto power in relation to Israel and Russia's use of veto power following its invasion of Ukraine. These cases show that powerful states can formally participate in international institutions while using those institutions to prevent responsibility for their own actions or their close allies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DEFENSIVE NEOREALISM

This essay uses defensive realism to explain why powerful nation-states continue to undermine the role of international institutions. Kenneth Waltz argues that international system is defined by anarchy that is absence of a central authority competent of enforcing rules and guaranteeing state security (Waltz, 1993). In such system, states cannot rely on institutions or other actors for their survival and must prioritize self-help and autonomy. States are insecure regardless of the anarchic structure of the system that as well generates insecurity regardless of state intentions, making caution and autonomy the rational response.

Waltz argues that excessive power seeking can be counterproductive as it provokes balancing behaviour of other states and increases insecurity (Waltz, 1993). This differentiates defensive realism from offensive realism: powerful states do not seek to maximise power for their own sake rather they do this protect their existing position and protect their core national interests. International institutions may promote cooperation under certain condition but they cannot change the anarchic structure of the international system. States will always prioritise their state security interests than meeting institutional demands. Robert Jervis explains the significance of the security dilemma by how actions taken by states to increase their own security can intimidate others leading to escalation that includes participation in or withdrawal from international institutions; it can be interpreted as threatening by others, leading to escalatory actions that no

states intended (Jervis, 1978). This perception explains the veto mechanism, when powerful states use their institutional privileges to block resolutions, they may demonstrate this is defensive or protective, yet the effect of these kinds of action is that other states and institutions identify as violations of international norms.

James Mosher argues that states remain worried about relative gains and the distribution of power when number of states increases in international system (Mosher, 2003). Even when institutions promise mutual benefits powerful states remain insecure of rules and norms that could give advantage to others or limit their own freedom of action. This explains why states merely do not just leave international institutions, which would lead to sacrificing advantages of membership, they work towards shaping outcomes of international institutions from within with their institutional membership powers like blocking initiatives that threaten their strategic interests while benefiting from areas of cooperation that serve them.

Stephan Walt argues that states respond mainly to threats instead of rules meaning that institutional commitments gets weak when institutions are seen as barriers for autonomy (Walt, 1987). Powerful states comply with institutions when it enhances their security but resist them when outcome may lead to insecurity. In this view, compliance is always optional and strategic rather than unconditional for power states.

Altogether defensive neorealism explains why powerful nation-states undermine institutions. This does not mean that powerful nation-states reject the international institutions but it is a rational attempt on their part to protect their autonomy and to preserve power in an anarchic system. Powerful states continue to participate in institutions and in some areas even promote them but resist any application of institutional authority that threatens their core interests. The institutions become an instrument of power rather than a constraint upon it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review develops the sub arguments introduced in the introduction by engaging with major

scholarly debates around each one, whether institutional compliance by powerful states is conditional and not binding, whether powerful states undermine institutions by two distinct methods and whether powerful states selectively invoke international law and norms. In each case, opposing views are considered before establishing how the realist position is a better account for the empirical evidence.

Powerful states undermine international institutions by two different ways: institutional capture through governance structure and unilateral action in violation of international law. Ikenberry (2020) argues that hegemonic states create institutions to settle a favourable order and to show legitimacy in their leadership, which gives them incentive to work within institutional frameworks.

This is a convincing way to explain institutional design but it confuses two different actions: creating a system to serve own self interested goals and damaging it when it no longer does. Luck (2006) argues that the veto was a strategic choice, the major powers joined the UN only as they knew that its rules could never be used against them. This arrangement allows two paths. A permanent member can violate the UN Charter, as Russia did in Ukraine because its veto blocks any formal response. Or United States can shield an ally like Israel from pressure without breaking any laws itself. Both the situation leads to the same result that the institution is stopped from performing its duty by its own internal norms.

Powerful states use international law carefully, applying rules to others while ignoring them for themselves and their allies. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) claim that international rules hold their own power to shape state behaviour via social pressure. They argue that using rules contradictorily shows that these rules are not totally accepted.

However, Koskeniemi (2004) presents a more convincing view that international law is in nature open to manipulation because its rules are vague and their enforcement is weak. Ideas such as self defense or responsibility to protect can be used to justify

contradicting actions depending who is justifying. The United States used these principles to justify wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, yet blocked their use with regards to Israel and Gaza. Similarly, Russia used the responsibility to protect as a reason to enter Georgia in 2008 but rejected it in Ukraine. As Grieco (1988) suggests that this is a strategic behaviour for states that see legal systems as tools for strategy than limits. This regular selective use in the long run ruins the institution's status by highlighting the gap between high ideals and political reality.

Powerful states treat institutional compliance as optional and conditional rather than unconditional. Keohane (1984) argues that institutions promote cooperation by reducing costs for transactions, improving flow of information, this makes non cooperation costly over time as chances of reputational damage increases over time. This can work well for cooperation in regular (peace) times but it cannot explain why powerful states block institutional action when their core interests are directly in danger.

Grieco (1988) provides a significant counter argument: states are concerned about relative gains and not merely just absolute gains, how institutions outcomes share benefits with themselves and their rivals as well. When compliance leads to some disadvantage of a powerful state, it will resist regardless of absolute benefits. This explains why the United States and Russia cooperate on counterterrorism and non proliferation of arms while parallelly blocking UNSC action when their core interests are at stake.

Altogether it can be understood that institutions can promote cooperation but their ability to limit behaviour of powerful nation-states is inadequate. The logic of relative gains, self-help and strategic autonomy time after time overrides institutional commitment. Powerful states do not leave institutions but instead restructure, manipulate and obstruct them from within making sure that institutional authority extends only as far as the powerful nations allow it to. Liberal scholars explain how

institution matter in regular cooperation but defensive realism better explains that institutions are relevant but because their authority is conditional on the very states whose behaviour they are meant to constrain.

Case Study 1: United States' Use of Veto in Support of Israel

The use of veto power by the United States in support for Israel shows how powerful states undermine the authority of international institutions to protect allies. Since 1972, the United States has used its veto more than 45 times to block UN Security Council resolutions in relation to Israel, making the US the most frequent veto user in this case (Security Council Report, 2024; O'Dell (2023). These vetoes have tackled issues ranging from Israeli settlement activity in Palestinian territories to calls for ceasefires and measures for accountability, along with civilian casualties, often there was global support for these resolutions. In many cases, these resolutions have the vast majority support of the Council, in different UN bodies and in the whole international community.

This continued during the Gaza conflict. Civilian infrastructure was demolished and approximately 29000 civilian casualties and mass displacements were reported by UN agencies (UN OCHA, 2024). Genocide watch released alarming alerts and warned about serious risk of genocide, reporting mass civilian deaths, enforced displacements and people abstained from basic humanitarian access (Genocide Watch, 2024). UN special Rapporteurs and international human rights showed similar concerns (UNDPPA, 2023). Multiple UNSC resolutions were vetoed by the USA called for an urgent ceasefire and methods for resolutions and accountability. The 2023 October veto of a resolution that secured thirteen votes in favour and only one abstention, almost near unanimous opinion of the council was nullified by a single permanent member, showing the institutional stagnation that Luck (2006) explains as structurally rooted in the UNSC's design.

Each veto shows a choice by the United States in a deliberate attempt to advance its strategic alliance with

Israel over aims and authority of the UNSC. To date, Israel received USD 174 billion in US military aid (Congressional Research Service, 2025). This explains how the United States takes advantage of its institutional position to prevent the institution from working according to its mandate and parallelly providing material support that promotes actions the international community has widely denounced. This mixture of institutional hindrance and material support explains the depth of strategic alignment and to what degree the United States uses its institutional position, constant with Walt's (1987) argument that states respond to threats rather than norms.

From a defensive neorealist perspective, this behaviour demonstrates conditional compliance rather than commitment to the aims and objectives of the institution. The United States continued to participate in the UNSC, supporting it as an institution with active cooperation in proceedings that align with its strategic interests. However, when institutional action threatens its relationship with a close ally, it exercises veto without hesitation. This is completely in agreement with Mosher's (2003) argument that powerful states see institutional outcomes in terms of relative gains. The institution does not constrain American behaviour but American behaviour constrains the institution.

This case study explains how a powerful state can undermine an international institution by not withdrawing from it but by capturing its governance structures. The UNSC fails in the Gaza case because the United States uses its institutional membership as a tool to serve its own interests but not because of United States abandoning multilateralism. Hegemonic states create and sustain institutions to the degree that those institutions serve their interests and hinder them when they do not. This exposes the limits of institutional autonomy and highlights constant uneven power distribution shaping outcomes, limiting collective action, weakening regulative enforcement and grinding down trust in global institutions over time.

Case Study 2: Russia's Use of Veto in Ukraine Crisis

Russia's use of veto power following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shows a second case of undermining institution by a powerful state. This case is especially important because it shows both modes of institutional undermining and in a very severe form. Russia first undermined the international institution via independent action i.e. by invading a sovereign state in clear violation of the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force. It then used its institutional position as a permanent member of the UNSC to block the institution from responding to its own defiance, an action in direct confirmation of Waltz's (1993) argument that states prioritise self-help over institutional compliance when their core interests are at danger.

Russia vetoed the UNSC resolutions at least five times between February 2022 and December 2023, considering and condemning its actions and calling for withdrawal thus, preventing the council from taking enforcement measures (UNSC Records, 2023). This use of veto is almost identical to that of the United States in the Israel case: a permanent member using its institutional power to prevent the council from acting in a way that would threaten its own core strategic interests. The difference lies in that Russia's own action was subjected in the proposed resolutions, it was vetoing resolutions directed at its own behaviour rather than that of an ally. This makes the case an even straighter example of how the veto machinery, rooted in the architecture of the Security Council serves great powers (Luck, 2006) and allows them to act with impunity.

The UN estimated over 500,000 casualties and more than 6 million people displaced by the war and sheltered as refugees, by late 2023, making this one of the largest displacement issues in recent European history (UNHCR, 2024). The Russian president Vladimir Putin was alleged as a criminal for unlawful deportation of population and the International criminal court issued an arrest warrant against him, a direct ruling by an international legal institution that the head of a permanent member of the UNSC had committed crimes under international law

(International Criminal Court, 2023). Yet neither the extent of humanitarian emergency nor the ICC arrest warrant produced any UNSC action for enforcement because veto as a tool protects Russia even when it is directly responsible for large-scale violations of international law.

The response of the international community in the UNGA is didactic. The UNGA passes several resolutions condemning Russia's invasion and insisting withdrawal, securing 141 votes in favour in March 2022. These resolutions show that Russia's actions were rejected by the vast majority of the international community. But as the framework of realism predicts, non binding UNGA resolutions have no enforcement mechanism and Russia continued its military campaign unchanged by institutional pressure. The gap between the vast condemnations demonstrated through the UNGA and the absolute institutional paralysis of the UNSC summarises the structural problem of when a powerful state chooses to act against institutional norms and rules, the institution is unable to enforce compliance over the state.

Russia's behaviour in this case also shows the selective and strategic nature of the institutional participation that Waltz (1993) and Walt (1987) argues. Russia did not withdraw from the UNSC following its invasion, it continued to participate in meetings of the council, use its role as a permanent member in other aspects and use its position to decisions around the conflict.

Institutions provide important informational and credible resources, and Russia continued to take advantage of these resources at the same time blocking the UNSC from acting against it. Membership in an international institution, as this case shows, does not involve commitment to that institution's authority. It can alternatively as a stage from managing the diplomatic and reputational outcome of actions that violate institutional norms, while the veto make sure that those actions cannot be punished /sanctioned.

Technology, Digital Governance and Contemporary Power Politics

The relation between powerful states and international institutions is ever more visible in domains such as digital governance, cyber security, artificial intelligence and strategic communication technologies. Bode (2024) observes that international relations scholarship on AI has come together around disciplinary concerns such as balance of power. These areas show that the logic of defensive neorealism goes beyond traditional military and diplomatic practices.

Competition over artificial intelligence governance, cyber norms, data sovereignty, and semiconductor supply chain shows wider geopolitical rivalries among major powers. Miller's (2022) account of the semiconductor industry illustrates how control over chip design and fabrication has become a central instrument of state power, with the United States, China and Taiwan each supply chain leverage as a matter of national security rather than open market competition. Farrell and Newman (2019) similarly argue that states occupying central positions within global economic networks can weaponise this structural advantage, undermining liberal assumptions that interdependence necessarily leads to peaceful cooperation.

The growing race over technological and digital influence shows how international institutions continue to reflect power distributions within the international system. From a defensive neorealist perspective, state behaviour in emerging technological domains supports the argument that powerful states support institutions only so long as those institutions advance rather than restrict their security, economic and strategic objectives (Waltz, 1979). Therefore, technology driven geopolitical competition represents an extension of the broader pattern of institutional undermining identified all through.

CONCLUSION

This essay shows that powerful states in practice undermine international institutions when their core national interests are at stake, and this can be best understood from lens of defensive realism. In an anarchic international system states cannot rely on institutions to maintain their security and protect their national interests. Consequently, powerful states comply with institutional rules only when it aligns with their strategic interests, when it does not they prioritise autonomy and self-help over institutional authority.

The essay developed this argument with distinct yet interrelated mechanisms. Powerful states may undermine institutions through independent action as seen in 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine in violation of the UN Charter. Also, they may undermine institutions by misusing governance structure of international institutions, exploiting their positions, like veto to prevent institutions from acting against their interests or those of their allies, as both the United States and Russia have done in the UNSC.

The two case studies clearly shows that both United States and Russia continue to function within the United Nations Security Council while using the veto power to block actions that were against their interests. This explains how their participation in institutions is not a commitment to its principles and values. Instead powerful states behave in these institutions in a selective and strategic manner.

These findings have significant value for the future of international governance. If powerful states continue to use their institutional positions to follow their strategic interests than upholding international norms, the reputation of institutions like UNSC will diminish over time. One dimension of reform is restructuring the veto system, including proposals to restrict its use in cases involving mass atrocities. Without structural reforms of this kind, the pattern understood in this essay i.e. powerful states maintaining formal membership in institutions while undermining their authority is very likely to persist. While institutions can aid cooperation in less sensitive areas, their actual ability to manage powerful states remains limited. When there is a direct conflict between institutional norms and state interests, states interests are given priority and they prevail. In this sense, international institutions simply show existing power relations more than they amend them, power stays where it already is, which supports the main argument of this essay.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2026 by Ojas Dubey Authors retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

References

- [1] Bode, I. (2024) 'AI Technologies and International Relations: Do We Need New Analytical Frameworks?', *The RUSI Journal*, 169(4).
- [2] Congressional Research Service (2025) *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel: Overview and Developments since October 7, 2023*. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33222>.
- [3] Duffield J. (2007) What Are International Institutions?, *International Studies Review*, Volume 9, Issue 1, March 2007, Pages 1-22, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4621775>
- [4] Farrell, H. and Newman, A.L. (2019) 'Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape Coercion', *International Security*, 44(1), p.p. 42-79.
- [5] Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. *International Organization*, 52(4), 887-917. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2601361>

- [6] Genocide Watch (2024) 'Gaza and Israel: War and Genocide 2023 - 2024,' *genocidewatch*, 7 September. Available at: <https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/gaza-and-israel-war-and-genocide-2023-2024>.
- [7] Grieco, J.M. (1988) 'Anarchy and the limits of cooperation: a realist critique of the newest liberal institutionalism', *International Organization*, 42(3), pp. 485-507. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027715>
- [8] Ikenberry, G.J. (2020) *A world safe for democracy: liberal internationalism and the crises of global order*. New Haven; Yale University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300256093>.
- [9] International Criminal Court (2023) "Situation in Ukraine: ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova." Available at: www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and.
- [10] Jervis, R. (1978) "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World politics*, 30(2), pp. 167-214. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958>.
- [11] Keohane, R.O. (1984). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (REV-Revised). Princeton University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7sq9s>
- [12] Koskeniemi, M. (2004) *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870-1960*. Cambridge University Press. Available At: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511494222>
- [13] Luck, E.C. (2006). *UN Security Council: Practice and Promise* (1st ed.). Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203969335>
- [14] Miller, C. (2022) *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology*. New York: Scribner.
- [15] Mosher, J. S. (2003). Relative Gains Concerns When the Number of States in the International System Increases. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 47(5), 642-668. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002703254296>
- [16] O'Dell, H. (2023) *How the US has Used its Power in the UN to Support Israel for Decades*. Available at: <https://globalaffairs.org/commentary-and-analysis/blogs/how-us-has-used-its-power-un-support-israel-decades>.
- [17] Prime Minister AtalBehari Vajpayee's speech at the 58th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. (n.d.) *South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP)*. Available at: https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/document/papers/pm_un58.htm
- [18] Security Council Report (2024) *The Veto*. Available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-security-council-working-methods/the-veto.php>.
- [19] UN OCHA (2024) *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel - Reported humanitarian impact, 20 May 2024 at 15:00*. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-humanitarian-impact-20-may-2024-1500>.
- [20] United Nations (2023) *Dag Hammarskjöld Library Research Guides: UN Security Council Meetings & Outcomes Tables: 2023 (S/RES/2672-2721)*. Available at: <https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick/meetings/2023>.
- [21] United Nations and Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (2023) *Repertoire of the practice of the Security Council*, Supplement 2023. Available at:

- https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/default/files/2025/26th%20Supplement%282023%29_web.pdf.
- [22] United Nations Department of Peace Operations (2025) *Peacekeeping Fact Sheet - December 2025*. New York: United Nations. Available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/data>
- [23] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2024). *GLOBAL TRENDS FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN 2023*. [online] Copenhagen, Denmark. Available at: <https://www.unrefugees.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/global-trends-report-2023-ukforunhcr.pdf>
- [24] Uppsala University (2024). *UCDP: record number of armed conflicts in the world - Uppsala University*. [online] www.uu.se. Available at: <https://www.uu.se/en/press/press-releases/2024/2024-06-03-ucdp-record-number-of-armed-conflicts-in-the-world>.
- [25] Walt, S.M. (1987) *The origins of alliances*. 1st ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801469992>.
- [26] Waltz, K.N. (1993) "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International security*, 18(2), pp. 44-79. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539097>