

**Geopolitical Fragmentation and Transactional Diplomacy: A  
Realist Analysis of United Nations Ineffectiveness in  
Contemporary Humanitarian Crises**

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# Geopolitical Fragmentation and Transactional Diplomacy: A Realist Analysis of United Nations Ineffectiveness in Contemporary Humanitarian Crises by Yusof Gibran

## Introduction

As great-power rivalry intensifies, in an increasingly fragmented international system, the United Nations' (UN) recurrent failure to respond effectively to humanitarian crises reflects not institutional weakness but the logic of transactional diplomacy embedded in realist power politics. Transactional diplomacy refers to a results-oriented approach to international relations that prioritises immediate, tangible gains—such as economic incentives, security guarantees, or political concessions—over normative principles.<sup>1</sup> Recent scholarship indicates that major powers increasingly favour instrumental forms of cooperation over normative approaches.<sup>2</sup> Based on Allen's research, empirical data from 1994–2013 indicate that the UN Security Council interventions were enabled primarily by political alignment rather than issue severity.<sup>3</sup> Further examination of Allen's research shows that large-N qualitative data indicate Security Council practices—including formal meetings, vetoes, resolutions, and informal consultations—are structured around agenda-setting processes that precede and shape formal outcomes.<sup>4</sup> To elaborate, states often look for strategic rationale and political utility when providing humanitarian assistance, ensuring that aid aligns with broader national interests. Analytically, the United Nations — despite its liberal institutional foundations — frequently serves as a bargaining arena in efforts to address and mitigate complex global challenges.

When conducting a comparative study of the United Nations' record in conflict mitigation, contrasting outcomes reveal the conditions under which the organisation has succeeded or failed. A recurring pattern underlies the outcomes of major conflicts, stemming from strategic calculation and transactional diplomacy among major powers. Binder's research indicates that humanitarian intervention occurs only when needs coincide with strategic spillovers or low target-state resistance, meaning crises must pose direct threats to major powers' interests and political costs that affect them.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, humanitarian involvement can involve overlapping political agendas, where genuine humanitarian concerns are blurred with broader realist pursuits.<sup>6</sup> This demonstrates that enabling

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Transactional Peacemaking: Warmakers as Peacemakers in the Political Marketplace of Peace Processes," *Contemporary Security Policy*, January 14, 2025, 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2024.2448908>;

S. Nanthini, "Humanitarian Aid in an Era of Transactional Diplomacy," RSIS\_NTU, 2017, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip26005-humanitarian-aid-in-an-era-of-transactional-diplomacy/>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew F Cooper, Emel Parlar Dal, and Samiratou Dipama, "Fragmented Multilateralism and International Institutions between Complexities and Challenges," *Third World Quarterly*, October 1, 2025, 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2562908>.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Hannah Allen and Amy T Yuen, "United Nations Security Council Activity, 1994–2013," *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 5 (2020): 658–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/48631654>.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Hannah Allen and Amy T Yuen, "United Nations Security Council Activity, 1994–2013," 660 – 662.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Binder, "Paths to Intervention: What Explains the UN's Selective Response to Humanitarian Crises?," *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 6 (July 16, 2015): 712–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343315585847>.

<sup>6</sup> Alyssa J. Lyon and Chris J. Dolan, "American Humanitarian Intervention: Toward a Theory of Coevolution," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3, no. 1 (January 2007): 46–78, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2007.00041.x>.

intervention requires political transactions among relevant states, thereby undermining the premise that humanitarian considerations alone are sufficient.

To situate this research, the analysis focuses on humanitarian cases involving civilian casualties in major conflicts/disputes. At the same time, the paper adopts a realist theoretical approach to examine the dynamics of transactional diplomacy, thereby clarifying how humanitarian assistance is justified within logic of national interest. For realist theoretical framework, we draw on John Mearsheimer's premise that institutions reflect underlying power distributions rather than constrain them, which underpins the claim that UN failure is structural rather than procedural.<sup>7</sup> To accompany the conceptual framework, qualitative evidence is utilised to examine patterns of decision-making, diplomatic behaviour, and institutional interactions to better understand the complex dynamics between major states in a liberal institutional setting. Building on this framework, the paper examines how great-power rivalries shape decision-making within the UN Security Council. It then analyses how humanitarian action can still proceed despite geopolitical fragmentation. Finally, the paper evaluates whether mechanisms could be introduced to mitigate these constraints.

### **How do great-power rivalries shape decision making within the UN Security Council?**

Great-power rivalry impacts UN security council by inducing paralysis, reducing effectiveness in major conflicts and shifting focus toward respective national interest. When discussing great-powers, classical and modern scholarship refer to states that possess significant economic capacity, commonly measured by their gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, in an anarchic international system, states with greater economic capacity structure great-power competition." Moreover, the likelihood of transactional diplomacy embeds into liberal institutions to benefit them.

Research by Hellmüller and Salaymeh indicates transactional logics infiltrate peace processes often associated with liberal multilateralism, and slowly delve into being marketplaces for strategic exchange which were meant for upholding international norms.<sup>9</sup> By scholarly definition of political marketplace, De Waal infers that domestic level governance of weak institutional structure may harbour non-formal, personal, and ad hoc governing mechanisms where actors bargain for loyalties.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 5–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078>.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* 80, no. 80 (1990): 153–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>; Thomas Müller, "Narratives, Knowledge Objects, and the Making of Great Power Competition," *Global Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (July 1, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae059>.

<sup>9</sup> Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Transactional Peacemaking: Warmakers as Peacemakers in the Political Marketplace of Peace Processes," 315 – 318

<sup>10</sup> Alex De Waal, "Mission without End? Peacekeeping in the African Political Marketplace," *International Affairs* 85, no. 1 (January 2009): 99–113, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2009.00783.x>.

Here, we argue that De Waal's argument concerning domestic-level politics can be expanded to broader governing institutions, which similarly structure and condition political influence.

To assess this argument, the analysis examines qualitative evidence that supports the proposed claim. In Owen's article, he provides empirical evidence that great powers actively seek to control and reshape international institutions.<sup>11</sup> Building on Owen's research, the evidence drawn from U.S.–China relations demonstrates how major powers actively seek to shape international institutions in accordance with preferred political and ideological orders, rather than acquiescing to established liberal norms.<sup>12</sup> China is viewed as a major power seeking to reorder the existing liberal norms of the contemporary international system, whereas the United States acts as a defender of the liberal order by employing veto threats, procedural blocking, and agenda-shaping to influence outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on a case study aligned with Owen's research objective, China's assertive posture in the South China Sea has intensified great-power rivalry with the United States, raising contested questions of political legitimacy and legal norms concerning territorial sovereignty and freedom of navigation.<sup>14</sup> In correlation to humanitarian concerns, civilian navigation and economic livelihood dependant on maritime travel through the south China sea may be threatened by China's militarised posture.<sup>15</sup> In addition, a potential Sino-American warfare may erode legal protections for civilian maritime activity.<sup>16</sup> Taken together, the evidence—interpreted through a realist lens—demonstrates that great-power rivalry not only generates conflict but also produces humanitarian repercussions, as clashing national agendas embedded within state foreign policies undermine civilian welfare and human security. This dynamic further renders the UN Security Council largely stagnant in addressing the conflict, as both major powers—the United States and China—are permanent members of the Council.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, ethical considerations that might otherwise justify swift intervention are constrained by the competing ideologies and strategic priorities of both states.

From analysing the evidence, it is argued that major powers within the international system tend toward persistent anarchic rivalry—as theorised by John Mearsheimer—and consequently use existing institutions to advance agendas that serve their respective national interests whilst halting liberal institutional interference. Consequently, peripheral actors such as civilian populations may

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<sup>11</sup> John M Owen, “Why Great Powers Compete to Control International Institutions,” *International Security* 49, no. 3 (2024): 84–121, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/953265>.

<sup>12</sup> John M Owen, “Why Great Powers Compete to Control International Institutions,” 101 – 106

<sup>13</sup> John M Owen, “Why Great Powers Compete to Control International Institutions,” 109 – 113

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Chubb, “International Law as a Driver of Confrontation? UNCLOS and China's Policy in the South China Sea,” *European Journal of International Law* 36, no. 4 (January 8, 2026): 891–925, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chaf066>.

<sup>15</sup> Collin Koh, “The South China Sea: The Flashpoint of War between China and the United States,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, November 14, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-025-09928-3>.

<sup>16</sup> Youngmin Seo, “Power Shift, the South China Sea Dispute, and the Role of International Law,” *Michigan Journal of International Law*, no. 45.1 (2024): 93, <https://doi.org/10.36642/mjil.45.1.power>.

<sup>17</sup> David L Bosco, *Five to Rule Them All: The UN Security Council and the Making of the Modern World* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

become vulnerable to humanitarian harm if they are affected as collateral by the conflict. Thus, the strong influence exercised by major powers over liberal institutions—particularly the United Nations Security Council—raises serious concerns for peripheral actors, as these actors may face humanitarian risks while swift intervention by liberal institutions becomes constrained by political deadlock.

### **Humanitarian outcomes under geopolitical fragmentation in an era of transactional diplomacy**

As humanitarian appeals increasingly become shaped by transactional diplomacy, this section examines how humanitarian efforts continue to be undertaken despite persistent geopolitical fragmentation. Scholarly study indicates that in an increasingly polarised international environment, efforts to move away from globalised norms lead sovereign states to prioritise national security considerations over economic efficiency.<sup>18</sup> However, this pattern is observed across relevant states that are either affected by — or contribute to — geoeconomic fragmentation, as peripheral states prioritising economic security increasingly operate within evolving and fragmented international dynamics.<sup>19</sup> Returning to the central discussion, we suggest that cases of humanitarian efforts persistently suffice under conditions of geopolitical fragmentation, despite the prevalence of transactional diplomatic practices. It is important to recognise that fragmented movements opposing globalisation manifest in varied forms and contexts, and thus differ substantially from one another. Accordingly, the case study selected here reflects a specific dimension of correlation between geopolitical fragmentation and the conditions under which humanitarian action can be enabled.

A case study on Syria is particularly relevant to this discussion given the abundance of empirically rich sources that enable a detailed examination of the factors underlying its humanitarian and political challenges. Syria faces multiple severe humanitarian crises that necessitate substantial aid and assistance from the United Nations, however, these efforts have been repeatedly constrained by vetoes from Russia, as well as conditional aid-delivery mechanisms.<sup>20</sup> Russia's position on Syria are not humanitarian agnostic but rather overlapping geopolitical interest in the broader pattern of fragmentation. A strong military presence at the Tartus naval facility serves as a strategic means of projecting power in the Mediterranean and counterbalancing Western dominance.<sup>21</sup> At present, Russia continues to maintain control over the facility despite the collapse of the Assad government.<sup>22</sup> To

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<sup>18</sup> Ling Chen and Miles M Evers, “‘Wars without Gun Smoke’: Global Supply Chains, Power Transitions, and Economic Statecraft,” *International Security* 48, no. 2 (January 1, 2023): 164–204, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00473](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00473).

<sup>19</sup> Joel Slawotsky, “Conceptualizing National Security in an Era of Great Power Rivalry: Implications for International Economic Law,” *East Asia* 42 (October 11, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-024-09434-y>.

<sup>20</sup> Graham Melling and Anne Dennett, “The Security Council Veto and Syria: Responding to Mass Atrocities through the ‘Uniting for Peace’ Resolution,” *Indian Journal of International Law* 57, no. 3-4 (December 2017): 285–307, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40901-018-0084-9>.

<sup>21</sup> Oluwaseyi Emmanuel Ogunnowo and Felix Chidozie, “International Law and Humanitarian Intervention in the Syrian Civil War: The Role of the United States,” *SAGE Open* 10, no. 2 (April 2020): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020919533>.

<sup>22</sup> Kelly Kassis, “Russia’s Enduring Grip on Syria,” *Rusi.org*, 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-enduring-grip-syria>.

resume, Russia's decision to maintain the Tartus naval facility was shaped in part by NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya, which Moscow perceived as an abuse of humanitarian mandates.<sup>23</sup> This experience contributed to Russia's subsequent use of veto power in the UN Security Council concerning Syria, where state sovereignty was prioritised over humanitarian intervention.

As a result, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have increasingly taken the initiative to deliver cross-border humanitarian assistance on their own operational terms, often without oversight from the UN Security Council. This is evidenced by primary research showing that NGOs continued to sustain humanitarian aid logistics despite the failure of UN Security Council re-authorisation, resulting in the emergence of ad hoc delivery arrangements.<sup>24</sup> Based on legal analysis, NGO need not depend on UN security council authorisation to conduct humanitarian missions.

By and large, when we interpret the humanitarian case of Syria from realist lens, it is evident that Syrian humanitarian aid persist due to failures of liberal institution effectiveness. In conclusion, NGOs often undertake ad hoc humanitarian assistance to states in need as a consequence of limited support from the UN Security Council, which is constrained by the competing priorities of major powers.

### **Mitigating UN constraints**

Although this discussion is necessarily informed by hindsight, existing cases and empirical examples nevertheless allow for the identification of potential mitigating measures. In this context, the introduction of formal checks and balances may constitute a plausible — albeit limited — response to the complex dynamics among major states operating within a framework of transactional diplomacy. A plausible and realistic solution that may deal with civilians involved in conflicts involves enhancing localisation of NGOs and operational autonomy reducing the reliance on UN-centric approvals. Based on empirical cases, NGOs localised in Yemen has exercised autonomy that reduces reliance on UN authorisation.<sup>25</sup> To further add, NGOs in Yemen embedded cooperation with local structures to navigate political and access constraints.

However, this cannot be regarded as an absolute solution, as NGOs remain constrained by the coercive enforcement capacities of states, including military and law-enforcement authorities. The Mavi Marmara incident involved Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) commandos intercepting a Turkish-led

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<sup>23</sup> Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (July 12, 2013): 795–823, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12046>; Charles E Ziegler, "Contesting the Responsibility to Protect," *International Studies Perspectives* 17, no. 1 (2016): 75–97, <https://doi.org/10.2307/44218892>.

<sup>24</sup> Security Council Report, "In Hindsight: The Demise of the Syria Cross-Border Aid Mechanism, August 2023 Monthly Forecast : Security Council Report," [www.securitycouncilreport.org](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org), 2023, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2023-08/in-hindsight-the-demise-of-the-syria-cross-border-aid-mechanism.php>.

<sup>25</sup> Ghassan Elkahlout et al., "Localisation of Humanitarian Action in War-Torn Countries: The Experience of Local NGOs in Yemen," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 75 (June 2022): 102921, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2022.102921>.

flotilla that sought to deliver humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip.<sup>26</sup> This goes to show that states retain the enforcement authority over access and NGOs cannot compel against a declared blockade.

In sum, while NGOs may pursue greater autonomy to enhance the delivery of humanitarian assistance—thereby compensating for the limitations of UN effectiveness—they are not immune to state authority. Ultimately, NGOs remain subject to state enforcement mechanisms and are required to comply with state-issued regulations and rulings.

## **Conclusion**

Humanitarian assistance continues to serve as a vital instrument for alleviating needs in states experiencing crisis. However, its effectiveness increasingly depends on rapid and flexible mobilisation capable of navigating the political constraints imposed by major powers and their competing ideological agendas. Within an anarchic international system, where no central authority restrains state behaviour, such constraints are reinforced by incentives for states to pursue conflict when doing so aligns with their strategic interests. The United Nations possesses existing mechanisms intended to regulate tensions and facilitate humanitarian assistance; however, persistent political gridlock among major powers has severely constrained their effectiveness. As a result, transactional diplomacy has become embedded within multilateral decision-making, increasingly serving the strategic interests and agendas of states rather than collective humanitarian objectives.

As a potential mitigating approach, NGOs may increasingly pursue localisation strategies by embedding humanitarian services within local structures. This approach can facilitate more effective aid delivery by allowing humanitarian operations to navigate geopolitical constraints and reduce dependence on politicised state-level processes or liberal institutions. Only then, NGOs will effectively attend to humanitarian crises to make up for UN ineffectiveness. In conclusion, the complex dynamics of the international system—particularly competition among major powers—often render even basic humanitarian efforts subject to prolonged and cumbersome political processes. To mitigate these constraints, greater organisational autonomy and localisation of non-governmental organisations may enable more timely and flexible humanitarian responses, allowing aid to be delivered swiftly when needs arise.

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<sup>26</sup> D. Guilfoyle, “The Mavi Marmara Incident and Blockade in Armed Conflict,” *British Yearbook of International Law* 81, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 171–223, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bybil/brr002>.

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