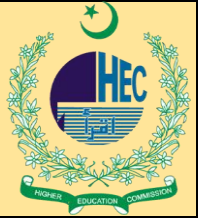




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The Role of International Organizations in Contemporary Conflict Resolution: A Focus on the United Nations in Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine (2020–2024)

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ABSTRACT

In the post-2020 global political landscape, intensification of armed conflicts has become its hallmark. These conflicts are particularly marked by complex issues. These issues includes: humanitarian crises, fractured international alliances, and diminishing faith in multilateralism. The United Nations (UN), however continues to serve as the principal international organization. It is mandated to maintain peace and security. Nevertheless, it continues to confront unprecedented challenges to its legitimacy and effectiveness. This article, therefore, attempts to examine UN's contemporary role in conflict resolution. The examination is through an analytical focus on three emblematic crises: Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine. These cases represent varying dimensions of conflict, i.e., the collapse of a state and re-emergence of authoritarian rule, a protracted civil war characterized by external intervention, and a large-scale interstate war in violation of the UN Charter. The present research uses a qualitative, document-based methodology. It explores the UN's mediation efforts, peacekeeping mechanisms, and humanitarian responses from 2020 to 2024. It has analyzed official UN reports, Security Council resolutions, and policy literature. In the context, it is to assess both the organization's operational capacity and its structural constraints. The research findings reveals that though UN remains central to normative legitimacy and humanitarian coordination, however, it has become increasingly reactive rather than preventive. In the context, the paralysis is observed to be due to the Security Council and the resurgence of great-power rivalry. In Afghanistan, for example, UN sustains humanitarian operations under Taliban rule but lacks political leverage. Furthermore, in Syria, it has preserved fragile humanitarian corridors despite increasing diplomatic deadlock. In Ukraine, UN has defended international law through moral authority; however, it is unable to enforce compliance. The article concludes that revitalizing the UN's peace architecture through Security Council reform, enhanced early-warning diplomacy, and stronger partnerships with regional organizations is essential for restoring its credibility and relevance in twenty-first-century conflict resolution.

Keywords: United Nations, conflict resolution, peacekeeping, diplomacy, Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine.

Introduction

Conflict(s) still remains one of the most enduring and complex features of international relations. It continues to pose persistent threats to global peace, development, and human security. Since the founding of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, the organization has been tasked with a central mission. The mission includes preventing war and fostering peaceful coexistence among nations. Its Charter has in this context, articulated 'collective security' as the bedrock of international order. It has been anchored in diplomacy, multilateralism, and respect for sovereignty. However, the post-2020 period has been profoundly testing this vision. The resurgence of great-power competition, the erosion of global consensus, and the unprecedented humanitarian consequences of conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine have revealed the limitations of existing conflict-resolution mechanisms. This has raised urgent questions about the UN's contemporary relevance.

The post Cold War optimism that once framed the UN as a guarantor of a liberal peace order has been largely fading. Instead, the twenty-first century has witnessed what scholars term a "fragmented multilateralism". In the context, it's a system in which the UN operates amid competing geopolitical blocs and contested norms of intervention (Weiss, 2020). The crises in Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine would exemplify this transformation. Each of these cases represents a distinct form of conflict. Afghanistan symbolizes state collapse and the reassertion of authoritarian governance under Taliban rule. Syria for example embodies a prolonged internal war intertwined with foreign interventions; and Ukraine demonstrates a flagrant breach of the UN Charter through interstate aggression by a permanent member of the Security Council. Collectively, these cases would encapsulate the structural weaknesses and moral dilemmas that define contemporary conflict resolution.

The global landscape since 2020 has been further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate-induced displacement, and economic instability, all of which have aggravated preexisting vulnerabilities. In this turbulent environment, the UN continues to mediate humanitarian access, facilitate negotiations, and uphold normative frameworks such as international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights conventions. Nevertheless, its political capacity to resolve conflicts has been severely constrained by divisions within the UN Security Council (UNSC). It is particularly the use of the veto by major powers to protect their allies or strategic interests (Bellamy & Hunt, 2022). This paralysis not only undermines the credibility of the UN but also erodes the faith of smaller states and civil society actors in the possibility of impartial global governance.

At the same time, the UN's enduring presence in conflict zones through agencies like the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria highlights its indispensable humanitarian function. The organization's unique legitimacy allows it to operate in contexts where bilateral diplomacy or regional interventions have failed. However, the increasing tendency of powerful states to bypass the UN forming ad-hoc coalitions or regional arrangements that signals a gradual shift from multilateral to minilateral diplomacy (Müller, 2023).

The purpose of this study is to critically assess the role of the United Nations in conflict resolution from 2020 to 2024, focusing on its responses to the crises in Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine. By examining these three cases, the article seeks to identify patterns of institutional adaptation and limitation within the UN system. Specifically, it explores how the organization balances its humanitarian mandate with political realities, how it navigates challenges of legitimacy and sovereignty, and what lessons can be drawn for the future of multilateral conflict management.

The central argument advanced here is that the UN remains an indispensable yet constrained actor: while it provides moral and normative legitimacy to peace efforts and delivers life-saving aid to millions, its ability to enforce compliance or achieve sustainable political settlements is curtailed by the structural imbalance of power embedded in its institutional design. The subsequent sections build upon this premise, beginning with a review of scholarly debates on the UN's peace and security role, followed by a methodological overview, detailed case studies, comparative discussion, and policy-oriented conclusions.

Literature Review

Scholarly debates about the United Nations' role in conflict resolution revolve around two core tensions: the UN as a normative, humanitarian actor and the UN as a political arena shaped by great-power interests. Classic works in the field argue that the UN provides essential legal and institutional frameworks that make multilateral conflict management possible (Weiss, 2013; Paris, 2021). Building on that literature, recent scholarship emphasizes how post-Cold War peace operations have transformed into multidimensional missions that blend security, governance, and human-rights objectives (Paris, 2021). Yet a growing body of literature contends that the UN's normative reach is increasingly undermined by geopolitical fragmentation and the strategic use of veto power by permanent Security Council members, which converts the Council into an arena for power politics rather than a reliable instrument of collective security. This critique is central to contemporary assessments of the UN's performance since 2020.

A second cluster of research focuses on the UN's operational strengths: humanitarian coordination, monitoring of human-rights abuses, and the maintenance of minimal security conditions that permit relief delivery. Empirical studies and policy reports show that UN agencies including OCHA, UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF. They regularly outperform other international actors in terms of logistical reach and access negotiations precisely because of their perceived neutrality and institutional presence on the ground (Bellamy & Hunt, 2022). For instance, cross-border humanitarian mechanisms authorized by the Security Council have been critical in sustaining aid flows into hard-to-reach areas of Syria, demonstrating the UN's practical centrality even amid diplomatic stalemate. However, the sustainability of these mechanisms is fragile, as reauthorization processes are susceptible to political contestation in New York.

A third strand of the literature interrogates the UN's capacity for mediation and political settlement. Analysts note that the UN's mediatory success depends less on its internal capacity and more on external political conditions. i.e., whether major powers are willing to enable or constrain settlements (Richmond, 2019; Björkdahl & Höglund, 2020). The acceleration of great-power rivalry since 2020, particularly between Western states and Russia/China, has therefore limited the UN's room for maneuver. In practice, where permanent members are directly implicated in a conflict (as with Russia in Syria and Ukraine), the Security Council becomes impotent for coercive diplomacy, shifting the burden of political management to alternative fora (regional organizations, ad-hoc coalitions) or to the General Assembly for moral condemnation. Recent UN policy documents and analysts' commentaries have highlighted this shift and called for creative institutional responses to preserve humanitarian space while acknowledging political constraints.

A closely related debate concerns institutional reform that are most prominently, proposals to constrain veto use in mass-atrocity situations or to expand Security Council membership to better reflect twenty-first-century geopolitics. Proponents argue that such reforms would reduce paralysis and increase legitimacy; critics counter that reform remains politically unrealistic without the consent of those who benefit from the status quo (UN General Assembly, 2021; Security Council reform literature). The Secretary-General's 2021 *Our Common Agenda* report

articulates the need for “renewed multilateralism,” including practical changes to improve responsiveness and accountability—an agenda that scholars and policymakers have since debated in light of the Afghanistan withdrawal, Syria’s protracted war, and the Ukraine crisis. Finally, the literature emphasizes the evolving tactics the UN employs to adapt to constraints: reliance on the General Assembly for normative affirmations, pragmatic use of cross-border authorizations for humanitarian access, and investment in prevention and early-warning mechanisms (Bellamy & Hunt, 2022; Guterres, 2021). Case-specific studies show that these adaptations can mitigate acute suffering even if they cannot generate final political settlements. Yet a recurrent criticism is that such “adaptive multilateralism” risks normalizing a lower-ambition model of international governance. In the context it’s the one that prioritizes damage control over transformative conflict resolution. That critique is particularly salient in scholarship on Syria, where cross-border aid and humanitarian programming have become ends in themselves amid the absence of viable political settlement pathways. The subsequent case studies (Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine) test these conceptual claims by examining how theoretical expectations about UN strengths and limits map onto practice since 2020.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative case study design to evaluate the United Nations’ (UN) role in conflict resolution in three post-2020 contexts: Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine. These cases were selected using a purposeful sampling approach based on their diversity in conflict typology and the UN’s varying degrees of involvement. Afghanistan represents a case of state collapse and de facto authority recognition, Syria exemplifies a protracted intrastate conflict with internationalized dimensions, and Ukraine constitutes an interstate war involving a permanent member of the Security Council. The comparative nature of these cases enables an assessment of both structural and situational factors shaping UN performance across distinct geopolitical and institutional environments.

Data Sources

The study relies on documentary and secondary data, drawing from a range of primary and authoritative sources. These include official UN Security Council resolutions, General Assembly resolutions, Secretary-General Reports, and publications from UN specialized agencies such as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Supplementary material was collected from peer-reviewed academic articles, policy briefs by think tanks (e.g., International Crisis Group, Chatham House), and reputable international media outlets that provide contextual information about each conflict. This triangulated data collection enhances validity and reliability by combining institutional documentation with scholarly and journalistic perspectives.

Analytical Framework

The analysis employs the theoretical lens of multilateral conflict resolution, which conceptualizes the UN as both a normative institution and a political arena where state interests intersect. The framework integrates elements from liberal institutionalism, highlighting the UN’s role in norm diffusion, mediation, and humanitarian governance and realist critiques that emphasize structural power asymmetries within the Security Council. The study applies thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns across cases, focusing on four dimensions of UN engagement:

1. Political Mediation and Diplomacy – efforts toward ceasefire negotiations, peace talks, and political settlements.

2. Humanitarian Coordination – mechanisms ensuring access to conflict-affected populations.
3. Normative Legitimacy – invocation of international law and the UN Charter.
4. Institutional Constraints – structural and geopolitical factors limiting effectiveness.

Case Study 1: Afghanistan (2020–2024) – From Peace Process to Political Collapse

The United Nations has maintained an extensive presence in Afghanistan since the early 2000s through the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), originally established to support governance and peacebuilding efforts after the fall of the Taliban regime. However, developments after 2020 particularly the U.S.–Taliban Doha Agreement and the subsequent Taliban takeover in August 2021 would transform the UN's role from political facilitation to crisis management and humanitarian coordination.

Following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, the UN faced a severe legitimacy dilemma: how to operate under the Taliban's de facto rule without conferring formal recognition on their government. The Security Council Resolution 2626 (2022) renewed UNAMA's mandate, emphasizing humanitarian assistance, human-rights monitoring, and engagement on women's and minorities' rights (UNSC, 2022). Despite this, the Taliban's restrictions on female employment and education severely hindered the delivery of aid, particularly as women comprised a large portion of humanitarian workers (OCHA, 2023).

The humanitarian situation deteriorated rapidly. According to UN reports, by 2023, nearly 28 million Afghans (two-thirds of the population) required humanitarian aid, marking one of the world's largest crises (UNAMA, 2023). Agencies such as WFP, UNHCR, and UNICEF coordinated relief across health, nutrition, and shelter sectors, though limited funding and access impeded sustainability. The UN's apolitical approach helped sustain life-saving operations, but it also faced criticism for inadvertently normalizing the Taliban's governance structures (Suhrke, 2022).

Politically, the UN attempted to facilitate dialogue through regional diplomacy involving neighboring states and international donors. However, divisions within the Security Council, especially between Western members favoring conditional engagement and others advocating pragmatic cooperation that prevented consensus on a political framework. The appointment of a Special Coordinator for Afghanistan in 2023 represented an effort to consolidate strategy, but tangible progress toward governance reform or inclusion remained minimal.

Overall, the Afghan case illustrates the UN's humanitarian resilience but diplomatic weakness. While the organization maintained operational continuity amid regime change, it lacked the leverage to influence political behavior or secure human-rights commitments. The Afghanistan experience underscores the paradox of the UN's modern conflict role: it remains essential for preventing humanitarian collapse but largely peripheral in shaping political outcomes.

Case Study 2: Syria (2020–2024) – Protracted Conflict and Diplomatic Stalemate

By 2020, the Syrian conflict had entered its second decade, evolving into one of the world's longest and most devastating humanitarian crises. Despite intermittent efforts toward a political settlement, the United Nations (UN) has struggled to translate humanitarian engagement into meaningful political resolution. The organization's involvement in Syria since 2020 has centered on three pillars: sustaining humanitarian access, facilitating dialogue through the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-Syria), and supporting reconstruction and refugee assistance via UN agencies such as UNHCR, WFP, and UNICEF.

The renewal of UN Security Council Resolution 2585 (2021) was a major achievement, allowing continued cross-border aid delivery through the Bab al-Hawa crossing between Turkey and northwest Syria. This mechanism provided a lifeline for nearly four million civilians living in non-government-controlled areas (UNSC, 2021). However, this authorization became increasingly

politicized, as Russia and China repeatedly threatened to veto its renewal, framing it as a violation of Syrian sovereignty (Lund, 2022). Consequently, humanitarian operations faced chronic uncertainty and resource limitations, with OCHA reporting that over 14 million Syrians required humanitarian aid in 2023 (OCHA, 2023).

On the political front, the Geneva process and the Constitutional Committee, launched under UN auspices in 2019, have remained stagnant. The Office of the Special Envoy, led by Geir O. Pedersen, has struggled to convene consistent meetings or secure commitments from the Syrian government and opposition factions. Analysts argue that the fragmentation of opposition groups, coupled with international fatigue, has turned the UN's mediation into a procedural rather than transformative exercise (Phillips, 2023).

Despite limited political traction, the UN has played an indispensable role in humanitarian coordination and resilience-building. Agencies have maintained vaccination campaigns, education programs, and protection services for internally displaced persons (IDPs), often under precarious security conditions. Nonetheless, critics such as Hinnebusch and Imady (2022) contend that the UN's cautious engagement with the Assad regime has inadvertently legitimized state control and contributed to the normalization of the conflict's status quo.

The Syrian case demonstrates the UN's capacity for humanitarian endurance amid diplomatic paralysis. It highlights both the moral necessity and political futility of its engagement sustaining millions of lives while lacking the consensus or leverage to advance peace. Syria thus epitomizes the broader crisis of UN mediation in contemporary conflicts: the organization's humanitarian machinery functions effectively, but its political engine remains stalled by great-power rivalry and the erosion of collective will.

Case Study 3: Ukraine (2022–2024) – Collective Security Under Strain

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked the most severe violation of the United Nations (UN) Charter since World War II and exposed the fragility of the collective security system. The UN Security Council (UNSC), entrusted with maintaining international peace, was immediately paralyzed by Russia's veto power as a permanent member. This institutional deadlock forced a rare procedural shift: the UN General Assembly (UNGA) assumed a central role, convening an emergency special session that adopted multiple resolutions condemning the aggression and reaffirming Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity (UNGA, 2022). While these resolutions carried strong symbolic legitimacy, they lacked enforcement power, underscoring the UN's structural dependence on member-state cooperation.

On the humanitarian front, the UN mobilized one of the largest relief operations in Europe's history. By 2023, 17 million people required assistance, and over six million refugees had fled to neighboring countries (OCHA, 2024). UN agencies including UNHCR, WHO, WFP, and UNICEF have played critical roles in coordinating emergency aid, supporting refugee integration, and restoring essential services such as health care, education, and energy infrastructure. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) coordinated funding appeals that reached billions of dollars, reflecting unprecedented donor engagement. Despite logistical success, humanitarian workers faced recurrent access challenges in frontline areas and territories under Russian occupation.

Diplomatically, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres pursued mediation efforts that yielded limited yet meaningful results. In July 2022, the Black Sea Grain Initiative, brokered by the UN and Türkiye, enabled Ukrainian grain exports through safe maritime corridors, mitigating global food insecurity exacerbated by the war (UN, 2023). However, Russia's withdrawal from the agreement in mid-2023 demonstrated the fragility of such arrangements and the UN's lack of enforcement capacity.

Legal and normative mechanisms also came under strain. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Russia to suspend its military operations (ICJ, 2022), and the UN Human Rights Council established a commission of inquiry into war crimes. Yet, without Security Council consensus, accountability mechanisms remained largely declaratory.

Overall, the Ukraine conflict underscores both the moral authority and structural impotence of the UN system. While the organization has effectively mobilized humanitarian responses and preserved international norms, it remains incapable of constraining aggression by a permanent member. The Ukraine case thus epitomizes a central paradox of twenty-first-century multilateralism: the UN defends international law but cannot enforce it against those who created it.

Comparative Discussion

The three case studies: Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine reveal both the enduring significance and the structural limitations of the United Nations (UN) in conflict resolution. Collectively, they illustrate how the UN's capacity to act is contingent upon the political alignment of major powers, the nature of the conflict, and the scope of its humanitarian apparatus. Each case exposes distinct dimensions of the UN's dual identity: as a normative body upholding international law and human rights, and as a political institution constrained by state sovereignty and power politics.

1. Thematic Continuities

Across all three contexts, the UN's humanitarian centrality stands out as its most reliable and visible function. Whether through UNAMA in Afghanistan, OCHA and WFP in Syria, or coordinated refugee operations in Ukraine, the organization demonstrated remarkable logistical capacity and institutional endurance. In each case, UN humanitarian mechanisms sustained civilian populations when other international actors either withdrew or failed to coordinate effectively. For instance, cross-border aid in Syria and emergency food delivery in Ukraine exemplify the organization's operational adaptability under severe political constraints. These experiences reaffirm the UN's comparative advantage in crisis mitigation, even when conflict resolution remains elusive.

The second commonality is the persistent paralysis of the UN Security Council (UNSC), which undermines collective enforcement. In Afghanistan, internal divisions prevented a unified political strategy after the Taliban takeover; in Syria, Russian and Chinese vetoes shielded the Assad regime; and in Ukraine, Russia's veto rendered the Council virtually inoperative. These cases confirm what scholars such as Weiss (2020) and Bellamy and Hunt (2022) describe as the "structural dysfunction of collective security"—a system where those responsible for maintaining peace often obstruct it. This dysfunction has eroded confidence in the UNSC's legitimacy and prompted a shift toward alternative decision-making platforms such as the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and regional coalitions.

A third continuity concerns the erosion of the UN's normative authority. In Afghanistan, cautious engagement with the Taliban has been perceived as tacit normalization of an exclusionary regime; in Syria, humanitarian coordination without political accountability risks entrenching authoritarian control; and in Ukraine, the inability to restrain aggression by a permanent member weakens the moral foundations of the Charter. As Mearsheimer (2022) and Müller (2023) argue, this reflects a broader transformation in which geopolitical realism overrides liberal institutionalism—the rules of the system bend to power rather than principle.

2. Divergent Patterns

Despite these continuities, each case also demonstrates distinctive outcomes reflecting different levels of UN influence and access. Afghanistan represents a high-access, low-leverage scenario:

the UN operates widely on the ground but wields limited political influence. Syria exemplifies medium access and minimal leverage, where humanitarian activities persist under constant negotiation and threat of veto. Ukraine, in contrast, presents a low-access but high-visibility case—while direct UN involvement in the battlefield is minimal, its normative stance and global advocacy remain strong. This spectrum underscores how context determines the balance between visibility, access, and impact.

3. Institutional Adaptation

The UN's responses across these conflicts demonstrate a gradual evolution toward adaptive multilateralism. Faced with Security Council deadlock, the organization has sought creative procedural avenues to maintain engagement. The invocation of the UNGA's "Uniting for Peace" mechanism in Ukraine, the reliance on cross-border authorizations in Syria, and the establishment of a Special Coordinator in Afghanistan illustrate how the UN leverages alternative institutional pathways to preserve relevance. Yet these adaptations, while innovative, are reactive rather than transformative, addressing immediate crises without altering the structural imbalance that produces them.

4. Lessons and Insights

Three lessons emerge from the comparative analysis.

First, humanitarian credibility cannot substitute for political effectiveness. The UN's ability to deliver aid sustains its legitimacy but does not resolve the underlying causes of conflict. Second, the organization's success depends on external political will, not merely internal reform. Without consensus among major powers, even well-designed missions risk stagnation. Third, UN legitimacy still matters, even when effectiveness falters. In all three cases, the UN's imprimatur provided moral and legal justification for international action, enabling cooperation among states and non-state actors under a shared normative umbrella.

In sum, the comparative discussion highlights a paradoxical truth: the UN remains indispensable yet insufficient. It continues to serve as the world's moral compass and humanitarian lifeline but struggles to act as an enforcer of peace. The 2020–2024 period thus reveals a UN that is resilient in function but fragile in authority, capable of alleviating human suffering yet constrained from addressing its root causes.

Conclusion

The post-2020 conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine reveal both the resilience and fragility of the United Nations (UN) as the centerpiece of international conflict resolution. Across these cases, the UN has demonstrated enduring value as a humanitarian coordinator and moral authority, yet it remains constrained by political divisions, limited enforcement power, and the structural imbalance embedded within the Security Council. Its efforts underscore a recurring paradox: the organization is indispensable for alleviating suffering but insufficient for enforcing peace.

In Afghanistan, the UN sustained vital humanitarian operations despite regime collapse, yet it lacked leverage to influence Taliban governance. In Syria, it preserved cross-border lifelines and negotiated fragile access agreements but failed to generate political momentum toward reconciliation. In Ukraine, the UN defended international law and coordinated massive humanitarian efforts but was powerless to halt aggression by a permanent Council member. These experiences collectively demonstrate that the UN's legitimacy persists even when its authority falters.

The challenges confronting the UN are not merely operational—they are systemic. The veto power, selective enforcement of norms, and political instrumentalization of humanitarian aid erode its credibility. However, the organization continues to embody the only universal platform

capable of convening states, mediating disputes, and articulating shared moral and legal standards. Reforming its peace architecture—through Security Council restructuring, limits on veto use in mass-atrocity situations, and enhanced early-warning diplomacy—is essential to restore confidence in multilateralism.

Ultimately, the UN's future relevance depends on its ability to adapt to a fragmented international order without abandoning its founding ideals. As global conflicts grow more complex, the UN must transition from reactive crisis management to proactive conflict prevention rooted in justice, inclusivity, and accountability. While imperfect, it remains the world's most legitimate instrument for negotiating peace; a reminder that the failure of multilateralism would not only diminish the UN but imperil the very idea of collective security itself.

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