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The United Nations and Contemporary International Peace and Security: Challenges, Effectiveness and Reform in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

The United Nations (UN) has remained the principal international organization entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining international peace and security since its establishment in 1945. Created in the aftermath of the Second World War, the organization has played a significant role in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, and the promotion of international cooperation. However, the changing nature of global politics, increasing geopolitical rivalries, and the emergence of non-traditional security threats have raised important questions regarding the effectiveness of the United Nations in fulfilling its mandate. This study critically examines the role of the United Nations in maintaining international peace and security in the twenty-first century. It analyses the contributions of the organization through its peacekeeping operations, collective security mechanisms, conflict resolution efforts, and humanitarian interventions while also examining the institutional, political, and operational challenges that constrain its effectiveness. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on secondary data collected from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, official United Nations reports, and policy documents. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Liberal Institutionalism and Realism, the paper argues that although the United Nations continues to serve as the cornerstone of global governance and multilateral diplomacy, its effectiveness is increasingly influenced by the competing strategic interests of major powers, particularly within the Security Council. The paper concludes that meaningful institutional reforms, including the restructuring of the Security Council, improved peacekeeping mechanisms, enhanced financial sustainability, and greater international cooperation, are necessary to strengthen the United Nations' ability to address contemporary security challenges. Despite its limitations, the United Nations remains indispensable for promoting international peace, stability, and collective security in an increasingly complex global order.

Keywords: United Nations, International Peace, Collective Security, Peacekeeping, Security Council, Global Governance, International Relations.

Introduction

International peace and security constitute the foundation of a stable and prosperous international order. Throughout history, armed conflicts have resulted in immense human suffering, economic devastation, political instability, and humanitarian crises, demonstrating the necessity of institutional mechanisms capable of preventing war and promoting peaceful cooperation among states. The catastrophic consequences of the First and Second World Wars fundamentally transformed international thinking regarding global governance and collective security. While the League of Nations represented the first organized attempt to establish an international institution dedicated to preserving peace, its inability to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War revealed significant structural and political weaknesses (Claude, 1966). Consequently, the international community sought to establish a more effective organization capable of maintaining peace through collective action, leading to the creation of the United Nations (UN) on 24 October 1945. The United Nations was founded on the principles of sovereign equality, peaceful settlement of disputes, collective security, respect for international law, and international cooperation. These principles are enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, which identifies the maintenance of international peace and security as the organization's primary objective (United Nations, 1945). Unlike its predecessor, the United Nations was designed with stronger institutional structures, including the Security Council, General Assembly, International Court of Justice, Economic and Social Council, Secretariat, and Trusteeship Council. Among these organs, the Security Council occupies a unique position because it possesses the legal authority to determine threats

to international peace, impose sanctions, authorize peacekeeping operations, and approve collective military action where necessary under Chapter VII of the Charter (United Nations, 1945). During the Cold War (1947–1991), the effectiveness of the United Nations was often constrained by ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The frequent use of the veto by both superpowers limited the Security Council's ability to respond effectively to many international crises. Nevertheless, the organization continued to perform important functions by facilitating diplomatic negotiations, supervising ceasefire agreements, supporting decolonization, delivering humanitarian assistance, and deploying peacekeeping missions in conflict-prone regions (Hurd, 2017). Following the end of the Cold War, expectations regarding the role of the United Nations increased considerably. The emergence of a relatively cooperative international environment enabled the organization to expand its peacekeeping operations, peacebuilding initiatives, electoral assistance programmes, and humanitarian interventions across different parts of the world (Weiss, 2016).

In the contemporary international system, the nature of security has undergone profound transformation. Traditional interstate wars continue to pose serious challenges; however, they are increasingly accompanied by non-traditional security threats such as international terrorism, cybercrime, climate change, pandemics, transnational organized crime, irregular migration, and violent extremism (Buzan & Hansen, 2009). These challenges transcend national borders and require coordinated international responses that cannot be effectively addressed by individual states acting independently. Consequently, the role of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations has become increasingly important in facilitating international cooperation, coordinating humanitarian assistance, promoting sustainable development, and strengthening international legal frameworks.

One of the most significant contributions of the United Nations has been the development of peacekeeping operations. Although peacekeeping is not explicitly mentioned in the UN Charter, it has evolved into one of the organization's most visible and effective mechanisms for maintaining peace in conflict-affected societies. Since the deployment of the first UN peacekeeping mission in 1948, the organization has conducted numerous operations aimed at monitoring ceasefires, protecting civilians, supporting democratic transitions, supervising elections, disarming former combatants, and facilitating post-conflict reconstruction (Bellamy & Williams, 2022). According to Fortna (2008), the presence of peacekeeping forces significantly reduces the likelihood of renewed violence and contributes to long-term political stability in post-conflict societies. Similarly, Diehl (2014) argues that peacekeeping has become one of the defining features of modern international conflict management.

Beyond peacekeeping, the United Nations has played an essential role in conflict prevention through preventive diplomacy, mediation, arbitration, and negotiation. The Secretary-General frequently employs "good offices" diplomacy to facilitate dialogue between conflicting parties, while the International Court of Justice provides legal mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes between states. Furthermore, various UN agencies—including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)—deliver humanitarian assistance to millions of people affected by armed conflict, natural disasters, and displacement (Barnett, 2011). These activities demonstrate that the United Nations has progressively adopted a broader understanding of peace that encompasses not only the absence of armed conflict but also human security, sustainable development, and the protection of fundamental human rights.

Despite these achievements, the effectiveness of the United Nations has increasingly come under scrutiny. Contemporary geopolitical developments, including the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the Israel–Hamas conflict, tensions in the South China Sea, and ongoing civil wars in Sudan and other regions, have exposed significant institutional and political limitations within the organization. The frequent use of the veto by the five permanent members of the Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—has often prevented timely collective action during major international crises (Malone, 2022). Scholars such as Bosco (2009) argue that while the veto was originally intended to ensure cooperation among major powers, it has increasingly become an obstacle to effective multilateral decision-making.

Another persistent criticism concerns the representativeness of the Security Council. The Council's permanent membership reflects the geopolitical realities of 1945 rather than the contemporary international order. Emerging powers such as India, Brazil, Germany, Japan, and major African states continue to seek greater representation in global decision-making processes. According to Weiss (2016), the legitimacy and credibility of the Security Council depend upon its ability to adapt to changing global political realities. Similarly, Hurd (2017) argues that institutional legitimacy is closely linked to perceptions of fairness, representation, and procedural justice. The growing complexity of international security has also challenged traditional concepts of collective security. Kaldor (2012) argues that modern conflicts increasingly involve non-state actors, identity politics, terrorism, and irregular warfare rather than conventional interstate military confrontations. Likewise, Paris (2004) contends that sustainable

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peace requires comprehensive peacebuilding strategies that address governance, institution-building, economic recovery, and reconciliation rather than merely ending armed violence. These perspectives suggest that maintaining international peace in the twenty-first century requires multidimensional approaches extending beyond traditional military interventions.

Although the literature on the United Nations is extensive, much of it focuses either on peacekeeping operations, Security Council politics, humanitarian intervention, or institutional reforms as separate areas of inquiry. Comparatively fewer studies integrate these dimensions to provide a comprehensive assessment of the United Nations' effectiveness in responding to both traditional and emerging security challenges within the evolving geopolitical environment of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, recent developments—including intensified great-power competition, expanding geopolitical fragmentation, and the rise of non-traditional security threats—necessitate renewed scholarly attention to the organization's role in maintaining international peace and security.

Against this background, the present study critically examines the role of the United Nations in maintaining international peace and security, with particular emphasis on its institutional achievements, contemporary challenges, and prospects for reform. The study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the organization's principal mechanisms, including collective security, peacekeeping, humanitarian intervention, and peacebuilding, while analysing the political and structural constraints that influence their implementation. Employing a qualitative research methodology based on secondary sources and drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Liberal Institutionalism and Realism, the paper argues that although the United Nations faces significant institutional and political challenges, it remains the most legitimate and comprehensive global organization for promoting international peace, conflict resolution, and multilateral cooperation. Strengthening its institutional capacity through meaningful reforms will be essential if the organization is to remain effective in addressing the increasingly complex security challenges of the twenty-first century.

Literature Review

The United Nations has occupied a central position in the study of international relations since its establishment in 1945. Scholars have examined its role from diverse theoretical perspectives, including realism, liberal institutionalism, constructivism, and critical security studies. While there is broad agreement that the United Nations remains the most comprehensive international organization devoted to maintaining international peace and security, considerable debate exists regarding its effectiveness in responding to contemporary global conflicts and emerging security challenges. Early scholarship primarily focused on the concept of collective security and the institutional significance of the United Nations within the international system. Claude (1966) argued that the organization represented the most ambitious attempt to replace the traditional balance-of-power system with a framework based on collective responsibility for maintaining peace. According to Claude, although the United Nations cannot independently prevent every conflict, it provides an institutional mechanism through which states can pursue diplomacy, negotiation, and peaceful settlement of disputes. Similarly, Goodrich and Hambro (1969) emphasized that the Charter established legal principles that continue to shape international behaviour and reinforce respect for international law.

Subsequent research shifted attention towards the effectiveness of the Security Council as the principal organ responsible for maintaining international peace and security. Hurd (2017) contends that the legitimacy of the Security Council derives not merely from its legal authority but also from the willingness of member states to recognize and implement its decisions. However, several scholars argue that the concentration of decision-making authority among the five permanent members has increasingly undermined the Council's effectiveness. Bosco (2009) observes that the veto power, while originally intended to preserve cooperation among major powers, has often produced institutional paralysis during major international crises. Likewise, Malone (2022) argues that geopolitical rivalry among permanent members continues to influence Security Council decision-making, limiting the organization's ability to respond promptly to armed conflicts.

The literature on United Nations peacekeeping has expanded considerably since the end of the Cold War. Earlier peacekeeping missions primarily focused on monitoring ceasefires between states, whereas contemporary operations increasingly involve civilian protection, electoral assistance, institution-building, and post-conflict reconstruction. Bellamy and Williams (2022) argue that peacekeeping has evolved into one of the organization's most successful conflict management tools despite numerous operational challenges. Fortna (2008), through a comprehensive empirical study of civil wars, concludes that the deployment of peacekeeping missions significantly reduces the likelihood of renewed conflict and contributes to long-term political stability. Similarly, Diehl (2014) maintains that although peacekeeping missions frequently operate under difficult political and logistical conditions, they remain an indispensable component of international conflict management.

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Another important body of literature examines the relationship between peacebuilding and sustainable peace. Paris (2004) argues that ending armed conflict alone does not guarantee lasting peace unless accompanied by political reforms, institution-building, economic development, and reconciliation. Call (2008) similarly emphasizes that successful peacebuilding requires strengthening state institutions, promoting democratic governance, and addressing the root causes of conflict. These studies broaden the understanding of international peace by emphasizing that sustainable stability depends not only on military security but also on social, political, and economic development.

The emergence of non-traditional security threats has further expanded scholarly debates concerning the role of the United Nations. Buzan and Hansen (2009) argue that contemporary security extends beyond interstate military conflicts to include terrorism, cyber threats, environmental degradation, pandemics, and transnational organized crime. Kaldor (2012) similarly contends that modern conflicts differ fundamentally from traditional wars because they increasingly involve non-state actors, identity politics, and irregular forms of violence. These changing security dynamics require international organizations to adopt more comprehensive and cooperative approaches towards conflict prevention and crisis management.

Humanitarian intervention and the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) have also generated extensive academic discussion. Evans (2008) argues that the international community possesses a moral and political responsibility to protect populations facing genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity when national governments fail to fulfil this obligation. Bellamy (2009), however, notes that implementing the Responsibility to Protect remains politically controversial because states continue to disagree over the balance between humanitarian intervention and the principle of state sovereignty. Consequently, the application of R2P has often been influenced by political considerations within the Security Council rather than purely humanitarian concerns.

Numerous scholars have also examined institutional reforms necessary to improve the effectiveness of the United Nations. Weiss (2016) argues that although the organization remains indispensable, meaningful reforms are essential if it is to remain relevant in the changing international environment. Proposed reforms include expanding the membership of the Security Council, restricting the use of the veto in humanitarian emergencies, strengthening peacekeeping capacities, and improving financial sustainability. Luck (2018) similarly argues that institutional legitimacy depends upon greater transparency, accountability, and representativeness within the Security Council.

Recent literature has increasingly focused on the United Nations' response to contemporary international crises. The Russia–Ukraine conflict, the Israel–Hamas conflict, civil wars in Sudan and Syria, and the growing strategic rivalry between major powers have intensified debates concerning the effectiveness of multilateral diplomacy. Scholars argue that while the United Nations continues to provide humanitarian assistance, coordinate peacekeeping operations, and facilitate diplomatic engagement, political divisions among permanent members frequently prevent decisive collective action (Gowan, 2023; Malone, 2022). This has renewed calls for institutional reforms capable of enhancing the organization's credibility and operational effectiveness.

The review of existing literature demonstrates that scholars generally acknowledge the significant contributions of the United Nations in promoting international peace, facilitating diplomatic negotiations, conducting peacekeeping operations, supporting humanitarian relief, and strengthening international cooperation. Nevertheless, the literature also reveals persistent concerns regarding the Security Council's structure, the use of veto power, inadequate institutional reforms, financial constraints, and the growing complexity of contemporary security threats. Although previous studies have extensively analysed these issues individually, relatively few have integrated the organization's achievements, institutional limitations, and contemporary geopolitical challenges into a comprehensive assessment of its effectiveness in maintaining international peace and security in the twenty-first century. The present study seeks to address this gap by providing a holistic analysis of the United Nations' evolving role, the challenges confronting its institutional framework, and the reforms required to strengthen its capacity to respond to an increasingly complex international security environment.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to examine the role of the United Nations in maintaining international peace and security in the twenty-first century. The specific objectives of the study are:

- To examine the role of the United Nations in promoting international peace and security.
- To analyse the contribution of the United Nations in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and humanitarian assistance.
- To identify the major challenges that affect the effectiveness of the United Nations in maintaining international peace.

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- To evaluate the need for institutional reforms to strengthen the role of the United Nations in addressing contemporary global security challenges.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What role does the United Nations play in maintaining international peace and security?
- How effective are the United Nations' mechanisms in preventing and resolving international conflicts?
- What are the major challenges faced by the United Nations in the twenty-first century?
- What reforms are necessary to enhance the effectiveness of the United Nations in maintaining international peace and security?

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research approach and is descriptive as well as analytical in nature. The research is based entirely on secondary sources of data. Information has been collected from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, official publications of the United Nations, reports of international organizations, and other reliable academic sources. The use of secondary data is appropriate because the study seeks to analyse existing knowledge and evaluate the effectiveness of the United Nations in maintaining international peace and security rather than generating primary empirical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The collected data have been analysed using descriptive and analytical methods. Relevant literature has been critically examined to understand the evolution of the United Nations, its role in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, collective security, humanitarian intervention, and peacebuilding. The study also considers recent international developments to assess the contemporary relevance of the United Nations in responding to evolving global security challenges. To provide a practical dimension to the analysis, the study incorporates a case study of the United Nations' response to the Russia–Ukraine conflict. The case study illustrates both the strengths and limitations of the organization in dealing with contemporary geopolitical crises and highlights the challenges posed by great-power politics within the Security Council. Although the study relies exclusively on secondary data, every effort has been made to consult authentic and credible sources to ensure the reliability of the findings. The conclusions drawn are therefore based on a careful analysis of scholarly literature, official documents, and internationally recognized publications.

Limitation of the Study

The study is confined to secondary sources of information and does not include primary data collected through interviews, surveys, or field investigations. It primarily focuses on the role of the United Nations in maintaining international peace and security, with particular emphasis on its institutional mechanisms, contemporary challenges, and prospects for reform. While selected recent international conflicts are discussed for illustrative purposes, the study does not attempt to provide an exhaustive analysis of every peacekeeping mission or international crisis undertaken by the United Nations.

Role of the United Nations in Maintaining International Peace and Security

Since its establishment in 1945, the United Nations has remained the most important international organization responsible for maintaining international peace and security. Established in the aftermath of the Second World War, the organization was created with the objective of preventing future wars through collective security, peaceful settlement of disputes, and international cooperation. Over the past eight decades, the United Nations has expanded its activities beyond traditional diplomacy to include peacekeeping, peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, human rights protection, and sustainable development. Although its effectiveness has often been questioned, particularly in recent years, the organization continues to play a central role in addressing both traditional and non-traditional security challenges (United Nations, 1945).

One of the most significant contributions of the United Nations is its role in the peaceful settlement of international disputes. The UN Charter encourages member states to resolve conflicts through negotiation, mediation, arbitration, judicial settlement, and other peaceful means before resorting to the use of force. In many instances, the Secretary-General has played an important diplomatic role by facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties and promoting confidence-building measures. Such preventive diplomacy has helped de-escalate tensions and reduce the possibility of armed confrontation. Although these diplomatic efforts are not always successful, they demonstrate the organization's commitment to resolving disputes through dialogue rather than military intervention.

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The United Nations has also made substantial contributions through its peacekeeping operations. Peacekeeping has evolved into one of the organization's most visible instruments for maintaining international peace. Since the deployment of the first peacekeeping mission in 1948, the United Nations has conducted numerous operations across Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. These missions have supervised ceasefires, monitored elections, protected civilians, facilitated humanitarian assistance, disarmed former combatants, and supported post-conflict reconstruction. Peacekeeping missions in countries such as Namibia, Cambodia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone have generally been regarded as successful examples of international cooperation in restoring political stability and supporting democratic governance (Bellamy & Williams, 2022).

However, the nature of peacekeeping has changed considerably over time. Earlier missions primarily focused on monitoring ceasefire agreements between states, whereas contemporary operations increasingly involve protecting civilians, supporting state institutions, promoting the rule of law, and assisting in nation-building. Consequently, peacekeepers often operate in highly volatile environments where armed groups remain active and political settlements are fragile. Despite these challenges, studies suggest that peacekeeping operations have significantly contributed to reducing the recurrence of violent conflict and creating conditions for sustainable peace (Fortna, 2008). Another important contribution of the United Nations lies in the principle of collective security. The Security Council is empowered to identify threats to international peace, impose sanctions, authorize peacekeeping missions, and, where necessary, approve collective military action under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Through legally binding resolutions, the Security Council has attempted to address issues such as nuclear proliferation, international terrorism, civil wars, and violations of international law. Economic sanctions, arms embargoes, and diplomatic measures have frequently been employed to discourage aggression and encourage peaceful resolution of conflicts.

In addition to its security functions, the United Nations has emerged as the world's leading humanitarian organization during armed conflicts and natural disasters. Millions of people affected by war depend upon humanitarian assistance coordinated through various UN agencies. Organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) provide food, healthcare, education, emergency shelter, and protection to refugees and internally displaced persons. These humanitarian interventions not only alleviate immediate human suffering but also contribute to long-term peace by preventing further instability in conflict-affected societies (Barnett, 2011).

The United Nations has further strengthened international peace through peacebuilding initiatives. Experience has shown that ending armed conflict does not necessarily guarantee lasting peace. Political instability, weak institutions, poverty, ethnic divisions, and economic inequality often increase the likelihood of renewed violence. Recognizing these realities, the United Nations has increasingly focused on post-conflict reconstruction by supporting democratic institutions, judicial reforms, electoral processes, security sector reforms, and socio-economic development. The establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission in 2005 reflected the organization's recognition that sustainable peace requires addressing the structural causes of conflict rather than merely ending hostilities (Paris, 2004).

The organization has also contributed significantly to the development of international law and global norms governing the use of force. Through the International Court of Justice, international treaties, conventions, and Security Council resolutions, the United Nations has promoted respect for international legal principles. These legal frameworks have strengthened accountability, encouraged peaceful dispute resolution, and reinforced the importance of multilateral cooperation in addressing international conflicts. Although enforcement remains dependent upon the cooperation of member states, the normative influence of the United Nations has shaped the conduct of international relations for several decades.

In recent years, the scope of the United Nations' responsibilities has expanded considerably due to the emergence of non-traditional security threats. International terrorism, cybercrime, climate change, pandemics, food insecurity, and transnational organized crime increasingly affect global peace and security. These challenges cannot be effectively addressed by individual states acting independently. Instead, they require coordinated international action involving information sharing, capacity building, humanitarian cooperation, and multilateral diplomacy. The United Nations has therefore assumed an important coordinating role by facilitating dialogue, promoting international agreements, and encouraging collective responses to these complex challenges (Buzan & Hansen, 2009).

Despite numerous achievements, the effectiveness of the United Nations largely depends upon the political commitment of its member states. The organization does not possess an independent military force or autonomous enforcement powers. Consequently, the implementation of Security Council resolutions, peacekeeping mandates, sanctions, and humanitarian programmes depends heavily on the willingness of member states to provide financial resources, military personnel, logistical support, and political cooperation. This dependence often limits the

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organization's ability to respond rapidly to emerging crises. Nevertheless, the United Nations remains indispensable in the contemporary international system. No other international organization possesses comparable universal membership, legal legitimacy, institutional experience, or operational capacity to coordinate global responses to international conflicts and humanitarian emergencies. Although the organization has faced criticism regarding its institutional limitations, its contributions to conflict prevention, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, and international cooperation continue to make it the cornerstone of the global collective security system. Strengthening these functions through institutional reform and greater political cooperation will be essential for ensuring that the United Nations remains capable of addressing the increasingly complex security challenges of the twenty-first century.

Challenges Faced by the United Nations in Maintaining International Peace and Security

The United Nations has played a pivotal role in promoting international peace and security since its establishment in 1945. Nevertheless, the organization has been unable to overcome several institutional, political, financial, and operational constraints that have limited its effectiveness in responding to contemporary global crises. While the UN remains the most important multilateral institution for conflict management, its performance is increasingly challenged by changing geopolitical realities, evolving security threats, and divergent national interests among member states. A major challenge confronting the United Nations is the structure and decision-making process of the Security Council. The Council was established in the aftermath of the Second World War to maintain international peace through collective action. However, the concentration of decision-making authority in the hands of the five permanent members has frequently resulted in political deadlock. The veto power enables any permanent member to block resolutions regardless of the support expressed by the majority of member states. Consequently, conflicts involving the strategic interests of major powers often remain unresolved because political consensus becomes difficult to achieve. Scholars argue that the frequent use of the veto has weakened the credibility of the Security Council and reduced confidence in its ability to act impartially during international crises (Bosco, 2009; Fassbender, 2003).

Another significant issue concerns the representativeness of the Security Council. The existing composition reflects the international political order that emerged in 1945 rather than the realities of the twenty-first century. Since then, the United Nations has expanded from 51 to 193 member states, while the global distribution of political and economic power has changed considerably. Emerging powers such as India, Brazil, Germany, Japan, and several African countries continue to advocate for a more representative Security Council that reflects contemporary geopolitical realities. Many scholars contend that meaningful institutional reform is necessary to improve the Council's legitimacy, accountability, and effectiveness in maintaining international peace (Blum, 2005; von Freiesleben, 2008).

The changing nature of armed conflict presents another challenge for the United Nations. Contemporary conflicts increasingly involve non-state actors, extremist organizations, private military groups, cyber threats, and transnational terrorist networks rather than conventional wars between sovereign states. Such conflicts are often prolonged, fragmented, and influenced by ethnic, religious, or ideological divisions. These developments have complicated the work of the United Nations because many of its institutional mechanisms were originally designed to address interstate disputes rather than complex internal conflicts (Kaldor, 2012). As a result, peacekeeping operations frequently encounter situations for which traditional mandates are insufficient.

Financial constraints also continue to undermine the operational capacity of the organization. The effectiveness of peacekeeping missions, humanitarian programmes, and peacebuilding initiatives depends heavily on financial contributions from member states. Delays in assessed contributions, uneven burden-sharing, and increasing operational costs have created significant budgetary pressures. Limited financial resources often affect the deployment of personnel, procurement of equipment, and implementation of long-term development and reconstruction programmes. According to Howard (2008), sustainable peacekeeping requires not only military personnel but also adequate logistical support, training, and financial commitment from member states.

Peacekeeping operations themselves face increasingly difficult operational environments. Unlike earlier missions that monitored ceasefire agreements between states, modern peacekeeping missions are frequently deployed in active conflict zones where violence continues despite the presence of international forces. Peacekeepers are expected to protect civilians, support democratic institutions, facilitate humanitarian assistance, and promote political reconciliation simultaneously. These multidimensional responsibilities often exceed the resources available to peacekeeping missions and expose personnel to significant security risks. Doyle and Sambanis (2006) argue that peacekeeping missions are most successful when they receive clear mandates, sufficient resources, and sustained political support from the international community.

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Another challenge concerns the implementation of humanitarian intervention. While the United Nations recognizes the importance of protecting civilian populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, disagreements frequently arise regarding the circumstances under which international intervention should occur. The principle of state sovereignty remains one of the cornerstones of international law, and many governments remain reluctant to support external intervention in domestic affairs. Welsh (2006) observes that balancing humanitarian responsibilities with respect for sovereignty remains one of the most controversial issues in contemporary international relations. Consequently, political disagreements often delay collective action during humanitarian emergencies.

The increasing influence of geopolitical rivalry has further complicated the functioning of the United Nations. Competition among major powers has intensified over the past decade, affecting cooperation within the Security Council and reducing the effectiveness of multilateral diplomacy. Strategic competition among influential states frequently shapes voting patterns, peace negotiations, and humanitarian responses. Rather than acting collectively, powerful states often pursue their own national interests, making consensus more difficult to achieve. This growing polarization has reduced the ability of the United Nations to respond quickly and effectively to international crises (Roberts & Zaum, 2008).

The emergence of global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, cyber insecurity, food insecurity, and forced migration has also expanded the responsibilities of the United Nations. These issues do not fit neatly within traditional concepts of international security and require coordinated action involving governments, international organizations, civil society, and regional institutions. Acharya (2014) argues that the evolution of global governance requires international organizations to become more flexible and responsive to emerging transnational threats. Adapting existing institutional mechanisms to these rapidly changing challenges remains a significant task for the United Nations.

Despite these limitations, the United Nations continues to occupy a unique position within the international system. Its universal membership, legal authority, diplomatic legitimacy, and extensive institutional experience make it indispensable for promoting dialogue, coordinating humanitarian assistance, and facilitating international cooperation. However, enhancing its effectiveness requires comprehensive institutional reforms, stronger political commitment from member states, sustainable financial support, and greater adaptability to the changing nature of international conflict. Without such reforms, the organization will continue to face significant obstacles in fulfilling its primary mandate of maintaining international peace and security in an increasingly complex global environment.

Case Study: The United Nations Response to the Russia–Ukraine Conflict

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has emerged as one of the most significant international security crises of the twenty-first century. Although tensions between the two countries had existed since 2014 following the annexation of Crimea, the conflict escalated dramatically when Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The war has resulted in thousands of civilian casualties, widespread destruction of infrastructure, displacement of millions of people, and serious disruptions to global food and energy security. The conflict has also posed one of the greatest challenges to the United Nations since its establishment, testing its capacity to maintain international peace and security in a conflict involving a permanent member of the Security Council.

Immediately after the outbreak of the conflict, the United Nations called for restraint, respect for international law, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. The Secretary-General repeatedly appealed for an immediate ceasefire and emphasized the need to protect civilians in accordance with international humanitarian law. The General Assembly convened an Emergency Special Session and adopted several resolutions condemning the use of force against Ukraine and reaffirming the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of states. Although General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, they reflected the views of a substantial majority of the international community and reinforced the normative principles contained in the UN Charter (United Nations General Assembly, 2022).

The Security Council, however, was unable to adopt effective enforcement measures because Russia exercised its veto power as a permanent member. This situation once again highlighted one of the fundamental institutional limitations of the United Nations. While the Security Council possesses the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, its effectiveness is significantly reduced when one of the permanent members is directly involved in a conflict. As a result, the Council remained largely divided, demonstrating how geopolitical interests can constrain collective security mechanisms (Patrick, 2023). Despite these political limitations, various United Nations agencies played an important humanitarian role throughout the conflict. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) coordinated assistance for millions of refugees who fled to neighbouring countries, while the World Food Programme (WFP) delivered emergency food assistance to conflict-

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affected populations. UNICEF expanded programmes aimed at protecting children, ensuring access to education, healthcare, and psychological support. These humanitarian efforts demonstrated that although the United Nations may face limitations in preventing armed conflict, it continues to play an indispensable role in reducing human suffering during humanitarian emergencies (UNHCR, 2023). Another notable contribution of the United Nations was its support for international diplomacy concerning global food security. In cooperation with Türkiye, the organization facilitated negotiations that resulted in the Black Sea Grain Initiative in 2022. The agreement enabled the export of millions of tonnes of Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea despite ongoing hostilities, thereby helping to stabilize global food supplies and reduce pressure on developing countries dependent on grain imports. Although the agreement later encountered difficulties, it illustrated the ability of the United Nations to facilitate dialogue even under highly polarized geopolitical circumstances (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023).

The conflict has generated extensive academic debate regarding the future effectiveness of the United Nations. Many scholars argue that the inability of the Security Council to adopt decisive action demonstrates the urgent need for institutional reform, particularly concerning the use of the veto in situations involving mass humanitarian crises. Others maintain that expecting the United Nations to resolve conflicts involving major military powers overlooks the political realities upon which the organization itself was founded. Instead, they argue that the organization should be evaluated not only by its capacity to prevent wars but also by its contributions to humanitarian assistance, diplomatic engagement, and the preservation of international legal norms (Krasno, 2023).

The Russia–Ukraine conflict illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the United Nations. On the one hand, the organization was unable to prevent the outbreak of war or secure collective enforcement measures through the Security Council because of geopolitical divisions. On the other hand, it successfully mobilized humanitarian assistance, facilitated diplomatic engagement, promoted international legal principles, and coordinated global efforts to address the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. The case therefore demonstrates that while the United Nations remains indispensable to the international system, its effectiveness ultimately depends upon the political cooperation of its member states, particularly the permanent members of the Security Council.

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that the United Nations continues to occupy a unique and indispensable position in the international system despite facing significant institutional and political challenges. Since its establishment in 1945, the organization has provided an institutional framework through which states cooperate to prevent armed conflicts, promote peaceful settlement of disputes, undertake peacekeeping operations, and respond to humanitarian emergencies. The findings indicate that while the United Nations has achieved considerable success in several areas, its effectiveness remains closely linked to the political dynamics of the international system. One of the major findings of the study is that the United Nations has successfully institutionalized the principle of collective security. Through the Security Council, General Assembly, International Court of Justice, and various specialized agencies, the organization has developed mechanisms that encourage diplomacy, negotiation, mediation, and multilateral cooperation. Peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance, and post-conflict peacebuilding have become important components of international peace efforts. These mechanisms have contributed significantly to reducing violence, protecting civilian populations, and supporting political transitions in numerous conflict-affected regions.

However, the study also reveals that institutional effectiveness is often constrained by geopolitical realities. The Security Council, which bears the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, frequently experiences political deadlock due to disagreements among its permanent members. The use of the veto has repeatedly prevented timely collective action in situations involving major powers or their strategic interests. Consequently, the ability of the United Nations to respond decisively often depends less on its legal authority and more on the willingness of influential states to cooperate within the framework of multilateral diplomacy. The analysis further suggests that contemporary security challenges differ substantially from those that existed when the United Nations was established. While interstate wars remain important, international peace is increasingly threatened by civil wars, terrorism, cyberattacks, climate change, pandemics, forced migration, and transnational organized crime. These multidimensional challenges require comprehensive responses that integrate political, economic, humanitarian, environmental, and security considerations. The expanding responsibilities of the United Nations therefore demand continuous institutional adaptation and closer cooperation with regional organizations, governments, and civil society. The Russia–Ukraine conflict examined in this study clearly illustrates both the strengths and limitations of the United Nations. On one hand, the organization demonstrated its humanitarian capacity by coordinating refugee protection, emergency relief, and diplomatic engagement. On the other hand, divisions within the Security Council limited its ability to adopt collective enforcement measures. This case reinforces the argument that the effectiveness of the

United Nations depends not only on institutional design but also on the political commitment of member states to uphold the principles of the UN Charter. The study also highlights that the relevance of the United Nations should not be assessed solely on its ability to prevent every armed conflict. Rather, its broader contribution lies in providing an internationally recognized platform for dialogue, developing international legal norms, facilitating humanitarian cooperation, and encouraging peaceful conflict resolution. In many situations, the organization's role is preventive, diplomatic, or humanitarian rather than coercive. These functions, although less visible than military interventions, remain essential for preserving international stability. Overall, the findings suggest that the United Nations continues to serve as the cornerstone of the contemporary multilateral system. Although institutional reforms, particularly concerning the Security Council, remain necessary, the organization retains considerable relevance in addressing global security challenges. Strengthening political cooperation among member states, enhancing institutional responsiveness, and adapting to emerging security threats will determine the future effectiveness of the United Nations in maintaining international peace and security.

Conclusion

The United Nations was established with the primary objective of protecting future generations from the devastation of war and promoting international peace through collective security and international cooperation. Nearly eight decades after its creation, the organization continues to play a central role in addressing international conflicts, humanitarian crises, peacekeeping operations, and post-conflict reconstruction. Its universal membership, legal legitimacy, and institutional framework make it the most comprehensive international organization dedicated to maintaining peace and security. The present study examined the role of the United Nations in maintaining international peace and security by analysing its institutional mechanisms, major achievements, and contemporary challenges. The findings reveal that the organization has made significant contributions through preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, and the promotion of international law. These activities have helped reduce violence, protect civilian populations, facilitate political dialogue, and support reconstruction efforts in numerous conflict-affected regions across the world.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that the United Nations faces substantial challenges that limit its effectiveness. The structure of the Security Council, particularly the veto power exercised by the five permanent members, continues to impede timely collective action in many international crises. Financial constraints, political disagreements, and the changing nature of global security threats further complicate the organization's ability to fulfil its mandate. Contemporary conflicts increasingly involve non-state actors, cyber threats, terrorism, climate-related risks, and humanitarian emergencies, requiring responses that extend beyond traditional concepts of collective security. The case study of the Russia–Ukraine conflict illustrates the dual character of the United Nations. While the organization encountered political limitations in adopting binding Security Council measures, it continued to provide humanitarian assistance, support diplomatic engagement, and uphold the principles of international law through its agencies and the General Assembly. This demonstrates that the effectiveness of the United Nations cannot be measured solely by its ability to prevent war but also by its capacity to coordinate international cooperation and mitigate the humanitarian consequences of conflict.

The study concludes that the United Nations remains indispensable for the maintenance of international peace and security despite the limitations imposed by contemporary geopolitical realities. No other international institution possesses the same level of global legitimacy, membership, and operational experience. Nevertheless, preserving the relevance of the organization requires continuous institutional adaptation, stronger multilateral cooperation, and sustained political commitment from member states. The future effectiveness of the United Nations will ultimately depend upon its ability to respond to evolving global security challenges while remaining faithful to the principles of peace, cooperation, justice, and collective responsibility embodied in the Charter of the United Nations. In conclusion, although the United Nations cannot by itself eliminate all conflicts or guarantee global peace, it continues to represent humanity's most significant institutional effort to promote peaceful coexistence among nations. Strengthening the organization and reinforcing the principles of multilateralism remain essential for achieving a more peaceful, secure, and stable international order in the twenty-first century

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