

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Mandate Migration of UNSC? Middle-Power Brokerage and the Redistribution of Authority in International Law

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ABSTRACT

The transition toward a multipolar order has intensified rivalry among the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). US-China competition is central, but Russia-West confrontation and US support for Israel also explain why the Council becomes paralysed in politically salient conflicts. This paper examines the resulting shift from UN-centred collective security to middle-power brokerage. It compares UNSC practice concerning Syria, Ukraine and Palestine/Israel with mediation by Qatar, Turkiye, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in Gaza, the Russia-Ukraine war and the 2026 US-Iran war. Through process tracing, structured comparison and doctrinal legal analysis, the paper distinguishes diplomatic effectiveness from legal authority. It argues that middle-powers increasingly exercise "process authority": they convene adversaries, frame bargains and support implementation when the Council is blocked. They do not, however, inherit the Council's Charter authority. The emerging order is one of brokered legal pluralism - more responsive and sometimes life-saving, but also more opaque, selective and dependent on state leverage. The analysis shows that middle-power diplomacy strengthens international law when it operationalizes existing obligations and remains institutionally embedded; it weakens law when political compromise obscures legal asymmetry, substitutes soft commitments for binding rules, or enables forum shopping.

Keywords: multipolar, middle-powers, UN Security Council, mediation, international law, legal pluralism.



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Chapter 1. Introduction, Literature Review and Methodology

1.1 Introduction and research problem

Post-WWII international security order couldn't be established without the creation of the UNSC.¹ The UN Charter empowered the Council to adopt binding resolutions and sanctions, authorize the use of force, and launch peace-keeping missions. Reflecting its post-WWII legacy, the five Allied states occupied permanent membership and veto power. The understanding was that collective security would function only if the strongest states remained inside it.² But this compromised composition also meant that the Council's functionality depends on agreement among actors that are also ideological-strategic competitors.

With the Sino-US rivalry intensifying, that compromise is under renewed strain. China has accumulated economic and military influence; Russia has forcibly contested the post-Cold War security settlement. Against this backdrop, the US, the pioneer of globalization and free-market economy, is backsliding from its own ideals and asserting protectionism.³ Whereas Cold War 1.0 revolved around ideological spectrum, "Cold War 2.0" will play out around strategic and economic interests. So far, an all-out Sino-US rivalry and total collapse of the post-WWII global order has been averted. However, the increasing Sino-US confrontation will cause gradual erosion of the existing global institutional framework, a prime example being the UNSC's failure to uphold its basic mandate for international security. The UNSC suffers from a growing competitive multipolarity inside an institution built on great-power privilege.⁴

Practically, the consequence is issue-specific paralysis at the UNSC. The Council continues to adopt many resolutions, renew missions, and administer sanctions. Yet vetoing, narrow texts, and delayed action characterize UNSC decisions in conflicts that involve a permanent member, either directly or indirectly. So, any annual count of the Council's performance can therefore conceal the distributive problem. The Council may remain productive on lower-conflict files while failing precisely where collective authority is most needed. This gap between general activity and selective incapacity generates a trust deficit among states and affected communities.

¹ UN Charter, art 24(1): 'In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.'

² Charter of the United Nations (adopted 26 June 1945, entered into force 24 October 1945) 1 UNTS XVI ('UN Charter') arts 24(1), 25, 27(3), 39-42.

³ Protectionism has been asserted in two fronts: internal and external. Internally, the MAGA movement and externally, for example, the US trade war with China.

⁴ Christian Marxsen, 'Introduction: The UN Security Council's Four Defining Fields of Tension' in Congyan Cai, Larissa van den Herik and Tiyanjana Maluwa, *The UN Security Council and the Maintenance of Peace in a Changing World* (CUP 2024) 1, 3-7; Jessica Chen Weiss and Jeremy L Wallace, 'Domestic Politics, China's Rise, and the Future of the Liberal International Order' (2021) 75 *International Organization* 635, 635-60.

The Council's selective incapacity has ushered in middle-power brokerage that can operationalize its duties more effectively. But such brokerage can also make legality dependent on political access and leverage. The paper therefore rejects both celebratory and declinist accounts of middle-power brokerage; middle-powers redistribute practical authority and may effectively resolve conflicts. However, the effects of brokerage, as discussed in Chapter 4, from the international law standpoint are yet to be conclusively determined.

The Council's selective inaction does not eliminate demand for diplomacy. It simply redirects it. Such redirection is captured by states such as Qatar, Turkiye, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. They provide venues, communication channels, logistical resources and political guarantees. Some initiatives complement the UN, as Turkiye did with the UN-supported Black Sea Grain Initiative.⁵ Others bypass the Council while using UN norms.⁶ So, the central question is not whether middle-powers can mediate. It is what happens to international law when crisis management migrates from a universal institution, i.e., the UNSC, to ad hoc brokers. This paper argues that middle-powers are acquiring **process authority**, not formal supremacy over international law.

Process authority is the practical capacity to decide who enters negotiations, what issues are placed on the agenda, which legal descriptions appear in a text, and how compliance is monitored. Process authority affects the lived meaning of international law even when they do not change the formal catalogue of legal sources. The paper concludes that process authority has contributed to the development of **brokered-legal pluralism** in the face of the Council's failures.

1.2 Literature review

The first body of literature concerns the Security Council's design and effectiveness. Council members' unity can produce decisive action; its collapse can generate deadlock. Oudenaren identifies the danger of disintegrated allied unity and excluded states or coalitions' contestations of the legitimacy of the UNSC composition.⁷ The post-Cold War period enabled greater P5 cooperation in peace operations and sanctions. That cooperative phase was always selective, however, and the wars in Kosovo, Iraq and Libya left competing lessons about authorization, mandate interpretation and intervention. Von Einsiedel, Malone and Stagno Ugarte locate renewed difficulty in the erosion of great-power relations over Libya, Syria and Ukraine. They

⁵ 'Russia and Ukraine near to grain deal as heavy shelling continues' (Al Jazeera, 13 July 2022) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/13/russia-and-ukraine-near-to-grain-export-agreement-un-turkey>> accessed 10 August 2026.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, 'Transcript of the Press Briefing by the Spokesperson on Thursday 02nd April 2026' (2 April 2026) <[Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan](#)> accessed 13 August 2026.

⁷ John Van Oudenaren, 'Effectiveness and Ineffectiveness of the UN Security Council in the Last Twenty Years: A US Perspective' (Documenti IAI 09/30, Istituto Affari Internazionali 2009) 3-6; Ian Hurd, *After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power in the United Nations Security Council* (Princeton University Press 2007) 83-110.

also warn against equating dramatic vetoes with total institutional collapse. Even during periods of acute dispute, the Council adopts resolutions by consensus where interests overlap.⁸ This insight is essential. Effectiveness must be disaggregated into at least three dimensions: **output effectiveness**, meaning the Council's ability to adopt and administer decisions; **outcome effectiveness**, meaning whether it prevents, limits or resolves violence; and **legitimacy effectiveness**, meaning whether decisions are perceived as principled, representative and consistently applied. The Council can perform well on output while failing on outcomes and legitimacy.

The second literature examines middle-powers. The definition and concept of middle-power is contested. Efstathopoulos reconstructs the behavioural model around internationalism, coalition-building, and niche diplomacy. A state should not qualify merely because leaders claim middle-power status; it must demonstrate the capacity to secure preferred international outcomes.⁹ Laatikainen's account of diplomacy at the UN reinforces this performance criterion: the classic middle-power role is not simply a position in the distribution of capabilities but a practice of bridge-building and consensus-seeking that can generate influence and legitimacy beyond material size.¹⁰ This approach avoids treating every medium-sized state as a mediator and directs attention to performance.

Aydin similarly combines position and performance. Middle-powers favour institutions because rules can constrain stronger states, and they can mediate because they are often considered less threatening. Yet Aydin also shows that middle-powers are not inherently liberal or trustworthy.¹¹ Byrne adds a reputational dimension. For middle-powers, image and public diplomacy can convert limited material capabilities into diplomatic credibility; the same assets can support a mediation, but they also make status competition part of brokerage.¹² Middle-powers' access to antagonistic parties may derive from strategic ambiguity rather than normative consistency.

Behringer's study of human-security initiatives provides a further corrective to great-power-centric analysis. Middle-powers helped produce the Ottawa landmines regime, the International Criminal Court and rapid-

⁸ Sebastian von Einsiedel, David M Malone and Bruno Stagno Ugarte, 'The UN Security Council in an Age of Great Power Rivalry' (United Nations University Working Paper 04/2015) 1-4, 10-13.

⁹ Charalampos Efstathopoulos, 'Middle-powers and the Behavioural Model' (2018) 32 *Global Society* 47, 47-52; Eduard Jordaan, 'The Concept of a Middle-power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle-powers' (2003) 30 *Politikon* 165, 165-81; Andrew F Cooper (ed), *Niche Diplomacy: Middle-powers after the Cold War* (Macmillan 1997) 1-24.

¹⁰ Katie Verlin Laatikainen, 'Pushing Soft Power: Middle-power Diplomacy at the UN' in Katie Verlin Laatikainen and Karen E Smith (eds), *The European Union at the United Nations: Intersecting Multilateralisms* (Palgrave Macmillan 2006) 70-91.

¹¹ Umut Aydin, 'Emerging Middle-powers and the Liberal International Order' (2021) 97 *International Affairs* 1377, 1377-94; Weiss and Wallace (n 5) 635-64.

¹² Caitlin Byrne, *Campaigning for a Seat on the United Nations Security Council: A Middle-power Reflection on the Role of Public Diplomacy* (CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy Paper 10, Figueroa Press 2011) 8-23.

deployment arrangements. Their success depended on coalitions, civil society participation, entrepreneurial leadership and a negotiating design. It nevertheless remained constrained by the core interests of the superpowers.¹³ The lesson travels to contemporary mediation: brokerage can overcome some great-power opposition, but it rarely survives direct and sustained opposition by all actors possessing decisive coercive leverage.

A third literature studies institutional substitution. Atoyan and Petrosyan argue that multipolar rivalry and veto politics are shifting crisis management toward regional and ad hoc arrangements while the UN remains indispensable as a forum and normative reference point.¹⁴ Jerliu's reform analysis sharpens the institutional implication: repeated crisis failure and the growth of alternatives may create pressure for Security Council reform when alternative venues begin to threaten the Council's centrality.¹⁵ Murithi makes a stronger claim regarding Ukraine: a dysfunctional Council failed to mediate because a P5 member was a belligerent, leaving an institutional gap that alternative mediators attempted to fill.¹⁶ Work on Palestine and the wider Middle East likewise connects selective enforcement and P5 protection to declining confidence in international legal mechanisms.¹⁷

Legal scholarship supplies a fourth lens. Work on pluralist theory explains authority distributed among overlapping sites, and the ILC's fragmentation study entertains rules for preserving coherence among specialized regimes. Peters' analysis of the Ukraine war adds an important qualification: the rise of peripheral forums does not displace the Council, because legal authority and institutional legitimacy continue to structure how decentralized responses are judged.¹⁸ This scholarship illuminates diplomatic migration but does not specifically theorize middle-power crisis brokerage.

¹³ Ronald M Behringer, 'Middle-power Leadership on Human Security' (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Halifax, 30 May-1 June 2003) 4-21; Kyle Beardsley, *The Mediation Dilemma* (Cornell University Press 2011) 1-18, 167-81.

¹⁴ Vardan Atoyan and Nushik Petrosyan, 'The United Nations in Multipolar Security Governance: Veto Politics, Norm Contestation, and Regional Substitution' (2026) 4 *National Security: A Journal of the National Defence University-Kenya* 161, 161-80.

¹⁵ Lirian Jerliu, *Veto Powers' Resistance: United Nations Security Council Reform Proposals and Global Governance Shifts* (Master's thesis, CIFE European Institute and LUISS School of Government 2025) 10-12, 52-58; Phillip Y Lipsky, *Renegotiating the World Order: Institutional Change in International Relations* (CUP 2017) 200-45.

¹⁶ Tim Murithi, 'The Failure of the United Nations Security Council in Creating the Framework Conditions for Mediation in the Russia-Ukraine Crisis' (2022) 44 *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 65, 65-78.

¹⁷ Jibrin Ubale Yahaya, 'Israel's Non-Compliance with UNSC Resolutions: Implications for Middle East Stability' (2024-25) 1 *Middle East & North Africa Journal on Violence and Extremism* 161, 161-85; Anwar Ghais, 'Multilateral Diplomacy and Human Rights in the Middle East' (2026) 1 *International Journal of Politics and International Relations* 84, 84-94.

¹⁸ Joost Pauwelyn, Ramses A Wessel and Jan Wouters (eds), *Informal International Lawmaking* (OUP 2012) 1-34; Nico Krisch, *Beyond Constitutionalism: The Pluralist Structure of Postnational Law* (OUP 2010) 69-103; International Law Commission, 'Fragmentation of International Law: Difficulties Arising from the Diversification and Expansion of International Law' (13 April 2006) UN Doc A/CN.4/L.682, paras 5-17, 410-80; Anne Peters, 'Power, Procedures, and Periphery: The UN Security Council in the Ukraine War' in Cai, van den Herik and Maluwa (n 5) 279-96.

These literatures establish the paper's first two propositions: great-power rivalry can paralyze salient Council files, and middle-powers can fill parts of the diplomatic space. The unresolved issue is the third proposition. Existing work usually evaluates alternative diplomacy by whether talks occur, an agreement is signed, or violence temporarily falls. It pays less attention to the legal form of the resulting instruments, the authority by which they are interpreted, the standards used to assess compliance, or the consequences for general and equal application of international law. This paper addresses that gap.

1.3 Methodology, scope and limitations

The research uses a structured, focused comparison covering 2014 to July 2026. This period begins with the Russian annexation of Crimea and encompasses the sharpening of US-China competition, the later full-scale invasion of Ukraine, repeated deadlock on Gaza and the 2026 US-Iran war. The analysis combines three methods.

First, **process tracing** examines the sequence from P5 disagreement to Council blockage, diplomatic migration and middle-power initiative. An alternative mediation is not automatically caused by a veto; conflict parties often prefer private talks for independent reasons. Cases where the Council failed to deliver, protagonists accepted an alternative forum, and the broker performed functions the UN had been unable to perform.

Second, a **structured case comparison** examines Qatar's Gaza co-mediation, the Turkiye-UN Black Sea Grain Initiative, Saudi-hosted Ukraine talks, and Pakistan's US-Iran mediation. These cases vary in institutional embedding, from a UN-linked mechanism to autonomous interstate bargaining. Each is assessed through the same questions: Why was the mediator acceptable? What instrument resulted? Which legal rules framed it?

Third, **doctrinal legal analysis** classifies the instruments and practices against the UN Charter, the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT), international humanitarian law and the recognised sources of international law. It separates legal validity from political influence. An arrangement may have substantial behavioural effects without being a treaty. Conversely, a legally binding obligation may remain ineffective without enforcement.

Sources extend beyond the supplied papers to UN datasets and records, treaties, ICJ and ILC materials, books, peer-reviewed journals, official statements and credible contemporaneous reporting. Oxfam's review of 23

protracted crises provides a reproducible conflict-specific denominator.¹⁹ Official claims are not treated as neutral proof of success. The 2026 US-Iran case remains provisional, and confidential drafting limits causal certainty.

1.4 Research questions and propositions

RQ1: To what extent, and through which veto patterns, has intensifying great-power rivalry reduced the conflict-response effectiveness of the UNSC since 2014?

Proposition 1: Rivalry produces concentrated rather than comprehensive paralysis. The Council remains active where P5 interests overlap, but outcome and legitimacy failures accumulate in conflicts involving a permanent member or protected ally.

RQ2: Under what conditions, and through which diplomatic instruments, have middle-powers complemented, bypassed or temporarily substituted for UN diplomacy?

Proposition 2: Brokerage is most effective when a middle-power combines access to antagonists, a valued diplomatic or logistical resource, coalition support and a narrow problem capable of verification. It is least durable when it collides with a protagonist's core security objective.

RQ3: How does the movement from UN-centred collective security toward middle-power brokerage affect international law's sources, interpretation, legitimacy and enforcement?

Proposition 3: The formal sources of law remain intact, but practical authority becomes decentralised. Brokerage reinforces the law by translating established duties into verifiable arrangements. It fragments law when private bargains redefine legal baselines, exclude affected groups or rely on guarantor leverage.

¹⁹ Oxfam International, *Vetoing Humanity: How a Few Powerful Nations Hijacked Global Peace and Why Reform Is Needed at the UN Security Council* (Oxfam 2024) 10-17; Oxfam International, 'UN Security Council Casts Nearly All Vetoes Last Decade on Syria, Palestine and Ukraine' (19 September 2024) <<https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/un-security-council-casts-nearly-all-vetoes-last-decade-syria-palestine-and-ukraine>> accessed 23 July 2026.

Chapter 2. Great-Power Rivalry and UNSC Paralysis

2.1 The veto bargain and the meaning of effectiveness

Article 24 of the Charter confers responsibility for peace and security on the Council.²⁰ Article 27 makes substantive decisions dependent on the concurring votes of the permanent members.²¹ The veto is therefore both a source of authority and a source of failure. It reassures great powers that collective security will not be turned against their vital interests and prevents the Council from responding to their own conduct or that of allies.

The existence of veto is not paralysis. Because adoption of Draft resolutions does not prove effectiveness: a diluted resolution may pass, but little may change. Four indicators are more useful. The first is the number and distribution of vetoed drafts. The second is anticipatory restraint, and drafts are never tabled because a veto is expected. The third is institutional displacement, visible when negotiations migrate to regional organizations, ad hoc groups, or individual middle-powers. The fourth is the gap between legal condemnation and enforcement.

2.2 An analysis of UNSC-Veto ratio²²

Conflict	Vetoed drafts	Total drafts in sample	Veto rate
Palestine/Israel	8	12	67%
Syria	17	56	30%
Ukraine	4	6	67%
Three-conflict total	29	74	39%

²⁰ UN Charter arts 24. The responsibility is primary, not exclusive.

²¹ UN Charter arts 27(3).

²² Author's compilation and calculations based on United Nations Security Council, 'Voting Records since 1992' <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/voting-records-1992> accessed 17 August 2026; United Nations Security Council, 'Vetoes since 1946' <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/vetoes-since-1946> accessed 17 August 2026.

2.3 Syria: joint resistance and mandate distrust

Syria illustrates mandate distrust aptly. Russia insisted on Syria's sovereignty and consent, with China joining. But the West emphasized civilian protection, accountability, and political transition. As of January 2023, Russia had vetoed 17 drafts while permitting 29 resolutions to pass.²³ So, there was no total deadlock but Russia backed 'tolerable measures'²⁴ and contested coercive or accountability measures.

Russia and China concluded that the 2011 Libyan intervention by NATO had stretched Resolution 1973 beyond civilian protection toward regime change. Western members disputed that reading. In later Syria negotiations, the argument over the content of one mandate became an argument over institutional trust. The case therefore shows that rivalry paralyses not only votes but interpretation. If permanent members do not trust one another, resolution and agreement on legal language lose value.

2.4 Ukraine: a belligerent inside the enforcement organ

Ukraine presents the clearest conflict of institutional role. Russia is simultaneously a belligerent, a permanent member and a veto-holder. In February 2022, Russia vetoed a draft deploring the invasion and in September it vetoed a draft condemning annexation.²⁵ The Council could address collateral issues, but failed to impose collective consequences on Russia.

The UNGA responded by condemning the aggression and later addressing humanitarian aid and reparations. Those resolutions carry major political weight but do not substitute for Article 25 authority. The Assembly could articulate the legal baseline, coalitions of states supplied sanctions, and mediators addressed food exports and possible negotiations. UN had no institutional or practical leverage against Russia.

2.5 Palestine/Israel: allied protection and unequal enforcement

The Palestine/Israel file displays a different veto structure. The US has acted alone to block drafts it considered prejudicial to Israel, premature for hostage negotiations, or insufficiently condemnatory of Hamas. During the genocidal war in Gaza, drafts seeking humanitarian pauses and ceasefires vetoed despite broad Council support.²⁶

²³ Marxsen (n 5) 6.

²⁴ Technical and humanitarian measures were considered tolerable.

²⁵ Draft SC Res S/2022/155 (25 February 2022), vetoed at UN Doc S/PV.8979, 6; Draft SC Res S/2022/720 (30 September 2022), vetoed at UN Doc S/PV.9143, 4; UNGA Res ES-11/1 (2 March 2022) UN Doc A/RES/ES-11/1; UNGA Res ES-11/4 (12 October 2022) UN Doc A/RES/ES-11/4.

²⁶ Draft SC Res S/2023/772 (18 October 2023); Draft SC Res S/2023/970 (8 December 2023); Draft SC Res S/2024/173 (20 February 2024); Draft SC Res S/2024/312 (18 April 2024). Each draft failed because of a United States veto.

The point is not that vetoed drafts accurately stated the law or would have produced compliance. It is that the Council's response is filtered through alliance politics before legal merits can acquire binding form. This creates incentives for Qatar and other intermediaries to negotiate concrete exchanges and ceasefire terms. It also creates a legal risk: issues governed by general obligations can be recast as reciprocal concessions between parties with unequal power and status.

2.6 From paralysis to institutional migration

Member states have developed partial checks. For example, Resolution 76/262 requires the Assembly to meet after a veto, increasing the political cost of obstruction.²⁷ These measures improve accountability but do not abolish the veto bargain. Nor do they give the Assembly or elected members the Council's Chapter VII powers. The predictable response is functional migration: sanctions move to state coalitions, negotiations move to middle-powers, monitoring is shared with international organizations, and implementation rests with states with leverage over the parties. Because when influence is blocked at the Council internally, middle-powers, with their disposal, invest externally in niche diplomacy and convening power.

RQ1 can therefore be answered in qualified terms. Great-power rivalry has not made the Council generally ineffective. It has reduced outcome and legitimacy effects in those conflicts that are central to the contemporary legal order. The resulting authority gap is real precisely because the Council remains institutionally and legally central to international order.

Chapter 3. Middle-Power Diplomatic Substitution

3.1 Who is a middle-power?

"Middle-power" is not a fixed rank. Material capacity matters because mediation requires diplomatic influence and the ability to offer relevant benefits. Efsthathopoulos identifies multilateral preference, coalition-building, and entrepreneurial leadership, while insisting that influence must be demonstrated rather than proclaimed.²⁸ Aydin adds that emerging middle-powers can translate global norms into regional settings because they possess cultural proximity and less hierarchical relationships.²⁹

²⁷ UNGA Res 76/262 (26 April 2022) UN Doc A/RES/76/262, paras 1-3; UN Charter arts 10-12.

²⁸ Efsthathopoulos (n 10) 47-52; Jordaan (n 10) 165-81; Cooper (n 10) 1-24.

²⁹ Aydin (n 12) 1380-89.

For this paper, a middle-power is a state below the great-power tier that possesses sufficient resources and relational access to shape negotiations beyond its immediate material rank. This functional definition includes Qatar despite its small size because it has exceptional mediation infrastructure, financial capacity, and contacts with diverse actors. It includes Turkiye, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan because each combines strategic relationships across rival camps.

Middle-power guarantees no impartiality. Rather, the relevant question is whether the parties consider the broker's interests compatible with theirs.

Behringer's analysis suggests five conditions for success.³⁰ Contemporary cases confirm these conditions, while adding two: control of a valued resource and an implementation mechanism.

3.2 Qatar and the Gaza negotiations

Qatar's role in Gaza rests on relationships that few states offer. It hosts political representatives of Hamas, maintains close security relations with the United States, possesses extensive financial resources, and has longstanding intelligence channels. This positioning made Doha useful even to actors suspicious of its policies.

In January 2025, Qatar, Egypt, and the United States announced a multi-stage agreement involving a ceasefire, hostage-prisoner release, and expanded humanitarian assistance.³¹ The content shows issue decomposition, since mediators did not settle statehood or the final status of Gaza. They converted only urgent legal and humanitarian problems.

Qatar's role both complemented and bypassed the UN. The negotiation did not originate in the Council and depended on access to Hamas and Israel rather than a Chapter VI mandate. Yet UN agencies were essential for humanitarian aid and other obligations, and Qatar called for Council support.³² In this hybrid substitution, the broker performs confidential diplomacy while seeking UN legitimacy.

³⁰ The conditions are, 'a coalition of like-minded states, international support, entrepreneurial leadership, appropriate negotiating rules, and objectives that do not directly threaten a superpower's core principles.' Behringer (n 14) 4-21; Beardsley (n 14) 167-81; Andrew Kydd, 'Which Side Are You On? Bias, Credibility, and Mediation' (2003) 47 *American Journal of Political Science* 597, 597-611.

³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, 'Qatar, Egypt, and the United States Announce that the Two Parties to the Conflict in Gaza Have Reached an Agreement' (15 January 2025) <<https://mofa.gov.qa/en/latest-articles/statements/qatar--egypt-and-the-united-states-announce-that-the-two-parties-to-the-conflict-in-gaza-have-reached-an-agreement-to-exchange-detainees-and-prisoners-and-return-to-sustainable-calm>> accessed 28 July 2026; Mehran Kamrava, 'Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy' (2011) 65 *Middle East Journal* 539, 539-56; Sultan Barakat, 'Niche Small States in Humanitarian Diplomacy: Qatar's Positionality in the Protection Ecosystem' (2024) 106 *International Review of the Red Cross* 585, 585-609.

³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, 'Qatar Reaffirms Readiness to Advance Lasting Middle East Peace with UN, Partners' (11 June 2026) <> accessed 16 August 2026.

3.3 Türkiye, Ukraine and the Black Sea Grain Initiative

Being a NATO member, Türkiye occupies a strategic position between Russia, Ukraine and the West. It controls access through the Turkish Straits under the Montreux regime and maintains stable relationships with both Ukraine and Russia. Ankara hosted early Russia-Ukraine meetings and became central to the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

The initiative is the strongest example of institutionally embedded middle-power brokerage. Agreements signed in Istanbul in July 2022 involved Ukraine, Russia, Türkiye and the UN through parallel instruments and a Joint Coordination Centre. The arrangement enabled the safe transportation of nearly 33 million metric tonnes of grain from Ukrainian ports to 45 countries.³³

Its legal significance lies in operationalisation. It created a practical security arrangement through which existing interests such as Ukrainian exports, Russian concerns, Turkish control, and global food security could be coordinated.

The initiative's termination also exposed limits. A narrow agreement's durability depends on the parties' continuing assessment of benefit. Neither Türkiye nor the UN could compel Russian participation once Moscow concluded that the bargain no longer served its interests.

The case supports Proposition 2 that middle-powers can operate within a set of limitations, but they cannot substitute for collective enforcement against a determined great power.

3.4 Saudi Arabia as convener on Ukraine

Saudi Arabia's Ukraine diplomacy is an exercise in bridge-building and status. Jeddah hosted representatives from more than 40 states to discuss principles for peace.³⁴ The attendance of diverse states allowed Riyadh to widen participation beyond a Western coalition, although Russia did not attend.³⁵

Saudi Arabia later hosted US-Russia talks in 2025. The venue reflected Riyadh's ability to provide political space that neither a NATO capital nor the UN Security Council could offer. It thereby exercised agenda and convening authority.

³³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 'Peaceful Resolution of Conflicts and Mediation' <<https://www.mfa.gov.tr/resolution-of-conflicts-and-mediation.en.mfa>> accessed 28 July 2026; United Nations, 'The Black Sea Grain Initiative: What Was Achieved? Why Was It Important?' (14 November 2023) <<https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative/achievements>> accessed 28 July 2026.

³⁴ Reuters, 'Ukraine calls Jeddah talks productive, Russia calls them doomed' Reuters (6 August 2023) <https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-calls-jeddah-talks-productive-russia-calls-them-doomed-2023-08-06/> accessed 17 August 2026.

³⁵ Saudi Press Agency, 'National Security Advisors and Representatives of a Number of Countries and International Organizations Hold Meeting in Jeddah on Ukrainian Crisis' (6 August 2023) <<https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/732712f5e5g>> accessed 28 July 2026.

However, their limitation is equally clear. A meeting without all principal belligerents cannot produce a final settlement. Saudi diplomacy nevertheless performed two functions: it tested areas of convergence and allowed great powers to communicate at lower political cost. For clarity, these are complementary functions rather than legal substitution since no Saudi-hosted outcome acquired the status or enforcement capacity through a Council resolution.

3.5 Pakistan and the 2026 US-Iran war

Pakistan's mediation during the 2026 US-Iran war is the most direct test of substitution. Islamabad shares a complex security relationship with Iran, maintains ties with Gulf states, and has high-level engagement with the US. Pakistani officials conducted intensive shuttle diplomacy and hosted the highest-level US-Iran talks.³⁶ The talks did not immediately resolve extraordinary issues but preserved dialogue after a temporary ceasefire.

A later interim arrangement collapsed in July, followed by renewed efforts through Pakistan and other channels.³⁷

This case shows two contrasting aspects: the value of relational access during conflict and that mere signature is not diplomatic success. The US' status as a permanent member and belligerent made the Council's binding action politically implausible. But Pakistan could host delegations without requiring public agreement on legal responsibility.

It temporarily substituted for UN peacemaking functions under Article 33, not for the Council's enforcement authority. It helped the parties communicate; it could not authoritatively determine the legality of the use of force or compel reopening of maritime routes.

³⁶ 'US, Iran Leave Door Open to Dialogue after Tense Islamabad Talks' Reuters (14 April 2026) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-iran-leave-door-open-dialogue-after-tense-islamabad-talks-2026-04-13/>> accessed 28 July 2026.

³⁷ 'Pakistan's High-Stakes Iran Peace Bid Is Fraught with Risk' Reuters (9 April 2026) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistans-high-stakes-iran-peace-bid-is-fraught-with-risk-2026-04-09/>> accessed 28 July 2026; 'Pakistan, Iran Explore Path towards New Talks with US in a China-Initiated Push' Reuters (24 July 2026) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/pakistan-iran-explore-path-towards-new-talks-with-us-china-initiated-push-2026-07-24/>> accessed 28 July 2026.

3.6 Comparative answer to RQ2

The cases form a continuum. Türkiye's grain diplomacy represents **UN-embedded complementarity**. Qatar's in Gaza represents **hybrid ad hoc co-mediation**: outside the Council but dependent on UN norms and agencies. Saudi Arabia represents **convening substitution**, supplying a forum. Pakistan represents **autonomous crisis brokerage**, performing peacemaking between belligerents when Council action was structurally blocked.

Across the continuum, four conditions recur. First, the brokers had access that the UN or great powers lack. Second, they had resources such as an intelligence channel, secure venue, or political relationship. Third, it narrows the agenda into verifiable steps. Fourth, it obtains support from a coalition or institution capable of implementation.

RQ2 is therefore answered conditionally. Middle-powers are playing a larger diplomatic role and sometimes performing functions the UN could not deliver. "Replacement" is accurate only at the level of particular processes and for limited periods. The UN remains the legal and operational reference point. Middle-powers fill gaps in a layered system but not inherit the system's apex.

Chapter 4. Effects on International Law

4.1 From formal sources to practical authority

The legal effect of middle-power ascendancy cannot be assessed by simply asking whether mediators "make law." Article 33 expressly recognises mediation and other peaceful means.³⁸ Middle-power diplomacy is therefore a method enshrined in the Charter, not an exception to it. The legal difficulty arises when mediation becomes the principal site where obligations are translated and enforced because the primary institution faces deadlock. Mediation does not alter formal sources as established under Article 38(1) of the ICJ Statute. Moreover, under the VCLT, a written agreement between states governed by international law may be a treaty regardless of title.³⁹ So, the emphasis should be on the parties' intention, terms, and context, since political significance and legal status are distinct and must not be conflated.⁴⁰

³⁸ UN Charter art 33(1).

³⁹ Statute of the International Court of Justice art 38(1); Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (adopted 23 May 1969, entered into force 27 January 1980) 1155 UNTS 331 ("VCLT") arts 2(1)(a), 11 and 24.

⁴⁰ Anthony Aust, *Modern Treaty Law and Practice* (3rd edn, CUP 2013) 16-42; Pauwelyn, Wessel and Wouters (n 19) 13-34.

Nevertheless, formal source doctrine also does not exhaust authority. A mediator, with Charter recognition, controls the drafting process. It may choose "cessation of hostilities" rather than "ceasefire" or "sustainable calm" rather than "peace". Those choices shape expectations and compliance. This is **process authority**: influence over the route through which law becomes operational.

But process authority does not create any formal source. It ensures multiple sites of norm application, in addition to UN bodies with different mixes of legal authority, legitimacy and leverage. So, formal sources, being bound with UN bodies, are receded, and practical authority fills the gap through process authority.

4.2 Legal form: treaty, special agreement or political commitment

The effects for international law are also expressed in legal form. Interstate arrangements may qualify as treaties if the parties intend to be governed by international law. Here, title is not decisive. Mediation outcomes deliberately avoid legal language to preserve flexibility or domestic political space.⁴¹

This ambiguity can help agreement. Parties may accept a political commitment where treaty ratification or public recognition is untenable. A temporary halt in violence can be valuable even if its legal form is ambiguous. But ambiguity reallocates interpretive authority to mediators and powerful guarantors, and disputes about meaning are settled through leverage rather than law. Parties can also exit such arrangements without any legal consequence. For example, the Russian exit from the Grain Initiative.

4.3 Interpretation and the risk of reframing

The second effect concerns interpretation. Because mediation rarely provides the certainty of law or legal obligations. Mediation simplifies divergence, addresses some immediate pressing needs, and opts for common vocabulary for flexibility. This pragmatic function can translate abstract rules into action, but it can also magnify legal asymmetry. And this risk is more visible in conflicts involving large power asymmetries.

⁴¹ Governments may deliberately record negotiated understandings as political or non-binding instruments rather than treaties in order to avoid creating international legal obligations while retaining political commitment and flexibility. See US Department of State, 'Guidance on Non-Binding Documents' <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/treaty/guidance/index.htm> accessed 10 August 2026. A useful example is the Qatar-facilitated Doha process: the 2020 US–Taliban instrument expressly referred to the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' as 'not recognized by the United States as a state', thereby preserving the United States' position on recognition while permitting negotiated commitments to be recorded. *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America* (29 February 2020), annexed to Letter dated 6 March 2020 from the Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council, UN Doc S/2020/184.

Gaza is an apt example here. Describing Gaza exclusively as a negotiation between Israel and Hamas may marginalize the legal status of occupation and the obligations of third states. Describing Ukraine exclusively through mutual "security concerns" can blur the distinction between aggression and self-defence. But it is also an opportunity. Middle-powers can localize and specify norms that a divided Council expresses only generally.

The decisive distinction is between **operational compromise** and **normative compromise**. Operational compromise may sequence compliance or define procedures. Normative compromise concerns the existence of a non-negotiable obligation. The first can strengthen law; the second weakens its claim to generality.

4.4 Enforcement: from Article 25 to guarantor leverage

The third effect is an enforcement shift. A Council decision benefits from Article 25 and, where relevant, Chapter VII powers. It can establish sanctions committees or authorize coercive action. Middle-power agreements usually rely on a different compliance architecture: diplomatic recognition, financial assistance, access to markets, or security relationships.

This architecture can outperform formal law in the short term. A broker with daily access may detect non-compliance faster than a distant institution. It can resolve ambiguities privately and provide face-saving solutions. Qatar's communication channels, Turkiye's control of a logistical hub, and Pakistan's access to both Washington and Tehran are practical assets that a Council resolution cannot create.

But the downside is selectivity and dependency. Notably, a violation receives attention when it threatens the mediator's interests, not necessarily when it harms the most vulnerable. Monitoring may be confidential, preventing outsiders from evaluating whether enforcement is consistent. Compliance becomes relational: the question shifts from "What does the law require?" to "What can the guarantor induce?"

On the other hand, Chapter VIII of the Charter is limited in scope. Regional arrangements may address peace and security matters, but enforcement action generally requires Council authorisation.⁴²

⁴² UN Charter arts 52-54.

Non-forcible measures are more complex. For instance, coalitions have imposed sanctions where the Council could not. Van den Herik treats such action as a potential correction to dysfunction while stressing legality, proportionality and humanitarian concerns.⁴³ Peremptory norms further constrain bargains. A treaty violating *jus cogens* is void, and all states have duties of co-operation to prevent serious breaches of peremptory obligations.⁴⁴

The resulting system is legally decentralized but not lawless. It is governed by the limits applicable to each state's conduct, not by the authority of a universal enforcement decision.

4.5 Norm formation and customary international law

The fourth effect concerns norm development. Middle-powers helped build the Ottawa and International Criminal Court treaty coalitions.⁴⁵ But contemporary crisis brokerage differs because it usually targets one conflict and avoids ratification.

A mediated practice may still influence custom, but repetition alone is insufficient. Custom requires general practice accepted as law. A confidential ceasefire term motivated by convenience is weak evidence of *opinio juris*. If states repeatedly describe mediator-supported humanitarian access, prisoner protection or safe navigation as legally required, their practice may reinforce existing norms.

The most plausible legal contribution of present middle-power mediation is therefore not new primary rules. It is the production of **operational norm templates**: sequencing models, monitoring mechanisms, and guarantees. Whether these templates strengthen international law depends on their relationship to existing duties and their later endorsement by more representative institutions.

4.6 Legitimacy, trust and participation

The fifth effect is sociological and institutional legitimacy. The Security Council possesses legal authority but suffers from representational inequality and selective enforcement. Middle-powers can gain trust through proximity and relationships with actors excluded from great-power diplomacy. Qatar can speak to Hamas; Turkiye can maintain channels with Russia and Ukraine; Pakistan can maintain communication with Iran, China, Gulf states and the US. Such access makes a process appear more credible to the immediate parties than a formal UN initiative.

⁴³ Larissa van den Herik, 'The UN Security Council: A Reflection on Institutional Strength' in Cai, van den Herik and Maluwa (n 5) 109, 155-85; International Law Commission, Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, UNGA Res 56/83 (12 December 2001), annex ('ARSIWA') arts 49-54.

⁴⁴ VCLT art 53; ARSIWA arts 40-41; International Law Commission, Draft Conclusions on Peremptory Norms of General International Law (*Jus Cogens*), UN Doc A/77/10 (2022) ch IV, conclusions 17-19.

⁴⁵ Another example, though not directly related to UN bodies, is the Hague Group. Created to bring war crimes and crimes of genocide in Gaza to account by member states.

Trust in a mediator, however, is not the same as the legitimacy of a rule. Mediators are self-selected, accountable principally to no international institutions and often pursue status or strategic benefit. Mediators deliver confidentiality but compromise on public accountability. Affected populations and smaller neighboring states may have no meaningful role. The process can therefore replace a P5 legitimacy deficit with an elite-bargain legitimacy deficit.

Franck's account of legitimacy links compliance pulls to determinacy, symbolic validation, coherence and adherence to accepted processes.⁴⁶ Applied here, a middle-power agreement gains legitimacy when its rules are clear, consistent with general law, produced through an accepted process, and validated beyond the mediator's bilateral network. It loses legitimacy when obligations are vague, enforcement is visibly selective, or affected groups are excluded.

The trust and legitimacy deficit should therefore be understood as a redistribution, not a simple decline. Trust may move away from the Council toward specific intermediaries, but personal or state-based trust is less durable than institutional trust. A change of government, alliance or economic interest can remove it.

4.7 Fragmentation, forum shopping and useful redundancy

The sixth effect is fragmentation. Multiple forums can generate competing proposals, inconsistent guarantees and uncertainty over which process is authoritative. Belligerents may use mediation to delay, divide external actors or seek a more favourable text. A party can accept a humanitarian track while rejecting accountability, or move between capitals when one mediator insists on stricter compliance. Great powers can also sponsor parallel initiatives to preserve influence.

The UN remains uniquely placed to coordinate because of its universality, agencies and legal mandate. Regional and middle-power roles need not challenge its centrality. Maluwa's analysis of regionalism concludes that partnership arrangements can provide expertise and legitimacy while complementing rather than displacing the Council.⁴⁷ The same logic can apply to individual middle-powers, but only if the relationship is designed rather than improvised.

⁴⁶ Thomas M Franck, *The Power of Legitimacy among Nations* (OUP 1990) 24-41; Hurd (n 8) 29-80.

⁴⁷ Tiyanjana Maluwa, 'The UN Security Council: Between Centralism and Regionalism' in Cai, van den Herik and Maluwa (n 5) 186, 203-74; Krisch (n 19) 69-103.

4.8 A spectrum of legal effects

The cases support a four-part spectrum.

Case	Institutional link	Principal legal effect	Main risk
Turkiye / Black Sea Grain Initiative	UN party and Joint Coordination Centre	Operationalises duties and creates verifiable procedures	Withdrawal when a great power's interests change
Qatar-Egypt-US / Gaza	UN norms and agencies; later search for Council support	Converts urgent protections into sequenced performance	Reciprocal framing of non-reciprocal obligations
Saudi Arabia / Ukraine talks	Broad coalition but no binding UN outcome	Widens diplomatic participation and tests principles	Exclusion of a belligerent or affected constituencies
Pakistan / US-Iran war	UN deliberation remains separate	Preserves communication and temporary restraint	Personalised guarantees, ambiguity and rapid collapse

The spectrum shows that institutional embedding correlates with legal clarity and monitoring, but not automatically with durability. For example, the grain initiative had the strongest institutional design and still ended. Embedding cannot overcome a party determined to withdraw; it does make obligations and facts easier to assess. Conversely, autonomous brokerage can achieve rapid results but leaves fewer procedures for managing non-compliance.

4.9 Reputational capital and legitimacy

Process authority depends on more than access, geography and logistics. It also depends on reputational capital: a mediator must be seen as sufficiently capable to deliver, sufficiently connected to communicate with antagonists and sufficiently distinct from a great-power patron to make participation politically tolerable. The supplied middle-power literature helps explain why. Laatikainen describes middle-powers at the UN as bridge-builders and consensus-seeking interlocutors whose influence can exceed their material

rank, while Byrne shows that reputation, image and relational public diplomacy are currencies through which middle-powers acquire diplomatic reach. In crisis brokerage, this creates a brokerage premium. Parties may accept a state not because it is neutral in an abstract sense, but because it combines credible access with a reputation for discretion, persistence and practical problem-solving.⁴⁸

That premium has two distinct legitimacy audiences. The first consists of the conflicting parties. They evaluate whether the broker can protect confidentiality, transmit messages accurately, mobilise incentives and make reciprocal performance plausible. The second consists of the wider community affected by the bargain: other UN members, humanitarian organisations, domestic constituencies and civilians whose rights or security are altered by implementation. These audiences may evaluate the same process differently. Confidentiality that helps belligerents reach a ceasefire can make it harder for outsiders to know whether legal asymmetries were acknowledged, whether excluded groups were heard or whether implementation standards are being applied consistently. A successful transaction can therefore possess high party legitimacy while retaining weak public or institutional legitimacy.⁴⁹

This distinction clarifies why soft power cannot be treated as proof of impartiality. Reputation is an enabling resource, not a legal status. A mediator may cultivate the image of a bridge-builder while also seeking status, investment, security partnerships, or strategic autonomy. Middle-powers will not show impossible disinterest.⁵⁰ So, the proper expectation should be that whatever interests brokers have, they are legible interests. Embedded brokerage should require a concise disclosure of the mediator's material stakes and institutional roles. Public diplomacy then becomes part of accountability: it can explain why a bargain is lawful and how compliance is measured, rather than merely advertise the broker's success.⁵¹

4.10 Substitution prospect and reform pressure

The relationship between brokerage and Security Council reform is not linear. Alternative forums can generate competitive complementarity: they address urgent problems while simultaneously revealing which functions the Council is failing to perform. Jerliu's hypotheses are useful here because they connect reform pressure to institutional prestige, minilateral competition, emerging-power agency and crisis-driven loss of legitimacy. Atoyan and Petrosyan similarly identify an expanding role for regional and ad hoc arrangements in a multipolar environment while retaining the UN as a normative reference point. On this view, middle-power brokerage is not only a substitute output. It is information about institutional demand. Repeated

⁴⁸ Laatikainen (n 11) 70-91; Byrne (n 13) 8-17.

⁴⁹ Byrne (n 13) 14-23; Laatikainen (n 11) 70-91.

⁵⁰ Impossible disinterest is not a realistic expectation in any international interaction or transaction. Impossible disinterest only means no involvement of brokers in the brokerage process.

⁵¹ Byrne (n 13) 16-23; Efstathopoulos (n 10) 55-62.

migration of negotiations away from New York signals that states still want collective problem-solving even when they no longer expect the Council to supply it on the relevant file.⁵²

Substitution can, however, produce the opposite effect. If middle-powers repeatedly absorb the diplomatic costs of deadlock, the P5 may preserve veto privilege while external actors supply alternatives. Functional adaptation may therefore stabilise the very constitutional imbalance that produced it. This is why the distinction between replacement and complementarity matters. Maluwa's regionalist account and Peters' analysis of the Ukraine war both indicate that peripheral or regional action can remain connected to the Council's legal centrality even when the Council cannot act effectively. The question is not whether diplomacy occurs outside the Council; it is whether external diplomacy develops a path back to universal institutions and public legal authority.⁵³

In this sense, the best brokerage is not an exit from the UN order but a provisional bridge around a blocked organ.

4.11 Alternative explanations and limits of the causal claim

Middle-powers do not mediate only because the Security Council is paralysed. They may possess geographic proximity, specialised knowledge, established intelligence or leaders seeking international status. Efstathopoulos expressly cautions against equating a preference for crisis management with influence. Middle-power status is meaningful only when diplomatic action produces consequential effects. Brokerage should therefore be analysed as both problem-solving and strategy, rather than a neutral response to the Council's failure.⁵⁴

The causal claim in this paper should accordingly be bounded. Evidence of substitution is strongest when three conditions occur in sequence: the Council is blocked on a function relevant to the conflict; the protagonists then accept an alternative forum; and the broker performs substantially the same missing function, such as convening, ceasefire negotiation, humanitarian coordination or verification. Evidence is weaker where the mediation channel predates the veto, where the broker and the UN are formally co-producing the mechanism, or where the alternative forum addresses a narrower problem that the Council was never mandated to manage. The cases themselves display this variation. Qatar's channels rest on relationships built before the latest Gaza deadlock; the Black Sea Grain Initiative was deliberately UN-embedded; Saudi convening combines bridge-building with status and strategic autonomy; and Pakistan's role also reflects

⁵² Jerliu (n 16) 10-12, 52-58; Atoyan and Petrosyan (n 15) 174-80.

⁵³ Maluwa (n 5) 263-77; Peters (n 19) 279-96.

⁵⁴ Efstathopoulos (n 10) 55-62; Byrne (n 13) 21-23.

geography and cross-cutting relationships. These differences are consistent with the literature's warning that middle-power behaviour is interest-bearing and selective.⁵⁵

This qualification strengthens rather than weakens the central argument. Substitution is a variable, not a binary condition, and process authority can have mixed origins. Future research can operationalise the degree of substitution through four indicators: temporal proximity to Council blockage; functional overlap between the blocked Council task and the broker's activity; the degree of UN institutional embedding; and durability after the broker's material support or political attention declines. Such an approach makes the theory falsifiable. It also prevents every successful mediation from being treated as evidence of UN collapse, while identifying the narrower set of cases in which diplomatic authority genuinely migrates because the universal security organ cannot perform a demanded function.

4.12 Middle-powers' redistribution role

The core answer to RQ3 follows. Middle-power ascendancy changes international law less by altering its formal sources than by redistributing practical authority over interpretation, sequencing and enforcement. It creates pathways for compliance when universal institutions are blocked. It also makes the experience of law more contingent on diplomatic access and bargaining power. The authority of international law becomes more plural, negotiated and uneven.

Chapter 5

5. Conclusion

Multipolarity has not rendered the United Nations obsolete. The paper didn't intend to prove otherwise. However, the paper has exposed a structural contradiction. The Council derives authority from great-power participation. But the veto allows those powers to paralyze the UNSC's collective action when it involves their core interest. Since 2014, this contradiction has become especially visible in Syria, Ukraine and Palestine/Israel, while diplomacy has increasingly migrated to actors (middle-powers) able to provide access and bargaining space outside the Council.

Firstly, the paper demonstrates that the Council still adopts resolutions, but it has lost its outcome and legitimacy effect in salient conflicts. Threatened vetoes, diluted texts and uneven enforcement make international law appear more constraining on weak states. The Council is selectively incapable, precisely where binding authority is most demanded; a functional gap.

⁵⁵ Aydin (n 12) 1380-89; Behringer (n 14) 4-21.

Secondly, middle-powers have convened adversaries, resolved conflicts when the UNSC could not. But their success depends on access, coalition support, a limited objective, and reputational capital. Any replacement is functional and temporary, and mediation can serve status and strategic interests as well as conflict management.

Finally, RQ3 is the paper's main contribution. Middle-power mediation does not create a new hierarchy of international law sources. It redistributes practical authority over which legal issues enter a bargain, how duties are sequenced, and how breach is verified. This brokered legal pluralism can operationalize law, but also obscure asymmetry, privilege political commitments, exclude affected groups, and facilitate forum shopping.

Middle-powers are likely to become more important as rivalry intensifies. Their authority will remain strongest in process rather than lawmaking. Whether that authority repairs or accelerates the UN trust deficit depends on institutional design and feedback. If brokerage remains opaque and transactional, international law risks becoming a negotiable resource allocated by access. A return path to universal institutions should be built into the process authority so that temporary workarounds generate institutional memory and reform pressure rather than harden into permanent legal fragmentation.

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