

Layered Rationality in the United Nations Security Council: Bridging Neorealism and Neoliberalism through Process Tracing

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ABSTRACT

This article compares the explanatory power of neorealism and neoliberalism in accounting for variations in the effectiveness of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in the post-Cold War period. It employs a qualitative comparative design and process tracing across four cases: the 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the Syrian conflict 2011–2014, the Ukraine crisis 2014–2022, and the UNSC response to Ebola in 2014 as a negative case. The evidence is drawn from UNSC resolutions, meeting records, veto data, UN fact sheets, and related institutional reports. The findings show that neorealism best explains institutional deadlock when issues involve vital great-power interests, especially intervention, annexation, and regional security alignments. By contrast, neoliberalism better explains sustained coordination on humanitarian, health, and technical matters. The article develops the concept of layered rationality to show that states do not abruptly switch theories; rather, they activate different response layers according to the issue's sensitivity to existential interests. The main contribution of the study lies in integrating high-politics and low-politics logics within a single analytical framework for explaining variation in UNSC outputs.

INTRODUCTION

Debates on the effectiveness of international organizations remain a central issue in the study of international relations. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is the clearest arena for examining this debate, as it holds the highest formal authority in addressing threats to international peace and security. Nevertheless, the performance of the UNSC is not uniform. At certain times, the Council is able to act quickly and produce operational decisions, while at other times it becomes deadlocked due to vetoes and differences of interest among the permanent members (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Luck, 2006; Weiss, 2018). This dynamic has become increasingly complex in the contemporary context, marked by the resurgence of sovereignty politics and rivalry among major powers, which often limits the ability of multilateral institutions to produce collective decisions (Patrick, 2018).

In mainstream literature, the two approaches most frequently contrasted are neorealism and neoliberalism. Neorealism views international institutions as reflections of the distribution of power, meaning that institutional effectiveness depends heavily on the alignment of interests among major powers (Mearsheimer, 1995; Waltz, 1979). Neoliberalism, by contrast, argues that institutions can reduce uncertainty, lower transaction costs, and establish relatively stable patterns of coordination even within an anarchic international system (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Martin, 1995).

The problem is that these two perspectives are often read in binary terms. When the Council is deadlocked, realist explanations are considered dominant; when the Council is able to produce coordination, liberal explanations are seen as more relevant. Such a reading is insufficient because, in practice, a single institution may fail on certain issues while remaining effective on others during the same period. The Syrian case demonstrates deadlock on intervention and sanctions, but it also shows progress through humanitarian channels. Similarly, in the context of Ukraine, political deadlock in the Council did not entirely prevent limited coordination on humanitarian aspects, which in many respects continued amid geopolitical tensions and competing narratives of state sovereignty (Patrick, 2018).

Departing from this issue, this article does not position neorealism and neoliberalism as mutually exclusive explanations, but rather as logics of rationality that may operate differently depending on the type of issue. To examine this, the study employs process tracing in four cases that represent variations in UNSC outcomes: Kuwait as a case of high effectiveness, Syria as a case of partial deadlock, Ukraine as a case of high deadlock, and Ebola as a negative case showing that low politics issues can generate high effectiveness despite the persistence of structural rivalry among major powers.

The main argument of this article is that variations in the effectiveness of the UNSC are better explained through the concept of layered rationality. Layered rationality does not mean that states suddenly shift from one logic to another, but rather that they activate different layers of response according to the sensitivity of an issue to their existential interests. At the vital layer, states tend to act according to neorealist logic; at the normative layer, the two logics may

overlap; and at the technical layer, neoliberal coordination tends to be more sustainable. In this way, the article offers a synthesis that is closer to the empirical dynamics of the UNSC.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Neorealism

Neorealism places anarchy as the basic structure of the international system and views states as the main actors seeking to preserve survival, security, and relative position. In this view, international institutions do not possess substantive autonomy capable of overcoming conflicts of interest among major powers. Institutional effectiveness can only emerge when the interests of the main power holders do not collide or when institutions function as coordination tools aligned with their preferences (Mearsheimer, 1995; Waltz, 1979). In the United Nations Security Council, the veto power is the most visible instrument showing the dominance of power structures in the decision-making process.

Empirically, the use of veto power by major states reflects strategic rationality aimed at protecting national interests and maintaining geopolitical position. This can be seen in the Syrian conflict, where Russia and China consistently blocked resolutions that could have opened the way for external intervention, with justifications referring to the protection of sovereignty and concerns over international precedent (Fung, 2019). From a neorealist perspective, institutional deadlock is not understood as a failure, but as a logical consequence of state interaction within a competitive and power-based international structure.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism accepts the assumption of anarchy but rejects the conclusion that cooperation is always fragile. International institutions are seen as capable of extending the shadow of the future, providing information, monitoring compliance, and shaping coordination incentives. Institutional success is not only measured by coercive decisions but also by its capacity to produce rules, procedures, and repeated coordination (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Martin, 1995; Martin & Simmons, 1998). In the context of the UN Security Council, this logic can be seen in humanitarian resolutions, peacekeeping operations, and administrative mechanisms that continue to function even when political conflicts remain unresolved.

Effectiveness of International Organizations

The effectiveness of international organizations can be divided into output and outcome dimensions. Output refers to the ability of institutions to produce resolutions, mandates, or decisions, while outcome refers to the extent to which those decisions change actor behavior and conditions on the ground (Underdal, 2002; Young, 1992). In this study, output is used as the main entry point because it is most closely related to the decision-making process in the UN Security Council. Output analysis is still complemented by limited outcome indicators,

such as the continuation of cross-border aid, the establishment of monitoring mechanisms, or the mobilization of international responses.

The effectiveness of international organizations also cannot be separated from the role of epistemic actors and knowledge networks that influence international policy coordination processes. The existence of epistemic communities enables the formation of shared understanding, normative standards, and common interpretive frameworks among states, thereby encouraging policy coordination even under conditions of high uncertainty (Haas, 1992). In this context, effectiveness is not only determined by formal outputs but also by the institution's ability to facilitate knowledge exchange and build technical consensus that supports policy implementation at the global level.

Research Gap

A number of studies have shown that the UN Security Council can become deadlocked on strategic issues while remaining productive on technical and humanitarian issues (Bosco, 2009; Weiss, 2018). The main gap lies in the lack of a strong explanation of how these two logics of rationality operate simultaneously within the same institution. Literature on strategic choice and inter-actor interaction emphasizes that state behavior is not singular but is shaped by rational calculations that are contextual to incentive structures and strategic interactions (Lake & Powell, 1999). The two-level games approach also shows that state decisions are influenced simultaneously by domestic dynamics and international pressures, resulting in variations in behavior across different issues (Putnam, 1988).

This article fills that gap by combining case comparison and process tracing, then developing a typology of layered rationality that links issue variation with variation in state logic.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a comparative qualitative approach with a process tracing technique. This approach was chosen because the purpose of the study is not merely to show that the two theories may be equally relevant, but to trace the causal mechanisms that make one logic more dominant than the other at specific decision-making moments (George & Bennett, 2005).

The case design follows the logic of institutional output variation. Kuwait was selected as a case of high effectiveness because the UN Security Council was able to move quickly from condemning the invasion to imposing sanctions and authorizing the use of force. Syria was selected as a case of partial deadlock because vetoes emerged on issues of intervention and sanctions, while cooperation continued in the area of humanitarian access. Ukraine was selected as a case of high deadlock because the conflict directly involved one of the veto-holding members. Ebola was selected as a negative case because the Council proved effective on a cross-border health issue that did not directly touch traditional geopolitical competition.

The empirical data used in this study include:

1. Resolution data (United Nations Security Council, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015) and UN Security Council meeting records

- (United Nations Security Council, 2022), which are used to trace decision-making dynamics and the positions of member states in each conflict.
2. Data on UN peacekeeping operations, including mission types, mandates, duration, and evaluations of policy implementation, as indicators of institutional effectiveness in practice (United Nations Security Council, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015).
 3. The categorization of high politics and low politics issues, which is used as an analytical framework to classify types of policies and state interests in the international system (Gilpin, 1981).

The research instrument was a structured document-analysis and process-tracing coding matrix developed to ensure that all four cases were examined using the same analytical criteria. The matrix contained five coding domains: (1) chronology and critical decision points; (2) institutional outputs, including adopted or failed resolutions, voting patterns, and veto use; (3) state positions and official justifications; (4) indicators of neorealist and neoliberal logic based on the operational definitions in Table 2; and (5) limited outcome indicators, such as humanitarian access, monitoring mechanisms, and international response mobilization. Each resolution, meeting record, veto record, and institutional report was coded against these domains before cross-case comparison was conducted.

Instrument validity and reliability were assessed using procedures appropriate for qualitative document analysis rather than psychometric testing. Content and construct validity were strengthened by deriving the coding categories directly from established theoretical concepts and by matching each category with explicit empirical indicators in Table 2. Source triangulation was used to verify interpretations across UNSC resolutions, meeting records, veto data, UN reports, and related institutional documents. Reliability was assessed through a code-recode check in which the same coding rules and operational definitions were reapplied to the documentary evidence; inconsistent classifications were reviewed against the coding matrix and the original source. Because the study used a single-researcher documentary design, inter-coder reliability statistics were not applicable. Consistent coding rules and an auditable link between source evidence, coding decisions, and case chronology were used to improve the dependability and reproducibility of the analysis.

The analysis was conducted in four stages. First, each case was mapped into a chronology of key decisions. Second, the researcher identified the Council's outputs, state positions, and justifications presented in official forums. Third, these empirical indicators were linked to the predictions of neorealism and neoliberalism. Fourth, the results of each case were compared to formulate a general pattern in the form of layered rationality. Table 2 summarizes the empirical indicators used to operationalize the concepts of neorealism, neoliberalism, and the effectiveness of limited outputs and outcomes in this study.

The concept of layered rationality was developed to capture variations in state logic within the same institution. Layered rationality does not mean that states shift completely from one paradigm to another, but rather that they adjust

their layers of response according to the degree of threat posed by an issue to their existential interests.

Table 1. Typology of Layered Rationality

Layer	Dominant Logic	Character of Issues in the UN Security Council	Examples
Layer 1 (vital)	Neorealism	Issues related to military intervention, annexation, regional security regimes, and the strategic position of major powers.	Authorization for the use of force against Iraq; Russia's veto related to Ukraine.
Layer 2 (normative)	Mixed	Issues that combine legal considerations, reputation, moral pressure, and strategic calculations.	Economic sanctions, political transition resolutions, condemnations of serious violations.
Layer 3 (technical)	Neoliberalism	Issues that emphasize coordination, assistance, monitoring, administrative peacekeeping, health, and humanitarian concerns.	Cross-border humanitarian access in Syria; the UN Security Council's response to Ebola.

Through this approach, the study does not merely examine the correspondence between theory and empirical data, but also identifies the causal mechanisms that explain how states may apply different logics of rationality within the same institution. This method provides a strong analytical foundation for developing a more comprehensive theoretical synthesis in understanding the effectiveness of international organizations amid the dynamics of contemporary global politics.

Table 2. Operationalization of Concepts

Logic	Empirical Indicators	Data Sources
Neorealism	Use of veto; rejection of intervention; statements emphasizing national interests, sovereignty, balance of power, precedent, or threats to a state's strategic position.	S/PV meeting records, UN veto data, draft resolutions that failed to be adopted.
Neoliberalism	Support for humanitarian or technical resolutions; abstentions that allow adoption; statements emphasizing coordination, assistance, procedural compliance, monitoring, or collective responsibility.	Adopted resolutions, UN press releases, humanitarian reports, peacekeeping reports.
Output effectiveness	Adoption of resolutions, speed of response, establishment of mandates, renewal of mechanisms, or absence of veto on the issue under discussion.	UN Security Council resolutions, meeting records, Security Council Report.
Limited outcome effectiveness	Opening of humanitarian corridors, establishment of monitoring mechanisms,	UN reports, partner agency reports,

mobilization of missions, or strengthening of multilateral responses.	operation/mission reports.
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RESULTS

The Kuwait Case (1990)

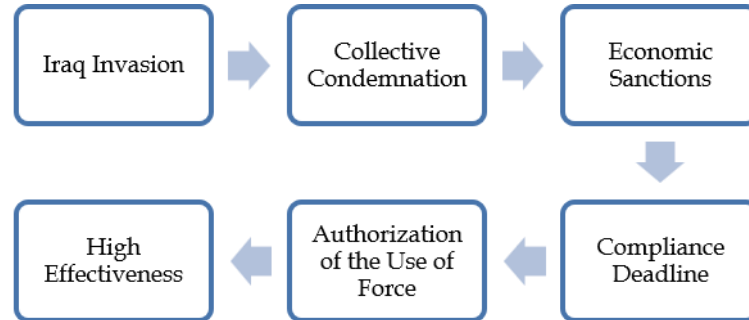


Figure 1. The Kuwait Case (1990)

Table 3. Chronology of the Kuwait Case (1990)

Date	Event	UN Security Council Action	Voting Result	State Justification	Logic of Rationality	Source
August 2, 1990	Iraq invaded Kuwait.	The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 660, condemning the invasion and demanding Iraq's immediate withdrawal.	14-0-0; Yemen did not participate in the vote.	Violation of the UN Charter and Kuwait's sovereignty, with a demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces.	Normative toward vital.	S/RES/660 (United Nations Security Council, 1990a)
August 6, 1990	Iraq still refused to withdraw its forces.	The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 661 on comprehensive economic sanctions.	13-0-2.	Coordinated collective pressure to compel Iraq's compliance.	Mixed.	S/RES/661 (United Nations Security Council, 1990b)
November 29, 1990	Iraq continued to ignore previous resolutions.	The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 678, setting a deadline of January 15, 1991, and authorizing "all	12-2-1.	A broad consensus emerged because the major interests of the	Vital.	S/RES/678 (United Nations Security Council, 1990c)

		necessary means."		permanent members were relatively aligned.		
January 17, 1991	The deadline expired without Iraqi withdrawal	The coalition acted on the basis of the mandate provided by Resolution 678.	The mandate had entered into force.	The authorization of force was used after sanctions and diplomatic efforts failed.	Vital.	S/RES/6 78

Based on Table 3, the Kuwait case shows a movement from the normative layer to the vital layer without encountering a veto. In the initial stage, the Council acted through the norm of anti-aggression and the demand for troop withdrawal. This stage still reflected the coordinative function of the institution, as collective condemnation and sanctions could be established quickly.

Table 3 shows that the high level of effectiveness in the Kuwait case occurred because there was no clash of vital interests among the major powers. As a result, neorealist logic did not trigger a veto but instead accelerated consensus. This confirms that, at the vital layer, institutions can remain effective when the structure of major interests is aligned. The entire process took place without the use of the veto by any permanent member state, reflecting a strong consensus among the great powers in responding to the aggression (Bosco, 2009).

From a neorealist perspective, this success can be explained by the alignment of the strategic interests of the major powers at that time. The Soviet Union, which was experiencing internal weakening, had no interest in opposing the United States, while Western states shared an interest in maintaining regional stability and energy security. Under conditions in which no vital interests were in conflict, the veto mechanism was not used, allowing the institution to function optimally as a reflection of the global distribution of power (Mearsheimer, 1995; Waltz, 1979).

Meanwhile, neoliberalism explains that this success was also supported by the role of institutions in facilitating international coordination and cooperation. The UN Security Council provided a normative and procedural framework that enabled a collective response through an institutionalized collective security mechanism. The anti-aggression norm and strong institutional structure helped reduce uncertainty and accelerate joint decision-making, showing that institutions can function effectively when supported by conducive political conditions (Keohane, 1984).

The Syrian Case (2011–2014)

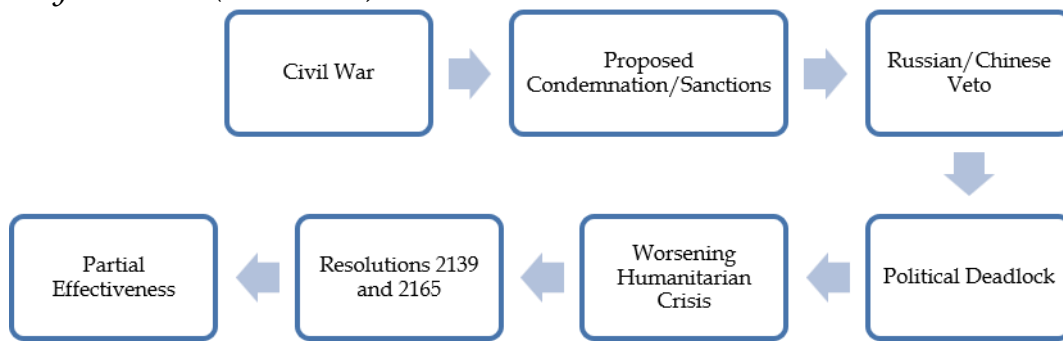


Figure. 2 The Syrian Case (2011–2014)

Table 4. Chronology of the Syrian Case (2011–2014)

Date	Event	UN Security Council Action	Voting Result	State Justification	Logic of Rationality	Source
4 October 2011	A draft resolution condemning the violence committed by the Syrian government was submitted.	The draft failed to be adopted due to vetoes by Russia and China.	9-2-4	The justification for the veto centered on rejecting the precedent of intervention and the text being considered unbalanced.	Neorealism (vital).	S/2011/612
19 July 2012	A draft resolution linking transition and the threat of sanctions was submitted.	The draft failed to be adopted due to vetoes by Russia and China.	11-2-2	The rejection was directed at the threat of sanctions and the possibility of escalation toward regime change.	Neorealism (vital).	S/2012/538
22 February 2014	The humanitarian crisis in Syria worsened.	The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2139 on humanitarian access.	15-0-0	There was a consensus that civilian aid should not be obstructed by political deadlock.	Neoliberalism (technical).	S/RES/2139 (United Nations Security Council, 2014a)
14 July 2014	Cross-border access required a new legal basis.	The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2165 on cross-border aid and monitoring mechanisms.	15-0-0	Technical coordination was considered necessary despite the persistence of sharp political differences.	Neoliberalism (technical).	S/RES/2165 (United Nations Security Council, 2014b)

Based on Table 4, the Syrian conflict shows that the deadlock over Syria occurred because of a clash of strategic interests at the vital level, while partial effectiveness still emerged on technical humanitarian issues. This confirms the existence of a separation in the logic of rationality within the same case.

From a neorealist perspective, the deadlock was a consequence of conflicting strategic interests among major powers. Russia sought to maintain its geopolitical influence in Syria, including its military and political interests in the Middle East, while China supported the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. In a situation where vital interests were perceived to be threatened, the use of the veto became a rational choice, preventing the UN Security Council from producing collective decisions on high-politics issues (Allison, 2013; Stent, 2014).

In contrast, neoliberalism explains that cooperation can still take place on issues that do not directly affect core strategic interests. The consistent adoption of humanitarian resolutions shows that institutions still play a role in facilitating coordination and international cooperation. This confirms that states can remain cooperative in the realm of low politics even when they are in conflict in the realm of high politics, reflecting variations in the logic of rationality within the same institution (Keohane & Martin, 1995).

The Ukraine Case (2014–2022)

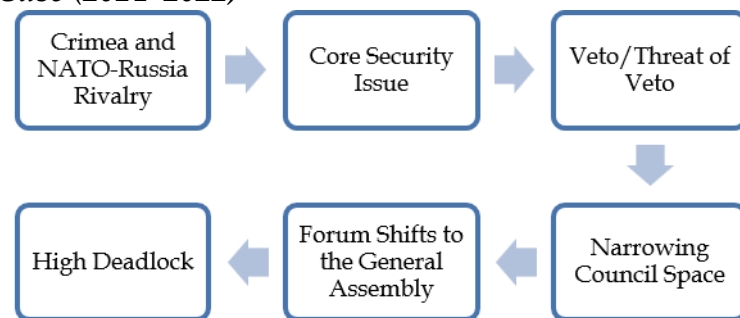


Figure. 3 The Ukraine Case (2014–2022)

Table 5. Chronology of the Ukraine Case (2014–2022)

Date	Event	UN Security Council Action	Voting Result	State Justification	Logic of Rationality	Source
March 27, 2014	The General Assembly adopted a resolution on Ukraine's territorial integrity after the Council reached a deadlock over Crimea.	The UN Security Council failed to produce a coercive response to the annexation of Crimea.	No substantive Council resolution was passed.	Russia viewed the issue as a core security interest and rejected Council pressure.	Neorealism (vital).	A/RES/68/262 (United Nations General Assembly, 2014)
February 17, 2015	Minsk II encouraged de-escalation efforts.	The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2202,	15-0-0.	There was room for coordination when the format	Mixed.	S/RES/202 (United

		endorsing the package of measures under the Minsk agreement.		supported the implementation of an agreement that had already been negotiated.		Nations Security Council, 2015)
February 25, 2022	After Russia's full-scale invasion, a draft resolution condemning the aggression was submitted.	The draft failed due to Russia's veto.	11-1-3.	Russia used its position as a permanent member to block Council condemnation of its own actions.	Neorealism (vital).	S/2022/155 (United Nations Security Council, 2022)
March 2, 2022	The General Assembly took over through an emergency special session.	The response shifted to the Uniting for Peace forum and other mechanisms outside the Council.	141 states supported the General Assembly resolution.	The Council deadlock encouraged forum migration to alternative institutions.	Institutional implication.	A/RES/ES-11/1 (United Nations General Assembly, 2022)

Based on Table 5, the Ukraine crisis confirms that when a conflict directly involves a veto holder, the vital layer is fully dominated by neorealist logic, resulting in a high level of deadlock. Under these conditions, institutional effectiveness shifts to alternative forums outside the Council. In this situation, UN member states redirected their response through alternative mechanisms, such as the General Assembly through the Uniting for Peace procedure, which allowed international pressure on Russia to continue (United Nations General Assembly, 2022).

From a neorealist perspective, Russia's use of the veto reflects a rational action aimed at protecting security and geopolitical interests considered vital, including maintaining influence in Eastern Europe and limiting NATO expansion. Within this framework, the UN Security Council is unable to function effectively when a great power becomes a direct party to a conflict, because the institution merely reflects the distribution of power within the international system. The shift of cooperation to other institutions, such as NATO and the European Union, also shows that states act according to the logic of power in seeking alternatives outside the UN Security Council (Mearsheimer, 1995).

The neoliberal perspective shows that international cooperation can still continue even when the UN Security Council experiences deadlock. States continue to coordinate through other institutions and maintain cooperation on humanitarian issues that do not directly touch core strategic interests. The UN Security Council remains capable of adopting resolutions related to humanitarian assistance, confirming that institutions still have a role in facilitating limited cooperation. This indicates that states can simultaneously

apply neorealist logic in high-politics issues while still allowing neoliberal cooperation in low-politics issues (Weiss, 2018).

Negative Case: Response to Ebola (2014)

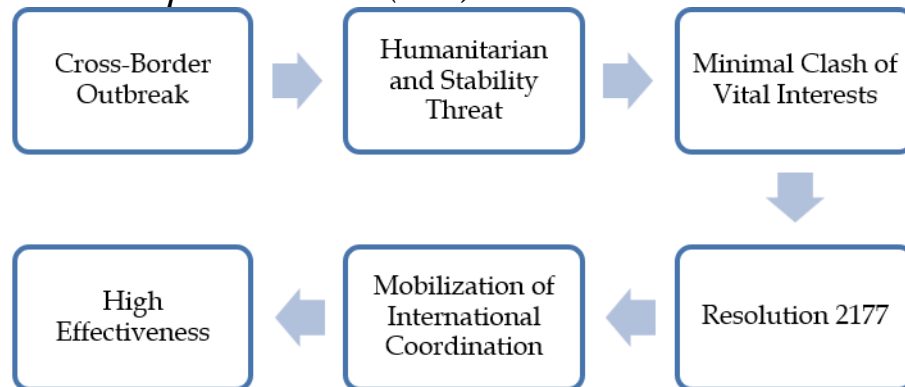


Figure. 4 Negative Case: Response to Ebola (2014)

Table 6. Chronology of the Ebola Case (2014)

Date	Event	UNSC Action	Voting Result	State Justification	Logic of Rationality	Source
8 August 2014	The World Health Organization declared Ebola a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.	Health threats began to be treated as cross-border issues with security implications.	No UNSC vote yet.	International pressure shifted toward emergency coordination rather than territorial competition.	Neoliberalism (technical).	(World Health Organization, 2014)
18 September 2014	The Ebola outbreak in West Africa was discussed as a threat to peace and security.	The UNSC adopted Resolution 2177.	15-0-0.	The Council emphasized the urgency of immediate action and rejected the isolation of affected states.	Neoliberalism (technical).	S/RES/2177 (United Nations Security Council, 2014c)
19 September 2014	The General Assembly and the Secretariat expanded response mobilization.	Inter-agency coordination was strengthened, including the establishment of UNMEER.	Not a Council vote.	The health crisis was positioned as a collective agenda requiring rapid institutional coordination.	Neoliberalism (technical).	(United Nations, 2014b)

October– December 2014	The international response continued to be mobilized.	The UNSC and UN agencies maintained coordinative pressure and field support.	Not depende nt on veto.	There were no vital geopolitical interests strong enough to block collective action.	Neoliberalis m (technical).	(United Nations, 2014a)
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Based on Table 6, the response to Ebola shows that the high level of effectiveness in the Ebola case emerged because of the limited conflict of strategic interests, allowing neoliberal logic at the technical layer to function optimally without veto obstruction.

Synthesis of Findings

The four cases show that variations in the effectiveness of the UN Security Council cannot be adequately explained if neorealism and neoliberalism are treated as mutually exclusive choices. Neorealism is highly useful in explaining when and why the veto is used, particularly when an issue touches upon vital layers of interest. Neoliberalism is highly useful in explaining why coordination remains possible on technical, humanitarian, and health-related issues.

The concept of layered rationality offers a more precise synthesis. States do not abandon the logic of power, yet they also do not always place all issues at the same level of threat. At the vital layer, states prioritize strategic position and the protection of their freedom of action. At the normative layer, considerations of reputation, legality, and international pressure operate alongside calculations of power. At the technical layer, states tend to open space for coordination because political costs are lower and collective benefits are clearer.

This formulation also explains why the effectiveness of the UN Security Council is partial. The Council may fail to stop large-scale violence, yet it can still succeed in opening humanitarian aid channels. It may be deadlocked over aggression involving a permanent member, yet remain effective in responding to disease outbreaks. The effectiveness of the UN Security Council should therefore be understood as a spectrum shaped by the type of issue and the position of major-power interests.

DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of the four cases shows that both neorealism and neoliberalism have significant explanatory power, although neither fully explains variations in the effectiveness of the United Nations Security Council comprehensively. Neorealism proves stronger in explaining institutional deadlock when the vital interests of major powers collide, as seen in the cases of Syria and Ukraine, where the use of the veto became the main instrument for defending strategic interests. In this context, international institutions function as reflections of the global distribution of power, making their effectiveness highly dependent on the alignment or conflict of interests among major powers

(Mearsheimer, 1995; Waltz, 1979). This approach, however, tends to be less capable of explaining why cooperation can still occur on certain issues even when high-level political conflict takes place at the same time.

Neoliberalism offers a more adequate explanation for the persistence of international cooperation in areas that do not directly touch the core strategic interests of states. The empirical findings show that although the UN Security Council experiences deadlock on high-politics issues, the institution is still able to produce humanitarian resolutions and maintain forms of sustained technical cooperation. This indicates that international institutions have the capacity to facilitate coordination and cooperation under certain conditions, particularly when political costs are relatively low and state interests are not fundamentally opposed to one another (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Martin, 1995). The effectiveness of international organizations is therefore not binary, as either success or failure, but partial and dependent on the characteristics of the issue being addressed.

These findings point to the need for a synthetic approach capable of explaining the simultaneity of two logics of rationality within the same institution. In this context, this study proposes the concept of “layered rationality,” which emphasizes that state behavior is contextual and layered. States do not always apply a single logic of rationality consistently. Instead, they may activate different logics depending on the sensitivity of the issue and the interests involved. In the realm of high politics, which includes military security, sovereignty, and regime stability, neorealist logic tends to dominate, causing conflicts of interest to produce institutional deadlock. In the realm of low politics, which includes humanitarian assistance and technical cooperation, neoliberal logic can operate relatively independently from such conflicts, allowing institutions to continue functioning even amid geopolitical tension (Lake & Powell, 1999; Putnam, 1988).

The findings are broadly consistent with earlier research that emphasizes the constraining effect of great-power interests on Security Council action. The deadlock identified in Syria and Ukraine supports the neorealist expectation that institutions become less effective when permanent members perceive core security, sovereignty, or geopolitical interests to be at stake (Mearsheimer, 1995; Waltz, 1979). It is also consistent with studies of Russia, China, and the Syrian conflict that emphasize the importance of sovereignty, strategic alignment, and resistance to external intervention in shaping Security Council positions (Allison, 2013; Fung, 2019; Stent, 2014). The similarity is likely to arise from the institutional structure of the UNSC itself: the veto converts intense strategic disagreement among permanent members into an immediate constraint on collective decision-making.

At the same time, this study differs from interpretations that treat realist deadlock and institutional cooperation as mutually exclusive outcomes. The Kuwait and Ebola cases, together with humanitarian resolutions in Syria and the limited coordination observed around Ukraine, show that cooperation can coexist with strategic rivalry when the issue under negotiation is less directly connected to vital interests. This pattern is compatible with the institutionalist

argument that international organizations can sustain coordination by providing rules, information, and repeated procedures (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Martin, 1995), while extending the observations of Bosco (2009) and Weiss (2018) that Security Council performance varies across political contexts. A possible reason for the difference is the analytical design of this study: process tracing examines sequences of decisions and separates vital, normative, and technical issue layers within and across cases, whereas broader theoretical comparisons or single-conflict studies may emphasize the final institutional outcome. The inclusion of Ebola as a negative case also makes visible a form of high institutional effectiveness that is difficult to explain through geopolitical rivalry alone.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the effectiveness of the United Nations Security Council is layered and contextual rather than uniformly high or low. The Kuwait case demonstrates high effectiveness when the interests of major powers are relatively aligned; Syria shows deadlock at the vital layer while preserving humanitarian coordination at the technical layer; Ukraine demonstrates the strongest deadlock when a veto holder is directly involved in the conflict; and Ebola shows that technical and humanitarian issues can generate rapid and unanimous coordination when vital geopolitical interests are not directly contested.

Across the four cases, neorealism provides the strongest explanation for veto use and institutional blockage on issues involving sovereignty, intervention, territorial control, and major-power security interests, whereas neoliberalism better explains continued coordination on humanitarian, health, monitoring, and other technical issues. The concept of layered rationality therefore synthesizes the empirical pattern identified in the results: states may apply different logics within the same institution according to the sensitivity of the issue, which explains why Security Council effectiveness often appears partial rather than simply successful or failed.

Based on these findings, the study advises policymakers and UN practitioners to preserve technical and humanitarian cooperation even when political negotiations at the vital layer are blocked. Where veto-driven deadlock limits Council action, separating technical measures from highly coercive political provisions can help maintain achievable institutional outputs, while alternative forums such as the General Assembly can be used when broader collective responses cannot proceed through the Council. These recommendations follow directly from the patterns observed in the Syria and Ukraine cases and from the cross-case synthesis presented in the results.

FURTHER STUDY

Future research could further examine how layered rationality operates across different United Nations Security Council cases, particularly by comparing decision-making processes during conflicts, humanitarian crises, and peacekeeping interventions. Comparative studies involving different permanent and non-permanent members could also provide deeper insights into how

neorealist interests and neoliberal institutional mechanisms interact in shaping collective security decisions.

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