

## United States National Security and United Nations System: Explaining the Linkage

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### Abstract

This paper examines the nature of the relationship between the United Nations and United States national security after the September 11, 2001 attack from 2002 to 2021. The central question that the research attempts to interrogate is whether the US can achieve most of its security objectives without engaging the UN mechanism in today's international system, which is dominated by transnational security agents. The global security architecture dramatically changed after the terrorist attacks on the American homeland on September 11, 2001. It brought to light that all nation-states are vulnerable to international terrorism and other transnational security threats. In response to the changed security environment where non-state actors have become major threats to sovereign states, the US decided to embrace unilateralism as an instrument of its post-9/11 foreign policy. To achieve the objectives of the study, data were gathered from secondary sources using the documentary observational method. The study was anchored on realist theory and utilized historical research design. The research found that the US supports multilateral actions but does not hesitate to take unilateral actions when necessary and that US-UN relations could be described as a "love-hate" relationship. It then concludes that the UN still serves as an effective platform for the US to achieve its national security goals. Amongst others, the study recommends that the US should not undermine the UN in devising national security policies, as it is an effective platform to achieve its national interests in a contemporary international system that is bedeviled by unpredictable and amorphous transnational threat agents.

**Keywords:** *Foreign Policy, National Security, United Nations, United States*

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### **Background to the Study**

The nexus between the United States (US) and the United Nations (UN) is a protracted and complex one. The UN is today a product of the United States (US) alongside four other Victorious Allied Powers (China, France, the United Kingdom, and the Defunct Soviet Union) (Hussain, 2011). “Though the US performed a pivotal role in the establishment of the global body, one can unequivocally state that the UN is a product of agreement, coalition, and cooperation among the allied great nations in 1945 in the aftermath of World War II (WWII). The UN was established under the principle of equality of states, meaning that states are equal in their capacity to drive global progress, peaceful coexistence, and security” (Ruggie, 2017). To achieve this common global public good, nations (particularly the great powers) of the world must come together to engage and address the issues of common concern that could threaten world peace. For this reason, “the UN is seen as the ultimate institution for global cooperation, collaboration and shared leadership” (Puchala, Laatikainen & Coate, 2016).

It is also for this same reason that the UN stamp of authority is necessary before any foreign policy adventure can enjoy global acceptability and legitimacy among member states of the international community (Inokoba, 2014). Hence, the broad aims of the organization include the following: building cooperation in international law, global security, peace, economic advancement, social progress, and human rights (Trent & Schnurr, 2018). As a result of the diverse issues under the UN purview, “the organization is a collection of several agencies and organs with the responsibility of engaging these multifarious issues that could comprise global well-being, development, and security” (Trent & Schnurr, 2018). To explain why hegemony, initiate and support International Governmental Organizations (IGOs), the realist theoretical model would argue that IGOs like the UN are normally formed and powered by great powers as instruments that could enhance their national interest and national security objectives.

This is in line with the position of the doyen of realism, Hans Morgenthau, who stated that states in the international system must consider their national interests, conceived as power among other powers (Hussain, 2011). What this invariably means is that hegemony like the US go into the creation of inter-state organizations to use them to enhance their national interests and powers in international politics. So, the fundamental question is: why has there never been a golden era in US-UN relations? Though the US is the pivotal force in the formation of the UN system, why has it treated the world body with so much ambivalence? “Granted that there were exceptional and crucial moments that American states embraced UN multilateralism, such as the Korea, Suez, Congo, and 1991 Gulf War situations, the common norm is that they have severally, especially during the Cold War era, by-passed and downgraded the UN system in their foreign policy planning and adventure” (Clement, 2003). In several instances, “the US withdrew from international agreements, sought exemptions from UN-organized global regimes, and acted on its own during several problems” (Crawford, 2021). The American inclination to act on its own in matters of foreign policy ranges from the repudiation of several multilateral treaties and conventions to forcefully invading Iraq and how the US dealt with the Al-Qaeda terrorist group to its position on global warming in its foreign aid policy (Damen, 2022). Other instances of American unilateral foreign policy postures include “the Bush administration's rejection of the Kyoto Treaty to reduce the

emission of carbon dioxide and other related greenhouse gases that promote global warming; its failure to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC); its refusal to approve the Ottawa Pact restricting production, trade and the utilization against personnel land mines; Its reluctance to be involved in UN peacekeeping operations (especially in developing countries); its annual dues withholding and assessments of UN peacekeeping operations; and its inability to authorize specific human treaties which include treaties on the Rights of the Child and the Eradication of Women Discrimination and several other unilateral foreign policy stance” (Forman, Lyman & Patrick, 2008).

The argument put forward by core realists to justify American brazen unilateralism is that “the US is strong and powerful enough to pursue and realize its foreign policy objectives without necessarily compromising its national interest and security within the institutional framework of multilateral governance provided by the UN system” (Inokoba, 2014). There is no doubting the fact that the awesomeness, comprehensiveness, and extensiveness of American power are incomparable and uncontestable (Inokoba, 2014). The US straddles the globe like a leviathan; it leads in commerce, communication, and business. It has the largest military and boasts the most efficacious economy in the world”. It is for this reason that a one-time French Minister, Herbert Vedrinciwu, in 1991 described the US as a hyperpower state (Nye, 2003). However, “there is now a limit to American power and brazen unilateral foreign policy. The gruesome terrorist attack on America on September 11, 2001 (otherwise referred to as the 9/11 events) changed the global security environment” (Iulian, 2017).

This tragic event drove home the reality that threats to American national security are no longer territorially located in sovereign states alone but now include non-state groups as well as other transnational threat agents. Going by that, can unilateralism be an appropriate policy instrument in a global security environment that has metamorphosed from traditional and territorially located and defined threats to the present-day security domain that is dominated by non-traditional and transnational security threat agents? In other words, “Can the US act alone outside the UN multilateral platform effectively to address and engage borderless and highly globalized security threats in post-9/11 international relations? The fact of the matter is that several security threats of international scope could compromise UN national security and which the US acting outside the UN framework cannot successfully address” (Nye, 2002; Gaddis, 2005; Belo & Carmet, 2022). Some examples of these transnational security threats are “terrorist networks and criminal groups like Al Qaeda; environmental problems like climate change; poverty; migration; failing and failed state phenomena; civil wars; the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD); financial instability, amongst others” (Forman, Lyman, & Patrick, 2008). These security threats are ubiquitous and amorphous; they do not have specific addresses and therefore do not respect national boundaries (Inokoba, 2014). Given the preceding backdrop, it is apparent that the issues bordering on the US achieving its national security objectives without the UN body have posed a puzzle in the literature. This paper therefore examines whether the US can effectively achieve its national security objectives without depending on the multilateral system provided by the UN body.

## Literature Review

UN- US relations in the post-9/11 era are in different phases. The UN platform covers a variety of interests, including security, which is the main concern of the Security Council (Buckley & Singh, 2006; Tryggestad, 2018). According to Torsella (2012), “the UN body is involved in a variety of issues, ranging from taking care of malnourished children to overseeing successful political transitions and maintaining international peace and security”. Scholars and analysts have criticized the US for some of its decisions regarding its foreign policy, as issues have been raised concerning the usefulness of the UN to the US foreign policy visa considering the major role played by the US in the formation and operation of the organization. Torsella (2012) argued that “criticisms of the UN are largely informed by inadequacies in the performance of the UN in maintaining peace in different parts of the world”. In line with the above argument, Holmes (2004) contended that the Security Council has been incapable of putting an end to conflict in this respect. Thus, self-defense plays a critical role in maintaining international peace.

The argument about US-UN relations in the post-9/11 era can be categorized into four sets of scholarly arguments. Those who argued that the “US is powerful enough to pursue and realize its national security objectives without depending on the multilateral platform provided by the UN system, specifically in containing national security challenges posed by global terrorism without unnecessarily compromising its national interest within the framework of unilateral institutions and processes” (Kagan, 2003), there are other groups of scholars who argue that the US, with its influence, has not in any way attained its peak and that the US will remain a major power for many years to come (Kagan, 2003).

Other scholars, such as Nye (2002), argued that threats to the superpower already exist economically and politically. The other set of scholars, such as Kagan (2003), argued that the problem of defining the US post-Cold War national interest and the instrument of realizing the US national security objectives were swept away in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy, and the US actions both in Afghanistan and Iraq marked US preference for unilateralism over multilateralism. “After the September 11 attacks, the US, despite its "superpower" position, was seen as a country susceptible to military defeat. The Al Qaeda terrorist attack weakened perceptions of US power” (Thimm, 2018, Crawford, 2021). The attack shows that the US, despite being a world power, could be defeated, irrespective of the fact that it was influential in creating the UN. This has not deterred the US from demonstrating reluctance to abide by the rules of the UN.

In line with the preceding, Malone (2003), stated that “although the US was involved in forming international institutions and agreements and continues to shape the course of the international system, it often abstains from ratifying them, and this trend makes it difficult for international organizations, notably the UN, to accomplish their international goals”. He added that, “The United States' refusal to participate in most UN agreements also makes it difficult for the US to achieve its security goals. It also brings down the status of the US as it weakens the standards of the government” (Malone, 2003). To this end, the inconsistent, non-consultant, and forceful attitude of the US partnership makes it very problematic for other

states to have genuine confidence in the US. Singh (2006) observed that the issue between the US and the UN will never end, as the US shows no signs of leaving unilateralism. From Singh's view, it is a known fact that the UN cannot work very well without the involvement of the US (Malone, 2003). This is because the success of multilateral actions can be optimally achieved if the powerful states, particularly the US, support them (Mahbubani, 2013).

Similarly, during the post-Cold War era, the US revitalized its function within the UN body, giving multilateral approval to global politics. The fact is that this is merely a new approach to actualizing the predetermined goals. This is because the US wanted to control the UN and ensure that it promoted its national interests. Also, the US became aware that, while trying to help herself, assisting other states became inevitable. This is a tough choice to make, but it is not impossible to achieve. Wendt (1999) observed that the EU is already taking proactive steps towards becoming a state on a regional basis. Christol (2004) noted that “the entire world has gone beyond the phase when national heads of state held unlimited rights to a phase when the preservation of equality before the law is emphasized”. Hence, statesmen now consider the relationship between their respective states and the UN and place reasonable restrictions on unilateral foreign policy.

Some other scholars argued that “the quest of other states to promote multilateralism is not only to pursue their interests but also because they believe strongly in multilateralism, which is what the UN represents” (Isola, 2012). The controversy over the US attitude towards other states globally entails the fact that it sees itself as second to none. This jettisons the idea of equality between states. Hence, “the reason backing the protection of US sovereignty is the fundamental distrust towards powers that are centralized, which is reflected in the constitution of the US” (Isola, 2012).

Furthermore, the US depends on domestic law and sovereignty, and it complies with international law only when it is beneficial to the state. This is disrespect for international law, and it happens any time it is not in line with US foreign policy goals. “The dissimilarity between the US and the UN can be found in the attitude displayed by the US in the international system during the formation of international law” (Isola, 2012). More so, international law was mainly created as an instrument for states to resolve problems that could not be handled alone. It helps protect states from external threats. States that are members of the UN regard the laws of the international system and endeavor to comply with them.

The US believes that “international law may only be used if it contributes something new to its domestic law; however, if that is the case, it must be ignored. This thinking is justified by the fact that there is no constitutional authority in the international domain” (Isola, 2012). Wendt (2003), in line with the above, “stated that the national abilities and technological strengths presently undermine the capacity of states to preserve the lives and property of their citizens. This has led to overpowering values devoted to matters related to security as well as threats of consideration from more influential states like the US”. States fight to be recognized in the international system; this therefore should eventually result in the formation of an environment for considering collective security, which requires forming binding decision-



making bodies, such as the UN, and this must be put together by international social agencies with mutual identity. Thus, the world has developed from a post-WWII multipolar system of inter-governments to a unipolar order and is waiting to bring a new structure into place. Murphy (2004) supports this “position by pointing out that, regarding the formation of an advanced world order, the US must exhibit the leader's true role by taking up responsibilities while not domineering” .

Waltz, cited in Burchill (2005), observed that “hegemonies at any time do not last forever, and they do not promote a unipolar world as the means of having lasting peace in the world. Also, a powerful state can't metamorphose into a leader who is responsible for a domineering power status”. The UN still possesses the competence to provide the needed structural framework for international governance if member states work towards it. The relationship between the UN and the US for over five decades now is very wide and has varying manifestations that trigger different reactions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The paper therefore rests on the realist theory, which is often credited to the works of 21st-century thinkers Kenneth Waltz and Hans J. Morgenthau. Its origins have much more historical roots and are attributed to traditional political thinkers such as Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes, and Niccolo Machiavelli, among others. Realism is a dominant theory in international relations that highlights the recurrent struggle for power and the primacy of national security in the international system (Burchill, 2005). The realists argue “that the main actor in the international system is the state. They hold that states acting in an international environment characterized by anarchy require a strong military to guarantee their security in the international system” (Burchill, 2005). For realists, security is the ability of states to prevent and respond to any form of threat. They perceive the anarchical nature of the international system as a predisposing factor to wars and inter-state conflicts; as such, states should prioritize their security, as this is a prerequisite for their existence.

The realist theory stems largely from the reoccurrence of wars and interstate conflicts in the international system. “The inability of the League of Nations to prevent a Second World War following the end of the devastating First World War provided a justifiable basis for the realist theory. The First World War created a perception amongst diverse key actors in the international system that states should take steps to prevent a second war. However, this argument turned out to be false following the outbreak of WWII” (Burchill, 2005). This outbreak largely obliterated utopian ideas that were propagated by idealists, and the international system came to be known as one that was prone to anarchy. The brain behind the creation of the UN has thus been realism (Burchill, 2005). Realists therefore argue that peace can be best guaranteed in the international system if states take care of their national interests. They contend that actions taken by states in international organizations like the UN can best be explained by the need for states to preserve their security. Realists argue that US support for the UN and other international organizations can be best explained from a balance of power perspective. They stated that a hegemon such as the US directs the course of international organizations like the UN and that great powers do not comply with rules or principles that do not serve their interests.

Baylis & Smith (1997), reiterated that the US has been pivotal in the formation of the UN but has not been entirely subjected to the rules of the UN. Despite playing a leading role in the UN, the US has been widely criticized for acting unilaterally, reneging on assigned obligations, declining the ratification of treaties that are widely accepted by the international community, and even disregarding the Security Council (Baylis & Smith, 1997). US policymakers, despite “showing much support for the UN, have been very conservative about the status quo. They have ignored the security concerns of other states and prevented the emergence of alternative coalitions” (Burchill, 2005). The UN serves as an instrument with which the US exercises its power in a way that is considered less threatening and more acceptable by other states in the international system. The hegemon of the US is therefore independent of the international system and does not necessarily conform to all the rules of the system (Hussain, 2011). The realist theory was adopted to show how great powers such as the US go into the formation of international governmental organizations like the UN with the primary purpose of using the organization as an instrument for achieving their national interests.

### **Research Methodology**

The paper adopts qualitative methods. It relied exclusively on secondary sources of data. Data were assembled from a desk study based on available textual evidence, which includes journal articles, relevant texts, official publications of relevant government agencies such as the US National Security Strategy document, the United States Department of State's Country Report on Terrorism, among others, reports, newspaper articles, and online academic materials that help generate useful data for the paper. The research design was therefore historical, and content based. This design fits the purpose of this study as it enables the researcher to relate past events to the present and can help predict the future. The design enabled an analytical interrogation that takes into consideration observable changes, the drivers of these changes, and the impact they have on the variables under study.

### **The Linkage between United States National Security and the United Nations System**

For the past century, and more specifically, during the Cold War era of international politics, “US national security concerns have focused primarily on threats from territorial nation-states. However, with the end of the East-West Cold War, the emergence of NNO, and the 9/11 incident, transnational and amorphous security challenges represented by the Bush, Obama, and Trump doctrines have increasingly been integrated into the US national security strategy” (McQuaid, Faber, & Gold, 2017). The most prominent of these transnational security threats is terrorism, which has risen to the top national security concern of the US because of the devastating terrorist attacks on US soil on September 11, 2001.

Notably, global terrorism is an instance of a transnational threat that is central to US security discourse; it is a result of the activities and objectives of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS, which aim to actively harm the American people and their communities for intended benefits at home and abroad (McQuaid, Faber, & Gold, 2017). Other transnational challenges that directly and indirectly affect US national security include cyberattacks, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, immigration, smuggling and piracy, drug and human trafficking, the spread of infectious diseases and epidemics, humanitarian crises, and international economic flows.

Numerous reasons have been offered to explain the US preference for unilateral action in pursuit of its foreign policy goals over multilateralism within the UN system. A major reason identified is the desire of the US as a major global power to maximize its freedom of action on the world stage. Simply put, “the magnitude of US socio-economic, political, technological, and military dominance provides an abundant incentive for her to act unilaterally. The unilateral action of the US is also explained by her perceived responsibility to protect the world order. It is held here that, given this responsibility, the US should not be harmed by international laws and multilateral organizations” (Forman, Stewart, & Martins, 2002; Nye, 2004; Kaqua & Kristol, 2002).

Neo-conservatives often highlight the following as “downsides of multilateralism to the achievement of US foreign policy objectives: reduction of constitutional autonomy, impairment of popular sovereignty, and restriction of US global power” (Whinerary, 2020). Consequently, the avoidance of UN diplomacy and other international commitments is considered necessary for achieving US foreign policy objectives. This stems from the perception that some international commitments within the UN are likely to reduce US initiative, restrict her choices, and encroach on her sovereignty.

It is factual that a “unilateral foreign policy provides the US with greater freedom due to the magnitude of its power in the unipolar world. However, unilateralism, as shown in the preceding sections of this report, predisposes the world and, by extension, the US to serious national security threats. For example, the failure of the 2010 Copenhagen Earth Summit to get a concerted approach to the challenges of climate change constitutes a security challenge that not only has a transnational character but also heightens other security risks in the international system. The failure to reach a concerted approach at the summit is largely attributed to the intransigent behavior of the US, especially during the Kyoto negotiation” (McQuaid, Faber, & Gold, 2017). This has “ultimately been responsible for US moral leadership in many parts of the world. It has made it very challenging for the US to make a case on other soft and hard security matters. This suggests that, by reneging on multilateral agreements, especially those under the UN, the US inadvertently undermined its chances of achieving its national security objectives” (Forman, Stewart, & Martins, 2002).

Additionally, unilateralism tends to weaken international organizations, including the UN, which is crucial for ensuring world peace and forms the core of US national security concerns. Unilateral actions of the US, like the refusal to ratify the 1999 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (C.T.B.T.), the abrogation of the anti-ballistic missile with Russia, and the decision to initiate the National Missile Defense Program, undermined and contradicted international nuclear stability. It also undermined the global concern for the non-proliferation of WMD. By implication, “the adoption of unilateral policy by the US signals the inadvertent encouragement of potential proliferators, which could metamorphose into the transfer of dangerous armaments to non-state authorities. This risk was identified by former US President Barack Obama as the most potent threat to US national security in contemporary times” (Silverbird News Report, April 12, 2010).



Unilateral action also undermines US interest in cooperative security efforts. When multilateral platforms are disregarded and the US takes unilateral action, the capacity of international organizations to mobilize quick responses to transnational security challenges (which are considered most important to the US) is limited. It constitutes a major limitation on meeting the oft-stated US goal of increasing international burden sharing. This culminates in placing greater demands on US military forces. “Many conflicts that have occurred globally cannot be effectively contained by unilateral action. This has been amply shown by the crises of nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the debacle in Somalia” (Nuscheler, 2004). The multilateral platform created by the UN is therefore very important for achieving US policy goals.

Nuscheler (2004), noted further that “US selectivity towards multilateral actions in the UN can wield enormous diplomatic costs. It creates difficulty in forging coalitions within the UN System as well as other global multilateral organizations. The US is widely viewed with apprehension globally, as many countries view them as preferring unilateral action with little respect for the interests of other states in the international system”. This has engendered the spread of anti-Americanism, which culminates in a severe threat to US soft power and its ability to attract other states through the attractiveness and legitimacy of US policies and the values that underlie them.

The US has historically been perceived to show a preference for unilateral action. A survey conducted a month before the 9/11 attack discovered that Western European countries already conceived the Bush administration's approach to US foreign policy as unilateralist. This argument became serious when the US invaded Iraq in 2003 (Inokoba, 2014). More so, “in a dramatic turnaround from the Cold War period, some countries in Europe see US unilateralism as a significant international threat to Europe in the years to come. About nine of the ten French and German countries supported this position after the Iraq invasion, conceiving the threat of US action acting alone as comparable to the threats displayed by North Korea” (Nye, 2004). Thus, US “unattractiveness has made the country lose important openings for cooperation with its European allies in addressing transnational security issues such as terrorism” (Lindsay, 2001).

It is well known that despite the East-West ideological hostilities, the UN has been able to expand its activities and functions to diverse areas that have a bearing on international peace, thereby reducing the US's role as the police of the world and manager of the global community. Although “these activities are not under the purview of the charter of the international system since some of these responsibilities have bearing on global peace and security, the UN tried as much as it could to carry them out during the Cold War period and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Some of these important activities include peacekeeping, peace enforcement, cease-fires, military training, arms inspection program policies, preventive diplomacy, election monitoring, nation-building, and constitution-drafting exercises” (Schle-Singer, 2006).

The US, as the most influential state in the world today, has also found the UN mechanism very useful in different areas of dealing with global problems that could have security

implications if they are not addressed. The international body virtually shares with the US the burdens of assistance to weaker states through such agencies as the WHO, FAO, UNESCO, UNEP, ICO, WFP, and UN Refugee Agency (Goldstein, 1993; Bhandari, 2018). With her extensive powers and influence, the US has imparted them to different parts of the globe. Thus, if there is any country in the world that needs a rule-based and orderly international system, it is the US. If the US continues to stick to its a la carte approach to foreign policy, it will end up finding itself not just isolated in a global society but also less secure and less prosperous. This can compromise US national interests, including its national security goals.

### **Concluding Remarks and Recommendations**

This paper concluded that, despite its enviable security structure, apparatus, and military strength, the UN still served as an effective platform for the US to achieve some of its national security interests. Also, the US cannot unilaterally achieve its national security objectives in the face of the transnational nature of contemporary security threats without depending on the multilateral platform provided by the UN system. These generally imply that the UN is still a useful platform for the US in pursuit of its national security goals in the present post-9/11 world order.

In this light, the following recommendations are pertinent:

1. The US should develop and pursue a national security policy that is structured to accommodate the peculiarities of the UN system, and at the same time does not undermine the collective ideology of the institution.
2. Due to the imperativeness of cost reduction in every sovereign state, the US should consider multilateral measures in conjunction with its unilateral efforts in striving to achieve its national security objectives.
3. The US should see beyond its internal military strength to adopt the multilateral platform provided by the UN body to effectively achieve its national security. This is based on the transnational nature of contemporary security threats around the world.

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