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US Reaction to Wars in Ukraine and Gaza in Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The article undertakes a comparative examination of how the United States has responded to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, situating these reactions within broader debates on international law, humanitarian principles, and the contested legitimacy of the “rules-based international order.” Both conflicts are marked by occupation, widespread civilian suffering, and repeated breaches of humanitarian law, yet Washington’s stance has diverged sharply. In Ukraine, Russia’s invasion has been cast as a direct assault on global stability, prompting sweeping sanctions, unprecedented military aid, diplomatic mobilization, and strong moral condemnation. In Gaza, however, U.S. policy has consistently shielded Israel from accountability, employing vetoes or dilutions of United Nations resolutions and sustaining arms transfers despite mounting evidence of humanitarian catastrophe.

Drawing on realist, liberal internationalist, and constructivist perspectives, the study argues that these differences are not accidental but reveal a selective application of norms shaped by strategic interests, alliance commitments, identity narratives, and media framing. By foregrounding civilian suffering and ethical concerns while maintaining scholarly rigor through verifiable sources, the article highlights how such double standards undermine international law, erode trust in global institutions, and intensify the divide between Western states and the Global South.

INTRODUCTION

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza stand as two of the most consequential and morally charged conflicts of the early twenty first century. Each has resulted in extensive civilian casualties, mass displacement, the destruction of critical infrastructure, and profound regional instability. Each has also placed international law and humanitarian norms under severe strain. Yet despite these similarities, the reactions of the United States, the most influential actor in the contemporary international system have been strikingly divergent.

In Ukraine, following Russia’s full scale invasion in February 2022, Washington rapidly positioned itself as the leader of a broad Western coalition. The conflict was framed as an existential struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, and as a clear violation of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. This framing justified unprecedented economic sanctions, massive military aid, intelligence sharing, and sustained diplomatic pressure on Moscow. In Gaza, by contrast, the United States has adopted a posture characterized by diplomatic protection of Israel, repeated vetoes in the United Nations Security Council, and the continuation, and in some cases expansion of military aid, even as international organizations and humanitarian agencies warned of famine, mass displacement, and the collapse of civilian life.

As Benoit Bréville observed in *Le Monde diplomatique*: “In terms of international law, there’s no ambiguity: Russia’s occupation of its Ukrainian neighbour is illegal, just as Israel’s occupation of its Palestinian neighbour is

illegal. The United Nations has repeatedly condemned them. Both should elicit the same censure from the West, which defends a ‘rules-based order’. But they don’t. In one instance, the United States and the European Union stand with the country under attack; in the other, with the attacker” (Bréville, 2024).

This stark observation captures the central puzzle of the present study. If international law and humanitarian norms are universal, why are they applied so unevenly? Why does the language of war crimes, sanctions, and accountability dominate US discourse on Ukraine, while restraint, silence, or justification characterize its approach to Gaza?

This article addresses these questions through a systematic comparative analysis of US responses to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Rather than treating each conflict in isolation, it examines how similar categories of policy sanctions, military aid, humanitarian responses, refugee policies, and media narratives are deployed differently across the two cases. The analysis builds on authoritative academic literature, policy reports, and journalistic investigations, ensuring that all source based claims are explicitly quoted and traceable.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it integrates fragmented strands of literature into a single comparative framework. Second, it bridges theoretical debates in international relations with concrete policy practices. Third, it highlights the broader global consequences of selective humanitarianism, particularly for perceptions of legitimacy among states and societies outside the Western bloc. By doing so, the article seeks not

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only to explain US behavior but also to reflect critically on the future of international law and moral authority in a deeply divided world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is organized into five interrelated subsections in order to provide a systematic and comparative understanding of existing scholarship. Each subsection specifies its approximate length and focuses on a distinct analytical dimension while maintaining coherence with the overall research question.

Scholarship on the War in Ukraine and U.S. Foreign Policy Responses

The academic literature on the war in Ukraine has expanded rapidly since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Much of this scholarship frames the conflict as a watershed moment for the post-Cold War international order, emphasizing violations of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the prohibition on the use of force. Within this body of work, the United States is frequently portrayed as a principal defender of the so-called rules-based international system.

Robin Luckham characterizes the war in Ukraine as part of a broader transformation of global security politics, arguing that it marks "another stage in the evisceration of the post-Cold War peace dividend and its replacement by a warmakers dividend, in which security trumps all else" (Luckham, 2025). This interpretation situates US policy within a wider militarization of international relations, where military assistance and alliance cohesion are prioritized over diplomatic de-escalation.

Other scholars emphasize the normative dimension of US responses. Thussu notes that Western governments and media have consistently framed the invasion as "the most serious threat to the liberal international system based on the inviolability of national sovereignty" (Thussu, 2024). This framing has justified extraordinary measures, including sweeping sanctions, large-scale arms transfers, and intelligence cooperation. The United States' actions are thus often presented in the literature as necessary and proportionate responses to a clear breach of international law.

Sanctions policy occupies a central place in analyses of the Ukraine war. Studies highlight the unprecedented scale of economic warfare waged against Russia, including asset freezes, exclusion from financial systems, and restrictions on technology transfers. As reported in the Persian edition of *Le Monde diplomatique*: "A few months ago, European leaders wanted to believe that they would easily prevail in the 'total economic and financial war' launched against Moscow... Six months after the implementation of the first series of Western sanctions, the Russian economy has been hit, but the sought-after collapse has not occurred" (Richard, 2022). This observation has generated debate over the effectiveness and long-term consequences of sanctions as a tool of coercive diplomacy.

Overall, the literature on Ukraine tends to portray US policy as normatively justified, strategically necessary, and broadly consistent with international law. However, this literature often treats the case in isolation, rarely engaging in sustained comparison with other conflicts where similar legal principles are at stake.

Literature on Gaza, Israel–Palestine, and U.S. Diplomatic and Military Support

In contrast to the Ukraine-focused scholarship, the literature on Gaza and the broader Israel–Palestine conflict has long emphasized asymmetry, occupation, and humanitarian crisis. Academic studies, human rights reports, and critical journalism repeatedly document the disproportionate impact of Israeli military operations on Palestinian civilians and infrastructure.

Rony Brauman underscores the centrality of occupation in shaping the conflict, arguing that "military occupation and the annexation of territories by force, features common to Russia and Israel in these two situations, elicit reactions from the West that are diametrically opposed to one another" (Brauman, 2024). This observation directly challenges claims of normative consistency in Western foreign policy.

A substantial body of literature focuses on the United States' role in shielding Israel from accountability. Analysts note repeated US vetoes of United Nations Security Council resolutions, as well as continued military assistance despite allegations of violations of international humanitarian law. Torunlu reports that "although the number of civilian casualties in Israel's bombing of the Al-Ahli Arabi Baptist Hospital in northern Gaza was much greater than losses in Russia's targeting of the Maternity Hospital in Mariupol... the US administration did not show the same harsh reaction toward Tel Aviv, when compared to Russia" (Torunlu, 2023).

Financial and military aid form another major theme. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, "Israel, the US's strongest ally in the Middle East, is the biggest recipient of US military aid in history, taking in \$251.2 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars since 1959" (Masters & Merrow, 2025). The extraordinary scale and durability of this assistance have been widely interpreted in the literature as evidence of a deeply institutionalized strategic relationship that operates with limited sensitivity to fluctuations in Israeli domestic politics or patterns of military conduct. Masters and Merrow further emphasize the intensity of recent support, noting that "since October 2023 the United States has delivered ninety thousand tons of arms and equipment on eight hundred transport planes and 140 ships. The extraordinary flow of aid has included tank and artillery ammunition, bombs, rockets, and small arms" (Masters & Merrow, 2025). Critical scholarship argues that the absence of effective conditionality attached to such assistance undermines the enforcement of international humanitarian law, particularly when extensive civilian casualties and the destruction of protected sites are documented.

Highlighting this normative dissonance, Mehr News Agency observes that “U.S. President Joe Biden called the bombing of the Mariupol hospital an ‘outrage to the world,’ yet he remained silent when Israeli bombings and sieges decimated many hospitals in Gaza” (Mehr News Agency, 2023). Similarly, Torunlu notes that “although the number of civilian casualties in Israel’s bombing of the Al-Ahli Arabi Baptist Hospital in northern Gaza was much greater than losses in Russia’s targeting of the Maternity Hospital in Mariupol, the US administration did not show the same harsh reaction toward Tel Aviv” (Torunlu, 2023). Together, these studies frame US military and financial assistance to Israel not as episodic crisis management but as a structurally embedded policy that contrasts sharply with the punitive and conditional logic applied to Russia in the Ukraine war.

Double Standards, Selective Humanitarianism, and Comparative Critiques

A growing body of comparative and critical literature explicitly addresses the issue of double standards in Western and particularly US foreign policy. Scholars in this tradition argue that violations of international law, such as military occupation, attacks on civilians, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure do not elicit uniform responses. Instead, reactions vary significantly depending on the political identity, alliance status, and strategic value of the actor involved.

Benoit Bréville articulates this critique with particular clarity, stating: “In terms of international law, there’s no ambiguity: Russia’s occupation of its Ukrainian neighbour is illegal, just as Israel’s occupation of its Palestinian neighbour is illegal... Both should elicit the same censure from the West, which defends a ‘rules-based order’. But they don’t” (Bréville, 2024). This observation has become a cornerstone in debates on selective norm enforcement and is frequently cited as evidence of moral inconsistency within Western policy frameworks.

Rony Brauman further emphasizes the structural nature of these asymmetries, arguing that “military occupation and the annexation of territories by force, features common to Russia and Israel in these two situations, elicit reactions from the West that are diametrically opposed to one another” (Brauman, 2024). For Brauman, the issue is not simply hypocrisy but the institutionalization of unequal treatment under international law.

Saul and Seymour extend this critique by situating violence within its historical and political context. They argue: “Violence is not a context-independent abstraction... we tend to forget that we celebrate the resistance fighters who, during the Second World War, killed Nazi occupiers” (Saul & Seymour, 2024). This argument challenges analytical frameworks that criminalize Palestinian resistance while legitimizing Ukrainian resistance, despite both being framed as responses to occupation.

This literature also highlights the global consequences of selective humanitarianism. Many scholars contend that double standards erode the legitimacy of international

norms by signaling that legality is contingent on power rather than principle. This perception is particularly pronounced in the Global South, where Western condemnation of Russia is widely contrasted with silence or justification regarding Gaza. As a result, skepticism toward Western-led international institutions has intensified, reinforcing calls for multipolarity and alternative normative orders.

Media Narratives, Representation, and the Hierarchy of Victims

Media analysis constitutes a crucial strand of the literature examining divergent responses to Ukraine and Gaza. Scholars argue that media framing plays a decisive role in shaping public opinion, moral judgment, and policy legitimacy. Daya Thussu observes that “while the victims of Russian invasion were lionized and helped materially and militarily by Western governments and received a very sympathetic response from the mainstream media, the victims of the Israeli invasion of Gaza are, more often than not, presented as partly culpable” (Thussu, 2024).

This asymmetry in representation contributes to what several scholars describe as a hierarchy of victims. Ukrainians are frequently depicted as heroic defenders of democracy and European values, whereas Palestinians are often framed through a security lens that associates them with extremism or collective responsibility. Such representations normalize radically different political and humanitarian responses.

Bréville highlights the cultural and racialized dimensions of refugee coverage. He notes: “From the start of the war in Ukraine, Europe flung its doors open to millions of Ukrainian exiles... There’s been no such welcome for the hundreds of thousands of people wanting to flee Gaza” (Bréville, 2024). This contrast reveals how perceptions of cultural proximity and similarity influence humanitarian solidarity.

The literature emphasizes that media narratives are not neutral reflections of reality but actively constitute political meaning. By framing Ukrainians as “like us” and Palestinians as “others,” mainstream Western media help legitimize sanctions, arms transfers, and diplomatic mobilization in one case, while rationalizing restraint, silence, or unconditional support for military action in the other. These discursive practices reinforce policy double standards and make them appear morally intuitive to domestic audiences.

Theoretical Approaches in Existing Literature: Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism

Existing scholarship interprets the divergent US responses to Ukraine and Gaza through competing theoretical lenses in international relations. Realist scholars emphasize strategic interests, power balances, and alliance commitments. From this perspective, US support for Ukraine is understood as part of a broader confrontation with Russia, while unwavering backing of Israel reflects its role as a long-standing strategic ally in

the Middle East.

Liberal internationalist approaches, by contrast, focus on norms, institutions, and the credibility of international law. Robin Luckham warns that selective enforcement “undermines the credibility of the ‘rules-based order’” and weakens trust in institutions such as the United Nations and the International Court of Justice (Luckham, 2025). For liberal scholars, the central danger lies in the erosion of universal norms through inconsistent application.

Constructivist analyses foreground identity, discourse, and social meaning. Thussu argues that representations of Ukrainians as culturally proximate and Palestinians as fundamentally “other” shape moral judgment and political behavior (Thussu, 2024). These identity-based narratives help explain why similar acts, such as attacks on civilian infrastructure are interpreted and judged differently across cases.

Despite the richness of these theoretical insights, much of the literature remains fragmented. Studies often focus on a single conflict or privilege one theoretical tradition. There is limited work that integrates sanctions policy, military aid, humanitarian discourse, and media narratives into a single comparative framework. Addressing this gap provides the central rationale for the present study.

International relations research often emphasizes the interaction between geopolitical competition and the role of international norms in shaping state behavior. As Akhtar and Niazi explain, “this review adopts a realist perspective, which asserts that states act primarily in their own self-interest and pursue power and security in international relations” (Akhtar & Niazi, 2024). Their analysis of the historical “Great Game” further illustrates how great powers compete for regional influence and control, reinforcing the enduring role of power politics in international relations. At the same time, other studies emphasize the importance of international norms in shaping diplomatic behavior. Examining Kenya’s participation in multilateral diplomacy, Mbaabu, Maluki, and Mutuma note that “the strategic alignment of Kenya’s foreign policy with international norms and its conduct within multilateral relations has significantly evolved, enhancing its global standing whilst promoting national interests” (Mbaabu *et al.*, 2025). Such findings suggest that contemporary international politics often reflects a complex interplay between geopolitical interests and the normative expectations embedded in international institutions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to examine the United States’ responses to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. A comparative methodology is particularly appropriate for this research because both conflicts involve prolonged military violence, large-scale civilian suffering, and repeated references to international law and humanitarian norms, yet they have generated markedly different political, legal, and moral reactions from the same external actor. By placing these two cases

side by side, the study seeks to illuminate patterns of consistency and divergence that are not readily visible in single-case analyses.

Research Design and Comparative Logic

The article employs a structured, focused comparison, a method commonly used in qualitative international relations research to analyze a small number of cases across a shared set of analytical dimensions. Ukraine and Gaza were selected not because they are identical conflicts, but because they are frequently evaluated by Western governments using similar normative vocabularies—sovereignty, self-defense, civilian protection, war crimes, and the rules-based international order. This makes them analytically comparable despite differences in geography, actors, and historical context.

The comparative logic of the study is guided by the following principle: when similar categories of international behavior, such as military occupation, attacks on civilian infrastructure, and mass displacement produce systematically different responses, those differences require explanation. Rather than assuming inconsistency as a given, the methodology treats divergence as an empirical phenomenon to be analyzed through policy behavior, discourse, and institutional practice.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The study relies exclusively on qualitative data drawn from primary and secondary sources that are verifiable, publicly accessible, and widely cited in academic and policy-oriented literature.

Primary sources include:

- Official statements and speeches by US presidents, secretaries of state, and senior government officials.
 - US voting behavior and statements in international institutions, particularly the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly.
 - Legislative and budgetary documents related to sanctions regimes and military assistance.
- Secondary sources include:
- Peer-reviewed academic books and articles in international relations, political economy, and media studies.
 - Policy analyses and data published by reputable institutions such as the Council on Foreign Relations.
 - Investigative and analytical articles from internationally recognized media outlets (e.g., *Le Monde diplomatique*).
 - Reports and commentaries by human rights organizations and international news agencies.

A strict selection criterion was applied: only sources that are traceable, publicly available, and suitable for academic verification were included. Furthermore, in line with methodological transparency, all claims derived from external sources are quoted verbatim within the text rather than paraphrased ambiguously. This approach minimizes interpretive distortion and allows readers to independently assess the evidentiary basis of the analysis.

Analytical Dimensions

To ensure systematic comparison, the analysis is organized around four core dimensions that recur throughout both conflicts:

Sanctions and Economic Measures

This dimension examines whether and how economic coercion—such as sanctions, asset freezes, and trade restrictions has been employed by the United States. The scope, intensity, and stated justifications of sanctions are compared across the two cases.

Military Assistance and Arms Transfers

This dimension focuses on the scale, type, and conditionality of US military aid. It includes analysis of financial allocations, arms deliveries, and the degree to which assistance is linked to compliance with international humanitarian law.

Humanitarian and Refugee Policies

This dimension assesses US and allied responses to civilian suffering, including humanitarian aid, evacuation policies, and attitudes toward refugees and displaced populations.

Political and Media Discourse

This dimension analyzes official rhetoric and dominant media narratives, focusing on how victims, perpetrators, and acts of violence are framed and morally evaluated. By applying the same analytical lenses to both cases, the study avoids anecdotal comparison and enhances internal validity.

Theoretical Framework and Interpretive Strategy

The analysis is informed by a pluralistic theoretical framework drawing on realism, liberal internationalism, and constructivism. Rather than treating these approaches as mutually exclusive, the study uses them as complementary interpretive tools.

- Realism is employed to analyze strategic interests, alliance politics, and power considerations shaping US behavior. From this perspective, differential responses are interpreted as rational outcomes of geopolitical competition and long-standing security partnerships.

- Liberal internationalism provides criteria for evaluating consistency with international law, institutional norms, and the principles of the rules-based order. This framework highlights tensions between declared commitments and actual practices.

- Constructivism is used to analyze identity, discourse, and representation. It helps explain how narratives of “us” and “them,” cultural proximity, and moral framing influence policy choices and public legitimacy.

This triangulated theoretical approach allows the study to capture both material and ideational dimensions of US foreign policy.

Method of Analysis

The study employs qualitative content analysis to

examine textual and discursive data. Official statements, media articles, and policy reports were analyzed for recurring themes, language patterns, and normative justifications. Particular attention was paid to the use of legal terminology (e.g., “war crimes,” “self-defense,” “genocide”), moral descriptors, and emotional framing. Rather than coding data quantitatively, the analysis prioritizes contextual interpretation. This is consistent with the study’s objective: not to produce generalizable causal laws, but to offer an in-depth, interpretive explanation of policy divergence.

Limitations

The study acknowledges several limitations. First, both conflicts are ongoing, and policy positions may evolve. Second, reliance on publicly available sources means that internal decision-making processes cannot be fully reconstructed. Third, qualitative interpretation inevitably involves analytical judgment. To mitigate these limitations, the study triangulates multiple sources and maintains strict transparency in sourcing.

Ethical Considerations

Finally, the methodology is guided by an ethical commitment to foreground civilian suffering and humanitarian impact without instrumentalizing them for polemical purposes. The aim is not advocacy but critical analysis grounded in evidence, consistency, and scholarly responsibility.

Comparative Analysis / Findings

This section presents the core findings of the study through a structured comparison of US responses to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. The analysis is organized around four analytical dimensions identified in the methodology: sanctions and economic measures, military assistance and arms transfers, humanitarian and refugee policies, and political and media discourse. Examining these dimensions side by side reveals a consistent pattern of selective norm enforcement and differentiated moral framing.

Sanctions and Economic Measures: Punitive Enforcement versus Strategic Immunity

One of the most striking contrasts between the two cases lies in the use or absence of economic sanctions. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the United States rapidly mobilized what has been widely described as an unprecedented sanctions regime. Russian state assets were frozen, major banks were excluded from the SWIFT financial messaging system, and wide-ranging export controls were imposed in coordination with European allies.

As *Le Monde diplomatique* observed: “European leaders wanted to believe that they would easily prevail in the ‘total economic and financial war’ launched against Moscow” (Richard, 2022). The sanctions were explicitly framed as punishment for violations of international law and as a deterrent against further aggression. US officials

repeatedly emphasized accountability, legality, and the defense of a rules-based international order.

In the case of Gaza, however, no comparable economic measures were taken against Israel, despite sustained military operations, mass civilian casualties, and widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure. This absence is particularly notable given that similar legal categories, occupation, collective punishment, and attacks on protected sites have been invoked by international organizations and legal experts.

Rony Brauman highlights this asymmetry succinctly: “Military occupation and the annexation of territories by force, features common to Russia and Israel in these two situations, elicit reactions from the West that are diametrically opposed to one another” (Brauman, 2024). Rather than sanctions, Israel has continued to enjoy preferential trade relations, diplomatic protection, and financial support from the United States.

This divergence suggests that sanctions are not applied as neutral tools of norm enforcement but as instruments conditioned by alliance structures and geopolitical priorities.

Military Assistance and Arms Transfers: Conditional Support versus Unconditional Backing

A second major finding concerns the scale, framing, and conditionality of US military assistance. In Ukraine, military aid has been justified as necessary support for a sovereign state exercising its right to self-defense. The United States and its European allies have provided advanced weaponry, intelligence support, and financial assistance on an extraordinary scale. Thussu notes that “the US spending more than \$100 billion, while the EU pledged \$96 billion, a windfall for defence companies” (Thussu, 2024).

Despite concerns about escalation, US officials have consistently framed this aid as defensive and normatively legitimate. The conflict has even been acknowledged as a proxy war, as reflected in German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock’s statement that European nations were “fighting a war against Russia” (Thussu, 2024).

In Gaza, by contrast, US military assistance takes a fundamentally different form. Rather than supporting civilian protection or reconstruction, US aid has consisted primarily of direct arms transfers to Israel during ongoing military operations. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “since October 2023 the United States has delivered ninety thousand tons of arms and equipment on eight hundred transport planes and 140 ships” (Masters & Merrow, 2025). This assistance includes “tank and artillery ammunition, bombs, rockets, and small arms.”

Crucially, this support has continued despite mounting allegations of violations of international humanitarian law. Unlike in the Ukraine case, where Russia is accused, sanctioned, and isolated Israel faces no meaningful conditionality tied to civilian protection. This unconditional backing constitutes one of the clearest empirical indicators of double standards in US foreign policy.

Humanitarian Law and Civilian Protection: Vocal Condemnation versus Strategic Silence

The third dimension concerns US responses to civilian suffering and alleged violations of international humanitarian law. In Ukraine, US leaders have repeatedly and publicly condemned Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure. President Joe Biden described the bombing of a maternity hospital in Mariupol as “an outrage to the world” (Mehr News, 2023). Such statements were accompanied by calls for investigations and accountability. In Gaza, however, similar or greater levels of civilian harm have not elicited comparable reactions. Mehr News Agency notes the contrast directly: “U.S. President Joe Biden called the bombing of the Mariupol hospital an ‘outrage to the world,’ yet he remained silent when Israeli bombings and sieges decimated many hospitals in Gaza” (Mehr News, 2023).

Torunlu further reports that “although the number of civilian casualties in Israel’s bombing of the Al-Ahli Arabi Baptist Hospital in northern Gaza was much greater than losses in Russia’s targeting of the Maternity Hospital in Mariupol... the US administration did not show the same harsh reaction toward Tel Aviv” (Torunlu, 2023).

This pattern of selective outrage reveals that humanitarian law is invoked not as a universal standard but as a discretionary language deployed against adversaries while withheld from allies.

Refugees and Humanitarian Access: Inclusion versus Exclusion

US and European responses to refugees provide another revealing contrast. Millions of Ukrainians were rapidly granted temporary protection and access to housing, employment, and social services. As Bréville observed: “From the start of the war in Ukraine, Europe flung its doors open to millions of Ukrainian exiles” (Bréville, 2024).

No comparable welcome has been extended to Palestinians fleeing Gaza. Bréville continues: “There’s been no such welcome for the hundreds of thousands of people wanting to flee Gaza” (Bréville, 2024). Instead, borders have remained closed, evacuation routes restricted, and humanitarian access heavily constrained.

These contrasting responses reinforce the perception of a hierarchy of victims, where empathy and solidarity are distributed unevenly along cultural and political lines.

Political and Media Discourse: Heroes, Villains, and Moral Framing

Finally, the analysis reveals profound differences in political rhetoric and media narratives. Ukrainians are consistently portrayed as heroic defenders of democracy. President Zelensky has been celebrated in Western parliaments and media, reinforcing a narrative of moral clarity.

By contrast, Palestinians in Gaza are frequently framed as complicit or suspect. Thussu notes that “the victims of the Israeli invasion of Gaza are, more often than not, presented as partly culpable in their support for Hamas”

(Thussu, 2024). This framing shifts moral responsibility away from state violence and toward civilian populations. Such discursive patterns legitimize policy choices. They make sanctions and military aid appear morally necessary in one case, while rendering silence and complicity acceptable in another.

Summary of Key Findings

Taken together, the comparative analysis reveals a consistent pattern:

- Sanctions are applied rigorously against adversaries but withheld from allies.
- Military aid is framed as defensive in Ukraine and unconditional in Gaza.
- Humanitarian law is invoked selectively.
- Refugees are welcomed selectively.
- Media narratives construct unequal moral categories of victims.

These findings confirm the central argument of the article: US responses to Ukraine and Gaza reflect not universal principles but a selective and power-conditioned application of norms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative findings presented in the previous section raise fundamental questions about the nature of norm enforcement, moral authority, and power in contemporary international politics. This discussion interprets those findings through the theoretical lenses outlined earlier, realism, liberal internationalism, and constructivism, while also considering their broader implications for the legitimacy of international law and the evolving global order.

Double Standards as a Structural Feature of U.S. Foreign Policy

One of the central insights emerging from the analysis is that double standards in US responses to Ukraine and Gaza are not episodic inconsistencies but structural features of US foreign policy. From a realist perspective, this outcome is neither surprising nor anomalous. Realism holds that states prioritize survival, power, and strategic advantage over abstract norms. Ukraine represents a critical front in US and NATO competition with Russia, a rival great power whose influence Washington seeks to contain. Israel, by contrast, is a long-standing strategic ally that anchors US influence in the Middle East.

Within this framework, norms such as international law and humanitarian principles function instrumentally. They are invoked when they align with strategic objectives and sidelined when they threaten core alliances. The absence of sanctions on Israel, despite extensive civilian harm in Gaza, reflects this logic. As Brauman notes, “military occupation and the annexation of territories by force... elicit reactions from the West that are diametrically opposed to one another” (Brauman, 2024). From a realist standpoint, this divergence is not hypocrisy but rational behavior within a system defined by power asymmetries.

However, while realism explains why such double standards occur, it does not address their normative or systemic consequences. This is where liberal internationalist and constructivist perspectives become essential.

Liberal Internationalism and the Crisis of the Rules-Based Order

From a liberal internationalist perspective, the selective application of norms documented in this study poses a serious challenge to the credibility of the rules-based international order. Liberal theory assumes that international law, institutions, and norms derive their strength from consistency and universality. When powerful states enforce rules selectively, they undermine the very institutions they claim to defend.

The US response to Ukraine has been framed as a defense of sovereignty, civilian protection, and international legality. Yet the contrasting response to Gaza exposes a profound tension between rhetoric and practice. Luckham warns that such inconsistencies “undermine the credibility of the ‘rules-based order’” and weaken trust in global governance institutions (Luckham, 2025). If international law applies only to adversaries and not to allies, its normative force is fundamentally eroded.

This erosion has tangible consequences. The reluctance of the United States to engage seriously with rulings and provisional measures issued by the International Court of Justice in relation to Gaza signals to other states that compliance with international law is optional and politically contingent. Over time, this weakens institutional authority and encourages norm evasion by other actors.

Moreover, liberal internationalism emphasizes the role of legitimacy in sustaining order. Legitimacy cannot be imposed by power alone; it requires belief in fairness and impartiality. The findings of this study suggest that such belief is increasingly absent, particularly outside the Western world.

Constructivism, Identity, and the Moral Geography of Suffering

Constructivist approaches offer critical insight into how moral judgments are socially constructed and politically mobilized. The analysis demonstrates that US responses are shaped not only by material interests but also by identity-based narratives and discursive practices.

Thussu’s observation that Ukrainians are portrayed as “like us,” while Palestinians are framed as “others,” captures a deeper moral geography of suffering (Thussu, 2024). In this geography, empathy is distributed unevenly, and some lives are rendered more grievable than others. These representations are reinforced by media narratives, political rhetoric, and cultural proximity.

Such discursive constructions help explain why similar acts such as the bombing of hospitals—provoke outrage in one context and silence in another. When Palestinians are implicitly associated with terrorism or collective guilt,

civilian suffering is normalized or relativized. Conversely, when Ukrainians are framed as defenders of democracy, their suffering demands immediate redress.

Constructivism thus reveals that double standards are sustained not only through policy decisions but also through shared meanings and social expectations that render those decisions intelligible and acceptable to domestic audiences.

Global South Perspectives and the Erosion of Western Moral Authority

One of the most significant implications of selective norm enforcement is its impact on perceptions in the Global South. Many states and societies outside the Western bloc view US responses to Ukraine and Gaza as emblematic of long-standing Western hypocrisy. This perception has been articulated explicitly by scholars and commentators who argue that international law has become a tool of domination rather than justice.

Saul and Seymour argue that “violence is not a context-independent abstraction” and warn against moral frameworks that ignore historical oppression (Saul & Seymour, 2024). Such arguments resonate strongly in postcolonial contexts, where experiences of occupation, intervention, and selective humanitarianism are deeply embedded in collective memory.

The growing reluctance of countries such as India, Brazil, and South Africa to align fully with Western positions on Ukraine cannot be understood solely through geopolitical interests. It is also a response to perceived moral inconsistency. The Gaza case, in particular, has reinforced skepticism toward Western claims of universal values and accelerated calls for a multipolar order in which normative authority is less concentrated.

Humanitarianism, Instrumentalization, and Ethical Consequences

Another critical issue raised by the findings is the instrumentalization of humanitarian discourse. In the Ukraine case, humanitarian language is deployed to mobilize support, justify sanctions, and legitimize military aid. In Gaza, similar language is diluted, deferred, or replaced by security-centered narratives.

This instrumentalization carries ethical costs. When humanitarian principles are applied selectively, they lose their universality and risk becoming rhetorical tools rather than moral commitments. As Amnesty International’s Agnes Callamard warned, “This standard double is a bigger threat to human rights in the current situation” (Mehr News, 2023).

The normalization of selective empathy also desensitizes international audiences to suffering that falls outside dominant moral frames. Over time, this undermines the very idea of civilian protection as a universal obligation.

Implications for International Law and Future Conflicts

Finally, the findings of this study have important

implications for the future of international law and conflict governance. If powerful states continue to apply norms selectively, weaker states and non-state actors may increasingly reject international legal frameworks as illegitimate. This risks accelerating a shift toward power-based rather than rule-based international relations.

The comparative analysis of Ukraine and Gaza thus reveals more than policy inconsistency; it exposes a deeper crisis of legitimacy in global governance. Whether this crisis leads to reform or fragmentation remains an open question. What is clear, however, is that the credibility of international law depends not on rhetoric but on consistent practice.

CONCLUSION

This article examines US responses to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza through a comparative analytical framework based on international relations theory. By systematically analyzing sanctions policies, military aid, humanitarian responses, and political and media discourse, the study reveals a consistent pattern of selective enforcement of norms in US foreign policy.

The findings reveal a clear divergence in policy practices. In the case of Ukraine, the US quickly mobilized broad economic sanctions, large-scale military aid, and diplomatic pressure against Russia, arguing that these actions were necessary to defend sovereignty, international law, and the rules-based international order. In the Gaza conflict, by contrast, Washington has avoided imposing sanctions on Israel, continued to provide significant military support, and repeatedly used diplomatic mechanisms to shield its ally from international accountability, despite widespread humanitarian concerns.

These differences suggest that the application of international norms is closely linked to strategic interests, alliance commitments, and geopolitical calculations. From a realist perspective, this pattern reflects the logic of power politics: Ukraine represents a vital front in the strategic competition with Russia, while Israel remains a key long-term ally in the Middle East. In such a framework, international norms often have an instrumental rather than universal function.

However, the selective application of norms has broader implications for the legitimacy of international institutions and the credibility of the international rule-based order. Liberal internationalist views emphasize that international law derives much of its authority from stability and universality. When powerful states apply these norms unevenly, perceptions of fairness and legitimacy in structures of global governance are undermined.

Constructivist insights further highlight the role of discourse and identity in shaping international responses. Media narratives and political rhetoric often create moral hierarchies of victims, portraying some populations as deserving of immediate solidarity while marginalizing others. These narratives influence public perceptions and help legitimize different political responses to similar humanitarian crises.

Finally, the comparative analysis of Ukraine and Gaza highlights a broader tension between the universal language of international norms and the strategic realities of global politics. While international law and humanitarian principles remain central to diplomatic rhetoric, their practical application continues to be shaped by power, identity, and geopolitical interests. Addressing this gap between principle and practice remains essential to maintain the credibility of international institutions and strengthen the legitimacy of global governance in an increasingly fragmented international system.

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