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Do Structural Inequalities in the International System Lead Powerful or Marginalized States to Ignore or Violate International Law?

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Abstract. This article explores how structural inequality within the international system enables powerful countries to selectively ignore or violate international law while forcing weak countries to abide by the rules. Through four case studies - the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration Case, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the WTO DS108 dispute - this article reveals how the veto power and weak enforcement mechanism of the United Nations Security Council gave rise to a legal system with privileges evade accountability, small countries find the law impractical and may not serve as a useful way of defense. However, the case of the WTO shows that even the strongest countries can be forced to abide by the rules when institutions provide credible automated mechanisms. The study reveals that the authority of international law depends on the design of the system: in the absence of an independent enforcement mechanism, the law ultimately submits to power; and after the establishment of an effective mechanism, powerful countries can also achieve compliance. The study points out that reform should focus on improving transparency, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and establishing mechanisms that link violations to substantial costs.

Keywords: Power Asymmetry, Legal Enforcement, International Compliance

1. Introduction

International law pursues universality and equal application, but the reality of the imbalance of global power often weakens this ideal. In practice, when core interests are threatened, major countries often use the structural advantages of the international system to circumvent or challenge legal constraints. Recent events have highlighted this contradiction. In 2022, Russia blatantly violated the prohibition of the use of force in the United Nations Charter, launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and then obstructed the United Nations Security Council's action by rejecting the draft resolution condemning the invasion and demanding the withdrawal of troops [1]. In 2016, China categorically refused to recognize the legally binding arbitration ruling under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which denied China's expansionary claim in the South China Sea [2]. China said that the ruling was "null and void" and unenforceable [2]. The United

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States bypassed the Security Council and invaded Iraq in 2003 without being explicitly authorized to use force, claiming that the previous resolution constituted a legal basis - a position that was later publicly questioned by the Secretary-General of the United Nations as contrary to the Charter [3]. These cases raise key questions: Does structural inequality in the international system essentially allow powerful countries to ignore or violate international law, while weak or marginalized countries must fulfil their obligations? This article discusses this problem by analyzing how the characteristics of the Security Council's veto and weak enforcement mechanism have created an unequal competitive environment in the field of international law. Scholars have long been controversial about the relationship between power and international law.

Scholars have long argued and questioned the relationship between power and international law. Realist perspectives contend that international rules ultimately reflect the distribution of power and cannot reliably constrain great powers when their security or core interests are on the line [4]. Indeed, the U.N. Charter itself embodies a compromise between law and power: it enshrined the prohibition of aggression, but it also granted the five victorious powers of World War II a permanent veto on the Security Council, effectively assuring that no enforcement action could proceed against them (or their close allies) without their consent [5]. The veto was rationalized as necessary to keep the great powers inside the system and prevent direct confrontation among them, but it has often functioned in practice as a shield that allows those same powers to exempt themselves from legal consequences [5]. Liberal institutionalist and constructivist scholars, on the other hand, emphasize that most of the time states do follow international law. As Louis Henkin famously observed, “almost all nations observe almost all principles of international law…almost all the time.” [6] Even powerful states generally seek legitimacy and typically justify their actions in legal terms rather than openly admitting defiance. That suggests global norms still exert reputational pressure. However, as this study will show, the high overall rate of routine compliance should not obscure the exceptional moments when the system’s structural biases become visible. When fundamental geopolitical interests are at stake, great powers have developed ways—legalistic or openly extralegal—to sidestep rules that others are expected to obey. Meanwhile, weaker states lack comparable escape hatches and often depend on international law as their primary shield, winning occasional “paper victories” that do not translate into material power.

This tension between legal equality and power inequality is the core contemporary controversy about the so-called "rule-based international order". One view is that the order is structurally skewed, which is reflected not only in the institutional design level (such as the veto of the Security Council, the weighted voting system of global financial institutions, the control of the agenda by the dominant country), and in the level of selective law enforcement (such as the sanctions mechanism, the handover of cases by the international tribunal, and the war against non-powers. Crime accountability mechanism). Another point of view points out that under the framework of a specific system, the law can even effectively restrain the powerful. For example, trade laws can sometimes force the United States, the world's largest economy, to adjust its policies due to unfavorable rulings under the credible retaliatory mechanism of the World Trade Organization (WTO) [7]. This article provides a new perspective for the debate by analyzing specific cases of structural inequality and power politics intertwined with legal obligations. It aims to reveal how the characteristics of veto and weak execution enable powerful countries to selectively ignore international law, and to explore under what kind of institutional design conditions, even large countries can be pushed to compliance.

Even powerful countries usually seek legitimacy and often use legal terms to justify their actions, rather than openly admitting disobedience. This shows that global norms can still exert reputation

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pressure. However, as this study will reveal, the overall high level of conventional compliance should not cover up those special moments - when the structural bias of the system appears. When fundamental geopolitical interests are threatened, powers have developed various means - whether legalistic or transcending the law - to circumvent the rules that other countries must abide by. At the same time, weak countries lack an equally effective escape route, often use international law as the main protective shield, and occasionally win a "paper victory" that is difficult to transform into substantial power.

2. Literature review

Early international law was built on the imagination of sovereign equality—the idea that all states are juridically equal. In reality, material power has always shaped which rules matter and who can enforce them. Classical realists like E. H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau argued that law and institutions are instruments of power, not independent constraints. John J. Mearsheimer sharpened this claim by arguing that institutions (and, by extension, international legal rules) largely “reflect the distribution of power in the world” and rarely force great powers to act against core interests [4]. The historical record appears to support this skepticism. Before World War II, the League of Nations proved unable to discipline expansionist great and regional powers; Japan and Italy simply exited the system after condemnation of their conquests. After 1945, the United Nations was deliberately structured to avoid that scenario. The United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and China made their participation contingent on a Security Council structure that granted them permanent seats and veto authority [5]. In other words, hierarchy was not an accident or a later distortion; it was baked into the enforcement machinery of the postwar order. A permanent member can violate the Charter’s core norm—the ban on aggressive war—knowing that it (or an ally) can veto any attempt to label the act unlawful or impose collective measures [5]. This creates an asymmetry between the “law on the books” (universal and categorical) and the “law in practice” (conditional on great-power consent).

Critics also highlight selective enforcement. Security Council sanctions and authorizations of force overwhelmingly target weaker states, not permanent members. Attempts to refer atrocities in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC), for example, were vetoed by Russia and China, and similar efforts to hold Russia legally accountable for its 2022 invasion of Ukraine are expected to meet the same roadblock in the Council [5]. Meanwhile, liberal institutionalists and constructivists counter that this portrait can be too cynical. They note that powerful states generally value a predictable, rules-based environment because it stabilizes markets, facilitates diplomacy, and legitimizes influence. Empirically, they argue, rule compliance is the norm: Henkin famously wrote that “almost all nations observe almost all principles of international law…almost all the time,” [6] and that remains a touchstone for the compliance literature. On this account, even hegemonic actors like the United States usually follow most treaty commitments most of the time, and they often accept adverse rulings in technical regimes—particularly trade—when the cost of open defiance would be economically or reputationally damaging [7]. The need for justification itself is meaningful: before the 2003 Iraq War, U.S. and U.K. officials argued (controversially) that prior U.N. Security Council resolutions already authorized force, signaling that they felt unable to simply say “we are using force because we can.” [8] Even when great powers stretch the law, they tend to speak its language.

A third strand of scholarship, including critical international law and Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL), argues that structural inequality is not a flaw to be patched later but a feature deliberately embedded in the international legal order. From this perspective, there is serious

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injustice in the application of the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and even humanitarian intervention - strict enforcement against some countries, and when powerful countries seek exceptions, these principles are misinterpreted or reinterpreted. Critics point to what they consider to be double standards: Western-supported interventions (such as the Kosovo incident in 1999; later under the name of "Responsibility to Protect") are defended as morally necessary even without explicit United Nations authorization, while other interventions (such as Russia's actions in Ukraine) are condemned as unrestrained aggression. These perceived inconsistencies have fueled a narrative - especially in countries outside the U.S.-dominated security system - that the "rule-based order" is often a "power-based order dressed in legal language." Reformist proposals, such as restraining the veto in cases of mass atrocities or requiring public justification whenever a veto is cast, are partly attempts to answer that critique by making enforcement less dependent on the goodwill of the great powers themselves [9].

In sum, existing scholarship splits between (1) realist and critical views that see law as subordinate to power and structurally biased, and (2) liberal and constructivist views that stress the everyday effectiveness of legal norms and institutions, even for great powers. This paper engages both. It accepts the realist and TWAIL argument that structural inequalities—especially the veto and asymmetrical enforcement—tilt outcomes in favor of powerful states. But it also acknowledges the institutionalist insight that where credible enforcement mechanisms exist and reputational or material costs become unavoidable, even strong states can be induced to comply. The following case studies examine these dynamics in practice.

3. Structural inequalities in action: case studies and analysis

To examine whether structural inequality drives non-compliance, this paper tests four hypotheses:

H1: Powerful states use institutional veto power to evade international law. Permanent members of the U.N. Security Council (the P5) will invoke or threaten their veto to avoid accountability for themselves or their protégés.

H2: International law lacks the coercive force to compel powerful states. When a major power receives an adverse legal ruling or faces collective censure, it can ignore the outcome without suffering formal punishment.

H3: Geopolitical interests dictate compliance. States obey international law only as long as doing so does not collide with core security, territorial, or regime interests.

H4 (Null Hypothesis): Powerful states do not systematically exploit structural inequalities to avoid compliance. Instead, most great powers generally act within the bounds of international rules, and exceptional violations stem from extraordinary threats or legal ambiguity, not from power-based impunity.

The first three hypotheses predict that power plus structural privilege (like the veto) allows selective compliance. The null hypothesis predicts that law still constrains great powers in meaningful ways. The four cases below test these claims. The first three (South China Sea, the Russia–Ukraine war, and the Iraq War) largely support H1–H3. The fourth (the WTO's DS108 dispute) partially supports H4 by showing that, under certain institutional designs, even a hegemon can be forced to comply.

4. The 2016 South China Sea arbitration (Philippines v. China)

On July 12, 2016, a tribunal constituted under Annex VII of UNCLOS issued its award in Philippines v. China concerning maritime entitlements and historic rights in the South China Sea.

The tribunal found that China's "nine-dash line" claim of "historic rights" over vast swaths of the sea had no legal basis under UNCLOS, and that many disputed features were legally "rocks" or low-tide elevations rather than full islands—meaning they generated only limited maritime zones, not broad exclusive economic zones [2]. The decision was a sweeping legal victory for the Philippines, a middle power facing a far stronger neighbor. It was celebrated by many observers as proof that smaller states could use law to check regional hegemons [2].

But the aftermath exposed the limits of law without enforcement. China had refused to participate in the arbitration and, immediately after the ruling, declared the award "null and void" and without binding force. Beijing's position directly contradicted UNCLOS Article 296, which provides that such awards are "final and binding" on the parties. The tribunal itself had no police power; and while the Security Council could, in theory, have endorsed or pressured compliance, China's status as a permanent member with veto power effectively guaranteed that no punitive collective action would emerge from that forum [5]. In other words, China could defy a binding ruling with near-total impunity because the system granted it both (a) the material capacity to hold its ground at sea and (b) institutional leverage to block any attempt at multilateral enforcement [5].

The Philippines, despite "winning" on paper, lacked comparable leverage. It could neither force Chinese withdrawal from contested features nor marshal a sanctions coalition willing to impose serious costs on Beijing. Over time, Manila adjusted by pursuing bilateral engagement and de-escalation with China in exchange for economic incentives. The episode illustrates Hypothesis 2 (law cannot coerce a great power absent enforcement) and Hypothesis 3 (compliance is interest-driven: China judged that domestic nationalism, strategic depth, and control of critical sea lanes outweighed reputational costs). It also shows how structural inequality—especially the veto—lets a powerful state convert a binding judgment into a largely symbolic document.

5. Russia's veto power and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine

Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which is a blatant violation of Article 2(4) of the U.N. Charter - This article prohibits the infringement of the territorial integrity or political independence of any country by force. The attack triggered the largest interstate war in Europe in decades, creating the type of crisis that the collective security system after 1945 aimed to deal with. However, the United Nations Security Council, which shouldered the "primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security", immediately encountered a structural Obstacle: The alleged aggressor is a permanent member of the Security Council with veto power.

On February 25, 2022 - just one day after the invasion began- the Security Council voted on a draft resolution condemning Russian aggression and demanding the immediate withdrawal of the Russian army. Eleven of the fifteen members of the Security Council voted in favor, only Russia voted against, and China, India and the United Arab Emirates abstained. Normally, eleven votes in favor were enough to pass the resolution, but the draft was finally aborted due to Russia's veto [1]. The diplomats pointed out the absurdity: the institution that should have stopped the aggression was actually disintegrated by the aggressor itself. This is exactly the embodiment of hypothesis I in reality. The permanent members used their veto power not only to exempt themselves from collective condemnation, but also to block follow-up actions such as United Nations sanctions or authorized use of force [5].

When the Security Council was paralyzed, United Nations member states launched the "Uniting for Peace" mechanism and turned to the General Assembly to convene an emergency special meeting to seek support. On March 2, 2022, the General Assembly passed Resolution ES-11/1 with

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141 votes in favour and 5 votes against (35 abstentions), condemning the invasion and demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops [1]. The resolution is of historical significance in terms of scale and expression, but the key is that it is not binding. The resolution has great moral and diplomatic influence - showing that most countries consider Russia's behavior to be illegal aggression - but it does not authorize collective coercive measures. Therefore, the Ukraine crisis highlights the structural paradox at the core of the United Nations: when a great power violates the most basic provisions of the Charter of the United Nations (prohibition of war of aggression), that great power can also prevent the Security Council from taking action. Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 have been verified again: the veto has become a legal shield to avoid accountability, and the lack of Security Council support means that the enforcement mechanism is in vain.

The aftermath of diplomacy also confirms hypothesis 3. Russia uses legal terms to defend the invasion, claiming self-defense, humanitarian necessity, and even on the grounds of the existence of "genocide" in eastern Ukraine, which are the arguments used by Western countries in the past. Linda Thomas Greenfield, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, responded to the Security Council that "Russia cannot fail the United Nations Charter", emphasizing that although Moscow's veto cannot erase the normative effect of the Charter, it has deprived the Security Council of its credibility [10]. This confrontation reveals two points: first, the power can substantially suspend the enforcement mechanism; second, even those who blatantly violate international law still need to wear a legal cloak for their own behavior to maintain the claim of legitimacy.

The war in Ukraine also immediately triggered calls for structural reform. In April 2022, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution requiring any permanent member who exercises the right of veto to explain the reasons to the General Assembly [9]. At the same time, France and Mexico restarted political initiatives and urged permanent members of the Security Council to voluntarily give up their veto power in the case of mass atrocities [9]. These proposals do not eliminate the veto - nor can they be eliminated because the revision of the Charter of the United Nations itself requires the consent of a major power - but they are aimed at increasing the reputational cost of exercising the veto and condemning impunity. It is not certain whether this soft pressure can effectively curb future vetoes, but the promotion itself shows that many countries believe that unrestrained veto is a structural push for the recklessness of powerful countries.

6. The United States and the 2003 invasion of Iraq

The Iraq war led by the United States in March 2003 once again vividly demonstrated how major powers circumvent international law when major strategic interests are involved. In November 2002, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1441, declaring that Iraq "materially breached" its disarmament obligations and giving Baghdad a "last chance" to cooperate with weapons verification [8]. However, the key is that the main members of the Security Council, including France and Russia, insist that resolution 1441 does not authorize the automatic use of force; if Iraq refuses to cooperate, it must be approved by further resolutions of the Security Council before military action can be taken. John Negroponte, the then U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, also stated that the resolution did not have the "automaticity" or "hidden triggers" of war, which reinforced this explanatory position [8]. In early 2003, when France and other countries clearly vetoed the new resolution, the United States and Britain gave up seeking Security Council authorization and still launched an invasion - arguing that Iraq's continued breach of contract made the existing authorization of the resolution during the Gulf War automatically take effect. Most international law experts and members of the Security Council rejected this claim.

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From the perspective of the Charter of the United Nations, the legal basis of the Iraq war is extremely fragile. This is neither a clear act of self-defense against armed attacks nor a license for the use of force explicitly authorized by the Security Council. By 2004, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan publicly declared that the war was "illegal" because it violated the provisions of the Charter without the authorization of the Security Council [3]. This has always been in vain and has a great symbolic meaning: the top official of the United Nations essentially declared that the permanent members had launched an illegal war. However, at the level of formal international law enforcement, the United States has not been punished in any way. Neither have sanctions been imposed nor has a court been set up to try the crimes of aggression committed by U.S. leaders. This impunity confirms Hypothesis II (lack of enforcement mechanism) and Hypothesis I (structural protection of the role of permanent members). As a permanent member, the United States rejects any disciplinary resolution of the Security Council. In the absence of the transfer of cases by the Security Council, the United States is also not subject to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court for the crime of aggression - and Washington is fully capable of obstructing the handover [5]. The only substantial cost is the loss of reputation and political dimensions: mass global protests, diplomatic rifts with allies, and long-term damage to the credibility of the United States.

As far as this study is concerned, the case of Iraq reveals how hegemonic countries have gradually evolved: first trying to operate within the system (seeking the support of the United Nations), then misinterpreting vague resolutions for legitimacy, and finally acting unilaterally when it cannot be legally recognized. The case also shows that the structural design of the Security Council and the International Criminal Court ensures that powerful countries bear the maximum indirect costs, even if international law is generally recognized as trampling. This comprehensively reflects hypothesis 1-3: the veto power (H1) and the lack of enforcement mechanism (H2) enable the United States to move forward; the core geopolitical goals - the regime change in Iraq and the post-9/11 security strategy - are above legal constraints (H3).

7. Compliance under constraint: the U.S. and an adverse WTO ruling (DS108)

The conflict between power and law does not always end in confrontation. The trade law provides an important counterexample. The WTO "hard-wires" economic punishment and breach of contract. This enforcement mechanism even restrains the United States in practice. A landmark case is the "U.S.-foreign sales company tax treatment" dispute (DS108) that has lasted for many years [7].

In the DS108 case, the European Union questioned that the U.S. tax provisions essentially subsidized exporters by exempting domestic taxes on specific overseas sales revenue. Between 1999 and 2000, the WTO Group of Experts and the Appeals Body ruled that the scheme violated WTO rules and constituted an illegal export subsidy and ordered the United States to revoke it. The United States formally repealed the offending regime—called “Foreign Sales Corporations”—but quickly enacted successor legislation that, in Brussels’ view, replicated the subsidy in slightly altered form. The EU returned to the WTO, which again found the revised U.S. measures noncompliant [7].

At that point, the EU requested authorization to retaliate. A WTO arbitrator approved sanctions of up to roughly $4 billion per year—the largest retaliatory award ever granted in the system [11]. The EU then prepared (and later imposed) escalating tariffs on U.S. goods to force compliance. This mattered domestically: the threatened tariffs hit politically sensitive export sectors and galvanized U.S. business lobbies to pressure Congress. Under that pressure, Congress passed the American Jobs Creation Act and subsequent follow-up measures to remove the offending subsidies. Between 2004 and 2006, after years of resistance and delay, the U.S. ultimately brought its tax code into conformity and the EU lifted its sanctions [7].

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This episode shows Hypothesis 4's partial validity. When an institution is designed so that defiance is costly, even a hegemon is forced to comply. The United States did not simply walk away from the WTO or declare the ruling irrelevant. Instead, it delayed, bargained, and then changed its domestic law. In other words, credible enforcement capacity can narrow the gap between powerful and weaker states. A mid-sized actor (the EU) could credibly threaten billions in countermeasures and thereby force policy change in the United States. That is precisely what did not exist in the South China Sea, in Ukraine, or in Iraq.

At the same time, the WTO story also shows the limits of legal constraint. In recent years, the United States has systematically blocked appointments to the WTO Appellate Body—the organization's top appeals tribunal—leaving it unable to hear appeals since late 2019. As of 2024–2025, U.S. obstruction has kept the appellate function paralyzed and prevented the restoration of a fully binding, two-tier dispute system, even as more than 100 WTO members have pushed to revive it [12]. Washington's ability to stall reform underscores that powerful states can, over time, reshape or disable enforcement mechanisms they find too constraining.

8. Cross-case comparative analysis

In these four cases, a consistent pattern is presented. When core security or sovereign interests are implicated, major powers either use structural protection mechanisms (such as the Security Council's veto power) or rely on the lack of a strong enforcement mechanism to avoid adverse legal consequences. Russia vetoed the Security Council's resolution condemning its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and prevented the collective implementation of the prohibition of aggression in the United Nations Charter. China refused to implement the binding maritime rights and interests of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, while using its naval presence and permanent membership of the Security Council to obstruct substantive sanctions. The United States foresaw the risk of veto and was unwilling to wait for further verification. In 2003, it invaded Iraq without the authorization of the Security Council. Although it suffered a loss of reputation, it was not formally punished by law. These results confirm hypotheses 1-3: the veto and weak enforcement mechanisms make selective compliance possible; compliance behavior follows geopolitical interests rather than abstract legal obligations [4].

However, the case of the WTO shows that structural inequality is not predestined. In the DS108 case, the European Union imposed a credible and substantial price on the non-compliance of the United States through a legalized, rule-based forum. In the face of escalating authorized retaliation measures, Washington finally chose to comply by amending the tax law (although the process was slow and reluctant). This part verifies the zero hypothesis (H4): under a specific institutional design, even hegemonic countries will obey the rules they do not agree with. The key difference lies in the strength of implementation - when there are clear and automatic countermeasures (such as the WTO mechanism), the law is "compulsory"; while when the implementation depends on the authorization of the Security Council (such as the use of force, maritime disputes), the law is reduced to "begging" [5].

A second insight is that structural inequalities are iterative, not static. Great powers learn from one another. Russia justified its Ukraine invasion using legal rhetoric reminiscent of Western justifications for Kosovo or Iraq, trying to frame unilateral force as humanitarian or preemptive. The United States, after the backlash to Iraq, placed renewed emphasis on multilateral legality in later interventions. China, after the South China Sea ruling, doubled down on asserting "sovereign rights" and courting regional states economically rather than accepting the tribunal's reasoning. Each power both resists legal constraint and seeks legal cover.

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Third, international law itself is bifurcated. In some domains (trade, investment arbitration, some human rights bodies), procedures and remedies are comparatively institutionalized, and enforcement can be reciprocal or automatic. In others (use of force, territorial disputes, Security Council–mandated accountability), enforcement depends on the consent—or at least non-obstruction—of the very states most likely to violate the rules. That bifurcation explains why smaller states often view “the rules-based order” as selective and hierarchical: they see a world where they are expected to obey rules that great powers treat as optional.

Finally, the cases reveal that unequal structures give powerful states a choice. A weaker state, when condemned by the Security Council or handed an adverse ruling, is likely to face sanctions, isolation, or even force. A great power can choose: comply, delay, reinterpret, or openly defy. It can also work over time to modify the institution itself, as the United States has done by paralyzing the WTO Appellate Body since 2019. That capacity to choose—grounded in structural privilege—is at the heart of the inequality problem [12].

9. Conclusion

This study asked whether structural inequalities in the international system cause powerful states to ignore or violate international law—and how marginalized states fare under the same order. The evidence indicates that structural inequality does, in fact, generate a two-tier system. China rejected a binding maritime award and faced no formal sanction [2]. Russia launched a war of aggression against Ukraine and then vetoed Security Council action against itself [1]. The United States invaded Iraq without the authorization of the Security Council and was not subjected to any legal punishment except for damage to its reputation [3]. In every case, the core norms of international law - the peaceful settlement of disputes, sovereign equality, and the prohibition of aggression - are subordinated to the interests and institutional privileges of major powers. In contrast, weak countries still rely mainly on the law as the first (and sometimes the only) line of defense, which means that even the decisive "legal victory" achieved by the Philippines in the South China Sea ruling can often only be transformed into moral influence if the enforcement mechanism is structurally obstructed [2].

But international law is not completely abandoned by powerful countries, as the following can promote longer-term interests. The WTO DS108 dispute shows that even the United States will eventually amend domestic laws to conform to international norms when institutions give credible retaliation to vulnerable parties [7]. Even if a major country violates high-level norms (such as Iraq in 2003 or Russia in 2022), it rarely claims to be above the law. On the contrary, they often work hard - sometimes clumsy - to find a legal basis for their behavior. This rhetorical compulsion shows that international law still provides a discourse system of legitimacy. It may not be able to restrain power immediately, but it can set the tone for global public opinion afterwards [6].

Looking to the future, the credibility of international law will depend on whether structural inequality can be reduced without triggering the withdrawal of major powers. Efforts have been made. For example, after Russia used its veto power against Ukraine, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution requiring the permanent members of the Security Council to explain to the General Assembly before exercising veto power. France and Mexico proposed and urged the members to voluntarily give up their veto in case of large-scale war and affairs. These measures, while not abolishing the veto, aimed at condemning abuses and gathering diplomatic pressure when the Security Council is temporarily paralyzed [9].

Another way is to establish a system design that links violations with automatic consequences. The WTO model - which authorizes retaliation against parties who refuse to perform the contract -

provides a model. But the model is equally fragile. Since 2019, the United States has repeatedly obstructed the appointment of members of the WTO Appeals Body, which has essentially paralyzed the Supreme Court of the system and weakened the enforceability of the ruling. By 2024-2025, more than 100 WTO members have called for the restoration of the appeal function, but the obstruction of the United States has paralyzed the mechanism [12]. The irony is that the mechanism that forced the United States to comply with the ruling in the DS108 case is now weakening mainly due to the obstruction of the United States. This highlights a core dilemma: the reform measures that successfully "constrain" the major countries may provoke the encroachment on the system by these major powers [12].

It is not realistic to completely eliminate structural inequality. Unless there is a dramatic change at the geopolitical plate level, the Security Council's veto will not disappear, and powerful countries will still exert a disproportional influence in shaping global norms. However, gradual measures - enhancing the transparency of the use of veto power, strengthening the role of neutral arbitrators, imposing automatic or collective punishment for serious violations, and voluntary commitment of major countries to limit the right to veto in the event of atrocity - can gradually narrow the gap between formal legal equality and actual impunity.

Ultimately, the authority of international law depends on the harmony of power and principles. When the two contradict each other, the principle often makes concessions, and the law is the same as false. But the consequences of these events - wars of aggression, regional unrest, and the collapse of trust - often become the political driving force for reform. The revelations of these cases are neither fatalistic despair ("law is meaningless") nor naive optimism ("law will tame power on its own"). It is a conditional hope: the law can play a role when the system is deliberately designed to make the cost of illegality high - even for the powerful - and when the reputation price of impunity is made public. The mission of the next few decades is to transform this insight into lasting reform. If successful, international law may change from a tool often distorted by the power to a norm closer to common constraints; if it fails, we will slide into a world where "might makes right" is not only practiced but also openly admitted.

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