

# Policy Volatility and Normative Challenges: American Engagement in Syria (2011–2024) and the Reconfiguration of Global Governance

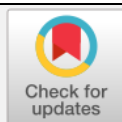
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## ARTICLE INFO

**Publication Info:**  
Research Article



### How to cite:

Fauzi, W., Adi, I. R., & Hindun, H. (2025). Policy Volatility and Normative Challenges: American Engagement in Syria (2011–2024) and the Reconfiguration of Global Governance. *Society*, 13(2), 985–998.

**DOI:** [10.33019/society.v13i2.950](https://doi.org/10.33019/society.v13i2.950)

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**Received:** February 15, 2025;  
**Accepted:** April 27, 2025;  
**Published:** July 7, 2025;

## ABSTRACT

*The Syrian conflict, ongoing since 2011, has revealed the volatility of American foreign policy and raised critical normative questions for global governance. This article examines the trajectory of U.S. engagement in Syria from 2011 to 2024, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between evolving policy strategies and international norms. Utilizing a qualitative case study design that combines document analysis and process tracing, the study identifies three major phases: Obama's ambivalent interventionism, Trump's pragmatic retrenchment, and Biden's selective return to multilateralism. The findings demonstrate that domestic political polarization, geopolitical rivalries involving Russia, Iran, and Turkey, and normative tensions surrounding sovereignty and humanitarian protection collectively shaped U.S. policy volatility. These oscillations undermined America's credibility as a consistent norm entrepreneur, contributing to the erosion of unipolar governance structures. Consequently, the Syrian conflict has accelerated a transition toward multipolar and fragmented global governance, in which non-Western powers and non-state actors increasingly influence outcomes. The article argues that addressing policy volatility and normative fragmentation requires deeper engagement with regional powers and non-state actors while reinforcing multilateral frameworks to manage protracted crises in an era of multipolarity.*

**Keywords:** Global Governance; Normative Challenges; Policy Volatility; Syria; U.S. Foreign Policy

## 1. Introduction

The American engagement in the Syrian conflict from 2011 to 2024 exemplifies the volatility and inconsistency of U.S. foreign policy amid global power realignments and intensifying regional tensions. The outbreak of the Syrian crisis within the broader context of the Arab Spring initially reflected the willingness of Western states, including the United States, to support democratic movements. However, this stance quickly devolved into a protracted civil war, further complicated by the interventions of regional powers and the geopolitical strategies of states such as Russia and Iran, which sought to exploit the instability to expand their influence in the region (Seven, 2025).

President Obama's administration adopted a cautious approach marked by selective intervention, including the use of airstrikes and limited support for certain rebel factions. This policy was defined by a reluctance to engage militarily on a large scale, shaped by the lingering legacies of U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Critics contend that the Obama administration faced mounting pressure to act decisively in response to humanitarian crises, particularly as evidence of mass atrocities emerged (Ahmed, 2023; Mahmood et al., 2021).

In contrast, President Trump's administration pursued a policy of pragmatic retrenchment, characterized by a substantial reduction in U.S. military presence and support for opposition groups in Syria. This approach reflected a broader strategic preference for disengagement from long-term foreign commitments, consistent with growing domestic skepticism toward interventionism. The shift represented a marked departure from the multilateral orientation of previous administrations, further complicating the dynamics of the Syrian conflict and diminishing America's role as a regional mediator (Alshoubaki & Harris, 2018; Lionberger, 2017).

Under President Biden, U.S. foreign policy underwent yet another shift, marked by a renewed emphasis on multilateralism and the promotion of human rights. His administration sought to rebuild alliances and prioritize diplomatic engagement while continuing to confront persistent threats from ISIS and other extremist groups. This complex interplay between renewed international engagement and adherence to core American values has reignited debates about the effectiveness of U.S. policy in addressing humanitarian crises stemming from the Syrian conflict, where questions of sovereignty and the legitimacy of external intervention remain increasingly contentious (Huland, 2019).

The shifts in U.S. policy during this period underscore a broader fragmentation within international governance frameworks. The United Nations Security Council's inability to take decisive action in response to the Syrian crisis exposed the inherent limitations of existing global governance structures, particularly when confronted with sovereignty disputes and the politicization of humanitarian aid. Furthermore, as regional powers such as Turkey and Iran maneuvered for influence within Syria, the erosion of U.S. leadership became increasingly apparent, raising profound concerns about the future of the liberal international order established in the aftermath of World War II (Schwoon & Duxbury, 2019).

Thus, U.S. engagement in Syria is a microcosm of broader foreign policy transformations. It has catalyzed deeper discussions about governance, sovereignty, and the moral imperatives of intervention in global crises. The persistent dissonance between U.S. policy behavior and evolving international norms underscores the urgent need to re-evaluate the conceptual and institutional frameworks guiding foreign intervention, particularly in light of the growing complexities surrounding humanitarian emergencies and the competing principles of human rights and national self-determination (Eggerman et al., 2023; Zeno, 2022).

Accordingly, this study seeks to address two central questions: (1) How has U.S. policy in Syria evolved across three administrations between 2011 and 2024? and (2) What normative implications has this policy volatility produced for the configuration of global governance? By situating U.S. actions in Syria within broader theoretical debates on foreign policy analysis and global governance, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between great power behavior, normative contestation, and the evolving future of multilateralism.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework**

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) provides a critical lens for examining the actions of states, particularly the United States, within the intersection of domestic and international influences. Analyzing the U.S. response to the Syrian crisis, it becomes evident that domestic variables such as presidential leadership styles, partisan polarization in Congress, and public opinion regarding military intervention significantly shaped foreign policy choices. The contrasting approaches of the Obama and Trump administrations toward Syria demonstrate how internal political factors can generate divergent foreign policy strategies, even when both confronted similar structural constraints (Imamgayazova, 2017). This observation aligns with Hudson's argument that understanding state behavior requires analyzing the interaction between domestic politics and external pressures (Smith & Williams, 2021).

Global governance, particularly within fluid geopolitical landscapes, represents a complex interplay of norms and institutions that seek to manage international challenges without centralized authority (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). The Syrian conflict exposes the limitations of liberal internationalism and the emergence of a multipolar order in which non-Western states increasingly assert influence. Within this setting, the contestation of norms surrounding sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) reflects a deep tension between humanitarian intervention and respect for state sovereignty (Janzekovic, 2014). As the conflict evolved, the repeated use of veto power by Russia and China in the UN Security Council raised critical concerns about the effectiveness and legitimacy of R2P when geopolitical interests clash with humanitarian imperatives (Paglia, 2021).

The R2P doctrine was originally conceptualized to reconcile humanitarian imperatives with the principle of non-intervention, as articulated by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) (Schwoon & Duxbury, 2019). However, its inconsistent implementation, most notably in Syria, highlights persistent flaws in the global governance framework. The paralysis of the Security Council, driven by veto practices among major powers, illustrates the fragmentation of normative authority and weakens the international community's capacity to deliver timely humanitarian responses (Lionberger, 2017; Sytnik et al., 2022). Such selective enforcement has drawn significant criticism, illustrating how geopolitical rivalries undermine collective action in confronting mass atrocities (Parubochaya & Kovach, 2022).

Analyzing U.S. foreign policy in the Syrian context underscores the intricate linkages between domestic political dynamics and global structural forces. FPA offers a valuable analytical framework to interpret these interconnections, as does the discourse on global governance and the contested norms shaping state behavior in international society. The inconsistencies surrounding R2P and the influence of major powers further demonstrate the difficulties of achieving effective global governance in an increasingly multipolar world.

## 2.2. Research Gap

While the existing literature offers valuable insights into the Syrian conflict’s military, humanitarian, and normative dimensions, few studies systematically link the volatility of U.S. foreign policy to the reconfiguration of global governance. Most works treat American actions as isolated policy choices or focus narrowly on battlefield dynamics, neglecting their broader implications for international norms and institutional legitimacy. This study addresses that gap by situating U.S. policy shifts in Syria within the wider theoretical debates on foreign policy inconsistency and transformations in global governance.

Scholarship on U.S. foreign policy in Syria generally clusters into three major strands.

- 1) Studies focusing on strategic and security dimensions emphasize military involvement, counterterrorism objectives, and the containment of ISIS (Guler & Demir, 2024; Lister, 2015). While these works effectively map operational strategies, they often underplay the normative contradictions between humanitarian rhetoric and pragmatic security imperatives.
- 2) Research grounded in international relations theory highlights great-power competition, particularly the triangular dynamics among the United States, Russia, and Iran (Lund, 2019; Phillips, 2022). These studies illuminate geopolitical maneuvering but treat normative frameworks, such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), as peripheral rather than central to understanding policy volatility.
- 3) A smaller body of scholarship explores the normative and legal dimensions of the Syrian conflict, focusing on debates surrounding sovereignty, humanitarian intervention, and the paralysis of the UN Security Council (Janzekovic, 2014; Thakur, 2016). However, these analyses often evaluate global governance in static terms, without tracing how shifting U.S. policies have actively reshaped governance norms across administrations.

Compared with these strands, the present study contributes to the literature in two main ways.

- 1) It integrates process tracing with normative analysis, bridging the gap between empirical foreign policy decision-making and the contestation of international norms.
- 2) It extends the temporal horizon to include the fall of Assad in 2024, a turning point overlooked in earlier analyses, revealing how U.S. reactivity and inconsistency have accelerated the reconfiguration of global governance.

By positioning itself at the intersection of foreign policy analysis and global governance theory, this study provides a dynamic account of how policy volatility is reflected. It reshapes the normative architecture of the international order.

**Table 1. Comparative Review of Key Studies on U.S. Policy in Syria and Global Governance**

Author(s) & Year	Focus of Study	Key Contribution	Limitations	Contribution of This Study
(Ekim, 2015; Lister, 2015)	U.S. military strategy, ISIS containment, counterterrorism	Provides detailed mapping of U.S. operational choices	Underemphasizes normative contradictions and governance implications	Links security strategies to broader normative challenges and governance shifts
(Lund, 2019; )	Geopolitical competition (U.S.–	Explains balance-of-power dynamics in	Treats normative frameworks (e.g.,	Integrates geopolitics with



Author(s) & Year	Focus of Study	Key Contribution	Limitations	Contribution of This Study
Phillips, 2022)	Russia–Iran triangle)	Syria	R2P, sovereignty) as peripheral	normative analysis to explain volatility
(Guler & Demir, 2024; Thakur, 2016)	Normative/legal debates on sovereignty, R2P, and UN paralysis	Highlights ethical and institutional dilemmas	Assesses norms statically; lacks linkage to policy volatility over time	Demonstrates how shifting U.S. policy actively reconfigures governance norms
(Magruder et al., 2020)	U.S. strategic posture in Syria and regional engagement	Provides empirical insights and policy recommendations for U.S. counterterrorism, alliances, and reconstruction in Syria	Primarily descriptive and advisory; limited theoretical depth and normative analysis	Builds upon empirical findings to articulate a theory-driven linkage between U.S. policy volatility and shifts in global governance
(Salih, 2024)	U.S. policy in Northeast Syria and strategic reconfiguration after a decade of conflict	Analyzes the evolving U.S. approach in post-ISIS Syria, emphasizing the recalibration of strategy toward deterrence, alliance-building, and containment of regional powers (Iran, Turkey, Russia)	Focused primarily on security and operational aspects; offers limited engagement with normative and institutional dimensions of global governance	Builds on Salih’s strategic insights to develop a theory-driven interpretation of how U.S. policy volatility shapes normative contestation and the reconfiguration of global governance

As summarized in **Table 1**, previous studies on the Syrian conflict have examined U.S. engagement through fragmented analytical lenses. Security-oriented works provided detailed accounts of military operations, counterterrorism efforts, and ISIS containment strategies but gave limited attention to how these choices intersected with broader normative and governance frameworks (Ekim, 2015; Lister, 2015). Geopolitical analyses emphasized triangular rivalries among the United States, Russia, and Iran while treating norms such as sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as peripheral (Lund, 2019; Phillips, 2022). Normative and legal studies explored sovereignty, humanitarian intervention, and UN paralysis but largely assessed norms as static rather than evolving through shifting U.S. foreign policy (Guler & Demir, 2024; Thakur, 2016). Think-tank reports offered strategic insights into U.S. engagement and regional reconfiguration yet remained primarily descriptive, providing limited theoretical grounding on how policy volatility influences transformations in global governance (Magruder et al., 2020; Salih, 2024).

This study bridges these analytical strands by combining process tracing of U.S. policy shifts across the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations with normative analysis of sovereignty, humanitarian intervention, and R2P. Extending the temporal scope to include the fall of Assad in 2024, it captures a decisive turning point previously overlooked. It demonstrates

how U.S. foreign policy reactivity and inconsistency reshape the normative architecture of global governance in an increasingly multipolar order.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative case study design to analyze U.S. engagement in Syria between 2011 and 2024, including the post-Assad transition period. The case study approach is particularly appropriate because it enables an in-depth examination of complex policy dynamics, tracing causal mechanisms across multiple administrations, and the assessment of their normative implications for global governance.

#### **3.2. Analytical Approach**

Two complementary analytical strategies underpin this research. First, process tracing is applied to reconstruct the policy decisions and shifts that defined U.S. engagement in Syria under the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. Through this method, the study identifies causal linkages connecting domestic politics, geopolitical pressures, and normative frameworks to the volatility of U.S. foreign policy. Second, a normative analysis explores how U.S. actions and inconsistencies interacted with international norms, particularly sovereignty, humanitarian intervention, and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). This analytical lens further assesses how these interactions contributed to the reconfiguration of global governance, especially in the aftermath of Assad's fall in 2024, when U.S. policy became increasingly reactive.

#### **3.3. Data Sources**

The research draws upon a combination of primary and secondary data sources. Primary data include official U.S. government documents such as *National Security Strategy* reports, presidential speeches, Department of State briefings, and Congressional records, all offering direct insight into the formulation and evolution of foreign policy. In addition, United Nations resolutions and Security Council debates about the Syrian conflict are examined to capture the international dimension of governance and norm contestation. Public statements and policy papers issued by key regional actors, particularly Russia, Iran, and Turkey, are also analyzed to contextualize U.S. policy within broader geopolitical rivalries.

Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed journal articles on U.S. foreign policy, the Syrian conflict, and global governance, which provide theoretical depth and scholarly interpretation. These are complemented by analytical reports from leading think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment, CSIS, and The Washington Institute, offering policy-oriented perspectives and contemporary analysis. Finally, credible news outlets, including *AP News*, *Politico*, *BBC*, and *Al Jazeera*, are consulted to document recent developments, particularly those surrounding Assad's fall in 2024.

#### **3.4. Data Sources**

Data were collected systematically from 2011 through early 2025 to ensure comprehensive coverage of all three U.S. administrations involved in the Syrian conflict. Post-Assad developments (December 2024–May 2025) were also included to capture the reactive trajectory of U.S. policy in the immediate aftermath of regime collapse.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded through several sequential stages. Policy documents were first coded thematically using categories derived from *Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA)*, including domestic drivers, leadership styles, partisan politics, and public opinion, and from *Global Governance Theory*, encompassing norm contestation, sovereignty, and R2P. Building upon this coding, process tracing was employed to connect key turning points, such as Obama’s “red line” declaration in 2013, Trump’s troop withdrawal in 2019, Biden’s selective multilateralism between 2021 and 2024, and the fall of Assad in 2024, to broader transformations in global governance. To strengthen reliability, triangulation was implemented by cross-validating insights from primary documents, secondary scholarship, and contemporaneous media reporting, thereby minimizing bias and enhancing the validity of the findings.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Volatility of U.S. Policy in Syria

The analysis identifies four phases of U.S. engagement in Syria, each reflecting a different presidential doctrine and strategic rationale. From Obama’s ambivalent interventionism to Trump’s pragmatic retrenchment, Biden’s selective multilateralism, and finally the reactive posture following Assad’s fall in December 2024, these phases collectively demonstrate the volatility and inconsistency of U.S. foreign policy. **Table 2** summarizes the orientation, key actions, and normative implications of U.S. policies across these phases.

**Table 2. U.S. Policy Shifts in Syria (2011–2025) and Normative Implications**

Administration/ Phase	Policy Orientation	Key Actions in Syria	Normative Implications for Global Governance
Obama (2011–2016)	Cautious Interventionism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Declared the “red line” on chemical weapons but pursued a limited military response.</li> <li>Led a coalition against ISIS.</li> <li>Relied heavily on diplomacy and multilateral sanctions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ambiguity weakened the credibility of R2P.</li> <li>Raised doubts about U.S. humanitarian commitments.</li> <li>Reinforced perceptions of selective enforcement.</li> </ul>
Trump (2017–2020)	Pragmatic Retrenchment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ordered limited strikes following chemical attacks.</li> <li>Withdrew U.S. troops from northern Syria.</li> <li>Prioritized counterterrorism over regime change.– Pursued “maximum pressure” on Iran.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undermined U.S. reliability as a norm entrepreneur.</li> <li>Shifted the balance of power toward Russia and Turkey.</li> <li>Accelerated fragmentation of international consensus.</li> </ul>
Biden (2021–2024)	Selective Multilateralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintained a limited troop presence.</li> <li>Emphasized human rights and humanitarian aid.</li> <li>Re-engaged diplomatically with allies and the UN.</li> <li>Avoided large-scale military escalation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reinforced normative discourse, but with limited enforcement.</li> <li>Highlighted the gap between rhetoric and practice.</li> <li>Reflected a multipolar governance structure where non-Western actors increasingly shape outcomes.</li> </ul>
Post-Assad Fall (Dec 2024–2025)	Reactive Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responded to regime collapse by engaging interim authorities, including groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intensified the legitimacy crisis surrounding R2P and humanitarian intervention.</li> </ul>

Administration / Phase	Policy Orientation	Key Actions in Syria	Normative Implications for Global Governance
		linked to HTS. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Recalibrated sanctions and aid policies.</li><li>Repositioned troops to manage the resurgence risk of ISIS.</li><li>Reacted to rapid maneuvers by Turkey, Iran, and Russia.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Norms of sovereignty and recognition became contested.</li><li>The U.S. appeared reactive rather than proactive in norm-setting.</li><li>Accelerated the trend toward fragmented, multipolar governance.</li></ul>

The inclusion of the post-Assad phase illustrates the culmination of policy volatility. While Obama, Trump, and Biden pursued distinct yet internally coherent doctrines, the sudden collapse of Assad’s regime exposed the reactive and adaptive nature of U.S. engagement. Instead of proactively shaping the transition, Washington adjusted its policies to developments driven by regional powers and contentious interim authorities.

This reactive engagement amplified existing normative challenges. Questions of legitimacy emerged as actors with militant backgrounds assumed leadership roles, testing U.S. commitments to democratic norms and human rights. Simultaneously, ongoing debates surrounding sanctions, humanitarian aid, and diplomatic recognition underscored inconsistencies in the application of international norms.

The four-phase trajectory reflects a gradual decline in U.S. normative leadership: from ambiguous enforcement (Obama), to retrenchment (Trump), to selective engagement (Biden), and ultimately to reactive adjustment (post-Assad). This evolution weakened the coherence of U.S. foreign policy. It accelerated the reconfiguration of global governance toward a fragmented multipolar order in which regional powers and non-state actors exert growing influence.

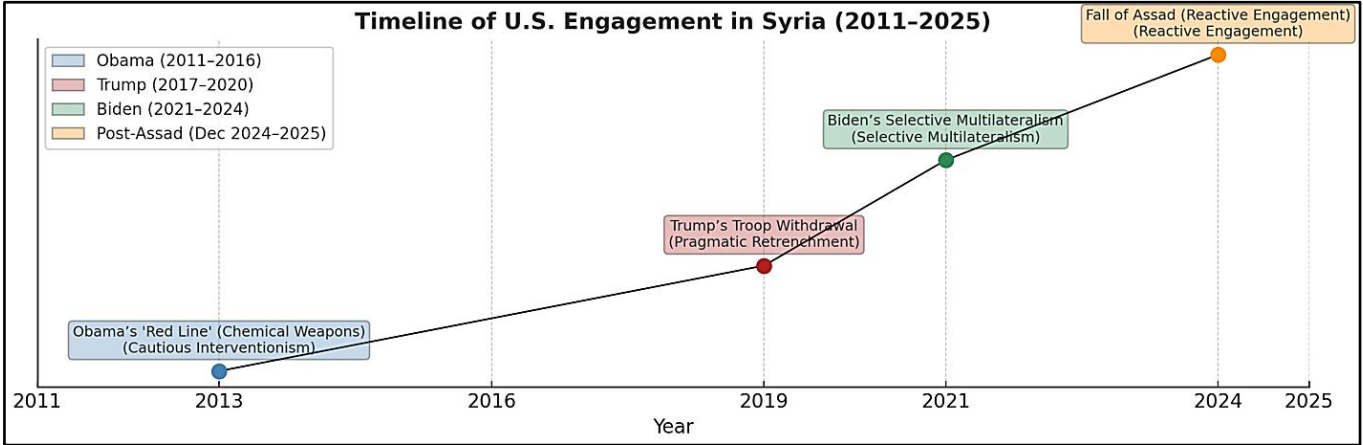


Figure 1. Timeline of U.S. Engagement in Syria (2011–2025)

Color-coded phases:

- **Blue (Obama, 2011–2016):** “Red Line” 2013, *Cautious Interventionism*
- **Red (Trump, 2017–2020):** Troop Withdrawal 2019, *Pragmatic Retrenchment*
- **Green (Biden, 2021–2024):** Renewed Multilateralism 2021, *Selective Engagement*
- **Orange (Post-Assad, Dec 2024–2025):** Fall of Assad, *Reactive Adjustment*



## 4.2. Drivers of Policy Volatility

The oscillations in U.S. policy can be broadly attributed to three interrelated factors: domestic politics, geopolitical rivalries, and normative pressures. Collectively, these drivers illustrate how internal and external dynamics interact to shape and perpetuate policy volatility.

### ▪ Domestic Politics

Domestic political conditions profoundly influence U.S. foreign policy decision-making, particularly through partisan polarization and public attitudes toward military engagement. Research indicates that sharp divisions within Congress and among the electorate often precipitate abrupt policy reversals between administrations. For instance, the divergent approaches of the Obama and Trump administrations toward international institutions such as the United Nations exemplify how shifts in domestic political landscapes directly affect foreign policy orientation and implementation (Brands, 2017). The abandonment of prior commitments, such as in Syria, frequently stems from public war fatigue and the electoral need to respond to changing public opinion, highlighting the intrinsic link between domestic political pressures and foreign policy adjustments (Blomdahl, 2018).

### ▪ Geopolitical Rivalries

The absence of a consistent U.S. policy approach has created openings for other states, most notably Russia, Iran, and Turkey, to expand their influence in strategically significant arenas such as Syria. These powers have skillfully exploited the uncertainties inherent in U.S. foreign policy to consolidate regional leverage and challenge Western dominance. For example, Russia's assertive military intervention in Syria capitalized on perceived American indecision, reshaping the regional power balance (Lakoff, 2013). The oscillatory nature of U.S. policies has, in turn, invited greater geopolitical maneuvering by competing actors, deepening strategic complexity and eroding the coherence of existing international relations frameworks (Ates, 2021).

### ▪ Normative Pressures

Normative frameworks surrounding humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) have generated persistent tensions within U.S. foreign policy. International calls to uphold humanitarian norms frequently conflict with respect for state sovereignty and the constraints of multilateral decision-making within institutions such as the United Nations. The absence of consensus in the UN Security Council further amplifies America's susceptibility to internal political debates advocating intervention or restraint, depending on prevailing ideological and electoral currents. This conflict between moral imperatives and sovereignty principles exposes the philosophical contradictions that underpin U.S. policy volatility (Martini & Estebanez, 2015).

Domestic constraints, geopolitical rivalries, and normative pressures reveal a complex interplay of forces shaping U.S. foreign policy. These factors underscore volatility arising from the convergence of internal political dynamics and external structural challenges, consistent with insights derived from Foreign Policy Analysis (Falqui et al., 2024).

## 4.3. Normative Challenges and Global Governance

The volatility of U.S. engagement in international affairs over the past decade has generated profound normative challenges that have reshaped global governance architecture. Three interrelated themes are central to understanding these transformations: the inconsistent

application of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), the paralysis of the UN Security Council, and the rise of alternative governance models amid the gradual decline of American authority.

The inconsistent application of R2P has become a critical source of normative erosion. Selective and politically motivated interventions have undermined the perceived legitimacy of this doctrine, reinforcing skepticism among states regarding its underlying principles. Analyses indicate that when humanitarian interventions are perceived as advancing geopolitical interests rather than moral imperatives, the normative foundation of R2P weakens significantly (Bril-Mascarenhas & Maillet, 2017). This inconsistency compromises the doctrine's moral authority and raises questions of fairness in protecting human rights, particularly when some crises attract disproportionate international attention while others remain neglected (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Consequently, global humanitarianism appears contingent upon strategic convenience rather than universal ethical commitment.

The paralysis of the UN Security Council during critical moments, most notably throughout the Syrian conflict, has further exposed the limitations of multilateral governance (Thi Thuy Nguyen, 2013). The Council's persistent inaction in the face of documented atrocities exemplifies the structural weaknesses of existing global institutions in addressing urgent humanitarian emergencies. This paralysis reflects entrenched power rivalries among permanent members and signals growing disillusionment with traditional multilateral mechanisms (Shani, 2025). As the capacity for collective action diminishes, state and non-state actors have increasingly turned toward unilateral and regional initiatives, thereby fragmenting the coherence of the international order.

In parallel, alternative governance structures have emerged, reflecting a discernible shift toward multipolar authority. Russia's military interventions, Iran's extensive proxy networks, and Turkey's cross-border operations in the Middle East exemplify how regional powers have expanded their influence within a geopolitical landscape once dominated by the United States (Olsen, 2022). These developments signify a substantive reconfiguration of power in which regional actors assert growing autonomy in global politics, frequently bypassing or contesting established institutional frameworks. While these localized governance arrangements may enhance responsiveness to regional crises, they often lack multilateral governance's procedural legitimacy and normative universality (Bolan et al., 2020).

The convergence of U.S. policy volatility, selective humanitarian engagement, and institutional paralysis within the UN Security Council has collectively produced significant normative challenges for global governance. These interlocking dynamics have created space for alternative centers of authority to emerge, leading to a fragmented international order increasingly shaped by regional and non-state actors. This transformation underscores the urgent need to re-evaluate foundational principles of international governance in light of a shifting global landscape and the erosion of traditional norm-setting leadership.

## 5. Conclusion

The trajectory of U.S. engagement in Syria between 2011 and 2024 demonstrates the volatility of American foreign policy and its far-reaching normative consequences. Across three administrations, U.S. policy oscillated from cautious interventionism under Obama, to pragmatic retrenchment under Trump, and selective multilateralism under Biden. These shifts were primarily driven by domestic political polarization, geopolitical rivalries, and normative pressures surrounding sovereignty and humanitarian intervention.

The analysis confirms that such policy volatility undermined U.S. credibility as a consistent global norm entrepreneur, eroding the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) legitimacy and

weakening confidence in the United States as a stabilizing force within international governance. At the systemic level, this inconsistency contributed to the decline of unipolar governance. It accelerated the emergence of multipolar, fragmented arrangements in which Russia, Iran, Turkey, and influential non-state actors play increasingly decisive roles. The Syrian conflict thus illustrates how foreign policy inconsistency affects immediate strategic outcomes and reshapes the normative architecture of global governance.

The shifting character of U.S. policy in Syria underscores the urgent need for greater strategic coherence if Washington intends to restore its credibility and effectively uphold international norms. Multilateral institutions, particularly the United Nations, must likewise adapt by developing more inclusive mechanisms less dependent on hegemonic leadership. The Syrian case further highlights the necessity of engaging regional powers and non-state actors in shaping norms and managing conflict within an era of multipolarity. At the normative level, the transparent and equitable enforcement of R2P remains essential to restoring legitimacy and preventing selective moral application. These adjustments are vital for constructing a more resilient global governance order capable of responding effectively to protracted and complex crises.

This study highlights the broader implications of U.S. policy volatility in Syria for the evolving global governance landscape. For policymakers, it underscores the imperative of aligning rhetoric with actionable commitment to rebuild credibility and sustain international norms. For international institutions and scholars, it emphasizes the need for adaptive frameworks and more flexible mechanisms to address protracted crises under multipolar conditions. Ultimately, consistent foreign policy conduct, inclusive institutional reform, and principled norm enforcement represent the cornerstones of a stable and legitimate international order in the twenty-first century.

## 6. Acknowledgment

The authors would like to sincerely thank all individuals and institutions who provided valuable support throughout this research. Constructive feedback, insightful discussions, and professional guidance have greatly contributed to improving the quality of this study.

## 7. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, or publication.

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