
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Manufacturing Institutional Non-Decision: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the United States Gaza Discourse at the United Nations Security Council

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| ABSTRACT

This study is an application of qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the discourse of United States (US) representatives in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on Gaza's ceaseless crisis that erupted in 2023. Drawing on Fairclough (1995), Van Dijk (1998, 2006), and Van Leeuwen (2008), and grounding the analysis in a corpus that comprises six UNSC records that includes the justifications of vetoes delivered by US representatives across the six Gaza-related resolutions between October 2023 and September 2025, the study investigates how US representatives put into use three discursive mechanisms, namely, euphemism, lexical absence, and agent deletion jointly to shape the linguistic construction of violence and institutional responsibility regarding Gaza conflict. It shows how US representatives softened killing and engineered starvation into a neutral vocabulary of "loss" and "humanitarian needs", how they kept salient categories such as occupation, collective punishment, and genocide out of the operative frame, and how they removed Israel from the grammatical position of agent of harm while installing Hamas as the transitive cause of the catastrophe. Further, by tracing these mechanisms across the full sequence of vetoes, the study shows that this discursive architecture persists while its surface forms strengthen as the factual and legal pressure on the US grows, moving from the suppression of the ceasefire demand to the delegitimisation of the very instruments that establish atrocity. This paper argues that the institutional lack of decision and non-action is produced and legitimised through the usage of multiple discursive mechanisms which function as discursive enablers, diffusing agency and lowering political and moral costs of institutional inaction. By doing so, the study offers a fresh viewpoint on international relations and discourse studies, explaining how language is used not to justify intervention, but to legitimise deadlock and render institutional failure structurally unavoidable.

| KEYWORDS

Critical discourse analysis; euphemism; agent deletion; lexical absence; UN Security Council; institutional non-decision; legitimisation.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The broader historical context of Gaza is shaped by occupation (1967-2005), blockade and military operations (after Hamas took control in 2007). However, the most recent escalation started on October 7, 2023 has made this densely populated Palestinian territory one of the most consequential tests of the contemporary international order, and the UNSC sits at the centre of that test. This study evaluates the discourse of US representatives to the UNSC on the Gaza crisis from 2023 to 2025. Drawing on excerpts from the UNSC meetings and related records on Gaza and the wider Middle East situation, the researcher seeks to illustrate how language is strategically employed to transform institutional inaction into a binding reality.

1.1 Contextualising the Gaza Conflict and the Role of the UNSC

The Israel-Palestinian ongoing territorial dispute is not a new phenomenon, its seeds date back to 1948. However, the death toll has never risen to such catastrophic levels within the same round of the conflict. The data coming out of Gaza is stark. Initial

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reports of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights placed the death toll above 30,000, two-thirds of them women and children (OHCHR, 2024). Independent academic work has since revised these figures sharply upward. A population-representative survey in *The Lancet Global Health* estimates violent deaths between October 2023 and January 2025 at roughly 75,200 (95% CI: 63,600–86,800), of which 56.2% were women, children, and the elderly (Spagat et al., 2026). More than 1.9 million people in Gaza, representing 90% of the population, have been displaced, while the official Ministry of Health count underreports actual violent deaths by nearly 35% (Spagat et al., 2026). As documented by the United Nations Office for the coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2024), the World Food Programme (WFP, 2024), and World Health Organisation (WHO, 2024), these numbers make Gaza an epicentre of mass suffering. Parallel UN records bear this out: heavy civilian casualties, damaged humanitarian infrastructure, severe shortages of food and medicine, all of them material facts that nonetheless tend to be subordinated to diplomatic framing (United Nations, 2023). The situation in Gaza has accordingly become a standard for assessing the effectiveness of UN action.

Against this backdrop, officials from a range of sovereign states perceive Gaza as a decisive challenge to the multilateral order, as they attribute the suffering in Gaza to systemic failures in collective security (Duman & Rakipoğlu, 2025). Many argue that the initial step to any sustainable peace is the stoppage of illegal occupation and settlement activity exercised by Israel. This position was recently supported by the International Court of Justice (2024) in its advisory opinion on the legal consequences of Israel's policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. However, within the UNSC, efforts to pass binding resolutions to establish a ceasefire, or to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access, and advance Palestinian statehood have been time and again hindered by a pattern of vetoes exercised by US representatives. This has led to an apparent “paralysis” where passivity or inaction is viewed as a consequential choice that prolongs the catastrophe (Hathaway et al., 2025, p. 12). It is how this paralysis is linguistically achieved and legitimised that the present paper sets out to address. The following section presents the objectives and the proposed central argument.

1.2 Problem Statement, Central Argument, and Research Objectives

Despite its clear mandate of maintaining international peace and security, and even with the documented scale of the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, the UNSC has been unable to respond effectively. This repeated failure to act on Gaza has been widely attributed to the US vetoes (Hathaway et al., 2025; Olayiwola, 2024; Setiawan, 2025). While accurate, this account is incomplete. It attributes the blockage to the mechanism of its production, but does not explain how such blocking was politically sustained. In other words, how the US representatives managed, across successive Council and Assembly meetings, to justify their obstruction before an international audience increasingly opposed to it. It is this discursive dimension of obstruction that the present paper takes as its problem.

This paper argues that the veto mechanism was not the sole tool used to prolong the Security Council's inaction on Gaza. Rather, US representatives used a wide range of discursive strategies jointly to legitimise their obstruction. This process of legitimization was paramount for sustaining the conditions under which institutional inaction became possible. That said, analysis will focus on euphemism, lexical absence, and agent deletion. These discursive mechanisms appear with striking regularity across the US statements under study, which suggests they are structured rather than incidental features of the discourse. In addition, each one carries out a distinct legitimization function, as the analysis will show, while together they constitute a coherent discursive system through which obstruction is made tolerable.

To advance this argument further, the paper aims to achieve three objectives. The first one is to situate the US' vetoes within the broader context of UNSC paralysis on Gaza. The second objective is to analyse three distinct discursive strategies, namely, euphemism, lexical absence, and agent deletion employed by the US representatives across the relevant Council meetings. And finally, to assess what this case reveals about the relationship between discourse, legitimacy, and collective security in the contemporary UN system.

This reframing has two interrelated implications. First, it offers a fresh viewpoint for international relations scholarship by showing how language practices within the principal security organ not only reflect but actively constitute conditions that make enforcement and protection less likely. Second, it contributes to discourse studies by demonstrating how classical CDA concepts, such as euphemism, lexical absence, and agent deletion, operate within high-stakes diplomatic settings to produce concrete juridical and humanitarian consequences. Yet, before developing the proposed argument, the paper situates its contribution within the existing scholarship. The remainder of this paper is structured in the following manner: the subsequent section reviews the literature on the discursive dimensions at the UN, the UNSC paralysis, and the politics of the veto; Section 3 outlines the methodology; Section 4 presents the discourse analysis of US representatives' statements delivered at the UNSC on the situation in Gaza; Section 5 discusses the findings; and Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis and International Politics

International political spaces such as the UNSC are settings where language that presents itself as neutral or technical can mask unequal distributions of power and accountability. This makes CDA particularly adapted to interrogating such arenas. As Wodak

and Meyer (2015) argue, the basic object of inquiry that CDA takes is the large discursive unit of text, however it insists on systematically relating textual choices to wider socio-political structures and struggles, rather than examining them in isolation. Within CDA, discourse is understood as a social practice that mirrors and helps shape patterns of dominance, control, and discrimination; language, in this view, operates as the medium through which inequality in society is legitimised, normalised, or resisted (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Critical approaches to language, therefore, provide tools for exploring how international institutions symbolically organise conflict, power, and responsibility.

Several strands within CDA, such as the dialectical-relational (Fairclough, 1995), the discourse-historical (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), and the socio-semantic (Van Leeuwen, 2008) approaches point towards the assertion that language is absolutely not neutral, and that lexical selection, narrative organisation, and grammatical construction encrypt premises about agency, causality, and moral responsibility. In political discourse on conflict as well as in media, these choices are extremely important, for they can foreground or obscure culpability, they can create in-group, construct out-group, and shape what counts as legitimate violence or acceptable inaction (Hodges & Nilep, 2007; Kandil, 2017; Van Dijk, 1998). Van Dijk proposes a perspective on ideology and manipulation that frames language as an instrument by which powerful actors affect public cognition regularly through implicit meanings, while obscuring the boundary between what counts as legitimate persuasion and what should be spotted as illegitimate manipulation (Van Dijk, 1998, 2006). This emphasis placed on how the ruling class use discourse as a means of obtaining consent for certain types of contested events is clearly relevant both to the practices of states and to actions taken by international organisations (Van Dijk, 1989, 2008).

Within CDA's wider area of criticism, Fairclough's three-dimensional model stands out as a central framework for linking micro-level linguistic analysis (i.e., the study of vocabulary and grammar) with macro-power relations at both the individual and institutional levels. His model distinguishes between three discrete levels of analysis, namely, the text level, the discourse-practice level, and the social-practice level. Rather than providing a description of vocabulary and grammar through interpretation of production and reception processes, analysts are encouraged to present explanation in terms of wider structures and struggles (Fairclough, 1992, 1995). Brought to bear on conflict communication, this architecture provides analysts with a basis to analyse specific grammatical patterns such as agent deletion, and acts of vocabulary selection like euphemism, as material evidence of ideological encoding, while situating them within organizational routines, and institutional political contexts (Fairclough, 2003; Kandil, 2017; Van Leeuwen, 2008). A practical example that illustrates this approach is Za'rour's (2026) work on bilingual media coverage of the 2023-2024 Gaza conflict. By combining qualitative analysis of agents through vocabulary and grammatical means with frequency mapping across a matched corpus, this illustrative work demonstrates how ostensibly technical features affect audiences' specific ideological calibration (Za'rour, 2026).

A further variation of CDA is the Discourse-Historical Approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, 2016). It draws attention to argumentation, topoi, and rhetorical strategies like metonymy, metaphor, and rhetorical questions, as significant tools for constructing groups the political actors label as their in-group, or out-group, which potentially allows them to manipulate audiences (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, 2016). An illustrative research that adopts this CDA tradition belongs to parliamentary discourse scholarship; Bull and Wells (2012) characterise the parliamentary discourse as an adversarial genre, they argue that each participant attempts to undermine his or her opponent's credibility while establishing his or her own through the use of complex combinations of argumentative and evaluative language techniques (Bull & Wells, 2012). These insights are operational in the context of multilateral diplomacy, where representatives must communicate to multi-levelled audiences, navigating simultaneously strategic persuasion, formal rules, and maintaining the legitimacy of the institution.

An additional understanding proposed by Van Leeuwen (2008) provides systematic categories for analysing how social actors and social actions are represented in discourse, it provides the fine-grained analytical apparatus that shows how impersonalization, abstraction, and agent deletion can push the responsibility out of sight, lend impersonal authority to contested actions, or create connotative meaning(s) to social actors (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 47). Such language strategies are said to be "abundant" within a bureaucratic language governed by impersonal procedures (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 47). Institutional and media discourse research indicates that when looking solely at the explicitly available language, we risk to miss how ideologies are naturalised through silences, lack of explicit reference, and limited use of specific kinds of narrative structures (Van Leeuwen, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). In an arena characterised by indirect negotiation when it comes to creating legal categories and attributing accountability such as international politics, the focus on what is not named, who is syntactically erased, and how abstract entities substitute concrete actors provides an incredibly insightful perspective for examining multilateral organisation's abilities to manage crisis, responsibility, and inaction at the level of the discourse, which is exactly what our paper attempts to realise by examining the US discourse within the UNSC on Gaza crisis.

Taken together, the strands of CDA surveyed above share a multidisciplinary commitment whereby linguistic analysis is not regarded as an end in itself, instead, it is treated as a route or a means for understanding how language constructs social, political, and institutional relationships that discourse mediates. In this instance, this commitment requires that the analysis of statements made by representatives of the US must be situated against the normative and legal structures of the international system within which those statements are produced. The next subsection thus sets out the legal and institutional structures that govern armed conflict and the Security Council's mandate to address it.

2.2 Normative and Legal Frameworks in Armed Conflict Governance

Debates on Gaza frequently invoke International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Criminal Law (ICL), and the UN charter to frame violence as both regrettable and legally actionable. For the purposes of this study, the normative-legal framework is seen as the collection of rules and principles or standards that are supposed to regulate the way military operations are carried out during wartime and the ways in which nations or institutions respond to it. This framework includes the Geneva and Hague Conventions and customary IHL (Henckaerts & Doswald-Beck, 2005), the Rome Statute and the jurisprudence of the International Criminal Court (Cassese et al., 2013), and the charter of the UN as well as any resolutions of the UNSC made under the authority of the charter (Simm et al., 2012). The primary purpose the normative-legal framework serves in this paper is specifically analytical; it is the analytical tool to identify the legally salient areas of civilian protection, prohibited acts, and duties of states and international organisations against which the discursive obstruction of collective action can be evaluated. Without this framework, 'obstruction' would be seen merely as a political description. However, here where the framework is introduced, obstruction becomes legally consequential because it indicates the frustration of a Council mandate under Article 24 in the face of conduct that constitutes violations of the Geneva Conventions, the Genocide Convention, and customary IHL.

Setting out the guidelines governing the conduct of hostilities, IHL's main principles are distinction, proportionality, precaution, and humanity. Within these principles various types of prohibitions are particularly relevant for the present case (e.g., the targeting of civilians and civilian property, collective punishment, using starvation as a method of warfare, and forcible transfer). Along with these prohibitions, there are also obligations under IHL which include facilitating speedy unrestricted access to humanitarian assistance to civilians in need (Henckaerts & Doswald-Beck, 2005). ICL converts these prohibitions into individual accountability through the Rome Statute, which codifies crimes against humanity, war crimes, aggression, and genocide (Cassese et al., 2013). The Genocide Convention holds a particularly significant place in the current Gaza debates, with South Africa's January 2024 application before the International Court of Justice (International Court of Justice, 2024) bringing its obligations into direct focus throughout the period examined in this article (Schabas, 2009).

The United Nations Charter establishes the institutional framework within which collective security is organised (United Nations, 1945). Article 24 confers on the Security Council "primary responsibility" for the maintenance of international peace and security and provides that the Council "acts on behalf of" all member states; Article 25 makes its decisions binding (Simm et al., 2012). Chapters VI and VII equip the Council with powers to recommend pacific settlement and to impose binding measures, including under Chapter VII the authority to determine threats to the peace and to authorise enforcement action. Article 27(3) provides the textual basis of the veto power by requiring nine affirmative votes including the concurring votes of the permanent members. The same paragraph also requires parties to a dispute to abstain from voting on decisions taken under Chapter VI, a requirement whose systematic non-observance was raised by several delegations in the debate analysed here.

The veto creates a structural tension within the Council's mandate. Article 24 charges the Council with primary responsibility for collective security; Article 27(3) gives any single permanent member the power to prevent the Council from discharging that responsibility. This tension produces the institutional condition that delegations across the debate describe as "paralysis": A Council that is mandated to act, structurally enabled to act, and procedurally prevented from acting by the unilateral exercise of the veto. Recent normative developments have sought to constrain this practice, notably the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Code of Conduct, the France-Mexico Initiative on veto restraint in cases of mass atrocity, alongside the broader Responsibility to Protect doctrine endorsed at the 2005 World Summit. These initiatives can be seen as evidence both of the normative pressure on veto-holders to justify their use of the veto and of the limits of that pressure to alter substantive outcomes.

Taken together, these instruments and arrangements define the categories of conduct that are legally consequential, the actors whose responsibility can be assigned, and the institutional duties that the Council is mandated to discharge. In other words, they establish a normative-legal terrain on which Security Council deliberation on Gaza unfolds. For this study, the framework performs a specific analytical function: it identifies what the discursive strategies analysed in the following chapters conceal, soften, or evade. Euphemism softens language that would otherwise invoke legally salient categories such as collective punishment and starvation as a method of warfare. Lexical absence omits referents whose explicit naming would activate those categories. Agent deletion removes the subjects to whom legal-normative responsibility would otherwise attach. The discursive obstruction of Security Council action is therefore not a free-standing rhetorical phenomenon but one whose legibility depends on the legal-normative framework it is designed to navigate. The next section turns to the methodology by which these strategies are identified in the corpus of US statements under study.

2.3 Theorizing institutional Inaction and Non-decision

Contemporary discussions surrounding the conflict in Gaza provide an opportunity for theorists to examine why international institutions have failed to act. Delegations across the six Security Council meetings on which the present analysis is built (S/PV.9442, S/PV.9499, S/PV.9552, S/PV.9790, S/PV.9929, and S/PV.10000) draw connection between the tens of thousands of Palestinian lives lost, millions displaced, and millions at risk of famine with the repeated vetoes exercised by the US. They argue that the failure to implement binding resolutions passed by the UNSC, together with the failure to take any action to address these humanitarian crises as required by the IHL, demonstrates that the inaction on behalf of the UN does not conform with its

stated objectives, and constitutes complicity in acts that violate IHL and the provisional measures ordered by the ICJ. In this framing, inaction is also not neutral. It is a consequential institutional choice that will cause the humanitarian tragedy to worsen and reduce the legitimacy of both the UNSC and the larger system of collective security. This treatment of non-decision as an essential outcome, rather than a procedural void is what makes CDA the suitable analytic framework. In other words, if non-action is produced and sustained by language, then the linguistic practices that produce it also become a proper subject for analytic examination in their own right.

Academics have long viewed non-action as a purposeful and significant tool of power rather than just as a decision to do nothing. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) theorized "nondecision-making" as a second face of power through which issues are kept off the agenda and demands are suppressed before they are voiced, a line later extended by Lukes (2005) to encompass the shaping of what actors perceive as possible. In the study of international organizations, Lipson (2007), drawing on Brunsson (1989), has shown how bodies facing contradictory demands decouple condemnatory talk from substantive action, a dynamic directly relevant to a Council that verbally laments humanitarian catastrophe while withholding enforcement. Discourse studies, in turn, has developed tools for analysing this dynamic at the level of language: Huckin's (2002) taxonomy of textual silence, and the broader literature on silence and absence in political discourse (Schröter, 2013; Schröter & Taylor, 2018), demonstrate that what is left unsaid, such as, perpetrators, legal categories, complicity, is as analysable and as consequential, as what is explicitly stated.

Theorizing institutional inaction as discursively produced thus requires linking the micro-level linguistic patterns to macro-level institutional outcomes, a practice that Fairclough calls the central analytical movement of his three-dimensional model (1992, 1995). When Council debates describe Gaza as a catastrophic humanitarian crisis yet repeatedly decline to name specific perpetrators, legal categories such as war crimes or unlawful occupation, or third-state complicity in arms transfers, they contribute to a narrative in which violence appears tragic but structurally unassigned, and in which the Council itself figures as a passive observer rather than as an actor withholding enforcement (United Nations Security Council, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a, 2025b). Scholars of CDA argue that focusing exclusively on what is said, while ignoring how ideologies are expressed via silence, narrative preferences, and lexical omission will leave out much of the naturalization of ideologies; consequently, the critical analysis must account for what is not articulated as well as for what is textually present (Fairclough, 1995; Van Leeuwen, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). From this viewpoint, non-decision becomes understandable as the result of discursive practices that weaken, readjust, or even delete agency, which makes the decisive action less politically urgent and institutionally less imaginable.

These three theoretical strands (CDA as the analytical apparatus, the normative-legal framework of IHL and the UN Charter as the benchmark against which discursive choices acquire their meaning, and the theorisation of inaction as substantive exercise of power) jointly support the central claim of this article: that the prolonged inaction of the UNSC on Gaza is sustained not only by the procedural mechanism of the veto but by the discursive work through which obstruction is rendered legitimate before an international audience. Establishing this claim empirically requires a method capable of identifying the specific discursive strategies through which legitimation operates, of locating them within the institutional genre of diplomatic speech, and of reading them against the legal-normative framework they are deployed to navigate. The next section sets out the design and procedures by which this analysis is undertaken.

3. Methodology

This section sets out the methodology through which the article's central claim is examined empirically. The study is a longitudinal critical discourse analysis of US explanations of vote on six vetoed resolutions concerning Gaza at the United Nations Security Council, between October 2023 and September 2025. The subsections that follow specify the research design, the corpus, the analytical framework, the procedure of analysis, and the reflexive and ethical considerations that frame the work.

3.1 Research design

The study uses qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how United States representatives at the UN legitimised the United States' obstruction of Security Council action on Gaza across the active phase of the 2023–2025 conflict. The choice of CDA reflects the study's central argument: that institutional inaction is not a procedural void but an outcome that is, in part, discursively produced (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Huckin, 2002; Lipson, 2007). A quantitative or purely content-analytic approach could establish that particular terms appear with particular frequencies, but could not adequately address how specific linguistic choices function to legitimise obstruction within the institutional genre of diplomatic speech. CDA, by contrast, is designed precisely to link micro-level linguistic patterns to macro-level institutional outcomes (Fairclough, 1992, 1995), and is therefore the appropriate apparatus for the questions this article asks.

The design is longitudinal. The corpus comprises the six United States vetoes cast on Gaza-related resolutions at the Security Council between 18 October 2023 and September 2025. The longitudinal framing serves a specific analytical purpose. The Council's mandated function on matters of international peace and security unfolded over twenty-three months of sustained

humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, during which the discursive challenge to the United States' position deepened with each successive veto: civilian casualty figures rose; the Secretary-General invoked Article 99 of the Charter; the International Court of Justice issued provisional measures under the Genocide Convention; and the General Assembly's veto-debate procedure under Resolution 76/262 became a routinised institutional response to each Council blockage. By examining United States legitimisation discourse across the full sequence of vetoes rather than at a single moment, the design tracks how the discursive strategies through which obstruction is rendered legitimate persist, intensify, or shift as that institutional and humanitarian context changes. The analytical value lies in identifying patterns that operate across the sequence as a whole, not in a snapshot of any single case.

3.2 Corpus

The corpus comprises the official UNSC records associated with the six US vetoes on Gaza-related resolutions, together with the immediate institutional documents that frame them. All documents are publicly available verbatim records or official UN documents retrievable through the UN Digital Library (<https://digitallibrary.un.org>). The corpus consists of the following texts, set out in Table 1:

Table 1. *The corpus: United States vetoes on Gaza-related Security Council resolutions, October 2023–September 2025.*

Veto	Date	Security verbatim record	Council	Draft resolution
1	18 October 2023	S/PV.9442		S/2023/773 (Brazil)
2	8 December 2023	S/PV.9499		S/2023/970 (United Arab Emirates)
3	20 February 2024	S/PV.9552		S/2024/173 (Algeria)
4	20 November 2024	S/PV.9790		S/2024/835 (E10)
5	June 2025	S/PV.9929		S/2025/353
6	18 September 2025	S/PV.10000		S/2025/583 (E10/Denmark)

Furthermore, the Secretary-General's letter of 6 December 2023 invoking Article 99 of the Charter (S/2023/962), which is the immediate institutional trigger for the second veto and is referenced in the United States' explanation of vote that follows, together with The International Court of Justice provisional measures order of 26 January 2024 in *South Africa v. Israel*, which is referenced in the third draft resolution, forms part of the normative-legal terrain against which the US representatives' discursive choices are read but is not itself subjected to discourse analysis. The General Assembly debates convened under the veto-initiative procedure within ten working days of each Security Council veto form part of the institutional setting in which United States legitimisation discourse operates but are bracketed from analysis here; the unit of analysis remains the Security Council interventions, and the broader audiences before which United States legitimisation discourse also operates are noted as a limitation of scope in section 3.5.

The unit of analysis within the corpus is the statements made by US representatives at the Security Council in connection with the six vetoed resolutions, primarily the explanation of vote delivered at the meeting itself, together with any further interventions the same representative made during the meeting (statements before the vote, second interventions in response to other delegations, or rights of reply). These statements are the principal site at which the discursive work of legitimisation is performed: the moment when, in the institutional act of casting the veto, the United States must account for that act before the Council and before the wider international audience that the Council represents under Article 24 of the Charter. The statements of other delegations are included in the corpus as the discursive environment within which United States legitimisation takes place, but they are not themselves the object of analysis; they are mentioned for the way they position, challenge, or accommodate the United States' discursive choices.

3.3 Analytical framework

The analysis operates within Fairclough's (1992, 1995) three-dimensional model, navigating from textual features, through discursive practice, to social practice. At the textual level, the analysis is organised around three distinct discursive mechanisms: euphemism, lexical absence, and agent deletion. These three are drawn from established CDA categories, primarily Van Leeuwen's (2008) socio-semantic framework for the representation of social actors, which provides the apparatus for analysing

agent deletion and impersonalisation, and Van Dijk's (1998, 2006) work on ideology and manipulation, which grounds the treatment of euphemism and lexical absence as ideologically structured choices. There are two reasons for selecting specifically the three discursive mechanisms mentioned above. First, on inspection of the corpus they recur consistently across the six US vetoes, which suggests they are not incidental but structured features of the discourse. Second, each performs a distinct legitimisation function: euphemism softens acts that would otherwise appear indefensible, lexical absence removes referents whose explicit naming would invite condemnation, and agent deletion obscures the question of responsibility.

Regarding the discursive practice level, the analysis addresses how these textual choices are produced and received within the specific institutional genre of Security Council diplomatic speech, a genre characterised by competitive, adversarial argumentation in which participants seek to undermine opponents' ethos while enhancing their own credibility (Bull & Wells, 2012). In terms of social practice, the analysis associates the discursive patterns to the institutional outcome of Council inaction, drawing on the broader framing of inaction as a substantive exercise of power developed in the theoretical framework.

3.4 Analytical procedure

The analysis was conducted in four passes through the corpus. The first pass was orientational. Each document was read in full to establish its institutional setting, the speakers, the sequence of statements, and the immediate political context of the vote. The aim was familiarity with the corpus as institutional discourse before any analytical coding began. The second pass identified instances of the three discursive mechanisms within United States statements, applying the following operational definitions:

- **Euphemism** was identified as the substitution of a milder, vaguer, or more abstract term for one with more direct ideological or legal force, for example, "*the situation*" in place of "*the bombardment*," or "*hostilities*" in place of "*war crimes*." Identification required both a recognised alternative term that the institutional genre would normally invite and an interpretive judgement that the chosen term softens or abstracts away from it.
- **Lexical absence** was identified as the systematic non-mention of referents that the institutional genre would normally invite, specifically, perpetrators of identified acts, specific legal categories (collective punishment, starvation as a method of warfare, war crimes), and third-state complicity. Absence was treated as analytically meaningful only when the wider debate context made the non-mention conspicuous: silences that other delegations explicitly named, or that contrasted with the speaker's own discourse in adjacent passages.
- **Agent deletion** was identified through grammatical markers: passivisation without an explicit agent "*civilians were killed*", nominalisation "*the loss of civilian life*", and impersonalisation through abstract collective referents "*the international community*," "*the parties*". Each instance was examined for whether an identifiable agent could have been named within the same grammatical structure.

Instances were recorded in a coding table organised by veto, by speaker turn, and by strategy, with the surrounding co-text retained for interpretive context. The third pass examined the distribution and interaction of strategies. Particular attention was paid to passages where two or three of the mechanisms co-occurred, since the analytical claim of the study is that these strategies form a coherent rhetorical architecture rather than operating in isolation. The fourth pass was interpretive. Each identified pattern was read against the normative-legal framework established in section 2, asking, for each instance, what legally salient category the discursive choice was working to manage, and what institutional outcome it sustained. This final pass is what links the textual analysis to the broader claim about inaction as discursively produced.

The longitudinal dimension of the analysis was developed across all four passes by tracking which strategies appeared consistently across the six vetoes, which intensified as the institutional and humanitarian context deepened, and which emerged in response to specific developments: the Secretary-General's invocation of Article 99 before the December 2023 veto, the International Court of Justice provisional measures order before the February 2024 veto, the change of administration and of permanent United States representative in early 2025, and the Council's symbolic 10,000th meeting in September 2025. The aim of this tracking was to identify the structural features of United States legitimisation discourse, those that persist regardless of context, and to distinguish them from the contextually responsive features that adapt to specific institutional pressures.

3.5 Reflexivity and limitations

Critical discourse analysis is, by design, a normatively engaged method rather than a neutral one. It begins from the analyst's commitment to identifying how language sustains relations of power and inequality (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2015), and this study shares that commitment. The analytical interest in legitimisation strategies follows from a prior judgement that the institutional outcome under study, sustained Security Council inaction in the face of a documented humanitarian catastrophe, is itself worth interrogating, and that the discursive work supporting it warrants critical attention.

Three limitations of the design should be acknowledged. First, the analysis examines United States legitimisation discourse at the Security Council and the immediate institutional environment in which it operates. It does not examine the General Assembly veto-initiative debates that followed each veto, the bilateral diplomatic record, media reception, domestic political reception, or the broader public uptake of United States framings. The Council itself is the unit of institutional analysis, and the wider audiences before which United States legitimisation discourse also operates are bracketed for separate study. Second, the corpus

is bounded to the active phase of the 2023–2025 conflict. The findings cannot be straightforwardly generalised to other periods, other vetoes on other agenda items, or other institutional venues at which United States obstruction operates differently. Third, qualitative discourse analysis is inevitably interpretive, and another analyst working with the same corpus might identify additional strategies or weight the same strategies differently. The risk this poses has been addressed by retaining co-text alongside coded instances, by being conservative in interpretive claims, and by reading textual patterns against the independent benchmark of the normative-legal framework rather than against analyst-supplied criteria alone.

3.6 Ethical considerations

The corpus consists exclusively of publicly available United Nations verbatim records and official documents. The statements analysed are official representations of state positions, made in public institutional settings by accredited diplomatic representatives speaking in their official capacity. No personal data are involved, no human-subjects research is conducted, and no informed-consent or confidentiality considerations arise. The study uses primary documents in the form in which the United Nations itself makes them available.

4. Analysis

This section analyses the discourse of the United States representatives across the six vetoes cast in the Security Council against draft resolutions on Gaza between October 2023 and September 2025. It proceeds in two analytical movements. The first reconstructs the architecture of legitimisation: it is organised by mechanism and shows that euphemism, lexical absence and agent deletion operate systematically, rather than incidentally, across the corpus, and that together they form a coherent discursive structure through which US obstruction is rendered legitimate. The second movement traces the *trajectory* of that architecture: organised by phase, it shows that while the underlying structure remains stable, its surface forms shift as the institutional and legal pressure on US legitimisation intensifies. Throughout, two normative baselines are used to identify what the discourse softens, omits or obscures: The United Nations Charter, which supplies the Council's own vocabulary of responsibility, determination and action; and the layer of international humanitarian law and atrocity-crime instruments (the Geneva Conventions, Additional Protocol I, the Genocide Convention and the Rome Statute), which supplies the vocabulary of breach.

A methodological qualification frames the whole analysis. Diplomatic register is conventionally impersonal, hedged and nominalising; not every passive construction or abstract noun is therefore ideologically motivated. The analysis consequently rests its weight not on isolated soft phrases but on *asymmetry* and *markedness*. Where the same speaker, in the same statement, applies vivid and fully agentive language to one actor while applying euphemism and agent deletion to another; and where a term is absent from the US text yet present in the draft resolution under debate, in the Secretary-General's briefings, in binding instruments recalled by that very draft, and in the statements of the United States' own closest ally, there the choice cannot be attributed to convention, because convention would apply evenly. Rather than the presence of any single device, it is this contrastive evidence that sustains the proposed argument of this study.

4.1 The discursive architecture of US legitimisation

This movement establishes that the three mechanisms are structural features of the US discourse on Gaza. Each is examined in turn, drawing examples from across the vetoes to demonstrate recurrence, before the final subsection shows how the mechanisms combine into a single legitimating operation.

4.1.1 Euphemism: softening the language of legal and humanitarian categories

In the fields of linguistics, rhetoric, and communication studies, the use of softer, vaguer, or more abstract expressions in place of more direct or severe ones, where the referent is still identifiable but is made less impactful, is what we call Euphemism. Throughout our corpus, euphemism operates primarily in two domains: the depiction of Palestinian fatalities and the portrayal of the situation in Gaza as a result of military actions and supply restrictions.

The clearest single instance opens the sequence. On 18 October 2023, with the Al Ahli Hospital strike of the previous evening dominating the meeting, the US representative referred to "yesterday's *explosion* at the Al Ahli Arab Hospital" (S/PV.9442). The choice is exposed as marked by the surrounding discourse where every other delegation that addressed the same event named it as an *act*: Russia's "missile attack," China's "air strike," Malta's "horrific strike," the United Arab Emirates' "a strike that hit the hospital." Where the others used nouns that name an act without necessarily attributing it, the US selected a noun that dissolves the act itself, leaving only an occurrence with neither projectile nor author. The contemporaneous attribution dispute does not account for the choice, since "strike" was equally available to a cautious speaker and equally non-attributive; what "explosion" additionally removes is not the attribution but the act.

The same field recurs in the rendering of mass death as misfortune. "We mourn this tragic loss of life" (V1) reappears almost verbatim across changes of ambassador: "Every innocent Palestinian life lost is a tragedy" (Wood, V4) and "The loss of civilian life in Gaza is tragic. We all mourn that" (Shea, V5). The consistency of "loss" and "tragedy" across three representatives is itself significant: it indicates an institutional register rather than an individual idiom. "Loss" frames the dead as mislaid rather than killed; "tragedy" reframes a produced outcome as a befalling.

The second field, engineered deprivation, shows euphemism intensifying as the underlying condition worsens, which is analytically the more telling pattern. In October 2023, the catastrophe is “the humanitarian crisis facing Palestinians in Gaza” (V1), a nominalisation that lets the crisis “face” people as weather might. By November 2024 famine is rendered as Palestinians “who now wonder where they will find their next meal” (V4), a domestic, quotidian uncertainty standing in for a population-scale condition that the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, cited at that very meeting, had recorded as the worst it had ever classified. By June 2025 the softening is at its most extreme: “No one wants to see Palestinian civilians in Gaza go hungry or thirsty” (V5), the register of a missed meal, deployed in the same meeting in which the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs called Gaza “the hungriest place on Earth.” That the euphemism grows softer precisely as the factual basis for the harsher term grows stronger is a signature of legitimization work rather than of neutral description.

A related move reclassifies the deprivation itself into an administrative register. In June 2025 the blockade becomes “the disastrous shortcomings of the prior method of aid delivery” (V5): the deliberate restriction the draft resolution names as “all restrictions on the entry of humanitarian aid” is recast as a technical inefficiency in a “method,” a noun in which the restricting agent disappears. A parallel reclassification operates on the speech-act status of the resolution itself, which is repeatedly downgraded from a binding instrument to a mere “message” the Council “sends” (V4), pre-empting the bindingness that would otherwise generate an obligation to comply.

By the sixth veto the euphemistic operation has widened from softening individual referents to re-categorising the entire agenda. The September 2025 statement recodes the matter before the Council (humanitarian collapse and, by then, formally found atrocity) as “this brutal conflict,” “this war,” “this horrific conflict” (V6). The emotive adjectives are not incidental: they perform engagement with the gravity while the noun keeps the matter below any triggering category. “Conflict” is symmetrical and agentless; it carries no determination, and it simultaneously displaces both the Article 39 trio (threat to the peace, breach of the peace, act of aggression) and the atrocity register the Commission of Inquiry had just activated. Within the same frame, the famine confirmed by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification becomes the bland nominal “Gaza has humanitarian needs” (“needs” converting an engineered condition into a neutral lack), and the killing of civilians becomes civilians “in harm’s way,” a phrase with no one putting them there. The trajectory of the famine euphemism across the corpus is thus continuous and intensifying: “humanitarian crisis facing Palestinians” (V1) → “where they will find their next meal” (V4) → “go hungry or thirsty” (V5) → “humanitarian needs” (V6), each rendering softer than the last as the IPC determination moves from projected to confirmed.

4.1.2 Lexical absence: what the US discourse declines to name

Lexical absence is meaningful only against an expectation. The analysis therefore measures absence against the two declared baselines and, crucially, against the lexical field actually in use in the room: the draft under debate, the Secretary-General, the binding instruments those drafts recall, and the other delegations including the United States’ closest ally. Where a term saturates that field but is missing from the US text alone, its absence is marked.

Measured against the IHL and atrocity-crime layer, a stable set of terms is absent across all five vetoes: *occupation* (and *occupying Power*), *siege / blockade*, *collective punishment*, *starvation* and *forced displacement*. The expectation that licenses calling these “absent” is established each time by other speakers: across the meetings, Russia, Algeria, China, the United Arab Emirates, Switzerland, Sierra Leone, Pakistan and the Permanent Observer of Palestine supply precisely these terms, and the draft resolutions themselves use “occupied,” “besieged” and “starve.” In June 2025 Sierra Leone names the Fourth Geneva Convention and Additional Protocol I by article. The US, by contrast, refers throughout to “the Government of Israel” and “our close ally,” and to “restrictions” rather than a blockade.

Two absences are not merely stable but escalate, and they track the legal stakes. The first is the International Court of Justice. Once the Court issued its provisional-measures order of 26 January 2024, the order became the defining legal event of the February meeting: the draft resolution recalled it in its preamble, Sierra Leone read its operative paragraph aloud and stressed its binding character, and Mozambique, Switzerland, Malta, Guyana and Palestine all invoked it. The US statement did not mention it once (V3). The same silence recurs in November 2024 and June 2025 (V4, V5), even as the draft underscores respect for the Court and other delegations cite its binding measures. The second escalating absence is the word *genocide*. Through the early and middle sequence it is simply unspoken; by June 2025 the US moves from silence to rhetorical repudiation, dismissing “spurious accusations of genocide” as “inaccurate” and “dangerous” (V5); and by September 2025 it moves again, from repudiating the accusation to dismantling the instrument that grounds it: the Commission of Inquiry report, which found genocide, is called “slandorous,” “lies and distortions,” an “antisemitic witch-hunt” that should “be eliminated” (V6). The handling of the corpus’s most charged term thus hardens in three stages (omission, then repudiation of the naming, then destruction of the evidence) as the external pressure to use it becomes incontrovertible.

The sixth veto makes explicit a typology that was latent earlier and that organises the whole layer. Absence is produced by three distinct mechanisms. The first is *silent omission*: *occupation*, *protection of civilians*, Israel’s *obligations under international humanitarian law*, and the Charter language of *threat to the peace* and *primary responsibility* are simply not uttered. The most telling omission is quantitative: no Palestinian death toll appears anywhere in the US statement, where every other speaker cites

some 64,000–65,000 dead; the only fatalities the US records are the two Israeli soldiers killed at the Allenby crossing and the forty-eight hostages. The dead of Gaza are lexically absent as a counted, agent-caused category. The second mechanism is *reassignment: starvation* is present, but relocated to an inverted referent, “how Hamas has starved the hostages,” so that the IHL category (starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare) is foreclosed not by silence but by being spent elsewhere. The third mechanism, new to the sixth veto, is *delegitimation of the instrument: famine* appears only to be voided: the draft “wrongly references the report of the IPC, with its flawed methodology, changed standards and clear bias.” The terms are no longer kept out of the frame; they are spoken in order to remove their evidentiary basis. This performs the same function as absence, keeping the trigger-words out of the *operative* frame, by a different route, one demanded by the now-undeniable circulation of those terms in the room.

The treatment of the Charter completes the picture and yields the single most robust corpus-level finding. The Charter is not absent; it is *selectively present*. In every veto where it is invoked, it is invoked through Article 51: Israel’s “inherent right of self-defence” (V1), “the right to defend itself” (V2, V4, V5), the one provision that licenses the use of force. The articles that would obligate the Council to act (Article 24’s primary responsibility, Article 39’s determination of a threat to or breach of the peace, Articles 41–42’s enforcement measures) are absent throughout, as is Article 99, the provision under which the Secretary-General convened the December 2023 sequence and which Malta, Gabon, Japan, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Egypt all cite. The Charter, in other words, is mobilised where it authorises force or council’s restraint and suppressed where it would compel Council action. This selective presence is consistent across all five vetoes and three representatives.

4.1.3 Agent deletion: obscuring the question of responsibility

Agent deletion is the grammatical removal or backgrounding of a responsible actor, achieved through agentless passives, nominalisation, and the use of abstract or institutional subjects. The corpus shows that the US discourse does not delete agency in general, which would be unremarkable diplomatic style, but deletes it asymmetrically, removing it for one actor while maximising it for another. This perceivable contrast within single statements is the strongest indication, or the available evidence that the mechanism is ideological rather than conventional.

On one side, harm to Palestinians is consistently rendered without an agent. The hospital strike is an agentless “explosion” (V1); the dead are subjects of intransitive loss, “the deaths of the many thousands of civilians” and “every innocent Palestinian life lost” (V4); the catastrophe is a “humanitarian crisis facing Palestinians” that no one produces (V1); homes “have been destroyed” in an agentless passive (V3); aid is to “begin flowing” into Gaza through an intransitive verb that deletes the party controlling the crossings (V1). Most strikingly, across all five statements **Israel never once appears as the grammatical agent of a harmful act**. It appears only as a rights-holder (“Israel has the right to defend itself”), a partner (“we work with the Government of Israel”), or a victim (“a recipe for disaster for Israel”). In June 2025 the killing of civilians at aid distribution sites (the central new atrocity of that meeting, attributed by the United Kingdom, Denmark, China and others to Israeli forces) appears in the US text with no agent at all, surfacing only as the failure of a “method of aid delivery.”

On the other side, agency attaching to Hamas is grammatically maximal and, over the sequence, becomes causally total. From the outset Hamas is the transitive subject of vivid clauses, “Hamas’s own actions have brought on this severe humanitarian crisis” (V1). The construction recurs and expands: “it is Hamas that instigated this conflict” and “it is not Israel standing in the way of a ceasefire ... it is Hamas” (V4); “it was Hamas that started this brutal conflict ... Hamas has sustained it ever since ... puts Palestinian civilians ... in harm’s way” (V5); and, at its most concentrated, “Hamas started this brutal conflict,” “perpetrated the worst massacre,” “has starved the hostages,” “is responsible for starting and continuing this war” (V6). The suppression operates in both directions with the same strength. In the sixth veto, the single agentless passive “approximately 85 per cent of United Nations aid ... has been intercepted,” which leaves out the grammatical identification of the interceptor, implicitly referring to Hamas. In addition, the formula “Gaza has humanitarian needs because of Hamas” assigns the cause to Hamas while deleting the blockade and the military operation entirely. In this way, in later vetoes, Hamas is not only the agent of beginning the war and of putting the civilians in danger, but also of failing to deliver humanitarian help. This way of putting things positions the US veto as a response to Hamas’s choices rather than as an exercise of US agency. This is the same causal-substitution operation throughout: the proximate cause is emptied of any actor, and a single distal actor is installed in the vacated position. Israel, correspondingly, is activated only as an agent of relief and peace, such as in “Israel takes clear risks by working every single day ... to deliver aid,” “Israel has accepted proposed terms” (V6), and never as an agent of harm.

The most consequential application of agent deletion, for the argument of this thesis, is directed at the Council itself. The Charter’s grammar is relentlessly agentive about the Council as in, “the Security Council *shall* determine ... *shall* decide ... *shall* take ... action.” The US discourse systematically withdraws that agency, relocating genuine action to Off-Council, US-led diplomacy described in agentive first-person verbs such as, “the life-saving diplomacy we have undertaken” (V2), “American diplomacy will continue to press” (V4), “we have had our negotiators on the ground” (V5), while assigning the Council only a negative or suspended capacity: it must “not hinder,” it should “let that diplomacy play out” (V1), “now is not the time” (V3). The displacement intensifies until, in November 2024, the veto itself is re-attributed to the fourteen members who voted for the resolution, where they were professed as they “did not engage seriously” and “desired a US veto” (V4), and in June 2025, the resolution is recast as “performative” theatre, denying that the act the veto blocked was a genuine act at all (V5). The Council’s

own delegations name this operation as it happens: the UAE observes that the Council “appears to be untethered from its own founding document” (V2), France that it “failed to live up to the fundamental mission entrusted to it by the Charter” (V2), and China that the US has rendered the Council “unable to play its role, leading to its paralysis” (V4).

4.1.4 The integration of mechanisms

The three mechanisms are not independent tics but a single coordinated operation, and two clauses (one from the first veto, one from the last) show them working in sequence. “ Hamas’s own actions have brought on this severe humanitarian crisis” (V1) and, still more compactly, “Gaza has humanitarian needs because of Hamas” (V6) each fire all three at once: euphemism downgrades the siege and the military operation to “crisis” or “needs”; agent deletion empties that condition of any proximate Israeli actor; and re-attribution installs a single distal agent “Hamas” in the vacated causal position. Lexical absence does the enabling work in the background: because *occupation*, *siege*, *starvation* and *genocide* are never uttered in the operative frame, there is no vocabulary on the table through which the conduct could be named as a breach that would, under Article 39, trigger a duty to act. A single short clause thus dissolves the determination, the duty and the perpetrator together.

The product of the three mechanisms working together is a stable discursive world with four features: an agentless catastrophe; a single, already-named culpable party; a body of binding law and an array of fact-finding instruments that go unspoken or are stripped of authority; and a Council whose proper posture is to wait. This is precisely the posture that a veto enacts. The veto and the discourse are therefore not two separate causes of the Council’s inaction. The discourse furnishes the justification that makes the veto legible as prudence rather than obstruction; the institutional non-action is, in the fullest sense, *produced*, *legitimised* and *maintained* in language. It is this integrated architecture, recurring across six vetoes and three representatives, that the first movement establishes.

4.2 The trajectory of legitimisation across the six vetoes

The architecture reconstructed above is constant. What changes across the twenty-three-month sequence is the surface form of the single device that manages the resolutions’ central demand, namely, the call for a ceasefire, and in the layer of lexical absence, the technique by which the trigger-terms are kept out of the operative frame. This movement groups the vetoes into phases according to the analytical work the discourse is performing at each moment, and shows that both surfaces migrate in step with rising institutional and legal pressure on US legitimisation. The migration is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. The migration of the surface strategy across the veto sequence.

Veto / date	Surface strategy	Triggering institutional pressure	Characteristic move
V1, 18 Oct 2023 (S/PV.9442)	Suppression	First Council attempt to respond; hospital strike the previous night	“ceasefire” withheld entirely; the hospital strike named only as an “explosion”
V2, 8 Dec 2023 (S/PV.9499)	Inversion	Secretary-General’s Article 99 invocation	“ceasefire” named but recoded as the danger (“unsustainable”; “the seeds for the next war”)
V3, 20 Feb 2024 (S/PV.9552)	Deferral	ICJ provisional-measures order (26 Jan 2024); draft recalls the Genocide Convention	ceasefire conceded as a goal but postponed (“now is not the time”; “as soon as practicable”)
V4, 20 Nov 2024 (S/PV.9790)	Conditionalisation	14–1 isolation; UK crosses to “yes”; draft and UK both name famine	only a hostage-linked ceasefire acceptable; “unconditional” recoded as abandoning hostages; veto displaced onto the other members
V5, 4 Jun 2025 (S/PV.9929)	Delegitimation of the demand	Draft preamble names IPC famine risk; OCHA “hungriest place on Earth”; 14–1 again	the resolution recast as “performative” theatre; genocide-naming actively repudiated
V6, 18 Sep 2025	Delegitimation of	IPC famine confirmed	the evidentiary triggers themselves attacked: IPC

(S/PV....)	the instrument	(not projected); COI finding of genocide; ~64,000–65,000 dead cited by the chamber; 14–1	“flawed methodology ... clear bias”; the COI report “slandorous,” an “antisemitic witch-hunt” that should “be eliminated”
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4.2.1 Establishing the template (vetoes 1–2, October–December 2023)

In the opening phase the discourse builds the template the rest of the sequence will adapt. The first veto operates by *suppression*: the word *ceasefire* is withheld entirely, in a meeting whose two failed amendments and whose Russian and Chinese interventions are organised around it; the US substitutes “diplomacy,” “dialogue,” “humanitarian pauses” (V1). The second veto, cast a few weeks later under the pressure of the Secretary-General’s Article 99 invocation, cannot sustain simple suppression and shifts to *inversion*: the term is now named but recoded as the threat, an “unsustainable ceasefire” that would plant “the seeds for the next war” (V2). Already the defining structural features are in place: euphemism for Palestinian death, the transitive-Hamas / agentless-Israel asymmetry, the Article 51 / Article 39 selectivity, and the relocation of agency to off-Council diplomacy. The first phase, in short, establishes the architecture and demonstrates its first adaptation, from withholding the remedy to redefining it.

4.2.2 Consolidation under legal pressure (vetoes 3–4, February–November 2024)

The middle phase is defined by the entry of binding law and by the collapse of US support to a minority of one. The ICJ’s provisional-measures order of 26 January 2024 changes the normative environment: The February draft recalls the Genocide Convention and the Court’s order, and the question of genocide is explicitly on the table. The discourse responds not by engaging this new fact but by routing around it. The surface strategy migrates to *deferral*: the ceasefire is conceded as a legitimate eventual goal but indefinitely postponed through a vocabulary of correct timing, “now is not the time,” “as soon as practicable,” the “right way” at the “right time” (V3). Crucially, the ICJ order and the word *genocide* are met with total silence, even as the rest of the chamber foregrounds them. By November 2024 the pressure has shifted from the legal to the political: The United Kingdom crosses from abstention to a “yes” vote, leaving the US isolated at 14–1, and the draft and the UK alike now name famine. The strategy migrates again, to *conditionalisation*: a ceasefire is acceptable only if linked to hostage release, so that refusing an “unconditional” ceasefire is recoded as fidelity to the hostages (V4). In the same statement the veto itself is displaced onto the fourteen who voted for the text. The architecture is unchanged; what consolidates is its capacity to absorb both a binding Court order and near-total isolation without conceding the outcome.

4.2.3 Entrenchment under expanded challenge (vetoes 5–6, June–September 2025)

In the final phase the pressure is no longer only legal but evidentiary and procedural, and it crosses a threshold between the two vetoes. In June 2025 the draft’s own preamble names the IPC famine risk, OCHA calls Gaza “the hungriest place on Earth,” the US stands again at 14–1 with its closest ally voting against it, and the killing of civilians at aid sites is named across the chamber. Having exhausted the ways of recoding the *content* of the demand, the discourse turns on the *act of demanding* it: the resolution is recast as “performative” theatre, a “process ... wherein there was no true negotiation,” so that blocking it can be presented as defending the Council’s seriousness rather than obstructing its action (V5). By September 2025 the evidentiary record has hardened further still (the IPC famine has moved from projected to confirmed, and the Commission of Inquiry has moved genocide from alleged to formally found), and the discourse responds with its most aggressive move yet. Where the earlier vetoes kept the trigger-terms out of the frame by *omission*, and V5 began to *repudiate* the naming, the sixth veto *delegitimises the instruments* that establish the categories: the IPC report is dismissed for its “flawed methodology, changed standards and clear bias,” and the COI report, which found genocide, is called “slandorous,” “lies and distortions,” an “antisemitic witch-hunt” that should “be eliminated.” The logic is evidential: if there is no famine because the report is flawed, and no genocide because the report is slanderous, then no Article 39 determination is owed and no duty is breached by declining to act. Dismantle the trigger, and inaction has, discursively, nothing to act upon.

This final phase therefore reveals the developmental axis that runs beneath the whole lexical-absence layer: **omission** → **reassignment** → **delegitimation**. In the first four vetoes the trigger-terms are kept out chiefly by silence, with occasional reassignment (starvation spent on the hostages). At V5 the naming of genocide is repudiated rhetorically. At V6 the underlying instruments (IPC, COI) are themselves attacked. The progression tracks the hardening of the evidentiary record with near-exactness: the technique escalates precisely as omission is overtaken by events, because by the sixth iteration the suppressed vocabulary is being supplied by everyone else in the room, in the same session, fourteen delegations name genocide, occupation, forced displacement, the weaponisation of starvation, Charter responsibility and Chapter VII. The mechanism has had to evolve from keeping the words out to taking the words *down*. In the same moment the other two mechanisms reach their most acute form in tandem with the stakes: the euphemism for famine is at its blindest (“humanitarian needs” for a confirmed famine), and the agency-transfer to Hamas is total, with the entire agenda re-categorised as “this brutal conflict” whose remedy is Hamas’s surrender (“This war could end today if Hamas freed the hostages and laid down its arms”). The discursive labour

intensifies exactly as the factual and legal grounds for the harsher vocabulary become incontrovertible, the clearest possible indication that the language is performing legitimization rather than description.

Taken together, the trajectory yields the second movement's claim. The surface strategy for the central demand moves through five forms (suppression, inversion, deferral, conditionalisation and delegitimation of the demand) while the technique of lexical absence moves through three (omission, reassignment, delegitimation of the instrument), and each migration is occasioned by a specific increment of pressure: a Secretary-General's Article 99 invocation, a binding Court order, the defection of the closest ally, the naming of famine in the draft itself, and finally the confirmation of famine and the formal finding of genocide. That both surfaces reconfigure under pressure while the underlying architecture and the resulting outcome remain constant is itself the decisive evidence. A fixed diplomatic convention would not migrate in order to defend a constant result; only legitimization work, oriented to preserving non-action against a shifting normative environment, behaves this way. The constancy of the counterterrorism-and-hostages frame across all six vetoes, even as the suppressed terms become undeniable, is the diachronic proof that the blockage is discursively manufactured and self-sustaining, not merely a by-product of the veto vote.

5. Discussion

The two movements support a single conclusion about the relationship between the veto and the discourse that surrounds it. The orthodox account treats Council paralysis on Gaza as a function of the veto alone, a procedural fact about the distribution of power. The analysis here suggests that this account is incomplete. The veto is the procedural instrument of non-action, but it is the discourse that renders that non-action *legitimate*: that converts a refusal to halt mass killing into prudence, realism, patience, fidelity to hostages and, finally, defence of the Council's own seriousness. Euphemism, lexical absence and agent deletion are the means by which this conversion is accomplished. They are not rhetorical ornament around a decision taken on other grounds; they are constitutive of the decision's legitimacy, and therefore part of the mechanism of obstruction itself.

This is why the longitudinal design matters. A single veto, analysed in isolation, might plausibly be read as conventional diplomatic hedging. It is the recurrence of the same architecture across all six vetoes, across three representatives, and above all its *adaptation* to successive increments of legal and institutional pressure, that distinguishes structural legitimization from incidental style. The mechanisms are embedded; the surface adapts; the outcome is preserved. Most tellingly, the apparatus has had to evolve from keeping the trigger-words out of the frame to taking down the very instruments (the IPC, the Commission of Inquiry) that put those words beyond dispute: by the sixth iteration the naming is being done by everyone else in the room, and the mechanism adapts accordingly. In this sense the discourse does not merely accompany the institution's non-action toward the humanitarian collapse in Gaza: it produces, legitimises and maintains it.

Two qualifications bound these claims. First, the analysis has consistently distinguished marked from unmarked usage; phrases such as "the situation on the ground" and "humanitarian assistance" are somewhat conventional, and the argument rests on the asymmetric and marked items such as the agentless hospital "explosion," the softening of famine the draft itself names, the silence on a Court order the chamber repeatedly invokes, and the Transitive-Hamas / agentless-Israel contrast, where convention cannot account for the pattern. Second, the substantive US arguments cannot be reduced to obfuscation. The US has its own political positions which are echoed in various forms by other states. These positions, such as tying a ceasefire to hostage release, disputing over aid-delivery mechanisms, and demanding that Hamas disarm, are openly defended by Israel in their own terms. Our claim here is more focused. To advance their political positions in the chamber, US representatives consistently diverged from how other named actors framed the same events. They softened a famine the drafters had named, omitted an ICJ order they had recalled, erased the agent of killing even Israel had attributed, and recast as political performance a demand the sponsors framed as humanitarian. What the analysis exposes is not the merits of US policy, but the selective deployment of the legal-humanitarian lexicon through which it was advanced.

Appendix to the analysis: supporting apparatus

Table 3. The absence register: presence and absence of expected terms in the US statements, by veto.

Expected term (baseline)	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
occupation / occupying Power (IHL)	—	—	—	—	—	—
siege / blockade (IHL)	—	—	—	—	—	—
famine / starvation (AP I Art. 54)	—	—	—	—	—*	D/Re
collective punishment (GC IV Art. 33)	—	—	—	—	—	—
genocide / war crimes (1948 Conv.; Rome St.)	—	—	—	—	R	D

the ICJ / COI / its findings (institutional)	n/a	n/a	—	—	—	D
Article 99 (Charter)	n/a	—	—	n/a	n/a	n/a
Arts. 24 / 39 / 41–42 (Charter duty)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Article 51 / self-defence frame	P	n/a	P	P	P	P

Key: “—” = expected term absent from the US statement (absence by silent omission); “P” = present (selectively invoked, characteristically Article 51 / self-defence); “Re” = present but reassigned to an inverted referent (e.g. “how Hamas has starved the hostages”); “R” = naming of the category rhetorically repudiated; “D” = the evidentiary instrument that would establish the category openly delegitimised (IPC “flawed”; COI “slandorous”); “n/a” = expectation not yet activated at that meeting (the ICJ order post-dates V1–V2; Article 99 is the live frame chiefly at V2–V3); “” = present in the draft and in allied statements but rendered only by euphemism in the US text. The progression of codes for the famine and genocide rows — → R → D—is itself the diachronic finding of §5.3.*

These tables form the quantifiable backbone of the qualitative argument above. Table 2 documents the migration of the surface strategy that structures the second movement; Table 3 documents the stable and escalating absences that structure the trajectory of legitimation across the six vetoes, and its coding for the famine and genocide rows, moving from “—” through “R” to “D” renders visible at a glance the **omission → reassignment → delegitimation** trajectory that is the central diachronic finding of this study. Together, the two tables provide a condensed version of this work that is developed at length throughout the prose: across six vetoes and three representatives the architecture of legitimation holds constant while its surfaces harden in direct proportion to the strength of the evidence they are deployed to neutralise.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to explain how the United Nations Security Council failed to act on Gaza between October 2023 and September 2025 through an illustration of how that failure was discursively produced and sustained. Relying on the US explanations of vote across six vetoes as its corpus, and reading them through Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, against the dual baseline of the United Nations Charter and the layer of international humanitarian and atrocity-crime law, the analysis has demonstrated that the veto was never a self-sufficient instrument of obstruction. Around it, and indispensable to it, ran a body of legitimation work performed in language. The article’s contribution is to render that work visible and to specify how it operates.

The first analytical movement established the architecture of that work and thereby met the study’s second objective. Three mechanisms (euphemism, lexical absence, and agent deletion) recur with such consistency across six vetoes and three representatives that they cannot be read as the incidental hedging of diplomatic register. At the exact moment when the factual basis for the harsher term grew stronger, the US representatives employed softening and engineered euphemism to downgrade killing and famine to “loss” and “humanitarian needs,”. They used lexical absence to keep occupation, siege, collective punishment, starvation, and genocide out of the operative frame. At the same time, this rendered the Charter selectively present, mobilised through Article 51, which licenses force, and suppressed in other Articles (24, 39, and 99), where it would compel the Council to act. Agent deletion withdrew Israel from the grammatical position of agent of harm while installing Hamas as the transitive, and ultimately total, cause of the catastrophe. Integrated, the three produced a stable discursive world: an agentless catastrophe, a single pre-named culpable party, a body of binding law and an array of fact-finding instruments left unspoken or stripped of authority, and a Council whose proper posture is to wait. This is precisely the posture that the veto enacts.

The second movement traced the trajectory of that architecture and yielded the study’s central diachronic finding: the underlying structure holds constant while its surface forms harden in direct proportion to the strength of the evidence they are deployed to neutralise. The management of the ceasefire demand migrated from suppression, through inversion, deferral, and conditionalisation, to the delegitimation first of the demand and finally of the evidentiary instruments themselves; the handling of the genocide question moved from silence, through repudiation of the naming, to the attempted destruction of the fact-finding bodies that had established it. As binding law, near-total isolation, and confirmed atrocity findings accumulated, the discourse did not concede the outcome but escalated the means by which it kept that outcome below any triggering category.

These findings bear immediately on the third objective: what the case reveals about the relationship between discourse, legitimacy, and collective security. Placing the US vetoes in the broader paralysis of the Council, the analysis confirms, in a high-stakes institutional setting, the theoretical claim that non-decision is a substantive exercise of power rather than a procedural void. The Council’s paralysis was not the silent residue of a blocked vote; it was actively narrated into legitimacy. The discourse furnished the account that made the veto legible as prudence rather than obstruction, and in doing so it lowered the political and moral costs of inaction to a level at which inaction could be sustained before an international audience increasingly opposed to it.

The study therefore contributes on two fronts. For international relations scholarship, it shows that linguistic practice within the principal security organ does not merely reflect a distribution of power but actively constitutes the conditions under which

enforcement and protection become less imaginable. The political durability of the veto is, in part, a discursive accomplishment. For discourse studies, it demonstrates that the classical CDA categories of euphemism, lexical absence, and agent deletion retain their analytical force in the most formalised of diplomatic genres, where they operate not upon public opinion at large but upon the narrow, expert, and adversarial audience of the Council itself, and they produce repercussions that are juridical and humanitarian rather than merely rhetorical.

These claims are necessarily bounded. The analysis is confined to the Security Council and the immediate documents that frame it; the General Assembly veto-initiative debates, the bilateral diplomatic record, and the wider public reception of US framings remain to be examined, and may reveal whether the architecture identified here is reproduced, contested, or abandoned before different audiences. The corpus is bounded to the active phase of a single conflict, so its findings cannot be straightforwardly generalised to other periods or other agenda items, and the interpretive character of critical discourse analysis means that another analyst working from the same corpus might weight the same passages differently. Future work might test the generalisability of the suppression-to-delegitimation trajectory against other vetoes and other veto-holders, or trace the uptake of these framings beyond the chamber.

What the case ultimately illustrates is a mechanism by which institutional failure is made to appear structurally unavoidable. Language here was deployed not, as in the more familiar pattern, to justify intervention, but to legitimise deadlock: to render a Council mandated to act, and structurally enabled to act, into one whose inaction could be presented as the only responsible course. When the very instruments that establish atrocity are recast as the problem, the discourse arrives at a position in which there is, as it were, nothing left to act upon. Finally, what this study points to straightforwardly is that restoring the vocabulary of responsibility, determination, and breach that the Charter and international humanitarian law provides is not a peripheral concern but a precondition for the Council's capacity to discharge the mandate exercised in its name.

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