# The Decaying of International Institutions: Politicized in Action and Whataboutism

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**Abstract**

Whataboutism has destroyed the political, economic, media and social spheres of human life. It has made sure that there is no fruitful exchange of ideas or distribution of knowledge but it has converted debates and discussions into futile exercises of shaming, name calling and generating sensationalism. This paper sets a premise based on Public, Nationalist and Neo-liberal events to point out the development of the ideology of Whataboutism. Through an in-depth literary and objective review of political changes in the International institutions the paper works to establish a cause and effect relationship between the internal disintegration of International bodies and Whataboutist narratives in the public forum.

The paper focuses on three institutions - United Nations (political disposition), and International Court of Justice (legal disposition), to show the overall collapse of the International world order, leaving the local geographical bodies with power vacuums and broken financial tracks. It attempts to draw a parallel between the League of Nations and United Nations to show the signs and markings of obsoletion and inaction.

To present the gravity of the situation, the paper also supplies subject matter from three important geo-political situations - namely Israeli-Palestinian Crisis, Yemen Crisis and the Sudan-Darfur conflict for the United Nations jurisdiction.

Lastly, to provide an alternative to the sanctum of the United Nations, the paper will evaluate the legal frameworks in action currently.This multidimensional approach has been missing from mainstream discussions, making any change in the structure of International Organisations almost impossible. This paper established a perplexed cause and effect relationship between all the aspects to expedite the necessity of action.

**Keywords:** Whataboutism, Inaction, Politicized inaction, Nationalism, Democracy, United Nations, Institution

## Introduction

"Genius may have it's limitations, but stupidity is not thus handicapped" - Elbert Hubbard

John Cooke in 1614 in a stage play gave birth to the first usage of the work "tu quoque". The first Oxford dictionary usage goes to the novel Alice published in 1838. Having a latin origin, the phrase is used to outline a logical fallacy in an argument where the argumentator opposes something that they have been doing. Tu quoque arguments have always found a place in the political rhetoric, be it in the documented speech of Alexander the Great or Donald Trump's candidate debates. But the culture of fallacy has become a raging issue that sets to derail any and every form of activism that has ever found a step in the social sphere. And this happens in the form of Whataboutism. Whataboutism or Whataboutery is the formal

practice of responding to an allegation, question or accusation with a counter-accusation or allegation rather than addressing and answering it.

The core idea behind resorting to Whataboutery is to shift blame and point at something more problematic that what the person is accused of. It functions under the precipice that because they have highlighted something worse than their fault, gives them a higher moral ground. But time and again this has resulted in the lack of productive dialogues, derailing of activist streams and has resulted to be a faux pas rather than a 'tactic'.

In the last 5 years or less, Whataboutery has become more of an infestation than just a fallacy. Whataboutism is internally a reason for the rise of a lot of "alt" public figures like Piers Morgan and Andrew Tate. In his show, Piers Morgan got huge popularity for pointing out how Veganism is moot and vegans are hypocrites. In a conversation with vegan activists he attacked them with the rhetoric that veganism kills thousands of bees and other insects, thus implying that veganism is no better than non-vegetarian way of lifestyle as both of them are built on natural domination.

But it does not take more than the average IQ to realize that this argument is fallacious and is a classic example of Whataboutery. The rhetoric diverts attention from the horrifying acts of the meat industry and points fingers at almond cultivation, thus implying their innocence. This video clip, accentuated by the Instagram Reels, gained huge popularity installing him as the central figure against vegan activism. But this morally ambiguous incessant badgering and blame shifting defeats the purpose of the whole movement. It has no real impact on society and defends the oppressive meat industry.

The world gives out many more such examples of this fallacy in the political and social activistic spheres. But what is the real impact of this fallacy? It is not just a technicality in the debating world surely. Whataboutism has dictated how the thought process of millions are framed and influenced in the past years. Many politicians and activists base their popularity on this type of argumentation leading hundreds of people with misplaced agendas and stinted ideologies. We can delve deep into a few of the issues that are heavily dictated by this rhetoric in current times.

Whataboutism does not operate alone. Logically flawed tactics give rise to other tactics like fallacy of relative privation, false dilemma, false equivalence, implicit bias, red herring fallacy, social justice, among others.

## Research Gap

There has been extensive research on the theatrical and conventional application of Whataboutism. But the research on its effects on global politics and international institutions has been lacking. Understanding the cause and effect relationship would allow the public to read political inaction and diversionary tactics all too clearly, raising awareness and public participation into global politics. It would help us see the large scale implications of bad political practices be it in the nation or beyond it.

## Rise of Nationalism

Nationalism has been a unifying factor for people of a country at numerous times, including crisis and flourishing. But it is far more problematic than patriotism. Rather than being love for the country it is an outward projection of the superiority of the nation. In the last century, the Soviet Union engaged in rhetoric of Whataboutery with its western counterparts, bringing up Apartheid, Genocides and Recession, whenever the Union was questioned on the international forum.

But that wasn't an isolated phenomenon. Nationalist waves throughout the past decade have been built on

the pillars of cross questioning, red herring debates and counter-accusations. Emmanuel Macron, Joe Biden, Narendra Modi are all phenomena that have been riding the waves of the mistakes of their predecessors and gaining the compliance of the people. Macron has highlighted in his speech that he wants to right the wrongs done by the previous governments and ran towards rampant privatization. Taking every step in the opposite direction of what the public wants he blamed all of his failures upon the "damaged bureaucracy" handed to him by the previous governments.

The BJP-led NDA also has unleashed a wave of hypernationalism upon the country by making the majority fear the minority. The rampant and blatant fear mongering runs on Whataboutism and Red Herring. Red herring here refers to diversion of allegations towards something inconsequential and insignificant.

The government introduced the CAA NRC reforms under the attempt to realize the Uniform Civil Code agenda. But the inward looking policies, discriminatory towards the immigrants reflected another hyper nationalist attempt at homogenizing the native population pushing international collaboration and the possibilities further back.

One of the most recent events was during the G20 Summit. The government was criticized for its haphazard preparation and brutally executed beautification plans. In an effort to take the public view off of the issue, the attention was shifted to the changing of the country's name to Bharat and in turn picked up the finger against the British occupation for burdening the nation with an anglicized name.

These individual ideologies are all granted an off grid protection by this ridiculously deceptive rhetoric in the public sphere. And makes it one of the biggest reasons for Whataboutery to become an insufferable issue.


**United Kingdom - Brexit**

Objectively identifying ways in which Nationalism affects the International order is not a difficult task. Global and International dependency was supposed to erase borders and promote harmony but this decade has seen more internally viewed propaganda than ever before. Chronologically speaking, Brexit was the first and the biggest indication of a vindictive and alienating wave of nationalism. The United States of America was always intolerant towards the immigrants but With UK, this was the first time the "Us vs Them" propaganda was institutionalized. Tactfully following the Brexit decision Prime Minister Rishi Sunak took the office which served a two-pronged purpose;

First, the Indian diaspora within the nation which constitutes the second biggest nationality was won over through the rampant display of identity politics. Second, Sunak's policies remained the same as Brexit and appeased the majority Polish population through added expat allowances.

But, while the whole country and media upheld Mr. Rishi Sunak's ascension as the legitimate proof that racial division in the country had magically vanished, the annual population survey had another story to tell.

The way whataboutism plays a role in this is by understanding the government's statements on why this disparity exists. The government made claims that people of color tend to go for gig economies that keep them grounded into the lower working sector preventing their movement to the upper economic sectors. In an independent study, it was noticed that one in seven cab drivers were pakistanis and only one in twenty can drivers were white and/or britisher by race.

The government hails this as the race's self inflicted atrocity rather than accepting them as the effects of institutionalized racism in the nation. In the end, through official channels, the racial minority becomes responsible for their own downfall and inability to rise above their economic status. The Pierce Brosnan

statement of "Men get paid more because they take better paying and dangerous jobs" finds a resonance in the British statement of "Minorities choose lower paying jobs". The institutional difference becomes even more evident when the education numbers are taken into account. The education sector has always seen the South Asian diaspora doing better at schools but still the Pakistani and Bangladeshi population does not seem to have any economic or social benefit from it.

The rise of nationalism is built on a foundation of Whataboutism and shifting blame narratives. Machiavellian ideology of a state suggests that a leader has to be feared and not loved, leading to the formation of nation-states that provide for people. He argues that states and leaders have the right to bend the moral discourse to maintain, expand or preserve power (Machiavelli 1469-1527 #). But this minor abject difference between amoral and immoral has reduced the ideological maintaining of power into a mere justification towards subjugation and oppression. The fact that most authoritarian democratic governments show signs of being a Machiavellian "Prince" states is not a reassuring outlook for global democracy.

*Rousseau* and his theory of nation-states best describes the current nations, who are involved in self-preservation, alienating towards outsiders and dismissive of the commonalities in the differences. The Rousseau paradox states that democracy in its absolute nature will move towards instability. So the form of nations, have the people ruled by the government and the leaders ruled by the majority.

The division of power between the center and the periphery is just the way the Eurocentric outlook treats the world, but this time it happens individually to nations.

## Political Inaction

One of the biggest and most problematic outcomes of Whataboutism is political inaction. Instigative statements trigger activism but do not lead to any definitive action being taken to address the issue. Understanding the effect of it needs a deeper analysis of the international conflicts in the past and present. The Sudan-Darfur conflict since its inception in 2003, has been an active crisis for about 21 years now. The situation has not seen any improvement and has been largely forgotten by the majority of the common population. The sense of alienation stems from the lack of communication about the conflict at the international forum. Some of the common statements given by leading government officials in their term ranged from "...but what about Palestine? Where was the international community when there was an insurgency there…" - Israel, asking for protection and intervention in 2006; or "...there are many active conflicts the US is involved in, like Afghanistan which curtail our ability to act in this direction…" - White House, Official press release in 2008.

Although these are two examples they are the precedence to deflect the issues to run away from accountability and answerability. The Israel-Palestine conflict is not a new one. It has been an active conflict for about 76 years. It is an example of failure of every possible international institute in existence. Starting with the International Court of Justice, it is important to notice that the Court of Justice has failed twice at different times and has worsened if not destroyed the possibilities of peace. The inadvertent application of the UN Charter in the conflict during the proceedings of 2018, deferred on the Palestinian state needing statehood, leading to a UN veto on the cause.Then in the recent proceedings the Court urged the Israeli state against commiting acts of genocide but did not pass a legislation.

This could've been a legal failure only, but the reason Whataboutism invaded this discourse is Judge Sebutinde. The judge apart from the Israeli representative to defer on the decisions taken was Judge Sebutinde. Her statement suggested that she did not believe the Israel-Hamas or the Israeli Palestinian

conflict needed judicial action and is a "Cinderella's Glass Slipper". Her statement implying that the situation has risen due to fate and the actions of people through that metaphor is the prime reason why Whataboutism is one of the most poisonous issues in any deliberation (O'Dell).

**United Nations and institutionalized inaction**

Throughout the past decade time and again UN, and the UNSC particularly has been called out and criticized for its inaction. Be it in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict or the Taliban occupation of Afghanistan. This might have been just a rhetorical criticism but there are valid proofs in the UN database to support the fact that the structure and the unnatural division of power has rendered the United Nations incapable of taking actions on conflicts.

| Date | Agenda | Veto Nation |
|---|---|---|
| 18 February 2011 | Middle East situation, including the Palestinian question | USA |
| 4 October 2011 | Middle East - Syria | China Russian Federation |
| 4 February 2012 | Middle East - Syria | China Russian Federation |
| 19 July 2012 | Middle East - Syria | China Russian Federation |
| 15 March 2014 | Letter dated 28 February 2014 from the Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2014/136) | Russian Federation |
| 8 October 2016 | Middle East | Russian Federation |
| 5 December 2016 | Middle East | China Russian Federation |
| 28 February 2017 | Middle East | China Russian Federation |
| 12 April 2017 | Middle East | Russian Federation |
| 24 October 2017 | Middle East | Russian Federation |
| 16 November 2017 | Middle East | Russian Research |
| 17 November 2017 | Middle East | Russian Federation |

| 18 December 2017 | Middle East situation, including the Palestinian question | USA |
|---|---|---|
| 26 February 2018 | Middle East | Russian Federation |
| 10 April 2018 | Middle East | Russian Federation |
| 1 June 2018 | Middle East situation, including the Palestinian question | USA |
| 19 September 2019 | The situation in the Middle East | China Russian Federation |
| 20 December 2019 | The situation in the Middle East | China Russian Federation |
| 7 July 2020 | The situation in the Middle East | China Russian Federation |
| 10 July 2020 | The situation in the Middle East | China Russian Federation |
| 8 July 2022 | The situation in the Middle East | Russian Federation |
| 11 July 2023 | The situation in the Middle East | Russian Federation |
| 18 October 2023 | The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question | USA |
| 25 October 2023 | The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question | China Russian Federation |
| 8 December 2023 | The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question | USA |
|  | Total | 25 Vetoes |

**Table 1.1 : Vetoes in the United Nations Security Council ("Research Guides: UN Security Council Meetings & Outcomes Tables: Vetoes")**

Since 2010, over 25 resolutions in the Middle East sphere have been vetoed even though they were supported by the nations involved and suffering from the crisis. The internal breakdown of the mechanism could not have been more evident in this segment. UNSC has seen over 189 resolutions which involve discussing Palestine as a conflict issue, only 5 of them have been passed after 2002. Less than 1% of the

discussion on the conflict has happened in the last 20 years. UN Security council resolution 242 - advocated and accepted the two state solution for Israel and Palestine but has recently stated that "the ship has sailed" as the Israeli occupation is too large to withdraw.

**The Trident's decline model**

The fall of the international institutions can be ideated as a trident model to understand the reasons. Three major reasons for the decline of this pseudo-democratic institution are:

● Accountability
● Legal decay
● Democratic outlook

These reasons become the prongs of the trident and the shaft would be resting on politicized inaction and whataboutism. Looking at all three aspects, we can see why and what has caused the decline of the UN and its importance. Looking at the three reasons individually would lead to skewed understanding of the issue, hence we will approach the problem with a multidirectional approach and understand the recent image of the UN by making a case study on it.

Before 2020, in over 3 surveys conducted the image of the UN appeared to be clean and strong. The results showed that more than 45% of the world was in support of and trusted the institute of the United Nations. A 19-country survey done by PEW in 2022 also boasted that the United Nations had a good standing among the population.

Source: European Values Study and World Values Survey, "Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset," December 2022: R. Inglehart et al., eds., "World Values Survey: Wave 5 (2005-2009)," 2018.

The rapport starts to worsen during the pandemic, in around the timeframe of 2019-2023. The World Value Survey and European Value Survey that was conducted for the time period of 2017-2022 shows that only half the member states show faith in the functioning and working of the United Nations. Some of the clear reasons were the unprecedented pandemic of Covid-19 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict that dettered the good image of the United Nations.

In most of the conflict zones, the confidence in the actions being taken or previously taken by the UN have been low. Be it in situations of recent conflict like Russia and Ukraine or old conflicts like Yugoslavia and Sudan. This shows that the aftermath of UN involvement is also seen in a negative connotation.

**Legal Decay**

Addressing legal decay requires special understanding and analysis of the UN charter. Although being a very thorough document, the charter is still filled with inconsistencies that need to be straightened out to positively move towards reforms. The specific fallacies would be:

UN Charter Article 2 is the root cause of a lot of procedural issues and politicized inaction in the organization. The article fails to define the important term "aggression" leading to individual and situation based defining of it. The inability to adeptly choose one definition makes it significantly difficult to establish precedence and apply standard rules of procedures during armed conflicts. Member nations at times have changed the definition according to their favor thus delaying or outrightly denying the much needed humanitarian aid to the conflict zones. A significant failure of this was the Yemen crisis where the armed rebellion of the Houthis became a debate topic leading to a delay in procedure and thousands of lost lives.

In another area of issues, the establishment of equal sovereign states under the same article overruled itself in the appointment of the UNSC permanent members giving them arbitrary powers to make or delay decisions regarding world order. The P5 vetoes have always been a bone of contention among member nations because a lot of inaction results from one sided vetoes.

Lastly, the article fails to address what the "domestic matters" of a state are. This leads to questionable applications of the authority and jurisdiction of the UN charter. Some of the examples of this abject issue delaying humanitarian aid and legal actions are the Yugoslavian conflict, the Kosovo crisis and the Sudan-Darfur conflict.

## Democratic Outlook

The representation of power in the United Nations follows no particular precedent and is done in a new lateral. But that has created a mismatch of power at the very helm of the United Nations.

The P-5 countries were allotted their vetoes due to their effect on global relations, economy and trade, but in the past few decades all those forms of measurement have been surpassed by other nations and the leadership has seen no change. This isn't because countries aren't willing to be included, it's because the structure is built in such a way that any addition is just not possible. So additions and balances are just the surface steps, the UN needs a reevaluation and change in its very core structure.

But this is not groundbreaking information, so why was it not applied for years? The reason again circles back to Whataboutism. The powerful nations refuse to shoulder the consequences of the rampant use of their power and keep shifting their standards to something worse someone else has done. This is seen a lot in the US vs China and US vs Russia power blocs, most recently witnessed in the vetoes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The internal dialogues that circle around reverse blaming and shifting responsibility in this scenario too leads to redundant conversations inside the United Nations but fail to make actual changes, making the organization a slave to politicized inaction.

## Future research

The findings from this research suggests a strong need for a global index to measure public opinion and connect it to the accountability of an institution. The researcher suggests public opinion polls and also X (Formerly Twitter) as a very necessary source of evaluation. The tweets can be methodologically categorized to understand the popular or alt-popular sentiment in a particular time frame (Dash).

The next logical step into understanding the extent of damage inaction does is to establish a quantitative research framework.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have used a qualitative analysis based on the academic critique of interpretivist epistemology; which highlights the practice of analyzing every event from multiple viewpoints and perspectives. There are a few fixated understandings in the approach. The study is entirely political. It views people, policies and institutions to be guided by political interests and influence. In all the case studies mentioned, the prime motivating factor of action or inaction is political.

The researcher acknowledges that the first step to building better research would be a quantitative model that evaluates the democratic markers of institutions and better maps public opinion.

*John Adams* once wrote that democracy in itself will always commit suicide and wither away in itself. It is never robust like monarchy and always tends to be bloodier than the latter (John Adams, 1762). This

outlook leads to the need of constant analysis and reevaluation of the condition of our institutions. Democracy obviously is centered in the peoples' will but it is the institutional franchise that makes a space democratic. The democratic aspects like voting and representation are the markers of democracy but they are made valid because the institution allows the operation of these markers. Hence it is important to know that institutional transformation is necessary for democracy to change too.

The public opinion on democracy is dwindling because people tend to believe that no matter the condition, things never seem to change. A lot of negative viewpoints are due to the fact that there is no action driven under the banner of democracy. It has lost the accountability and trust of the common masses.The approach tries to establish a pluralistic approach of addressing the dwindling International world order before it collapses or loses its relevance. It tends to establish a cause-effect relationship between inaction and public opinion and operability. To understand it further and arrive at possible structural changes, deeper research is much required.

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