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Instrumentalizing the War in Gaza:
US-China Rivalry and Power Projection Through Selective Action and Strategic Inaction.

Master's Thesis

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Authorship Declaration:

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

This study examines the Gaza conflict from the October 7, 2023 escalation to 2025 as a symbolic and discursive arena of great-power rivalry between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC, China). It investigates how both states instrumentalize the crisis to advance competing claims to normative authority and global legitimacy, rather than engaging primarily through material intervention. Drawing on Social Constructivism as the theoretical framework and employing a Small-N Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) alongside Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study analyzes official diplomatic statements, United Nations (UN) interventions, and media discourse. The findings demonstrate that the US adopts a strategy of selective action, framing its engagement through counter-terrorism, alliance maintenance, and institutional responsibility, while China pursues strategic inaction, emphasizing humanitarian suffering, justice, and sovereignty while avoiding counter-terrorism framing. The study contributes to constructivist scholarship by illustrating how discourse, identity performance, and narrative framing function as key instruments of power in contemporary great-power competition and international crisis management.

Introduction

The escalation of the Israel–Hammas conflict following the October 7, 2023 attacks and the subsequent Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip represents more than a localized security crisis. It has become a significant moment in regional politics, placing renewed strain on the post–World War II international order at a time of declining confidence in global governance mechanisms and intensified great-power competition (Friedberg, 2021). This competition, primarily between the United States (US) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC, China), spans military, economic, technological, and diplomatic domains and increasingly extends into normative and discursive spheres.

This thesis argues that the Gaza crisis should be understood not only as a humanitarian tragedy but also as an episode that both great powers seek to instrumentalize within their broader strategic rivalry. The conflict exposes the limits of US influence while creating openings for China to expand its regional role through diplomatic positioning and narrative alignment (Fulton & Schuman, 2024). Gaza therefore provides a critical case for examining how contemporary great-power rivalry unfolds through competition for discursive authority, including strategic narratives, diplomatic framing, and claims to normative legitimacy. Under these conditions, power projection increasingly depends on the ability to construct credible identities while contesting the legitimacy of rivals.

The central argument is that rhetorical practices surrounding the conflict, expressed through diplomatic statements, media, and institutional behavior, function as key mechanisms through which both states pursue longer-term normative and geopolitical advantage. The US engages in what this study terms selective action, characterized by targeted involvement emphasizing counter-terrorism and alliance maintenance. China, by contrast, adopts strategic inaction, refraining from explicit condemnation of armed groups while presenting itself as a defender of justice and sovereign rights. Competition for regional influence thus unfolds not only through military or economic means but also through the cultivation of favorable perceptions among regional elites and publics. The Gaza crisis is rooted in decades of unresolved political and territorial disputes, making it one of the most enduring and symbolically charged conflicts in international politics (Mock, Obeidi, & Zeleznikow, 2014). Interpretations of the conflict have often reflected the political contexts in which they are produced, frequently aligning with the strategic interests of external powers. As such, Gaza has long functioned as a site where local dynamics intersect with broader geopolitical agendas. This dynamic intensified sharply

on October 7, 2023, when Hamas, designated by the US as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, launched a large-scale attack that killed more than 1,200 people and resulted in the abduction of approximately 251 hostages (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2023). Israel's subsequent military response generated a severe humanitarian crisis, including mass displacement and widespread civilian suffering. The scale of violence quickly transformed Gaza into a focal point of international diplomatic confrontation, most visibly within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), where competing vetoes and resolutions underscored divisions among major powers ("United States vetoes Gaza ceasefire resolution at Security Council," 2024). While the US emphasized diplomatic engagement and institutional processes, China intensified its normative critique by highlighting Palestinian rights and avoiding condemnation of armed groups (Alterman, 2024). Given Gaza's historical resonance, large-scale escalation has repeatedly drawn external intervention and heightened discursive competition.

The crisis is unfolding during a period of transition in global power relations marked by intensified US–China rivalry. Although the US consolidated regional influence following the end of the Cold War, its authority has faced growing scrutiny since the early 2000s. Perceived inconsistencies in the application of international norms and prolonged military engagements have contributed to questions about US leadership and credibility (Alterman, 2024). These challenges have underscored Washington's increasing difficulty in managing perceptions, an area that has become central to contemporary power politics. At the same time, China's engagement in the Middle East has expanded beyond resource acquisition to encompass diplomacy, investment, and selective security cooperation. Through this expanding presence Beijing seeks to present itself as a stable and non-interfering partner grounded in economic development and political sovereignty. Survey data from Gulf states suggest favorable perceptions of China, reflecting alignment with regional preferences for economic cooperation and non-intervention (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2024). The contrast between Washington's struggling normative credibility and Beijing's growing regional appeal highlights the growing importance of identity, norms, and legitimacy, alongside material capabilities, in shaping state behavior during the Gaza crisis.

The core research problem is therefore to understand how, in the period from October 2023 to 2025, the US and China have employed contrasting diplomatic and rhetorical strategies, selective action, and strategic inaction to pursue relative advantage. US selective action

involves extensive military assistance and diplomatic protection for Israel, most visibly through repeated UNSC vetoes. These actions prioritize alliance commitments and short-term stability, even as they generate criticism for undermining multilateral principles (Yager, 2024). Although US officials have framed vetoed resolutions as flawed or unbalanced, such positions have drawn criticism in parts of the Global South, where perceptions of double standards have complicated Washington's normative standing. (Yager, 2024; Krieg, 2025). Chinese strategic inaction, by contrast, refers to Beijing's avoidance of direct military commitments while emphasizing non-coercive influence (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2024). This restraint is paired with assertive rhetorical positioning that criticizes Israeli military actions and emphasizes humanitarian and legal norms without condemning Hamas. By aligning its discourse with widespread regional dissatisfaction toward US policy, China presents itself as a justice-oriented and non-hegemonic actor, enhancing its normative appeal at relatively low cost.

The conceptual framework guiding this study treats diplomacy, rhetoric, and institutional behavior as socially embedded practices through which states pursue strategic advantage. It assumes that language is not merely descriptive but constitutive of security politics and that discursive strategies are integral to foreign policy. Accordingly, this thesis contends that the Gaza conflict has become a central arena in US–China rivalry, revealing the limits of US military dominance while providing China with opportunities to expand influence through strategic inaction and narrative alignment. Whereas US selective action risks eroding normative legitimacy, China's rhetorical positioning enables it to challenge the existing regional order and advance alternative models of power projection.

This study is guided by three research questions:

1. What forms of selective action and strategic inaction characterize US and Chinese engagement with Gaza following the 2023 escalation, and how do these approaches reflect each state's strategic objectives and self-ascribed roles?
2. How are US and Chinese responses constructed and disseminated through official discourse and media, and what do these practices suggest about the future trajectory of US–China rivalry and crisis management norms?
3. To what extent do US and Chinese discursive strategies on Gaza reflect distinct audience orientations, and what does this differentiation reveal about the broader competition for

moral authority and political leadership within the international system?

This study borrows from social constructivism, an International Relations (IR) theory that emphasizes how international behavior is shaped by shared ideas, norms, and interpretive practices (Wendt, 1999; Onuf, 2013). From this perspective, identity claims and discursive framing link broader visions of order to specific policy choices, making it particularly well-suited for examining how great-power rivalry increasingly unfolds through contests over legitimacy and meaning.

Methodologically, the thesis employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) alongside a Small-N Most Different Systems Design (MDSN). CDA enables systematic examination of official statements, state media, and institutional discourse, while MDSN contrasts two politically distinct systems, the US and China, to assess how divergent structures produce comparable patterns of strategic competition. The comparative component is structured through an MDSN, contrasting two political systems that are consistently positioned far apart in leading global democracy assessments, most notably the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (scored from 0 to 10). Within this framework, the US, with a score of 7.85, is classified as a flawed democracy, while China, scoring 2.11, is categorized as an authoritarian regime (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025). Despite these pronounced systemic differences, both states converge on a similar outcome: the competitive instrumentalization of the Gaza crisis, making it a revealing lens through which to examine how great-power rivalry unfolds through ideas, rhetoric, and narrative framing in the contemporary international system.

Keywords: Gaza conflict, US–China rivalry, selective action, strategic inaction, Social Constructivism, Critical Discourse Analysis, narrative framing, normative legitimacy, diplomatic discourse, great-power competition.

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CHAPTER 1

Theoretical Framing and Literature Review

1.1 Constructivism in International Relations: Conceptual Foundations

Constructivist IR scholarship argue that great-power competition cannot be comprehended exclusively through material capabilities or military confrontations. From a constructivist perspective, global politics is fundamentally influenced by ideational structures, shared understandings, collective meanings, cultural narratives, and historically situated identities that inform the interests states pursue and the actions they consider appropriate. This chapter establishes the theoretical and literary framework for the study by utilizing social constructivism as the primary analytical perspective. Constructivism offers an analytical lens for understanding the Gaza conflict as a symbolic stage where the US and China express conflicting perspectives on global order, enact competing identities, and advance normative assertions regarding legitimacy, sovereignty, security, and humanitarianism. There are two main parts to this chapter. First, it talks about the theoretical ideas behind constructivism, focusing on how states form their identities, how they share norms, how they create meanings that are shared by others, and how they build threats and political roles. Second, it combines the existing research on Gaza and great-power discourse to show how constructivism provides a strong prism to understand why the US and China take selective action and strategic inaction, respectively, not just for practical reasons, but also to protect, stabilize, or change the normative structures through which their respective roles in the world are recognized. The objective is not merely to examine pertinent scholarship but also to delineate the conceptual framework that informs the empirical analysis in subsequent chapters.

Constructivism emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a response to the perceived limitations of dominant IR theories, arguing that international politics cannot be reduced to fixed material conditions or static institutional incentives. Constructivist scholarship holds that state interests are not given but are shaped through historical experience, political practice, and intersubjective meanings. Wendt's (1992) argument that "anarchy is what states make of it" highlights that the international system permits multiple patterns of interaction shaped by shared expectations developed over time. Constructivists therefore challenge the assumption that states are naturally driven to compete under anarchy, arguing instead that practices such as self-help and rivalry emerge through repeated interaction and historical learning (Adler,

1997).

Consequently, the significance of military power or diplomatic engagement depends on the symbolic and interpretive contexts that precede action. A central insight of constructivism is that identity lies at the core of interest formation. States act in ways that reflect how they understand themselves, whether as defenders of democracy, leaders of the Global South, guardians of international order, or advocates of sovereignty. These identities inform strategic priorities, policy preferences, and judgements about legitimate action. Finnemore (1996) demonstrates that international organizations and normative environments shape state identities by defining acceptable and desirable behavior, while Katzenstein (1996) shows that national security policy is embedded in cultural norms and domestic identity narratives rather than determined solely by material threats.

Constructivist scholarship also emphasizes the role of norms as shared expectations about appropriate state behavior. These norms shape how states evaluate themselves and others and influence the interpretation of events related to sovereignty, human rights, territorial integrity, and humanitarian protection (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). For the purposes of this study, attention is directed toward two closely related forms of power operating through discourse. One concerns the capacity to shape meaning at a foundational level, including how actors, actions, and responsibilities are understood. Through this process, labels such as “terrorism”, “self-defense”, and “humanitarian obligation” acquire political weight. A second dimension involves mobilizing moral authority, historical narratives, and claims to normative legitimacy to frame political positions and guide audience perceptions. These forms of power are exercised primarily through discourse, including official statements, diplomatic language, and media representations, and become especially salient during crises.

Although constructivism has been criticized for overemphasizing discourse or lacking predictive capacity, such critiques have contributed to methodological refinement and stronger integration with discourse analysis and practice-oriented approaches (Hopf, 2012). This study builds on that practice by arguing that the Gaza conflict, particularly following the 2023 escalation, functions as a symbolic arena in which the US and China enact competing identities and advance rival narratives of global order. Neither state is directly engaged as a combatant. Instead, Gaza serves as a site of limited material involvement alongside intensified ideational competition. This combination makes constructivism especially well-suited for analyzing the dynamics examined in this study.

Constructivism emphasizes the performance and reproduction of rivalry among states through discourse, symbolic behavior, and norm contestation, in contrast to structural theories that explain rivalry primarily through relative capabilities (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston & McDermott, 2009). This perspective is particularly useful for understanding the designation of the US and China as systemic competitors in contexts such as Gaza, where symbolic stakes are high despite limited direct material involvement. The rivalry between the US and China is sustained not only by shifts in power or economic ties but also by how each side constructs its own identity and that of the other. US discourse increasingly frames China as a systemic challenger to liberal norms and institutions, while Chinese narratives depict the US as a declining power whose selective application of rules undermines sovereignty and equality in international affairs (Boon, 2022). Crises such as Gaza serve as discursive arenas in which these identities are reaffirmed, contested, or adjusted.

Alexander Wendt (1999) argues that identities and interests develop through social interaction and are reproduced through habitual performances. In this sense, when the US and China speak about Gaza, they are asserting what kind of global actors they understand themselves to be. Within constructivism, states are understood to adopt socially recognized roles, such as 'responsible major power' or 'defender of sovereignty,' with crises functioning as moments in which adherence to these roles is assessed (Harnisch, 2011; Thies, 2010). The US has a long history of using Gaza in stories about fighting terrorism, standing up for alliances, and protecting a free, rule-based world order. So, selective action, giving humanitarian warnings, going back and forth between capitals, and vetoing resolutions that are considered unbalanced should not be considered just geopolitical calculation but also as a way to show who you are. Constructivist scholarship on US foreign policy identity underscores that Washington's self-perception as a global security manager is profoundly entrenched in domestic political culture, historical memory, and the ideological narratives employed by American leaders to rationalize their engagement abroad (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010). China's messaging, on the other hand, consistently positions Beijing as a non-Western power that stands alongside developing nations in their pursuit of sovereignty and justice, a framing that carries particular resonance given that China itself is officially recognized as part of the Global South. Constructivist scholarship on China's foreign policy emphasizes that Beijing's external behavior is deeply shaped by historically grounded narratives, particularly experiences of past humiliation, commitments to solidarity with developing nations, and a strong normative emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference (Boon, 2022). In crises like Gaza, strategic inaction, not

naming Hamas, avoiding counter-terrorism discourse, emphasizing root causes, and drawing on anti-colonial language, serves to reinforce this identity and distinguish China's position from that of the United States.

Constructivists stress that identity is relational, the 'self' is formed in opposition to the 'other' (Rumelili, 2004). Gaza offers both powers a stage for sharpening precisely these distinctions. When the US presents itself as a responsible actor upholding established international norms, it draws on a discourse around great-power responsibility that has long shaped how Washington defines expectations of others in the international order. China, by contrast, frames its position as humanitarian and anti-hegemonic, situating itself within an alternative vision of global order that distances itself from what it presents as Western-led governance. Constructivist scholarship on status politics underscores that great powers seek not only material advantage but also recognition of their preferred identities (Wendt, 1999; Hopf, 2012). Gaza thus becomes a site where both states compete for exactly that recognition.

Constructivists also stress the social construction of threats, as states assess dangers not merely through material capabilities but through shared understandings, historical narratives, and collective memory (Mitzen, 2006). In American discourse, Hamas is consistently framed as a terrorist group whose actions activate global counter-terrorism norms and justify defensive alliances (U.S. Department of State, 2024a). In Chinese discourse, Hamas is interpreted primarily through occupation, political resistance, and unresolved grievances, shifting the framing of threat from terrorism to structural injustice (Alterman, 2024; Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2025). These divergent framings reflect the distinct identities each state has developed. Likewise, the notion of global responsibility is a socially constructed category. Realist approaches, grounded in the structural assumption of anarchy, largely neglect responsible state behavior toward third parties, while liberals acknowledge a moral dimension of responsibility through their emphasis on cooperation over power politics. Constructivists, by contrast, provide insight into what counts as appropriate behavior for political actors, broadening the analytical space to incorporate normative expectations, treating responsibility not as a fixed structural condition but as a policy norm shaped by social context (Sienknecht & Vetterlein, 2024). It is through this lens that the contrasting engagements of the US and China with the Gaza conflict become analytically legible, each state invoking responsibility in ways that reflect and reinforce its broader identity claims.

This analytical framework helps explain why Gaza, a conflict geographically marginal to the

Indo-Pacific and materially insignificant to US–China military rivalry, has nonetheless emerged as a site of symbolic competition. The stakes involve legitimacy, global leadership, humanitarian credibility, and normative authority. Through speeches at UN, foreign-ministry briefings, diplomatic communiqués, and state-aligned media, each state uses Gaza to signal who it is, what it stands for, and what kind of world order it seeks to promote. In this context, constructivism clarifies not only differences in US and Chinese behavior but also the mechanisms through which discursive practices sustain structural rivalry. Identity, norm contestation, and narrative production are central to contemporary great-power politics. This theoretical stance directly informs the empirical chapters that follow, providing the conceptual grounding through which the symbolic role of Gaza in US–China rivalry is analyzed.

1.2 Gaza as a Symbolic Arena: Norm Contestation and Narrative Power

Constructivist scholarship on protracted conflicts underscores that violence is both material and symbolic, as conflicts persist not merely due to actors pursuing territorial or military advantages, but because competing identities, narratives, and claims to legitimacy become entrenched over time (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992). The Israeli–Hamás conflict exemplifies this phenomenon, as the terms used to describe violence, such as “occupation”, “resistance”, “terrorism”, “self-defense”, and “collective punishment”, are heavily politicized and historically entrenched. These categories function as frameworks that influence the interpretation of events, allocate responsibility, and establish permissible courses of action. Constructivism, with its focus on meaning, identity, and norm creation, is therefore well suited to explaining why the Gaza conflict has acquired strong symbolic significance in global politics.

For Palestinian narratives and much of the Global South, Gaza represents dispossession, occupation, and power asymmetry, while for Israeli narratives and many Western discourses, it is framed as a site of persistent security threats and non-state violence. These competing narratives delineate the moral parameters of the conflict and shape the invocation of international norms such as civilian protection, proportionality, and resistance. Constructivist studies of norm contestation emphasize that global norms are often mobilized as discursive resources rather than fixed standards, enabling actors to legitimize preferred interpretations (Wiener, 2014). Gaza thus constitutes a highly charged normative environment in which major powers frame events in ways that support or challenge dominant understandings. The attacks by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli military response triggered

intensified global discursive contestation. Constructivist scholarship on crisis narratives observes that episodes of abrupt violence often produce “narrative condensation,” in which actors rapidly stabilize preferred frameworks and marginalize alternatives (Roselle, Miskimmon, & O’Loughlin, 2014). US officials quickly framed the attacks through the language of terrorism and the right to self-defense, situating the crisis within a post-9/11 counter-terrorism framework central to US identity. Chinese discourse, by contrast, emphasized “root causes”, occupation, and collective punishment, placing the crisis within a longer narrative of structural injustice faced by Palestinians.

Constructivist analyses of these discursive patterns illustrate how Gaza becomes a symbolic arena of great-power rivalry, enabling both states to reaffirm and project their preferred identities on the international stage. US support for allies and condemnation of terrorism reinforce its self-image as a defender of a liberal, rules-based international order, despite growing criticism of normative inconsistency. China's emphasis on humanitarian language, sovereignty, and anti-colonial rhetoric supports its portrayal as an alternative form of global leadership aligned with the Global South. In both cases, identity performance is mediated through discourse and communicated via diplomatic and media channels, channels that are themselves shaped by the structural differences between the two systems. In the US, a relatively open media environment allows for a plurality of voices alongside official narratives, while in China, state-controlled outlets such as Xinhua and Global Times function as deliberate instruments of foreign policy messaging, amplifying Beijing's preferred framing with notable consistency. The conflict also facilitates contestation over the meaning of responsibility in international politics. The US invokes responsibility primarily in relation to counter-terrorism and alliance protection, grounded in post-9/11 security imperatives. China frames responsibility as moral restraint, humanitarian advocacy, and multilateral diplomacy, explicitly rejecting what it presents as selective application of Western norms, a framing that has become particularly visible in its Gaza discourse since October 2023. Constructivist scholarship emphasizes that such disputes actively shape the evolution of international norms rather than merely reflecting divergent preferences (Wiener, 2018).

The conflict further enables both powers to mobilize international audiences. Constructivist scholarship highlights that states actively seek recognition and validation of their preferred self-presentations from relevant external audiences (Ringmar, 1996; Wolf, 2011). The US primarily seeks this recognition from Western allies and security partners, while China appeals

to the Global South, particularly Arab states and postcolonial nations skeptical of Western-led international order. The conflict thus functions as a platform through which both states perform identity narratives tailored to distinct audiences. Discourse surrounding Gaza also creates opportunities for symbolic balancing, a process through which states challenge rivals not through military or institutional means, but by contesting their legitimacy claims and undermining their preferred self-representations. More broadly, Gaza operates as an ideational proxy arena reflecting transformations in global order. Constructivist scholarship on order transitions emphasizes that rising and established powers compete not only for material influence but also for authority over normative structures (Bukovansky et al., 2012). In this context, debates surrounding Gaza extend beyond Middle Eastern politics to questions of legitimate violence, appropriate state behavior, and moral responsibility in the international system.

These identities do not exist in isolation but evolve through recurring discursive practices and engagement with international norms (Wendt, 1999; Katzenstein, 1996). The US has long narrated itself as the guardian of a liberal, rules-based order rooted in democracy promotion and alliance leadership, while China has developed an identity centered on sovereignty, non-interference, and shared development, seeking recognition as a responsible major power advancing multipolarity (Acharya, 2018). Conflicts such as Gaza become sites where these identities are simultaneously reiterated and contested, making constructivism not merely a theoretical choice for this study but a necessary one. In the context of US response to the 2023 Gaza escalation, selective action functions as a performative reinforcement of identity commitments. Condemnation of Hamas and affirmation of Israel's right to self-defense reflect a post-9/11 identity in which terrorism is constructed as an existential threat, while simultaneous emphasis on civilian protection sustains a parallel claim to responsible leadership balancing security with normative obligations (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999). China's response, by contrast, reflects what Shih et al. (2019) describes as identity entrepreneurship, the strategic cultivation of a role resonant with Global South audiences. Its calls for a ceasefire, refusal to label Hamas a terrorist organization, and framing of the conflict as rooted in historical injustice draw on narratives of anti-colonial solidarity and equitable global governance (Acharya, 2018), positioning Beijing as normatively distinct from Washington without requiring direct confrontation.

Constructivist scholarship also enables interpretation of China's strategic inaction as a

deliberate normative signal rather than passivity. Silence and non-condemnation can function as meaningful diplomatic acts that contest dominant normative frameworks (Finnemore, 2009). China's refusal to condemn Hamas challenges the post-9/11 counter-terrorism norm promoted by the US and creates space for alternative framings centered on occupation and structural injustice. In this sense, China's inaction operates as a discursive intervention that undermines US moral authority without direct material confrontation. The symbolic dimension of this rivalry is amplified through media discourse and global communication networks. Strategic narrative theory demonstrates that states compete to impose interpretive structures on international events, shaping how audiences understand crises (Roselle, Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin, 2014). US narratives seek to preserve a rules-based order grounded in counter-terrorism and alliance legitimacy, while Chinese narratives emphasize global inequality, Western hypocrisy, and the need for a more balanced international system.

Although similar symbolic contests have emerged in other domains of US–China competition, Gaza is distinctive due to its emotional resonance and normative salience in the Global South. This intensifies the stakes of narrative competition, as both powers seek to accumulate normative legitimacy and discursive authority by framing the conflict in ways that resonate with different audiences. Despite this, neither narrative is universally persuasive. Constructivist critiques emphasize that identity performances are contingent and subject to contestation (Hopf, 2002). In the US case, the tension between humanitarian rhetoric and material support for Israel has raised questions about moral credibility, particularly among certain international audiences. In China's case, rhetorical solidarity without substantive risk-taking raises questions about commitment. As Zürn (2018) argues, global authority increasingly depends on normative legitimacy rather than material capability alone, a resource both powers struggle to secure unambiguously.

This chapter has outlined the theoretical foundations guiding the study. In the Gaza context specifically, where US–China rivalry unfolds predominantly through discourse rather than direct military confrontation, a theoretical approach capable of capturing nuance in language, symbolism, and narrative structure is not just useful but essential. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 2009) provides the tools to systematically examine how the US and China construct identities, project norms, and contest meanings through official statements and mediated communication. When situated within a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), the analysis can reveal how two fundamentally different political and institutional

systems, one liberal-democratic and one authoritarian, produce convergent or divergent discursive strategies when navigating the same international crisis. This interweaving of constructivist theory with discourse analysis and comparative design ensures the study remains analytically rigorous while capturing the complexity of symbolic power competition.

CHAPTER 2

Research Design, Research Methods, Data Sources and Research Limitations

This chapter sets out the methodological architecture of the study. It explains how the research is designed, which methods are used, where the data comes from, and what limitations inevitably shape the findings. The core aim is to investigate how the US and China instrumentalize the Gaza conflict to advance their great-power rivalry through competing strategic narratives and how these narratives reproduce distinct identities and normative claims. The chapter proceeds from the premise that language is not a neutral medium but a political practice through which states construct meaning, justify action, and contest legitimacy. For this reason, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist design, employs a small-N comparative approach inspired by the MDSD, and uses CDA as its primary research method. Because the study is grounded in social constructivism, highlighting the ideational processes through which competition is articulated, sustained, and reproduced.

2.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist ontology. The starting point is that the Gaza conflict, as it appears in US and Chinese discourse, is not simply an objective sequence of events but a socially constructed arena in which meanings such as “terrorism”, “self-defense”, “occupation”, or “collective punishment” are continuously negotiated and contested. The research therefore prioritizes depth, contextual sensitivity and careful interpretation over breadth or statistical generalization. The empirical analysis covers the period from October 2023 to 2025, encompassing the immediate escalation following the October 7 attacks through the subsequent phases of diplomatic engagement, institutional positioning, and evolving great-power responses.

Rather than treating discourse as a secondary reflection of underlying material interests, the design treats discourse as constitutive of foreign policy behavior. The way the US and China talk about Gaza is part of how they act in Gaza. It shapes expectations, justifies choices, and signals identities to different audiences. This requires a research design capable of engaging closely with language, with institutional context, and with the broader structure of US–China rivalry.

Methodologically, the design is small-N and comparative. It focuses on two cases, the US and China, and compares how each constructs and instrumentalizes the Gaza conflict in its public discourse. The comparative logic is inspired by the MDSD tradition in comparative politics, which contrasts cases that differ on many structural dimensions but share a similar outcome in order to highlight the role of common causal factors (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). In this study, the dependent variable is the shared outcome, the discursive instrumentalization of Gaza as a vehicle of symbolic power projection, through which both states, despite their profound structural differences, converge on the practice of using the conflict to advance competing claims to normative legitimacy. The independent variable, or explanatory variation, is how each state pursues that shared practice: the US through selective action, China through strategic inaction. These contrasting strategies are therefore not divergent outcomes but divergent expressions of the same underlying phenomenon, and it is this distinction that keeps the MDSD logic coherent. Importantly, neither "US discourse" nor "Chinese discourse" should be read as a single uniform voice. On the US side, the White House, the State Department, and the US Mission to the United Nations each operate within distinct institutional constraints and address partially different audiences. On the Chinese side, all outlets, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China's UN Mission, Xinhua, and Global Times, operate under state control, and their core foreign policy message on Gaza remains consistent across platforms. What varies is how that message is delivered. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs speaks in the measured language of formal diplomacy, while Global Times is notably more assertive, targeting both domestic audiences and foreign readers already sympathetic to China's positions. These differences in tone and audience orientation do not contradict the uniformity of the underlying message but add analytical texture to how Beijing calibrates its communication across different contexts.

The selection of the US and the PRC as the two core cases is both theoretically and empirically driven. On the one hand, the two states are structurally dissimilar. The US is an established liberal democracy with a plural media environment, competitive electoral politics, and dense alliance structures. China is a one-party authoritarian state with centralized decision-making and a tightly managed state media apparatus. Their historical trajectories, domestic institutions and normative self-understandings diverge sharply. On the other hand, they share a common outcome highly relevant to this thesis: both actively use the Gaza conflict as a stage for global identity performance and normative competition, albeit in different ways. The US tends to present itself as the responsible security manager and defender of a rules-based order; China positions itself as an anti-hegemonic, Global South-orientated actor championing sovereignty

and historical justice.

This combination of maximum structural difference and shared behavioral pattern makes the pairing well suited for an MDSD-inspired design. If two such different systems converge on the practice of instrumentalizing Gaza as a normative theatre of competition, this suggests that it is analytically productive to look for causes beyond domestic regime type alone, in particular, toward the shared social structure of great-power competition and the need to project strategic identities.

Case selection is also pragmatic. Both states are permanent members of the UNSC, maintain extensive diplomatic footprints, and generate abundant textual material, speeches, UN interventions, MFA briefings, and media content that can be systematically analyzed. This provides a rich empirical archive for tracing how narratives are constructed, repeated, adjusted and contested over time.

2.1.1 Depth of Analysis

A small-N qualitative design allows for the depth of analysis required by both constructivism and CDA. The focus here is not simply whether the US or China supports a ceasefire, criticizes Israel, or calls for restraint, but how they do so, which words are chosen and which are avoided, which actors are named and which are obscured, which norms are emphasized, and how these patterns evolve as the conflict develops.

Depth of analysis involves tracking concrete lexical patterns, for example, the US emphasis on “terrorism,” “hostages,” and “Israel’s right to self-defense” versus China’s emphasis on “injustice,” “collective punishment,” “humanitarian catastrophe,” and “historical responsibility.” It also involves examining silences and omissions, such as China’s reluctance to use the word “terrorist” for Hamas, and how these omissions are discursively managed.

This level of detail is essential for identifying ideational mechanisms rather than merely describing policy positions. It allows the research to explain not only that China avoids condemning Hamas, but also how that avoidance is framed to resonate with Global South audiences, to challenge Western counter-terrorism narratives, and to reinforce a particular self-image. Such mechanisms would be invisible in large-N designs that treat discourse as a secondary variable.

2.1.2 Controlled Comparison

The research standardizes the analytical lens used to study each case; both are examined in terms of their identity claims, normative framing, representation of key actors, construction of responsibility and articulation of desired political outcomes. By holding these analytical categories constant, it becomes possible to attribute observed differences in discourse to genuine divergence in narrative strategy rather than to inconsistencies in method.

Conversely, any common patterns in their behavior, such as the shared effort to turn Gaza into a stage for self/other identity construction, can plausibly be traced back to the shared social structure of rivalry, rather than to specific domestic or regional constraints. In this sense, the differences between the two systems serve as a control: if an outcome appears in both despite these differences, its explanation is likely to lie in what they have in common as great powers competing for normative leadership.

2.1.3 Theoretical Alignment

The research design follows directly from the constructivist understanding that state identities and interests are produced and reproduced through social interaction and shared ideas. In this view, competition itself is a social construct, shaped by how states narrate each other and themselves. The shared structure of US–China competition creates incentives for both states to engage in distinct rhetorical practices, selective action and strategic inaction, in order to stabilize and project their preferred identities in relation to Gaza. At the same time, these rhetorical practices feed back into the structure by reinscribing specific norms and expectations about their respective roles.

In this way, the design moves beyond the general claim that 'ideas matter' to show precisely how ideas, expressed through discourse, participate in foreign policy behavior. Taking discourse seriously as empirical data and comparing it systematically across two states with fundamentally different political orders allows the study to demonstrate how normative leadership is contested through language in a conflict that is not a primary military theater for either power.

2.2 Methods, Data Sources, and Analytical Framework

The core analytical method used in this study is CDA. CDA is particularly suited to examining how language and power intersect and how discourse contributes to the construction of social

realities, hierarchies, and identities (Fairclough, 2013). It fits well with a constructivist ontology, which treats discourse as a key site through which international politics is produced, rather than simply described. CDA is used here not as a mechanical coding technique but as a systematic, interpretive approach. The analysis proceeds through iterative reading of key texts, attention to patterns and absences, and continuous linkage between micro-level linguistic choices and macro-level structures of rivalry, identity, and norm contestation.

The study draws in particular on Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional model of discourse, which distinguishes between the textual level, the level of discursive practice, and the level of social practice. At the textual level, the analysis focuses primarily on vocabulary, recurring metaphors, and evaluative language, while remaining attentive to broader patterns of tone and emphasis. For example, it examines how often and in what contexts the US uses “terrorist,” “slaughter,” or “hostages”; how China uses terms such as “injustice,” “collective punishment,” or “Nakba”; and which actors are positioned as “we,” “they”, “innocent civilians”, or “extremists” (“Gaza must not become a battleground for political game,” 2025; “China urges action to ensure Nakba becomes history,” 2025).

At the level of discursive practice, the analysis considers how texts are produced, circulated, and consumed. This involves situating individual statements within specific genres (e.g., UN Security Council explanations of votes, MFA press conferences, presidential remarks) and institutional settings and asking how these contexts shape what can be said and what must be implied. It also pays attention to intertextuality, how later statements echo or subtly rework earlier formulations, and how state-aligned media pick up and amplify official themes.

At the level of social practice, CDA connects observable discursive patterns to broader structures of power and contestation. Here, the focus is on how US and Chinese narratives about Gaza reinforce or challenge prevailing norms of counter-terrorism, sovereignty, humanitarian protection, and legitimate resistance, and how these narratives contribute to their long-term identity construction as hegemon/anti-hegemon and security manager/Global South champion (Meyer & Wodak, 2015).

2.2.1 Data Sources

To implement CDA and satisfy the comparative aims of the design, the study relies on three main categories of data: official state documents, media outputs, and think-tank or policy reports. All data are textual and publicly accessible, which is appropriate given the focus on

public narrative construction.

Official documents constitute the core primary data set. For the US, these include speeches and statements from the White House, the US Department of State, and the US Mission to the UN, particularly during UN Security Council and General Assembly debates on Gaza. For China, key sources are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) press conferences, written statements, speeches by senior leaders, and interventions by the Permanent Mission of China to the UN. These texts are crucial because they represent the authoritative articulation of state positions. Unlike media commentary or secondary analysis, they express the language that governments deliberately choose for international and domestic audiences. Their formality and institutional status make them especially suited for systematic CDA.

Data extraction from official sources is conducted via targeted keyword searches (e.g., “Gaza,” “Hammas,” “ceasefire,” “self-defense,” “collective punishment,” “Nakba,” “terrorism”) and temporal filtering, restricting the data set to the post-7 October 2023 escalation. Statements are then grouped into thematic clusters (e.g., ceasefire debates, humanitarian access, hostage references, and references to international law). Reliability is high because these texts are primary, official records. Where statements are originally in Chinese, official English translations are used but cross-checked, where possible, against independent translations and secondary scholarly commentary to minimize the loss of nuance. Far from being a bias, the strategic nature of these texts is precisely what the research seeks to understand; CDA treats intentionality and selectivity as part of the empirical object, not as a distortion to be corrected.

Media sources provide a second layer of data, especially for tracing how official narratives are amplified, reframed, or contested in public spheres. For China, this includes editorials and articles from Xinhua and Global Times, both state-owned outlets that function as instruments of public diplomacy and are expected to reflect official foreign policy positions. For the US, the study draws on influential outlets such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, and CNN, where official narratives are engaged, debated, and at times challenged. Media texts are selected where they clearly engage with official discourses on Gaza, for instance, editorials responding to MFA statements or op-eds reacting to US vetoes at the UN, and are used primarily to understand how state narratives are translated and circulated for broader audiences. Reliability is handled through triangulation. State-aligned Chinese media are treated as quasi-official extensions of state discourse and thus valuable for CDA. Western media are recognized as more plural but still structured by particular editorial cultures. The analysis does

not take media narratives as neutral truth but as additional discursive sites where meaning is produced and contested.

2.2.2 Data Extraction and Reliability

From these reports, the study extracts analyses directly related to US and Chinese discourse on Gaza, their diplomatic moves in the UN, and the perceived strategic implications of their rhetoric. These sources are not treated as data on state preferences but as informed secondary interpretations that help validate or challenge the patterns identified in primary texts.

Reliability is addressed by considering the institutional origin of each report and potential biases (e.g., Washington-based vs. Beijing-based vs. regional). The use of multiple institutions with different geographic and political positions helps mitigate one-sided readings and strengthens analytical triangulation.

2.3 Analytical Proposition and Mechanisms

Although the research is interpretive rather than strictly positivist, it proceeds with explicit, theoretically informed expectations that structure the analysis. These analytical proposition function as “soft hypotheses,” guiding case selection, text selection, and interpretive focus.

Analytical Proposition 1 (AP1): US official discourse on the Gaza conflict following the October 2023 escalation predominantly frames the violence through a counter-terrorism lens, foregrounding Hamas as the primary source of violence and situating US policy within the language of institutional responsibility. This selective action prioritizes alliance maintenance and counter-terrorism norms, and is expected to coexist with conditional humanitarian language through which such engagement is presented as both morally warranted and institutionally legitimate.

Analytical Proposition 2 (AP2): Chinese official discourse consistently foregrounds humanitarian suffering and Palestinian national rights while avoiding counter-terrorism terminology in reference to Palestinian armed groups. This strategic inaction, the deliberate refusal to adopt Western counter-terrorism framing challenges US normative authority and reinforces China's self-presentation as an anti-hegemonic actor.

Analytical Proposition 3 (AP3): US selective action and Chinese strategic inaction are also oriented toward distinct audiences, US narratives directed primarily at Western allies and

institutional partners, while, Chinese discourse oriented toward Arab states and the broader Global South. This differentiation is expected to reveal how Gaza functions as a site of competition for moral authority beyond the immediate conflict itself.

These analytical propositions are assessed by tracing how specific themes, formulations, and silences recur over time, across different venues, and in relation to specific diplomatic and military developments.

2.4 Research Limitations

Despite the coherence of the design and methods, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the small-N, qualitative nature of the study means that its findings are analytically rich but not statistically generalizable. The conclusions speak directly to the US–China competition in the context of Gaza, but extension to other competitions or conflicts would require further comparative research.

Second, ideational causality is inherently difficult to pin down in a linear way. The relationship between what states say and what they do is complex and mediated. This thesis mitigates that challenge through close discursive analysis and careful contextualization, but it does not claim to establish simple cause-effect chains between specific phrases and specific policy outcomes. Instead, it traces how discourse helps make particular policies conceivable, legitimate, and sustainable over time.

Third, the analysis of Chinese discourse is constrained by the nature of an authoritarian information environment. Internal debates, alternative framing, or dissenting views are largely invisible in the official and state-aligned texts analyzed here. The thesis treats the very uniformity of Chinese discourse as an empirical finding, a feature of ideological control and image management, but this still leaves the internal dynamics of policy formation largely opaque.

Fourth, the reliance on publicly available discourse means that private communications, back-channel diplomacy, and confidential negotiations remain outside the scope of the study. For a constructivist, this is a tolerable limitation because the focus is on public meaning-making and the construction of shared understandings. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that there may be discrepancies between public narrative and private calculation.

Finally, the study is temporally bounded. It focuses on discourse in the period following the October 2023 escalation. Narratives are dynamic; they may evolve as the conflict continues, as domestic politics shift, or as new crises reshape priorities. The findings, therefore, should be read as a snapshot of how Gaza functioned as a symbolic arena of US–China competition during a specific, critical phase, rather than as a definitive account of all future discursive configurations.

Recognizing these limitations does not undermine the value of the study. Instead, it clarifies the scope and contribution of the thesis to provide a theoretically grounded, methodologically rigorous, and empirically rich account of how two great powers use language, silence and narrative to instrumentalize a violent conflict at the periphery of their material interests but at the center of their struggle over legitimacy, identity and global leadership.

CHAPTER 3

The Rhetoric of Responsibility: US Selective Action and Narrative Construction in the Israeli– Hamas War in Gaza

3.1 The US Discursive Landscape After October 7, 2023

The US' narrative framing of the war in Gaza that followed the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks developed within a dense intersection of strategic commitments, domestic political pressures, and expectations associated with global leadership. From the outset, official US discourse sought to balance two imperatives that often sat in tension with one another. On the one hand, Washington reaffirmed its long-standing role as Israel's primary security partner. On the other, it attempted to preserve its broader claim to moral responsibility and international legitimacy by acknowledging civilian suffering in Gaza and signaling restraint.

In his first major public remarks after the attacks, President Biden adopted language of moral clarity and emotional intensity, describing the Hamas assault as “barbaric” and characterizing it in absolute moral terms as “pure evil” (“Biden Calls Hamas Attacks in Israel ‘Pure Unadulterated Evil’,” 2023). He also framed October 7 as a historically exceptional rupture, calling it “the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust”, while at the same time drawing a boundary between Hamas and ordinary Palestinians by stating that “the vast majority of Palestinians are not Hamas” (“Hamas attack ‘deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust’, says Biden,” 2023; Miller Center, 2024). These formulations did more than condemn violence. They established the interpretive frame through which subsequent US statements were to be understood: October 7 was positioned as the initiating event that explained and justified what followed.

This framing was accompanied by repeated assertions of responsibility and leadership. Biden's insistence that the US would stand with Israel while also working to “protect innocent civilians” introduced a dual narrative that would persist throughout the conflict (Mason & Holland, 2024; Miller Center, 2024). Rather than resolving the tension between military support and humanitarian concern, US discourse managed it through careful modulation. Strong moral condemnation of Hamas coexisted with softer, often conditional language regarding Israeli conduct, enabling US officials to reaffirm alliance commitments while maintaining rhetorical distance from humanitarian consequences. State Department briefings and official statements reinforced this structure by foregrounding diplomacy and effort.

Officials stressed that the US was “engaging in intensive diplomacy” and “working around the clock” with regional partners, alongside reaffirmations of “ironclad” and US support for Israel’s right to self-defense (U.S. Department of State, 2024b; Matza & Vernon, 2024). Notably, these formulations emphasized activity and intent rather than measurable outcomes. Through this language, responsibility was framed less in terms of constraint and more in terms of ongoing management of a crisis.

Taken together, these early discursive moves established the architecture of US selective action. The US presented itself as morally justified in supporting Israel, procedurally responsible in its diplomacy, and normatively committed to humanitarian protection, without fully reconciling contradictions between these positions. This framing shaped how later debates about ceasefire, aid, and accountability unfolded.

3.1.1 Constructing the Moral Imperative: Terrorism, Innocence, and Responsibility

At the core of the US narrative lies a sustained reliance on a post-9/11 counter-terrorism framework. This framework functions as a principal mechanism through which continued military and diplomatic support for Israel is legitimized. Across presidential speeches and State Department messaging, Hamas is consistently constructed as an absolute moral antagonist rather than a political actor embedded in a broader conflict. Biden’s references to “pure evil” and the “slaughter of innocents” do discursive work by placing Hamas outside the realm of political negotiation and situating US policy within a familiar moral universe shaped by counter-terrorism (“Biden Calls Hamas Attacks in Israel ‘Pure Unadulterated Evil’,” 2023).

This framing is reinforced through the personalization of responsibility. In official briefings, US officials repeatedly located the main obstacle to ceasefire diplomacy in Hamas leadership, describing Yahya Sinwar as unwilling to accept terms that would secure hostage release and end fighting (Duss, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2024b). By concentrating blame in a single figure, the discourse simplifies the conflict’s causal structure and helps sustain the legitimacy of US selective action by portraying American diplomacy as persistent but constrained by forces beyond its control. The moral architecture of the discourse is further reinforced through repeated invocations of innocence. Israeli civilians are foregrounded as victims, particularly in early statements, through references to families, children, and civilian spaces targeted in the October 7 attacks. The emphasis on US hostages also serves a dual function: it performs responsibility toward American citizens while legitimizing intensive

engagement with regional mediators such as Qatar and Egypt (U.S. Department of State, 2024a; “Mediators Egypt, Qatar and Turkey sign with Trump,” 2025). When Biden stated that securing the release of hostages was his highest priority, this positioned the US as a protector of vulnerable citizens while strengthening the rationale for sustained diplomatic intervention (Yahus, 2023).

At the same time, the language used to address Palestinian civilian suffering is more carefully circumscribed. While US officials acknowledged humanitarian harm, these acknowledgements were often framed in generalized or passive terms, like ‘Far too many Palestinians,’ that register suffering without clearly attributing agency (Yahus, 2023). This contrast between explicit naming of Hamas violence and more abstract treatment of Palestinian casualties reflects an asymmetry in moral clarity. One form of violence is personalized, condemned, and politicized; the other is recognized but more frequently depoliticized.

Through this discursive structure, the US constructs itself as a responsible actor navigating a tragic but morally legible conflict. Counter-terrorism language provides an ethical anchor for military support, while humanitarian references signal concern without destabilizing alliance commitments. In this way, American responsibility is framed not as an impartial constraint but as a balancing of security imperatives and humanitarian values, articulated repeatedly, even when the tension remains unresolved.

3.1.2 Selective Humanitarianism and Strategic Ambiguity in Military Support

As the humanitarian situation in Gaza deteriorated and images of civilian suffering circulated globally, US discourse increasingly incorporated humanitarian language alongside security commitments. This did not displace the counter-terrorism frame; instead, humanitarian concern was layered onto it, functioning as a complementary narrative that enabled the administration to respond to growing international and domestic unease without revising its core strategic position. Beginning in late 2023, Biden and senior officials stressed the need for Israel to “minimize civilian harm” and facilitate humanitarian access (Hansler, 2023). These statements marked a tonal adjustment compared to October messaging, yet the language remained calibrated: appeals were framed as expectations and encouragement rather than demands, and they were embedded within continued affirmation of Israel’s right to self-defense. This pattern is visible in the State Department’s repeated calls for Israel to “maximize” aid entry and take “specific, credible steps” to reduce civilian harm (U.S.

Department of State, 2024a). These formulations project seriousness and involvement, but they generally stop short of specifying consequences or enforcement thresholds. Responsibility is expressed as procedural and cooperative rather than coercive.

The establishment of the Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore maritime aid corridor (JLOTS) further illustrates this dynamic. US communications portrayed the project as evidence of leadership and humanitarian commitment under difficult conditions, while subsequent evaluation documented significant constraints on its effectiveness and distribution outcomes (*USAID's Gaza Response*, 2024). In this analysis, the gap between visible effort and limited impact helps explain how humanitarian action can function discursively as well as materially. The initiative allows the administration to demonstrate engagement and moral concern while shifting attention away from structural restrictions that continue to limit aid flows.

Humanitarian language also served a legitimating function in response to domestic criticism. Civil society organizations and advocacy groups raised questions about accountability and the compatibility of unconditional military support with humanitarian norms (Bradner & Greene, 2025; “The crisis of accountability for assaults on Palestinians,” 2025). In response, official discourse increasingly emphasized review processes, “credible assurances”, and ongoing engagement, signaling that humanitarian considerations were being taken seriously even when policy outputs remained largely stable (Young & Hudson, 2024; The White House, 2024). Taken together, this selective humanitarianism did not reverse the underlying logic of US alignment with Israel. Instead, it functioned as a stabilizing narrative that absorbed criticism while preserving legitimacy. By foregrounding concern, effort, and procedural responsibility, US discourse maintained a claim to moral engagement while avoiding direct confrontation with the implications of continued military assistance.

Alongside humanitarian rhetoric, US discourse increasingly referenced legal and institutional constraints governing arms transfers and military support. These references gained salience as allegations of civilian harm intensified and as members of Congress, journalists, and advocacy organizations raised questions about compliance with US law, including expectations articulated under NSM-20 (Sharp & Zanotti, 2024). Rather than addressing these concerns through explicit policy shifts, the administration relied on language that balanced acknowledgement with non-commitment.

Official statements frequently affirmed that US assistance was subject to internal review and

that Washington expected partners to comply with international humanitarian law, but these affirmations were often expressed through conditional, forward-looking language, such as “we expect” and “credible assurances are required,” without defining clear thresholds or consequences (Young & Hudson, 2024; The White House, 2024; Sharp & Zanotti, 2024). This pattern projects accountability while leaving enforcement indeterminate. The tension between legal obligation and political reality became especially visible in late 2024 reporting about whether the administration might condition or delay certain transfers. Subsequent coverage described how initial signals of potential restrictions were softened or walked back, reflecting congressional pressure and alliance calculations (Broadwater & Solomon, 2025). In the official discourse that followed, emphasis returned to dialogue, review processes, and continued engagement, shifting attention from consequences to management.

From an analytical standpoint, this ambiguity performs important discursive work. It allows the administration to invoke the authority of law and procedure while preserving flexibility in practice. Accountability is framed as an internal, managed process rather than a public constraint, allowing legality to function as a symbolic resource that reinforces responsibility without compelling immediate change.

3.1.3 Discursive Performances at the United Nations: Vetoes, Responsibility, and Institutional Authority

The UNSC constituted the most visible arena in which US discourse on Gaza was formalized as an authoritative interpretation of international responsibility, legality, and legitimacy. In this setting, US representatives consistently framed vetoes and draft language as acts of responsibility rather than obstruction.

In its explanation of the vote regarding a UNSC ceasefire resolution in November 2024, the US Mission argued that a credible resolution must “clearly condemn Hamas” and contribute to “the release of all hostages”, presenting unconditional ceasefire demands as “detached from the realities on the ground” (United States Mission to the United Nations, 2024). This formulation reasserts Hamas as the primary moral and political problem, reframes veto use as protective rather than destructive, and positions the US as safeguarding a workable peace process rather than blocking international will.

Modality is central to this discourse. US statements repeatedly established what “must” occur: “Hamas must release hostages,” “Israel must retain the ability to defend itself,” and “diplomacy

must be credible,” thereby constructing the US as an arbiter of feasibility and legitimacy (Hagstrom, 2024; Crane, 2024; “Gaza: Security Council adopts US resolution,” 2024). The effect is to present US policy as the responsible center between unrealistic demands and destabilizing outcomes.

The adoption of a US-drafted three-phase ceasefire resolution in June 2024 further reinforced this positioning. International reporting described US diplomacy as advancing a “workable” framework, which US officials presented as a credible pathway compared to earlier proposals that lacked key conditions (Stockwell & Hansler, 2025; “Gaza: Security Council adopts US resolution,” 2024). In my analysis, the recurring contrast between “credible/workable” and “detached/simplistic” proposals helps sustain a hierarchy of legitimacy in which US approaches are framed as serious governance, while alternative framings are treated as politically resonant but operationally thin (Tawfik & Jordan, 2025). At the same time, US discourse often separated humanitarian concern from accountability. Civilian suffering was acknowledged, yet language generally avoided explicit attribution of responsibility for harm. Where agency is explicit, it tends to appear most strongly in references to Hamas’s actions; where agency is sensitive, passive or generalized constructions are more common. This discursive balance allows the US to express concern while limiting claims that would directly implicate its ally or raise sharper questions about US material support. A recurring feature of US discourse during the Gaza war is the construction of Washington as the central diplomatic actor, an indispensable organizer of negotiations, aid efforts, and de-escalation initiatives. This narrative is reproduced across official statements and reinforced through prominent US media coverage.

State Department briefings repeatedly emphasized intensive engagement with regional partners and described US diplomacy as continuous and high-level (U.S. Department of State, 2024a, U.S. Department of State, 2024b). Media reporting on ceasefire and pause negotiations often described proposals as US-brokered and developed in coordination with Qatar and Egypt, foregrounding US initiative and casting regional actors as key facilitators within a US-centered diplomatic process (The White House, 2024; Yahus, 2023; “Mediators Egypt, Qatar and Turkey sign with Trump,” 2025). This repeated foregrounding functions as a narrative of procedural leadership; even when outcomes are uncertain, the US is presented as the actor doing the diplomatic work that makes any outcome possible.

This framing also helps manage moments of diplomatic difficulty. When ceasefire diplomacy

stalled, official messaging and public remarks frequently emphasized complexity and constraints rather than policy choice. For example, Biden publicly stated that securing a Ramadan ceasefire was “looking tough,” framing the challenge as the product of difficult negotiations rather than as an expression of limited US leverage (“Ceasefire deal in Gaza before Ramadan 'looking tough', Biden says,” 2024). Such formulations allow the US to preserve claims to leadership by presenting setbacks as evidence of the seriousness of the task and the stubbornness of obstacles rather than as an erosion of authority.

3.1.4 Self-Presentation, Strategic Silences, and Media Ecosystems

An important dimension of US narrative construction lies in patterns of omission as well as explicit statements. Across the post, the October 2023 period, official discourse consistently foregrounded Hamas as the initiator of violence and reaffirmed Israel’s right to self-defense while avoiding certain terms and causal framings that would pull the discourse toward structural accountability. One recurrent silence concerns the broader legal and political vocabulary associated with occupation. While UN documentation and many international debates routinely locate Gaza within longer political frameworks; US official discourse generally avoided centering “occupation” as an interpretive lens. Instead, the war was framed as an episodic security crisis originating on October 7, with responsibility concentrated on Hamas rather than on contested structural contexts. A second silence concerns the legal implications of US arms transfers. While NSM-20 and related legal discussions circulated in Congress and in public reporting, official statements tended to rely on references to “credible assurances” and internal processes without specifying thresholds for enforcement or consequences (Young & Hudson, 2024; Sharp & Zanotti, 2024). The effect is not to deny legality but to keep legal accountability within the language of managed procedure. A third pattern concerns ceasefire language. In early months, the preferred term “humanitarian pause” signaled a temporary interruption framed around aid access rather than a political or legal commitment to cessation (Hu & Roth, 2023). When ceasefire language was adopted more openly later, it was often described in conditional or process-orientated terms that preserved flexibility and centered hostage release and security conditions.

US discourse on Gaza did not circulate in a single unified sphere. It moved across several media environments that amplified, revised, or contested official narratives. Mainstream outlets often reflected the administration’s dual framing, condemning Hamas while highlighting humanitarian suffering and reporting on internal tensions and policy debates. Investigative

reporting also documented limits and contradictions, especially around arms transfers and the difficulty of reconciling humanitarian rhetoric with outcomes (Hudson, 2025; Banco, Landay, & Pamuk, 2025). Conservative media, by contrast, generally amplified counter-terrorism and pro-Israel framing and treated US pressure on Israel as risky or misguided, increasing the domestic political salience of appearing unwavering on alliance commitments (Gilboa & Sigan, 2024). In this fragmented environment, official state messaging functioned as a stabilizing center. White House and State Department discourse consistently returned to a controlled set of keywords, terrorism, self-defense, responsibility, diplomacy, and humanitarian access, combined with hedging language that signaled concern and review while maintaining strategic continuity.

Taken together, the discursive practices examined in this section produce ideational effects that matter for the thesis's analytical propositions. First, the recurring portrayal of October 7 as a moral rupture reinforces a counter-terrorism interpretive frame that legitimizes military support as a response to terrorism rather than as a discretionary geopolitical choice. Second, humanitarian language operates as a form of managed responsibility; it signals moral engagement and leadership while preserving policy flexibility through conditional modality and procedural framing. Third, institutional discourse at the UN frames vetoes as stewardship and constructs US proposals as "credible" and "workable," reinforcing a claim to procedural authority in crisis management (Stockwell & Hansler, 2025; "Gaza: Security Council adopts US resolution," 2024).

3.2 China's Narrative Framing: Strategic Inaction and Normative Contestation

China's response to the post-October 2023 escalation in Gaza is striking not because of what it does militarily, but because of what it deliberately refrains from doing. Rather than intervening directly, Beijing pursues what can be described as strategic inaction: it maintains distance from coercive measures while simultaneously engaging in highly active, morally charged, and carefully calibrated discourse. This narrative strategy is not accidental. It reflects a broader effort to use the war in Gaza as a discursive arena through which China challenges US hegemony, promotes a vision of a multipolar international order, and consolidates its self-image as a principled representative of Global South interests (Aboudouh, 2024). This interpretation aligns with a growing body of scholarship on Chinese foreign policy that emphasizes Beijing's increasing reliance on normative and rhetorical strategies to contest Western dominance without assuming the costs and risks associated with military leadership

(Callahan, 2016; Acharya, 2014; Foot, 2020). Rather than mirroring US patterns of intervention, China frequently seeks to reposition itself as a moral and political alternative through discourse, particularly in conflicts involving Western military power.

From a constructivist perspective, China's discourse on Gaza does not simply describe events; it actively constitutes a particular understanding of the conflict and of China's role in global politics. Official statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), interventions at the United Nations, and coverage by state-aligned media such as Xinhua, CGTN, and Global Times together form a coherent narrative architecture. Through this analysis, three recurring functions become evident. First, humanitarian catastrophe and international law are elevated as the primary lenses through which Gaza is interpreted. Second, US leadership is delegitimized through the portrayal of veto use and unconditional support for Israel as morally bankrupt and structurally violent. Third, China is projected as a responsible great power, non-interventionist in military terms but normatively assertive, and committed to justice, sovereignty and Palestinian rights (Han, 2025).

In this reading, the war in Gaza becomes more than a regional tragedy. It functions as a test case for the credibility of the US-led "rules-based order" and as an opportunity for Beijing to position itself as an advocate of a more inclusive international system. Similar dynamics have been identified in analyses of China's responses to crises in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, where rhetorical assertiveness has substituted for direct involvement as a means of influence (Shih et al., 2019; Burton, 2019). From the outset of the escalation, Chinese discourse consistently foregrounded Gaza as a humanitarian catastrophe rather than as a theatre of counter-terrorism or great-power competition. In the immediate aftermath of the October 2023 hospital attack, an MFA spokesperson stated that China was "shocked" by the strike, expressed "deep mourning" for the victims, and called for an "immediate ceasefire and cessation of hostilities," urging all parties to make "every possible effort to protect civilians and avert an even worse humanitarian disaster" ("Abusing its veto power, the US is undoubtedly 'humanitarian disaster creator' in Gaza," 2024; "Russia and China veto US resolution," 2024). An examination of the language used in these statements shows that such lexical choices are not incidental. Expressions such as "shocked," "deep mourning," and "humanitarian disaster" center civilian suffering and emotional resonance rather than strategic calculation ("Abusing its veto power, the US is undoubtedly 'humanitarian disaster creator' in Gaza," 2024). Within this framing, the primary subjects of concern are not states or armed groups but civilians exposed to large-

scale violence. This emphasis is reinforced over time, as state media reports repeatedly highlight the destruction of residential areas, mass displacement, the collapse of healthcare infrastructure, and rising civilian casualties (“Health crisis looms over Gaza as fuel shortages pose deadly risk in hospitals,” 2023; “UN rights chief concerned by destruction of civilian infrastructure in Gaza,” 2024; “China urges action to ensure Nakba becomes history,” 2025).

The consistency of Beijing's humanitarian framing across institutional platforms and time periods, from early MFA statements to later UN interventions, suggests this was not reactive messaging but a strategically sustained discursive choice, one that systematically repositioned the moral stakes of the conflict away from securitized frameworks. This emphasis performs two interconnected ideological functions. First, it constructs civilians rather than states as the primary moral referents, displacing geopolitical framings centered on security or counter-terrorism. Second, it positions China as a moral actor that speaks in the name of humanitarian principles rather than alliance politics or strategic expediency. This framing is consistently tied to an insistence on ceasefire as an unconditional moral imperative. Chinese representatives describe a ceasefire as the overriding priority (“Foreign Minister Wang Yi outlines China’s views on first phase of Israel-Hamas ceasefire,” 2025). At the United Nations, Chinese envoys argue that a ceasefire requires the complete cessation of hostilities by all parties and warn that continued military operations will deepen the humanitarian catastrophe (“China, Arab states adopt series of outcome documents,” 2024; “Foreign Minister Wang Yi outlines China’s views on first phase of Israel-Hamas ceasefire,” 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, 2025). In subsequent interventions, Chinese officials contend that imposing political preconditions on a ceasefire amounts to condoning continued violence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, 2024). Through this framing, responsibility is redefined; actors resisting a ceasefire are implicitly positioned as choosing war over civilian life, a move that exerts symbolic pressure by narrowing the boundaries of legitimate action. Justice, International Law, and the Two-State Solution.

The humanitarian narrative is consistently embedded within a broader legal and normative vocabulary. Chinese discourse frames the war in Gaza not only as tragic but as unlawful and unjust. Official statements and state media frequently argue that Israeli military operations have exceeded the bounds of self-defense and constitute collective punishment of civilians (“UN rights chief concerned by destruction of civilian infrastructure in Gaza,” 2024; Aboudouh, 2024). Military actions are described as violations of international law and

international humanitarian law and characterized as unacceptable (“China urges Israel to halt Gaza offensive and settlement expansion,” 2025). This legal framing corresponds with scholarship highlighting China’s selective invocation of international law as a means of constraining Western intervention while advancing alternative interpretations of legitimacy (Foot, 2020). Legal language thus operates simultaneously as a critique and as a tool of normative positioning.

China’s opposition to forced displacement and territorial annexation reinforces this framing. Chinese officials explicitly oppose the removal of Palestinian populations and reject any attempt to annex Gaza or the West Bank, situating current violence within a longer history of occupation and dispossession (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, 2025; “China urges Israel to halt Gaza offensive and settlement expansion,” 2025). Gaza is thus presented not as an isolated emergency but as part of a structural injustice. At the same time, Chinese representatives link their legal critique to a political horizon centered on a two-state solution. This solution is repeatedly described as the consensus of the international community and the only viable path to lasting peace (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2023). Ceasefire is framed not merely as a temporary pause but as a necessary step toward Palestinian self-determination and sovereignty. In constructivist terms, this discursive move relocates Gaza from the register of the security crisis to that of unfinished decolonization, a framing that resonates strongly in non-Western political contexts shaped by anti-colonial histories (Acharya, 2018).

3.2.1 International Law, the Two-State Solution, and US Delegitimization

Alongside its humanitarian and legal framing, Chinese discourse systematically challenges the legitimacy of US leadership. The United Nations Security Council emerges as a central site of contestation, with repeated US vetoes of ceasefire resolutions portrayed as symbols of institutional paralysis and moral failure. Chinese representatives describe these vetoes as abuses of power that prevent the Council from fulfilling its responsibility to protect civilians (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2025; “China, Arab states adopt series of outcome documents,” 2024). In this narrative, the veto is reframed from a procedural instrument into a moral indictment of US behavior.

State-aligned media adopt sharper language. Global Times editorials label the US the primary obstacle to ceasefire efforts and portray it as a contributor to humanitarian disaster (“Abusing

its veto power, the US is undoubtedly ‘humanitarian disaster creator’ in Gaza.” 2024). Academic analyses of global governance identify such moments as indicative of a broader legitimacy crisis within the US-led order, particularly when institutional authority appears detached from humanitarian outcomes (Zürn, 2018; Kurlantzick, 2023). A defining feature of China’s discourse is what remains unsaid. References to Hamas, terrorism, or terrorist organizations are minimal or absent in official statements and state-aligned media. Instead, Chinese texts refer more generally to “parties to the conflict” or “armed groups” (“Xinhua Headlines: Xi urges ceasefire in Gaza, stresses two-state solution,” 2023).

This omission functions as a deliberate political strategy. Scholarship on norm contestation shows that silence and ambiguity can operate as meaningful forms of action, allowing states to resist dominant frameworks without direct confrontation (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Wiener, 2018). By avoiding post-9/11 counter-terrorism language, China challenges the normative hierarchy embedded in Western security discourse while preserving diplomatic flexibility and audience resonance.

3.2.2 Projecting Responsible Leadership: Mediation and the Global South

While criticizing US behavior and maintaining ambiguity on sensitive labels, China simultaneously constructs a positive self-image as a responsible and constructive great power. This identity is articulated through repeated calls for ceasefire, diplomacy, and multilateral initiatives, as well as selective highlighting of Chinese mediation efforts (Aboudouh, 2024).

Chinese officials consistently argue that a lasting ceasefire is the top priority and that Palestinians must govern Palestine (“Xinhua Headlines: Achieving lasting ceasefire in Gaza is top priority: Chinese envoy,” 2025). China’s foreign minister has advanced a four-point proposal emphasizing ceasefire, civilian protection, humanitarian assistance, and renewed commitment to a two-state solution (“The ‘four-point proposal’ injects stabilizing force,” 2025). These themes recur across official discourse, reinforcing China’s portrayal as a principled advocate of international law. China’s call for a broad-based international peace conference further supports this identity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2024; Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2025). Such proposals implicitly critique US-led diplomatic frameworks while positioning the UN and wider international community as legitimate conveners. Policy analyses suggest these initiatives are part of China’s effort to contest US diplomatic primacy without assuming the

risks of direct mediation (Aboudouh, 2024).

Media coverage of initiatives such as the Beijing Declaration and joint statements with Egypt reinforces this image, presenting China as a facilitator of dialogue and de-escalation (“Xinhua Headlines: China, Arab states adopt joint statement on Palestinian issue,” 2024; “China, Arab states adopt series of outcome documents,” 2024; Lu & Jijakli, 2025). While the material impact of these efforts remains limited, their discursive significance lies in reinforcing claims to responsible leadership. China’s Gaza narrative is oriented toward audiences beyond the immediate parties to the conflict, particularly within the Global South. References to occupation, displacement, historical injustice, and the Nakba resonate strongly in societies shaped by colonial experience and postcolonial struggle (“Gaza must not become a battleground for political game,” 2025; Aguirre & Bustelo, 2024). Through joint statements with Arab and Muslim-majority states and engagement with Palestinian factions, China seeks to present itself as a partner in justice rather than as a distant power seeking influence. This positioning reframes global leadership in moral rather than military terms (Lu & Jijakli, 2025; Aboudouh, 2024). The Gaza crisis has intensified Global South dissatisfaction with Western double standards, particularly when compared with responses to other conflicts such as Ukraine (Nguyen, 2024). Chinese discourse amplifies these critiques by linking Gaza to broader debates about inequality, representation, and norm-setting, positioning China as an advocate of systemic rebalancing (Aguirre & Bustelo, 2024).

Taken together, China’s narrative framing of the Gaza war reflects a deliberate and layered ideological strategy. Humanitarian suffering, legal norms, and Palestinian self-determination are foregrounded, while securitized labels are avoided. Official statements, UN interventions, and state-aligned media work in tandem to circulate and stabilize this narrative across multiple audiences. China’s strategic inaction is thus best understood as a form of ideational power projection. By insisting on a ceasefire, emphasizing humanitarian catastrophe, criticizing US vetoes, and mobilizing Global South solidarity, China challenges US moral authority while legitimizing its own claim to responsible leadership (Aboudouh, 2024). At the same time, the analysis indicates that China’s discursive influence is closely tied to the perceived failures of existing institutions rather than to material engagement. Policy-oriented scholarship suggests that such strategies can generate symbolic influence during crises but remain contingent on sustained credibility and audience reception (Aguirre & Bustelo, 2024). Gaza thus functions as a discursive stage on which China performs and refines its emerging global identity within

a fragmented international order.

3.3 Analytical Findings

The discursive confrontation between the US and China over the Israeli–Hammas war in Gaza illustrates how contemporary great-power rivalry increasingly unfolds through narrative construction, symbolic authority, and claims to moral legitimacy rather than direct material confrontation. Situated within a constructivist lens that emphasizes identity, norm contestation, and meaning-making, the US and Chinese narratives reveal fundamentally different strategies for justifying action, mobilizing audiences, and articulating competing visions of international order, with Gaza serving as the terrain on which these competing claims to global leadership play out.

The findings suggest that Gaza has actively deepened an ongoing struggle over the meaning of responsibility, legitimacy, and acceptable violence in world politics, a struggle that predates the October 2023 escalation but has been sharply intensified by it. This aligns with broader scholarship suggesting that the erosion of US normative hegemony and the emergence of more networked, post-unipolar regional structures have created new opportunities for narrative contestation (Krieg, 2025). Previous analyses of US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan further demonstrate how American strategic narratives often become internally strained when efforts to sustain military primacy conflict with claims to moral leadership (Efron & Goldenberg, 2018). Against this backdrop, China’s approach to Gaza represents an effort to refine a distinct discursive repertoire based on strategic distance, humanitarian framing, and multilateral legitimacy, rather than securitized intervention (Shawamreh, 2025; Aboudouh, 2024).

This discussion synthesizes the empirical findings through three interrelated dimensions: first, the competing constructions of legitimacy and moral authority (AP1 and AP2); second, narrative struggles over humanitarianism, law, and the meaning of violence; and third, the implications of audience-oriented discourse for an increasingly fragmented global order (AP3).

3.3.1 Selective Action and the US Construction of Responsible Leadership

The findings support AP1, which posits that US engagement in Gaza is shaped by selective action combining material support, diplomatic management, and discursive legitimation. US discourse consistently frames its role through the language of counter-terrorism, institutional responsibility, and alliance stewardship. This narrative allows Washington to present its

policies as necessary, restrained, and normatively grounded, even as those policies generate significant humanitarian and diplomatic controversy. Across presidential speeches, State Department briefings, and United Nations interventions, US officials repeatedly anchor legitimacy in the post-9/11 counter-terrorism framework. Hamas is consistently portrayed as the initiating and primary source of violence, while Israel's military campaign is situated within the broader logic of self-defense and global security (United States Mission to the United Nations, 2024; Efron & Goldenberg, 2018). This framing narrows the causal narrative of the conflict and foregrounds security imperatives over structural or historical contexts, such as occupation or asymmetry.

Humanitarian concern is incorporated into this narrative in a conditional and procedural manner. While civilian suffering in Gaza is acknowledged, responsibility is framed as mitigation rather than restraint. Calls for humanitarian pauses, increased aid access, and diplomatic engagement project moral awareness without necessitating a reassessment of military assistance or legal accountability (U.S. Department of State, 2024a; U.S. Department of State, 2024b). This aligns with scholarship showing that US humanitarian discourse often functions as a buffering mechanism that absorbs criticism while preserving strategic commitments (Phillips, 2023). At the institutional level, US vetoes at the UN Security Council further illustrate selective action as a narrative strategy. Vetoes are justified as acts of responsibility designed to preserve diplomatic credibility and prevent outcomes framed as destabilizing or irresponsible (United States Mission to the United Nations, 2024). In this way, the US sustains its identity as the guardian of procedural legitimacy, even as these actions contribute to perceptions of double standards among non-Western audiences.

3.3.2 Strategic Inaction and China's Normative Challenge

The findings also support AP2, demonstrating that China's strategic inaction operates as a deliberate form of ideational power projection. Rather than assuming military or mediation roles, Beijing relies on humanitarian framing, legal language, and moral critique to position itself as a principled alternative to US leadership.

Chinese official discourse consistently frames Gaza as a humanitarian catastrophe rooted in structural injustice rather than as a counter-terrorism crisis. Statements by the MFA and state-aligned media foreground civilian suffering, international humanitarian law, and the urgency of an immediate ceasefire, while avoiding securitized language and the explicit condemnation

of Hamas (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024; "China, Arab states adopt series of outcome documents," 2024; "China urges action to ensure Nakba becomes history," 2025). This omission is a strategic choice that allows China to resist Western security frames while maintaining resonance with Arab publics and broader Global South audiences (Rumley, Redlich, & Groeling, 2023).

China's humanitarian discourse is closely linked to a broader critique of the US-led international order. Repeated references to UN paralysis, veto abuse, and selective norm enforcement frame Gaza as evidence of systemic moral failure (Krieg, 2025; Duman & Rakipoğlu, 2025). Through this narrative, China constructs itself as a defender of multilateralism, justice, and sovereign equality, despite its limited material involvement. Importantly, China's approach combines moral maximalism with strategic minimalism. While its rhetoric is expansive and justice-oriented, its actions remain cautious and low-risk. This strategic distance allows Beijing to accrue symbolic capital without incurring the costs of enforcement or mediation, a pattern observed in China's responses to conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Libya (Lu & Zhou, 2024; Ullah & Xinlei, 2025).

3.3.3 Audience Orientation and Discursive Multipolarity

The evidence also supports AP3 while underscoring the importance of overlapping audiences. US and Chinese narratives are oriented toward different primary audiences, but they circulate across shared global platforms, producing a layered and competitive discursive environment.

US discourse primarily addresses Western allies, institutional partners, and domestic constituencies. Its emphasis on counter-terrorism, alliance credibility, and procedural responsibility resonates with audiences invested in the rules-based international order and post-9/11 security norms (United States Mission to the United Nations, 2024). At the same time, US messaging is shaped by domestic political pressures, including congressional scrutiny and media polarization (Efron & Goldenberg, 2018).

Chinese discourse is primarily oriented toward non-Western audiences, particularly Arab states and the broader Global South, where its emphasis on justice, sovereignty, and historical grievance aligns with widespread dissatisfaction toward Western interventionism and selective humanitarianism (Lu & Zhou, 2024; Dong, Wang, & Lian, 2025). To a lesser degree, Chinese messaging also reaches European and multilateral audiences, especially at the UN, where Beijing seeks to present itself as a credible normative actor within the existing institutional

order.

This results in discursive multipolarity, in which multiple narratives coexist. Media ecosystems amplify this fragmentation, producing parallel interpretive frameworks in which Gaza is simultaneously understood as a war on terror, a humanitarian catastrophe, and a manifestation of structural injustice (Ibrar & Khan, 2025).

3.3.4 Implications for Global Legitimacy and Great-Power Competition

Taken together, the findings suggest that the Gaza war represents a significant moment in the reconfiguration of global legitimacy. The US retains substantial material and institutional power, but its narrative authority is increasingly strained by perceived inconsistencies between its humanitarian rhetoric and strategic commitments (Krieg, 2025; Efron & Goldenberg, 2018). China, meanwhile, has expanded its symbolic influence by aligning its discourse with justice-based and humanitarian narratives, even as its material engagement remains limited (Shawamreh, 2025; Ullah & Xinlei, 2025).

Rather than signaling a simple transfer of hegemony, the findings point toward a more fragmented and networked international order in which legitimacy is dispersed and contested. In this environment, discourse becomes a central instrument of statecraft, and conflicts such as Gaza function as arenas for negotiating meaning, responsibility, and authority. Ultimately, the discussion demonstrates that the US–China rivalry in Gaza is fundamentally a struggle over narratives. Through selective action and strategic inaction, both states use language to define responsibility, legitimate violence, and leadership. Gaza thus serves not only as a mirror reflecting global power transitions but also as a catalyst accelerating the ideational reconfiguration of world politics.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine the post–October 7, 2023, Gaza conflict as a symbolic and discursive arena in which the US and China pursue relative advantage within an evolving global order. By applying a constructivist analytical lens alongside CDA and MDSD, the study has demonstrated that Gaza functions as a site of ideational competition in which identities, norms, and claims to legitimacy are actively constructed, contested, and projected.

The findings of this study speak directly to the three research questions that structured the analysis. The first asked what forms of selective action and strategic inaction characterize US and Chinese engagement with Gaza, respectively. The analysis shows that these are not simply policy choices but identity performances. US selective action, sustained military support for Israel, intensive diplomatic engagement, and repeated Security Council vetoes, is framed consistently through a long-standing self-conception as a global security manager. China's strategic inaction, expressed through deliberate avoidance of military commitments and securitized framing paired with a visible humanitarian and legal discourse, is equally purposeful. Both positions are active strategic choices shaped by how each state understands and projects its role in the international order.

The second research question asked how these responses are constructed and disseminated through official discourse. The analysis supports AP1 and AP2. US discourse foregrounds counter-terrorism, alliance credibility, and institutional responsibility, while weaving in conditional humanitarian language that has nonetheless generated widespread perceptions of double standards, particularly among Global South audiences. Chinese discourse centers civilian suffering, historical injustice, and international law, while its deliberate avoidance of counter-terrorism framing functions not as silence but as a calculated act of normative contestation.

The third research question asked to what extent these discursive strategies reflect distinct audience orientations. The findings support AP3: US narratives are directed primarily at Western allies and institutional partners, while Chinese discourse is oriented toward Arab states and the broader Global South. This differentiation is analytically significant, it reveals that Gaza has served not merely as a site of policy legitimation but as a platform on which both powers compete for moral authority and political credibility before very different global publics.

Taken together, these findings underscore a key insight of constructivism: power in international politics is not reducible to material capabilities or coercive force alone. Rather, it also operates through the ability to shape shared meanings, define legitimate categories of action, and secure recognition for preferred identities. The Gaza conflict illustrates how crises far removed from the core strategic theaters of great-power rivalry can nonetheless become central arenas for normative contestation. For both the US and China, Gaza has served as a platform for performing identity roles, mobilizing external audiences, and articulating competing visions of global order. The conflict thus reveals a form of rivalry that is predominantly symbolic, unfolding through discourse, representation, and institutional positioning rather than direct confrontation.

At the same time, the study does not suggest that China's approach represents an unambiguous alternative to US leadership. The analysis highlights inherent tensions within China's strategy of strategic inaction. While its discourse resonates with many Global South audiences, the limited material substance of its engagement raises questions about the durability of its normative appeal. Similarly, the US strategy of selective action, despite its normative contradictions, continues to rely on deeply embedded alliance networks and institutional influence that remain central to global governance. The Gaza conflict therefore does not signal a simple transition from US dominance to Chinese leadership but rather points toward a more complex, networked, and contested international environment in which legitimacy is increasingly difficult to secure and sustain.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The analysis is temporally bounded to the period following the October 2023 escalation and focuses on public discourse rather than private diplomacy or internal decision-making processes. Additionally, the reliance on official and state-aligned sources, particularly in the Chinese case, necessarily limits insight into internal debates or alternative framings. These constraints, however, do not undermine the core contribution of the study. Instead, they reflect the theoretical and methodological choice to focus on public meaning-making as a central dimension of international politics.

Future research could extend this framework to other conflicts or issue areas in which great powers engage primarily through discourse rather than direct intervention, such as global health governance, climate diplomacy, or cybersecurity. Comparative analysis involving additional actors, including regional powers or international organizations, could further illuminate how normative authority is negotiated in a multipolar system. Longitudinal studies

examining how narratives evolve over time would also enhance understanding of the durability and limits of discursive power.

This thesis showed that the Gaza conflict serves as a revealing case of how contemporary great-power rivalry is increasingly waged through narratives, identities, and claims to legitimacy. By examining US selective action and Chinese strategic inaction through a constructivist lens, the study contributed to broader debates on power, discourse, and global order. It demonstrated that in an era of shifting hierarchies and contested norms, the struggle to define the meaning of crises may be as consequential as the capacity to shape their material outcomes.

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Eesti Résumé

Gaza sõja instrumentaliseerimine: USA ja Hiina rivaliteet ning võimu projitseerimine valikuliste meetmete ja strateegilise tegevusetuse kaudu

Käesolev magistritöö käsitleb Gaza konflikti alates 2023. aasta 7. oktoobri eskaleerumisest kui sümbolset ja diskursiivset areeni, kus USA ja Hiina vaheline suurriikide rivaliteet avaldub. Selle asemel, et käsitleda konflikti üksnes humanitaarkatastroofi või regionaalse julgeolekukriisina, vaatleb uuring seda kui keskkonda, kus kaks erineva poliitilise struktuuriga suurriiki püüavad kujundada rahvusvahelist normatiivset autoriteeti ja legitiimsust, kasutades selleks erinevaid diplomaatilisi ja retoorilisi lähenemisviise.

Töö teoreetiline raamistik tugineb sotsiaalsele konstruktivismile, mille kohaselt riikide identiteedid ja huvid ei ole muutumatud, vaid kujunevad sotsiaalse suhtluse, jagatud ideede ja diskursiivsete praktikate kaudu. Sellest vaatenurgast ei ole see, kuidas riigid konflikti kirjeldavad, pelgalt informatiivne, vaid ka kujundav, see mõjutab ootusi, õigustab poliitilisi valikuid ning annab erinevatele auditooriumidele märku riigi identiteedist. Raamistikku rakendatakse kriitilise diskursuseanalüüsi abil, mis võimaldab süstemaatiliselt uurida, kuidas keel, vaikimine ja tõlgendusraamid toimivad mõjuvahendina. Lisaks kasutatakse kõige erinevamaid süsteeme võrdlevat väikese valimiga uurimisdisaini, mis kõrvutab kahte poliitiliselt erinevat süsteemi, kes mõlemad kasutavad konflikti sarnaselt diskursiivsetel eesmärkidel.

Empiiriline analüüs toob esile kaks erinevat strateegiat. USA rakendab käesolevas uurimuses nn selektiivse tegutsemise strateegiat. see hõlmab püsivat sõjalist toetust Iisraelile, aktiivset diplomaatilist tegevust ning korduvat vetokasutust ÜRO Julgeolekunõukogus, kõik seostatuna pikaajalise identiteediga globaalse julgeolekukorraldajana ja rahvusvahelise korra kaitsjana. Kuigi see lähenemisviis tugevdab liitlassuhteid ja kehtivaid julgeolekunorme, toob see kaasa ka märkimisväärsed normatiivsed pingeid. Terrorismivastase võitluse ja Iisraeli enesekaitsõiguse järjepidev rõhutamine koos tinglikuma humanitaarse keelekasutusega on tekitanud mitmetes riikides, eriti globaalse lõuna riikides, tajumuse topeltstandarditest, mis on järk-järgult nõrgestanud USA moraalse juhtrolli usaldusväarsust.

Hiina rakendab seevastu strateegilise mittetegutsemise lähenemist, hoidudes sõjalistest kohustustest ja julgeolekupõhisest retoorikast, rõhutades samal ajal nähtavalt humanitaar- ja

õiguslikku diskursust, mis toob esile tsiviilelanike kannatused, ajaloolise ebaõigluse ja Palestiina rahva õigused. Oluline on märkida, et Hiina keeldumine läänelike terrorismivastaste siltide kasutamisest ning Hamas'i hukkamõistmisest hoidumine ei ole passiivsuse märk, vaid teadlik diskursiivne valik. See positsioneerimine võimaldab Pekingil seada küsimärgi alla USA normatiivsele autoriteedile suhteliselt väikeste materiaalsete kulutustega, suurendades samal ajal oma sümboolset atraktiivsust Araabia riikide ja globaalse lõuna seas.

Analüüs toob samuti esile erinevad auditooriumile suunatuse mustrid. USA narratiivid on suunatud peamiselt lääneriikidest liitlastele ja institutsionaalsetele partneritele, peegeldades muret liitlassuhete ühtsuse ja institutsioonide legitiimsuse pärast. Hiina diskursus on orienteeritud eelkõige mitte-läänderiikidele, tuginedes õigluse, suveräänsuse ja hegemooniavastase solidaarsuse ideedele. See erinevus kinnitab, et Gaza ei ole üksnes poliitika õigustamise keskkond, vaid ka platvorm, kus konkureeritakse moraalse autoriteedi pärast erinevate globaalsete auditooriumide ees.

Laiemas perspektiivis viitavad uurimistulemused sellele, et kaasaegne suurriikide konkurents toimub üha enam narratiivide, identiteetide ja legitiimsuse kaudu, mitte otsese sõjalise vastasseisu vormis. Gaza juhtum illustreerib normatiivse autoriteedi kasvavat killustatust rahvusvahelises süsteemis, kus ükski riik ei suuda enam ühepoolset määratleda, mis on legitiimne või vastutustundlik käitumine. Tulevased uuringud võiksid laiendada käesolevat analüütilist lähenemist teistele kõrge sümboolse tähendusega konfliktidele või valdkondadele, kus suurriigid konkureerivad peamiselt diskursiivsete vahenditega, aidates seeläbi paremini mõista, kuidas võim toimib üha enam vaidlustatavas rahvusvahelises korras.

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