

Economic Leverage: The Role of Sanctions in Shaping International Relations

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Abstract

Economic sanctions have evolved into a pivotal instrument of foreign policy, enabling states to exert pressure without direct military confrontation. Traditionally viewed as tools for punishment or coercion, their strategic function as instruments of economic leverage is receiving growing scholarly and policy attention. However, a conceptual gap persists in understanding how sanctions operate not only as punitive measures but as proactive mechanisms for shaping global behavior and diplomacy. This study aims to bridge this gap by critically examining sanctions as instruments of economic statecraft, focusing on their ability to influence state behavior, uphold international norms, and serve long-term strategic interests. Adopting a qualitative, doctrinal methodology, the article analyzes key international legal frameworks, sanctions regimes, and historical case studies involving major powers such as the U.S., EU, and China. The findings reveal that while sanctions are often framed within legal and moral justifications, their effectiveness depends heavily on multilateral coordination, economic integration levels, and the credibility of enforcement. Ultimately, the study concludes that sanctions, when strategically designed and legally grounded, can serve as effective tools of economic leverage, but their overuse or misuse risks undermining their legitimacy and the broader international legal order.

Keywords: Economic sanctions, international relations, United Nations, European Union.

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1. Introduction

Economic sanctions are defined as restrictions on trade and international financial assistance (Carter,1987:1164). It is a threat or restriction of economic relations taken by one or more states to coerce a change in another state's behaviour (Kobayashi,2017:1). These deliberate, government-imposed restrictions on customary trade and financial relations (Elliott and Others,2009:5) have the aim of achieving foreign and security policy objectives. These measures can be made through different ways, including trade embargoes, asset freezes, travel bans, and financial restrictions (Krulikowshi,2024:1). Sanctions are often used as a tool of foreign policy to achieve a variety of goals which include promoting human rights, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, combating terrorism and responding to acts of aggression (Kobayashi,2017:1). For example, the United Nations has imposed sanctions on North Korea to curb its nuclear weapons programme (Council on Foreign Relations,2022:1), while the European Union has targeted sanctions against individuals and entities involved in human rights abuses in Belarus (European Council, 2025:1).

Furthermore, the subject of effectiveness of economic sanctions is constantly being discussed. This is because even though the main purpose of sanctions is to exert significant pressure on the targeted parties, the success in achieving these purposes. This is seen when critics argue that sanctions can sometimes harm the civilian population more than the intended targets and may not always lead to the desired political changes (Masters,2024:1). However, some opine that sanctions are very important as policymakers would consider sanctions in responding to foreign crisis when military intervention is not actionable (Masters,2024:1).

Thus, it is crucial to understand economic sanctions under the current globalized social context. Sanctions serve as a tool to influence international behaviour without opting for military actions (Smagin,2022:1) and it is also useful for maintaining global security by resolving human rights violations, nuclear proliferation and terrorism. This is illustrated in a recent instance where sanctions were imposed on Iran for its nuclear programme and on Russia for its actions in Ukraine, which highlight the effect of economic sanctions in international relations (Bradford,2024:1). As a result of the sanction against Iran, it has affected Iran's economy by decreasing its oil

revenue and its gross domestic product (GDP). Despite the consequences, Iran continued to develop its nuclear programme and has led to ongoing negotiations and adjustments regarding the sanction regime.

Hence, the importance of understanding economic sanctions extends beyond their immediate economic impact as sanctions also play a critical role in shaping diplomatic relations and international alliances. By analyzing the outcome of sanctions, valuable insights can be achieved and more can be made known about the complexities of international relations and the efficacy of sanctions as a policy tool. As the global landscape continues to evolve, understanding the role and implications of economic sanctions remains essential for various parties such as policymakers, businesses and scholars.

2. Methodology

This research employed a multi-method approach to examine the role of sanctions in international relations. Content analysis of articles, journals, and books (Lachica,2020; Abdullah and Others,2024) was conducted to establish a foundational understanding and highlight key debates. A doctrinal legal analysis focused on relevant international instruments such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and case law (Rohaida,2010; Althabhwawi,2013; Saiful,2023). Doctrinal research explored theoretical underpinnings (Ahmadian,2023), such as proportionality and adverse distinction. A comparative analysis (Alabdallahman,2023; Bahrami & Dasai,2024) assessed national and international sanction practices (Althabhwawi,2023). The findings were synthesized to identify patterns and propose actionable recommendations for reform (Salawati,2011). This methodological framework enabled a rigorous and balanced evaluation of sanctions, considering both their legal legitimacy and humanitarian implications.

3. Brief History of Sanctions

3-1. Early Use of Sanctions

It is important to know that sanctions have been in existence since ancient times as tools of diplomacy between empires. This is seen in the earliest recorded sanction which occurred in 432 BC where the Athenian Empire imposed economic sanction towards Greek city-states to ban Megarian traders from accessing Athenian markets during the Peloponnesian War (Alexander,2009:8). Besides that, it was also recorded that the Roman

Government, in 232-225 BC, had imposed a trade embargo on the Gauls to forbid anyone from trading gold with the Gauls (Alexander,2009:8). Hence, it is evident that sanctions have been used in early history to achieve political and economic objectives.

Following that, in the early modern period, economic sanctions were used on a broader scale. During the Napoleonic Wars, the British government and the French government both implemented measures that was aiming to cause commercial damage and weaken food supply through breaking trade patterns (Abughris,2021:1). The British implemented the Continental System, a blockade developed to isolate France economically and to weaken its military capabilities (Alexander,2009:13). In the 19th and early 20th centuries, economic sanctions were increasingly used as tools of international diplomacy. In the American Civil War, the Union government implemented a coastal blockade of Confederate ports, aiming to cripple the Southern economy by preventing the export of cotton and the import of war supplies which eventually defeated the Confederacy (Alexander,2009:13). In the early 20th century, the League of Nations promoted the use of economic sanctions as a means of maintaining international peace and security (Barber,1979:367). The League's Covenant included provisions for the imposition of sanctions against aggressor states, although the effectiveness of these measures was limited by the lack of enforcement mechanisms and the reluctance of member states to fully commit to sanctions (Financial Crime Academy,2025:1). Despite these challenges, the League's efforts laid the groundwork for the development of more robust international sanction regimes in the later 20th century.

Subsequently, the use of sanctions evolved significantly during the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly during the Cold War and post-Cold War eras. During the Cold War, economic sanctions played an important role in foreign policy for both the United States and the Soviet Union to exert pressure on rival states and to influence global political dynamics without resorting to direct military conflict (Morgan and Others,2023:9). Another example from the Cold War period is the United States' embargo on Cuba to isolate Cuba economically and to undermine the communist regime of Fidel Castro. Despite its long duration, the embargo has had limited success in achieving its political objectives, highlighting the complexities and

limitations of economic sanctions as a tool of foreign policy (United States Department of State,2025:1).

In the post-Cold War era, the nature and implementation of economic sanctions changed as international organizations like the United Nations (UN) began to play a more prominent role in the imposition of sanctions. In the 1990s, there was an increase in the use of UN sanctions as response to conflicts and human rights violations. For example, comprehensive trade and financial sanctions were imposed on Iraq in 1990 as a result of invading Kuwait that aimed to compel Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait and to dismantle Iran's biological and nuclear weapons programmes (Elliott,n.d.: 91). However, the humanitarian impact of these sanctions led to criticisms as the broad sanctions caused collateral damage towards civilian in Iraq, Haiti and neighbouring nations. Therefore, it led to the development of "smart" sanctions, which targeted specific individuals, entities and sectors rather than entire populations to minimize the humanitarian impact while maintaining pressure of the targeted parties (Kline and Hwang,2021:2).

The use of smart sanctions has become increasingly common in the 21st century, with measures targeting individuals and entities involved in terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and human rights abuses. Research has shown that smart sanctions, or also known as targeted sanctions, like financial and travel sanctions have a higher success rate than trade sanctions (Morgan and Others,2023:15) despite its difficulties in implementation as it might also influence other non-targeted sectors. For example, the Security Council prohibited the import of Liberian lumber as Liberian timber taxes were used to purchase arms but the export of the commodity may affect the state's economy and other legitimate businesses (Gordon,2011:317). Other than that, smart sanctions can be in the form of aviation bans as one of types of travel sanctions. In response to Libya's responsibility on the Lockerbie bombing, the Security Council imposed travel ban against Libya (The Guardian,2003:1). It was viewed as contributing to a successful outcome even though the enforcement of aviation bans may affect transportation and impact the civilian population who are not the intended subject of the sanction.

In short, the evolution of sanctions reflects the changing dynamics of international relations and the development effective tools to address global challenges. As the international community continues to struggle with issues

such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and human rights abuses, economic sanctions remain a critical instrument of foreign policy.

4. Mechanisms of Sanctions

4-1. Law on Sanctions and Its Implementation

The legality of sanctions is a constantly debated topic among academics. In general, sanctions within the UN framework are recognized as legal subjected to the proportionality principle and in accordance with human rights. Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, Article 41 states that the Security Council can take measures not involving the use of force, such as economic sanctions to deal with actions that pose threats to peace, breaches of the peace and acts of aggression. Therefore, it is up to the UN's discretion to determine what is a threat to the peace and it also requires nine out of 15 members of the Security Council to vote for the action to impose economic sanctions (Kunz, 1960: 386). Therefore, economic sanctions can be seen as an effort to preserve basic human rights of its citizens and moral principles while promoting economic development (Althabhwai and Others,2024: 206).

In the early stage of sanction use, problems arise when different members states have different interpretations on how the sanctions apply due to their different legal systems and overlapping jurisdiction between countries over the same parties poses difficulty in its implementation (Kunz,1960:326). This is seen in the financial sanction imposed by Canada against Iraq and Kuwait which froze their assets in addition to a trade embargo. Issue arises when the sanction does not reach foreign subsidies of Canadian companies because Swiss, British, French, Japanese and EC sanction regulations did not apply extraterritorially (Kunz,1960:332). Therefore, sanctions are generally legal under the UN Charter subjected to the proportionality of the decision and its effectiveness is subjected to the coordination of various countries and international organizations.

On the other hand, with regards to the European Union, Chapter Two of the Treaty of the European Union provides that the Council Decisions can set up sanction regimes. In relation to the effect of sanctions that impacts EU's economic and financial relations with other countries, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) requires the Council to regulate the functioning of common market as per Article 215 of the TFEU. Other guidelines that controls the use of sanctions is the Basic Principles on the

Use of Restrictive Measures (Sanctions) 2004 which outlines the subjects of sanctions and the types of sanctions that can be imposed. For example, the sanctions that can be in the form of arms embargo, visa-ban, financial sanctions and others. These sanctions can be used in cases that involve terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, upholding human rights and democracy (Christian,2017:55). In short, the EU utilises sanctions as a foreign policy instrument and an enforcement of its own interest against foreign countries.

Sanctions can also be imposed by a country towards other parties. For example, the US has employed various sanctions for different reasons to overcome issues that they encounter. These US sanctions are based on the ability of the US Congress to pass laws related to foreign commerce with the US as per Article 1 Section 8 of the US Constitution and the ability of the US President to enforce sanctions (Nephew,2019:94). To illustrate non-UN sanctions or also known as autonomous sanctions, the US has imposed sanctions against North Korea to reduce in export in oil and other commodities.

Sanctions can be imposed through two ways, unilaterally or multilaterally, where in a unilateral sanction, only a sender sanctions a target while in a multilateral sanction, a sender acts in conjunction with other agents to impose sanction on the target (Joshi and Mahmud,2017:52). Regardless of the nature of the sanctions, implementation and enforcement of sanctions involve coordination within different countries and international organizations related to the issue at hand. The implementation of sanctions begins with the identification of a threat or violation of international law, followed by the drafting and adoption of a sanctions resolution (Congressional Research Service,2023:11). To impose a sanction, Members States should agree on the decision to impose sanctions and coordinate within Member States to ensure that implementation is consistent on the decided sanction. When a sanction is imposed, its implementation will be monitored by bodies of international organizations such as the Sanctions Committee of UN and the European External Action Service of the EU. This is crucial to ensure the uniformity and effectiveness of the imposed sanctions, as well as prevention of violation of the sanctions.

4-2. Types of Sanctions

There are various types of sanctions, where each of them serves different purposes against different targets and different targeted sectors. Under

certain situations, several sanctions are used at the same time to maximize their impact and effectiveness in achieving the desired purposes. The common types of sanctions include trade restrictions, asset freezing, travel bans, financial sanctions and diplomatic sanctions.

Firstly, trade restrictions is a form of economic sanction that limits trade flow or prohibit the import or export of goods to and from the target country (Dai and Others,2021:1). These restrictions can be comprehensive, affecting all trade, or selective, targeting specific sectors such as arms, oil, or technology (Masters,2024:1). For example, the US imposed a unilateral trade sanction against Cuba due to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the US has also imposed sanctions on North Korea due to nuclear tensions (Dai and Others,2021:1). The purpose of trade restrictions is to weaken the economy of targeted nations by disrupting its access to markets significant towards its economy, which exerts pressure on its government to change their behaviour towards the issue at hand.

Besides that, sanctions can be imposed through the freezing of assets that involve blocking access to financial assets and properties held by targeted individuals, entities, or governments in foreign jurisdictions. The method of asset freezing aims to disrupt the financial networks and economic activities of the targets who are accessing funds to support their in illegal activities (Sanction Scanners,2025:1). Asset freezing is one of the main sanction regimes used by the UN Security Council as seen when it froze assets of Iranian individuals and entities connected to nuclear or missile activities (Brewer,2016:23). The European Union also has frozen the assets of individuals and entities linked to human rights abuses in Belarus (Financial Crime Academy,2025:1).

Next, sanctions can also be in the form of travel bans which prevent targeted individuals from entering the sanctioning countries. This is used to isolate political leaders, military officials, and other influential figures from the international community (Department for Business and Trade,2012:1). Furthermore, travel bans limit the mobility of specific individuals so that it is difficult for them to conduct illicit activities internationally. For instance, the United States has imposed travel bans on officials from Venezuela in response to human rights violations and corruption (BBC News,2014:1). Thus, by restricting travel, travel sanctions aim to assist in holding those in fault of objectionable policies or actions accountable for their decisions.

Other than that, financial sanctions are used to impose restrictions on financial transactions, such as prohibiting access to banking systems and financial markets. These sanctions can also involve the denial of foreign assistance, loans, and investments. Financial sanctions are designed to isolate the target from the global financial system, making it difficult for them to conduct international trade or secure financing for globally unaccepted policies. As a result of financial sanction imposed on Iran, most of its nuclear enrichment efforts were suspended and negotiations regarding its nuclear programme continued. Therefore, it can be said that financial sanctions assist in achieving foreign policy and national security goals (Krulikowski,2024:1).

It is undeniable that there are other types of sanctions utilised to exert pressure towards the targeted nations or specific individuals such as arm embargoes, diplomatic sanctions and investment bans. All of these sanctions share the same purpose to change the behaviour of the targets and prevent illicit activities which may harm the society through exploitation of human rights and development of war weapons.

5. Economical and Social Impact of Sanctions

It is undeniable that sanctions impact the economy of target countries and subsequently influence global markets. This is evident in the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Neuenkirch and Neumeier,2015:110), inflation and value of currency. These effects may occur even though there is no imposition of trade embargoes or suspension of international aid and capital flow because it tarnishes the reputation of the targeted countries in the global market that contributes to decrease in trade (Neuenkirch and Neumeier,2015:111). As a result, the targeted countries suffer decrease in exports and imports, bargaining power in the global market and decline in foreign aid and investments (Hufbauer et al,1991:90). Besides that, the decrease in entry of imported products and difficulty in obtaining raw materials will cause countries to suffer shortage of goods and lead to inflation (Majidi and Zarouni,2016:85). This can be seen in the Iraninan economy where they suffered inflation due to increased costs in foreign trade and commodity prices (Majidi and Zarouni,2016:85). Other than that, sanctions also contributes to the depreciation of exchange rate of targeted countries as confidence of foreign investors reduced due to the imposition of

sanctions as seen in Russia where the ruble depreciated while experiencing economical unstability (Kholodilin and Netšunajev,2018:41).

Notwithstanding that, sanctions also have significant influence on the sanctioning countries. This includes reducing foreign trade with the targeted country as seen in the reduced trade with between the US and other sanctioning countries and Russia when sanctions were imposed on Russia. This is because the Russian market plays an important role in global trade as it is a primary market for products and a big exporter in international trade. It is evident by looking at data which shows that there is a reduction in exports after the sanctions were imposed, which contributes to a decrease in foreign trade of the sanctioning trades (Kazantsev,2019:7). Hence, sanctions are said to be a two-edged sword as they not only impact the targeted countries but also affect the countries enforcing sanctions.

On the other hand, it is said that sanctions have benefits too. When sanctions are being imposed on a country, they become independent from international aid and relations. This can force the nation to be proactive in being self-sufficient, resulting in growth of the nation by developing its domestice industry to fill in the gap created by restricted trade (Galtung, 1967:386). Thus, sanctions can push countries to growth their domestic industry which enhances their independence from other countries and reduces the possibility of imposition of economic sanctions in the future (Selden,1999:20). The other benefits of sanction imposition is that military action can be avoided while achieving the same objective to compel targeted countries to change their behaviour towards their actions. This ensures national security and stability where society is protected from the serious consequences of walfare and can continue to strive due to the active development of domestic industries.

In short, sanctions result in various impacts that influence the economic and social sectors of the targeted country, as well as the sanctioning nations. Due to sanctions, targeted countries suffer from economic instability and reduce in imports and exports due to restrictions towards international trade. Sanctions also act as a two-edged sword by also affecting sanctioning countries by reducing trade due to sanctions. At the same time, sanctions also benefit targeted countires by fostering development of domestic industries and maintaining peace among the society.

6. Political and Diplomatic Effects

6-1. Isolation and Pressure

While being implemented economically sanctions can cause political consequences towards the targeted countries. Sanctions create significant political pressure by isolating countries from their participation in international institutions, financial systems and diplomatic engagement, consequently diminishing their position internationally (Barnes,2008:36). Therefore, sanctions may cause paradoxical political repercussions on the target nation, resulting in increasing political resistance to the sanctioning countries' demands (Kaempfer and Lowenberg,2007:872).

For instance, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the European Union (EU) and its allies imposed a series of sanctions both economically and politically to isolate Russia diplomatically (European Council,2025:1). These included imposing an asset freeze on entities that materially or financially support actions against Ukraine's territorial integrity (Council of the European Union,2014:1). EU nations also reinforced the suspension of Russia's membership in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Elliot,2022:1). When the EU-Russia meeting was called off, member states agreed not to convene regular bilateral summits, even bilateral negotiations on visas and the New Agreement between the EU and Russia have been halted (Prime Minister's Office,2014:1). Furthermore, the European Council imposes an export and import ban on the commerce of armaments, implements a restriction on exporting dual-use commodities for military or end-users in Russia, and limits Russian access to sensitive technology and services for oil production (EUR-Lex,n.d.:1).

These measures aim to exert economic pressure by disrupting Russia's financial transactions and limiting its ability to engage in global trade, which causes geopolitical instability (Maha and Others,2024:118). To further explain, the suspension of negotiations over Russia's accession to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Energy Agency (IEA) is designed to further isolate Russia from key international economic and energy institutions, limiting its participation in global policy-making processes. Likewise, similar actions as above-mentioned may be applied to other countries to compel behavioral change by increasing the political and economic costs of non-compliance with international norms.

6-2. Diplomatic Negotiations

Other than that, economic sanctions are often used as instruments of diplomatic leverage designed to compel targeted states to engage in negotiations. To illustrate, the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, is a typical example of how sanctions can cause diplomatic outcomes (Babar and Others,2021:129).

In the mid-2000s, the United States, European Union and United Nations imposed stricter economic sanctions on Iran in response to its uranium enrichment program, which Western powers suspected was a cover for developing nuclear weapons (Robinson,2023:1). These sanctions were targeted towards key sectors of the Iranian economy, including oil exports, banking system and access to international financial markets. According to a 2013 Congressional Research Service report, Iran's oil exports fell by over 50% (Katzman & Congressional Research Service,2020:1). The currency depreciation, high inflation and increasing unemployment further intensified domestic pressure on the Iranian government (Amuzegar,2012:1). When the global community was relatively united in pressuring Iran, Iran accepted the 2015 multilateral nuclear accord, JCPOA (Henneth,2020:1).

As a result, the JCPOA shows both the upside and downside of sanctions-based diplomacy within the larger context of international relations. It demonstrates that sanctions, when broad, multinational and accompanied by real incentives, may be successful tools for coercive diplomacy. The deal indirectly emphasized the importance of collective action in shaping state conduct, where coordinated measures by significant international parties, such as the P5+1, can authorize diplomatic pressure and encourage adherence to global non-proliferation rules. This diplomatic success also exemplifies that multilateral and coordinated sanctions, when paired with a clear path for relief, can compel states to shift policy and cooperate on contentious security issues.

7. Humanitarian Consequences

7-1. Impacts on Civilian Population

Sanctions have traditionally caused serious humanitarian effects on the civilians of target countries. These measures often limit the civilians' access to international financial systems, import-export markets, and essential supplies such as food, medication, petrol, and medical equipment (Mallard

and Others,2020:124). Consequently, sanctions have caused inflation (Ghorbani and Others,2018), unemployment, and devaluation of currencies (Peksen and Others,2015:448), all of which disproportionately harm innocent citizens rather than political leaders.

One of the relevant examples will be the United Nations Security Council's sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s. The imposition of comprehensive economic sanctions against Iraq and occupied Kuwait by the United Nations Security Council through Resolution 661 (1990) marked one of the most far-reaching enforcement measures. Such sanctions include a complete export ban to Iraq and Kuwait (Gordon,2020). Member states were instructed to prevent the sale or supply of any commodities or products, including weapons or military equipment to individuals or entities in Iraq or Kuwait. This prohibition extended to transactions carried out by nationals, entities, and vessels registered under the member state's flag.

However, Resolution 661 did include narrow humanitarian exceptions. Member states were allowed to export goods strictly intended for medical purposes, and in certain cases, to provide foodstuffs on humanitarian grounds (UN Security Council,1990). These exceptions acknowledged the risk that a full economic blockade could lead to widespread civilian suffering. Nonetheless, in practice, the bureaucratic hurdles and restrictive licensing systems associated with the humanitarian exemptions severely limited their effectiveness.

Additionally, the resolution imposed a stringent freeze on financial flows (UN Security Council,1990). All states were required to prevent the transfer of funds or economic resources to the Government of Iraq, as well as to any commercial, industrial, or public utility entities operating in either Iraq or Kuwait (UN Security Council,1990). Furthermore, individuals and entities within member states were barred from removing or transferring such funds from their territories to Iraqi-controlled entities (UN Security Council, 1990). Again, only transactions for strictly medical or humanitarian purposes, and food aid under humanitarian conditions, were permitted under this financial blockade.

These sanctions were implemented following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (Dyson and Others,2017:1), were among the most extensive in history. Such sanctions caused widespread malnutrition, a shortage of medical supplies, and an increase in child death rates (Popal,1999). Though disputed, a commonly quoted statistic claimed that the sanctions claimed to have killed

up to 500,000 Iraqi children (Spagat,2010:116). This shows that, even when sanctions are set out as nonviolent weapons of international enforcement, their humanitarian implications can be disastrous, especially if they are broad, long-lasting, and poorly intended. The case of Iraq demonstrates how extensive economic sanctions, when applied without substantial humanitarian safeguards or effective exemption mechanisms, can cause the systemic collapse of a vital civilian infrastructure. The breakdown of health-care institutions, water sanitation, and food distribution networks during the sanction, proves that economic coercion can cause extreme pressure and punishment to the civilians who did nothing wrong.

On the other hand, sanctions on Iran have been tied to restricting access to crucial pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, notwithstanding humanitarian exemptions. According to a Human Rights Watch study in 2019, US sanctions impaired Iran's ability to pay for crucial imports through international financial systems, resulting in shortages of insulin, chemotherapy medications, and rare illness therapies (Far,2019:1). This indicates that, even when sanctions are seemingly designed to exempt humanitarian items, indirect consequences such as financial over-compliance and logistical obstructions can substantially impede access to life-saving supplies.

These effects raise serious concerns about whether sanctions, especially when intended as a non-military alternative, are ethically appropriate when they result in widespread human suffering.

7-2. Ethical Considerations

The ethical dimensions of economic sanctions have become a focal point in international legal and political discourse. While sanctions are often employed as tools to enforce international norms and deter undesirable behavior, their implementation raises significant ethical concerns, particularly when they adversely affect civilian populations.

7-2-1. Proportionality and Discrimination (or Adverse Distinction)

The principles of proportionality and discrimination are fundamental to international humanitarian law (IHL) and provide a useful normative framework for assessing the ethical legitimacy of sanctions. Proportionality mandates that any harm inflicted by a coercive measure must not exceed the anticipated political or strategic benefit (Althabhwawi and Others,2023:127). On the other hand, discrimination requires that such measures distinguish

clearly between legitimate political or military targets and innocent civilians. In the context of economic sanctions, particularly comprehensive sanctions, these principles are frequently undermined.

Comprehensive sanctions regimes often fail to uphold these standards. Rather than applying direct pressure on political elites or decision-makers, such measures tend to inflict widespread harm on civilian populations, including disruptions to healthcare systems, food security, and access to essential infrastructure, as seen in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. In international law, disproportionate responses may themselves constitute violations (Valkadinova, 2018:183). This can be seen in Article 33 of the Geneva Convention IV (1949), where it states that: "No protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has not personally committed. Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited." This shows that international humanitarian law prohibits collective punishments. Sanctions cannot target civilians merely for their nationality, affiliation, or residence in an offending state.

To apply the above proportionality principle, a relevant example that may be referred to is Iraq (1990s), where UN sanctions severely limited Iraq's ability to import medicines and maintain infrastructure, leading to massive public health crises, high child mortality, and malnutrition. Another suitable example would be Iran (2019), where U.S. sanctions impaired Iran's ability to use international financial systems to pay for imported medications, including chemotherapy and insulin, causing significant harm to vulnerable patients. In both instances, the disproportionate harm to civilians, particularly those who were medically vulnerable, challenges the legitimacy of sanctions under both international humanitarian law and ethical norms. From a proportionality standpoint, sanctions should not impose excessive civilian suffering in pursuit of political goals, especially when the humanitarian damage outweighs or undermines the intended political outcomes.

Therefore, sanctions that severely impede a civilian population's access to essential goods and services including food, medicine, and medical equipment, not only infringe international humanitarian law (IHL) but also provoke serious ethical questions. When such sanctions contribute to public health crises, deteriorating living conditions, or rising mortality rates, they may violate the right to health as protected by Articles 11 and 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)

(Far,2019:1). Both Articles 11 and 12 connote that all Member States are states to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health,” as well as the right to an adequate “standard of living” that includes “adequate food.”

To conclude, coercive measures like sanctions must strike a balance between their intended political objectives and the humanitarian consequences they generate. If a sanctions regime causes widespread suffering among civilians, particularly vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, and the chronically ill, it may be deemed disproportionate, especially if the political goals are vague, unattainable, or could have been pursued through less harmful means.

8. Future of Sanctions

8-1. Emerging Trends

As global power dynamics evolve and technology reshapes international relations, the use of sanctions is undergoing significant transformation. No longer limited to broad economic embargoes, modern sanctions are increasingly targeted, strategic, and embedded in multilateral frameworks (European Council,2025:1). The future of sanctions lies in balancing effectiveness with ethical responsibility, ensuring pressure is applied to responsible actors without inflicting disproportionate harm on civilian populations.

In recent decades, the idea of “smart sanctions” has developed as a more precise alternative to traditional sanctions. Unlike comprehensive sanctions that often impact entire populations, smart sanctions aim to focus pressure on selected individuals, groups, or institutions, thereby reducing the risk of causing widespread humanitarian harm (Bull and Tostensen,2001:100). For instance, the United Nations and various countries have increasingly employed financial and travel restrictions against key figures involved in conflicts or human rights violations, rather than imposing blanket trade embargoes that can harm civilians. In particular, the United Nations imposed targeted financial sanctions by imposing a number of measures against individuals and entities associated with Al-Qaida (Council of Europe). The measures were implemented by countries according to the resolutions include asset freeze, travel ban and arms embargo in respect of individuals designated by the UN Sanctions Committee. In addition, the resolutions provide for procedures for the listing and de-listing of individuals, access to

funds for basic and extraordinary expenses, protection of rights of third parties, amongst other issues.

8-2. Policy Recommendations

8-2-1. Clear Objectives

Sanctions that adhere to international humanitarian law and ethical considerations should contain clear, realistic, and legally sound objectives. Sanctions should serve as instruments of measured coercion, not indefinite collective punishment (Jazairy,2018:1). When sanctions lack specificity, they risk losing both legitimacy and efficacy, as targeted states may perceive them as punitive rather than corrective.

Therefore, to avoid these pitfalls, a well-designed sanctions policy must include specific objectives. For example, ending acts of territorial aggression or restoring democratic governance. This clarity of purpose ensures that sanctions are perceived not as arbitrary punishment but as a conditional response to defined violations of international norms. When objectives are explicit, they offer the target state a clear understanding of the behavior required to achieve sanctions relief, thereby enhancing the coercive credibility of the measures and increasing the likelihood of compliance.

Aside from that, a sanctions regime should have an identifiable objective. These might include letting foreign weapons inspectors to return, releasing political detainees, or implementing specific legislative amendments. For example, Libya received widespread criticism and economic isolation following its alleged involvement in the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, which destroyed a Pan Am flight over Scotland, killing 270 people (Al Jazeera, 2003:1). In response, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) implemented a series of sanctions, starting with Resolution 748 (1992), which included an arms embargo, limitations on air travel, and a freeze on Libyan assets overseas (United Nations Security Council,1992). However, the sanctions regime was not unlimited or open-ended; rather, it was tied to specified, verifiable objectives that, if accomplished, resulted in their removal. Although United Nations Security Council Resolution 748 (1992) did not explicitly outline detailed benchmarks for compliance, it clearly stated that the objective was to address and eliminate threats related to international terrorism. The Libyan government's subsequent actions effectively addressed these concerns, which ultimately enabled the international community to justify the lifting of sanctions. For instance, Libya's action of recognizing responsibility for the bombing (Sipress and

Mintz,2003), agreeing to pay the victims' families (Al Jazeera,2003:1) and fully cooperating with international criminal investigators (United Nations, 2025). These conditions formed the basis for UN Security Council Resolution 1506 (12 September 2003), which formally lifted the sanctions following Libya's compliance.

In conclusion, the effectiveness and legitimacy of sanctions are significantly enhanced when they are guided by clear, specific objectives. Sanctions regimes that articulate well-defined objectives are more likely to influence state behavior and maintain international support. The inclusion of measurable benchmarks and time-bound conditions allows for transparent evaluation and reinforces the perception of sanctions as instruments of lawful, constructive pressure rather than indefinite punishment.

8-2-2. Monitor and Revise

Sanctions regimes must be dynamic and adaptable, rather than static and inflexible. Policies that are originally genuine and strategically sound may create unforeseen consequences or become pointless as geopolitical realities evolve. As a result, constant monitoring and built-in feedback mechanisms are required to ensure that sanctions remain consistent with their objectives and that their humanitarian and political consequences are thoroughly reviewed.

Monitoring requires a holistic approach. This involves independent assessments of the sanctions' outcomes, ongoing consultation with humanitarian organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) functioning on the ground, and transparent communication to the international community. The European Union's sanctions regime is an example of a responsive model, whereby restrictive measures are reviewed on a regular basis to assess their relevance and suitability in light of current trends. To further elaborate, Council decisions establishing autonomous sanctions last up to 12 months, but before expiry, the Council examines whether to amend, extend, or terminate them, based on current conditions. Hence, Council regulations, which implement sanctions within EU law, usually remain open-ended but are linked to underlying decisions and subjected to periodic review.

To conclude, constant evaluation and revision are not just technical adjustments, but they are central to ensuring that sanctions remain effective,

proportionate, and ethically defensible in an ever-changing global landscape.

9. Conclusion

In an era where diplomacy often requires alternatives to military force, economic sanctions have emerged as a central instrument of international statecraft. Sanctions, as discussed throughout this paper, are a type of economic leverage that enables governments and international organizations to impose regulations, regulate conduct, and address international issues without using force.

Sanctions can be used as diplomacy and law enforcement instruments to uphold international legal frameworks, suppress aggression, and encourage states to adhere to international norms. However, their effectiveness relies on their objectives being clear and proportionate, being regularly evaluated, and adhering to humanitarian values. Ambiguous, open-ended, or unduly wide sanctions pose the risk of undermining the very international order they are meant to defend by harming civilian populations disproportionately and losing their trustworthiness.

In the future, innovations such as targeted financial measures, technological export controls, and smart sanctions will gain recognition, particularly in a society dominated by the global financial sector, cybersecurity, and strategic supply chains. At the same time, preserving ethical safeguards such as humanitarian exemptions and constantly revising policy will be vital to ensure that sanctions are both effective and reasonable.

Finally, this research paper revealed that, while sanctions are not a cure-all for all global conflicts, they are indeed a powerful instrument of the international community's collective will. As a mechanism of economic pressure and normative enforcement, sanctions continue to shape international relations in enduring ways, thus affirming their role as a cornerstone of contemporary global governance.

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