

RETHINKING THE USE OF SANCTIONS BY UNITED NATIONS AND STATE BEHAVIOUR: IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

In the international system, sanctions are often used to enforce global norms, deter aggression, and influence policy changes. Against this backdrop, this study using secondary data and dependency theory as a theoretical framework explored the complex effects of United Nations sanctions and state behaviour and its implications for peace and development, revealing both the potential benefits and unintended harms. The findings of the study showed how sanctions disrupt access to essential goods, healthcare, and education, leading to severe humanitarian crises in countries like Venezuela, Iran, and North Korea. The study also shows how economic sanctions stifle development by restricting access to global markets, technologies, and investment, perpetuating poverty and limiting long-term economic growth. In response to these challenges, the study recommends rethinking the design of sanctions and shifting focus from economy-wide sanctions to targeted measures that specifically impact political and economic elites, thereby minimizing harm to ordinary citizens. Additionally, integrating developmental aid with sanctions regimes can alleviate the negative impacts on vulnerable populations, ensuring access to basic services while maintaining diplomatic pressure.

Keywords: Sanctions, State behaviour, Development, Humanitarian crisis, Peace, Policy change

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the last decades and especially since the end of the old war, inter-state sanctions have been on the rise serving as an important tool for coercion in international politics (Aidt ed ad, 2021; Felbermayr et al 2021; Gutmann et al, 2024; Sachs 2015). Sanctions are utilized in the international system to enforce actions that are of collective importance to the global community against the state that poses unwanted behaviours (Gutmann et al 2017). However, sanctions are hugely criticized nowadays for the “side effects” they have on the civil population. Indeed, the loyalty and effectiveness of sanctions is an issue of intense debate in the international system today. Lausdati and Pasaran (2021) posit that sanctions especially

those related to economic sanctions can destroy the economy of the sanctioned state thereby leading to an unprecedented development crisis and conflict.

Macaluso (2014) argued that pressure imposed by sanctions did not trigger a change in policy and behaviour of the Islamic Republic of Iran but instead changed only the Iranian government's strategy. He further noted that sanctions have not only been ineffective and harmed the Iranian population and the economy but they have also been counterproductive for the interest of the sanctioning states. World Bank (2014) reported that Iran's real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contracted by 5.6 per cent in 2012 and 4.9 per cent during the first quarter of 2013 marking the lowest point in more than two decades, many businesses failed, the number of non-performing loans increased, heavy industries registered huge losses as a result of the impact of sanctions on Iran. Indeed, despite the experiences of the terrible humanitarian consequences of sanctions over the years, in Iraq, Haiti, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela and Russia, the United States-led United Nations is still very much keen on dishing dozens of sanctions to any nation whose behaviour is perceived as a threat to the major players in the international system (Whalen and Belton, 2023). Meissner (2022) argued that the economic implications of sanctions are not only borne by the sanctioned state, the sanctioning states may also suffer economic crises as typical of the Russian sanctions by NATO countries which led to major energy and food supply crises in Europe and the rest of the world.

In the literature (Meissner 2022; Lausdati and Pasaran 2021; Gutmann et al 2017; Rasoulinezhad and Kirikilna 2023; Rodriguez et al 2021; Otaeven 2021; Nikolaos 2015) among others have explained the role of sanctions for both the sanctioned and the sanctioning states. This study differs from the previous as it focuses on how international sanctions affect state behaviour as well as the impacts of these sanctions on the socio-economic development of the sanctioned states, it also investigates why and how nations develop adaptative strategies to cope with sanctions, especially those from the international community as well as the effectiveness and/or ineffectiveness of the sanction strategy. The remaining part of the paper is divided into five sections. Following this introduction is a conceptual clarification of sanction and state behaviour, the third section provides theoretical legitimacy while the fourth and fifth section focuses on state response to sanction and its overall implications for peace, development and the sanctioned and sanctioning states.

1.1 Conceptualizing Sanctions and Development

According to Ilieva et al, (2018), sanctions refer to coercive measures taken by one state or in concert with several states, which are intended to convince or compel another state to desist from engaging in behaviour that violates international law and policies. Indeed, the use of sanctions as an alternative means of coercion raises hopes that international military conflicts can be avoided. Sanctions may be economic military or politically imposed by one country or a group of countries against another (Rasoulinezhad and Kirikilna 2023). In recent times, sanctions have been imposed on countries perceived to be erring members as a deterrent to their actions (Nakli et al 2021; Cheng et al 2023).

According to Onder (2020), sanction effectiveness on the behaviour of states is related to regime type. He argued that certain types of autocracies are more vulnerable to sanctions pressure than others. Portela and Mora-Sanguinetti (2023) posit that states practicing

democracy are more vulnerable to the pressure of sanctions and are more prone to change their behaviour in line with the goals of sanctions than non-democratic regimes. They further argued that because democratic rulers have to satisfy compassing majorities to survive, accountability and the fear of removal are lower in autocratic governments which depend on a small electorate while constraining the political freedom of the majority (Allen, 2005). On the other hand, they further argued that because democratic rulers have to satisfy compassing majorities to survive, accountability and the fear of removal are lower in autocratic governments which depend on a small electorate while constraining the political freedom of the majority (Allen, 2005). According to Brooks (2002), sanctions intersect with regime type, targeted sanctions are more likely to succeed when employed against autocracies than democracies while the opposites apply to comprehensive sanctions. Geddes (1999) is of a contrary opinion to Brooks above as he argued that the state could only change their behaviour due to sanction as a result of its ability to innovate strategies for resilience.

Indeed, sanctions no matter how brief it is, have been seen, as a trigger to many setbacks to the development of states. The scholars (Laudati and Pesaran 2023; Farzanegan and Hayo, 2019; Zamani et al, 2021) have presented empirical evidence on the impact of sanctions (especially economic sanctions) on the economy of the sanctioned state in particular and their overall development in general. Portela and Maro-Sanguinetti (2023) posit that international sanctions purport to advance a democratization agenda, often addressing situations of democratic backsliding (Peksen, 2017; Sejerson, 2018; Morgus et al 2021; Hufbauer et al 2007).

According to Laudati and Pasaran (2021), sanctions can adversely affect exchange rates, inflation, and output growth. Mazarei (2019) also posited that sanctions play a significant role in shaping the financial system and its fragility. Indeed, since sanctions are often targeted at a country's main economic sectors, it ultimately affects foreign trade which in turn has a differential effect with traded goods and financial sectors being more affected. All these will have a spillover effect on other sectors of the economy which will in turn create an atmosphere of underdevelopment (Ludati and Pesaran, 2021; Moon 2021). This presupposes that the effects will be overarching in labour, education and health outcomes.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Different theories have explained international sanctions and state behaviour. This study adopts the key formulation of the Dependency theory. Dependency theory was developed as a response to Modernization theory. Whereas the modernization theory is criticized for unilineal development tendency and failing to explain the underdevelopment of the Third world countries, the Dependency theory argues that the development of the global north is responsible for the underdevelopment of the global south, as imperialism and colonization made it possible for the global south to be integrated into a global capitalist system where they are made to be producers of raw materials and consumers of finished goods. Accordingly, the theory argues that sanctions exacerbate the structural economic inequalities between developed (core) and underdeveloped (periphery) states, trapping the latter in cycles of dependency (Cardoso & Faletto, 2016). By cutting off access to international markets, capital, and technology, sanctions deepen these dependent relationships, preventing economic growth and industrialization (Mason, 2022). For example, Venezuela's reliance on oil exports and its exclusion from global markets due to sanctions have worsened its economic crisis (Trakman, 2019).

Sanctions can also increase a state's reliance on a few trade partners willing to defy international norms, often on exploitative terms, as seen in Iran's growing dependence on China and Russia (Haidar, 2020). Moreover, sanctions may have unintended consequences, like strengthening authoritarian regimes that use sanctions as a rallying point for nationalist sentiment (Allen, 2018; Marinov, 2021). Critics of the Dependency Theory argue that it downplays the role of internal governance and overemphasizes external factors, limiting the agency of states to break free from dependency (Kohli, 2021; Oqubay, 2023; Carvalho 2013; Cosgel et al 2013; Cover 2023; Drezener 2015).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study utilized qualitative data in its analysis. The nature and sources of data collected were those related to secondary data, which main sources include; journals, newspaper bulletins, magazines, monographs, text books among others. Data were sorted on the basis of purposive sampling to suit the theme under discussion. Content analysis was adopted to analyze data relating to international sanctions and state behaviour.

3.1 Assessing State Behaviour: Resilience, Isolation, Crisis and Political Change

According to Ridi and Fikfak (2022), the ability of sanctions to change state behaviour largely depends on the nature of the act of sanctioning which is embedded in international law. Thus, this means that the target states must as a matter of necessity calculate their options very well in the gamut of international law before the act towards sanctions. Gutmann et al (2024) argued that sanctions have long been a tool of international diplomacy, aimed at altering the behaviour of states by imposing economic, political or military restrictions. They further noted that sanctions typically aim to weaken a state's economy, forcing it to change policies or to comply with international laws and conventions for instance, the US-led sanctions on Iran led to the reduction of its oil exports which generated a lot of domestic economic challenges including the collapse of its currency (Alsharabati and Nader, 2020). Despite these sanctions, Iran has continued its nuclear development programme which is an indicator that the impact of economic sanctions can be absorbed and is not sufficient to alter state behavior. In a similar vein, Kim (2020) posits that decades of sanctions on North Korea have failed to deter its nuclear ambitions; despite crippling its economy, North Korea has been able to establish networks for sanction evasion, using back-door trade and alternative financial system to mitigate the impact of sanctions.

Bull and Rosales (2020), noted that US-led sanctions against Venezuela were targeted at regime change thus, it is easier to identify and support opposition which led to the crisis in the country. They further noted that sanctions weakened the state institutions as a result of the effect on the oil-driven economy which affected other aspects of the Venezuelan economy. Thus, this means that the state in Venezuela was caught unaware as they may have no choice but to succumb to the whims and caprices of the sanctioning state.

Allen (2018) postulated that sanctioned states often turn to sympathetic allies for economic support as it is in the case of Iran's growing ties with Russia and North Korea's dependence on China. States can build resilience by consolidating political power in the face of external threats. For example, sanctions against Venezuela and North Korea have allowed their respective leaders to consolidate power by portraying themselves as defenders of national

sovereignty against imperialist aggression. Marinov (2021) and Frye (2022) also opined that while Russia's economy has experienced slow growth, President Vladimir Putin's regime has gained more influence using sanctions to heighten nationalist sentiments and justify the domestic crackdown on opposition. Gutmann et al (2024) also see sanctions as making state behaviour incline towards authoritarianism.

Indeed, the result in this segment has shown that states will always react and behave in such a way that it will be able to survive. Elsewhere Allen (2008) revealed sanctions have been successful in changing state behaviour in South Africa as the apartheid regime was dismantled in that country after a series of sanctions. Indeed, from the evidence above, it has been shown that sanctions produce different behaviour of states, some leading to resilience while others leading to isolation, crisis and political change.

3.2 Socio-Economic Effects of Sanctions and Development

The effects of sanctions have been a crucial issue among scholars with many affirming the fact that almost all sanctions are targeted at grounding the economies of the affected states. According to Peksen, (2016), sanctions have clear economic consequences, often leading to reduced economic growth, higher unemployment and decreased foreign direct investment. Indeed, scholars have demonstrated in their empirical studies the consequences of economic sanctions on the economy of states (Gutmann et al, 2023; Gutmann et al 2024, Neuenkirch and Nuemener 2015; Crozet and Hinz 2020; Maloney 2015; Johnson & Koyama 2013). They pointed out that sanctions lower income per capita, and affect consumption patterns, investments, trade and foreign direct investment.

Peksen and Woo (2018) noted that the economic impact of sanctions on affected countries is worsened by the reduced willingness of International Monetary Funds to lend to countries under sanctions. Farzanegan (2022) reported that Iran has reduced its military spending due to international sanctions. According to Ozdamar and Shahin (2021), the economic effects of sanctions are often focused on changes in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP). Thus, the level of sanctions effectiveness is determined by the performance of these macroeconomic indicators. Gharehgozli (2017) also reported that sanctions against Iran decreased her GDP by 17 per cent. Indeed, Russia is witnessing "institutional illiquidity", limited capital market access and increased state funding due to the consequences of economic sanctions. According to Bull and Rosales (2020), sanctions and counter strategies employed by states have produced multiple transformations such as the criminalization of the economy and these have led the Venezuelan economy to disarray. There is a noticeable decline in the manufacturing and oil and gas sectors as a result of sanctions, private sector in Venezuela now finds it too costly or difficult to operate in the formal sectors, and because the economy is oil-led economy, the crisis of the oil sector had an overbearing negative impact on other sectors. Rasoulinezhad and Kirilkina (2023) argued that sanctions imposed on Iran have had a severe impact on the country's economic prosperity. Thus, this has led to heightened economic instability with its attendant challenges. They further noted that the fluctuations in the economic growth rate over the past 15 years have produced a difference of 23% between the highest and the lowest growth rates.

However, the most devastating impact on Iran's economy occurred during Donald Trump's presidency, leading to a 4.99% decline in Iran's GDP from 2017 to the end of 2020 (Rasoulinezhad and Kirilkina, 2023; Kim 2022; Kaempter & Cowenberg 1994). Similarly, Rasoulinezhad and Sabri (2023) reported that in 2016; after signing the nuclear agreement, Iran experienced a short-term economic growth of 8.8% which declined during the periods of sanctions, with both exports and imports headed towards a downturn. Indeed, Russia's economic woes have been underreported as part of the counter-sanctions strategies. Russia has also adopted import substitution strategies by increasing domestically produced goods and pivoting towards the Asian market as an alternative trade partner, as the Western block intensifies economic sanctions against her (Rasoulinezhad and Kirilkina, 2023; Esfandiary et al 2022; Alireza et al 2014; Filipenko et al 2020). The table below presents economic fluctuations in Russia and Iran in the era of sanctions:

Table 1. GDP Growth of Russia and Iran, 2011-2022

Year	Russia's GDP Growth (%)	Iran's GDP Growth (%)
2011	4.30029136	2.645717918
2012	4.024086157	-3.7471714
2013	1.755422149	-1.5219792
2014	0.736267221	4.984775067
2015	-1.97271923	-1.42488494
2016	0.193690072	8.815086643
2017	1.825790064	2.758505246
2018	2.8072541	-2.25386361
2019	2.198075714	-2.65820666
2020	-2.6536545	3.330288459
2021	5.614290876	4.719777732
2022	-2.06971153	2.749166141

Source: (Adapted from Rasoulinezhad and Kirilkina, 2023)

According to Rasoulinezhad and Sabri (2023), economic sanction is often targeted towards a state's economic livewire to comprehensively bring states to change their behaviour. For instance, sanctions against Iran, Russia and Venezuela have been targeted at their energy sectors. Donald Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 led to a significant decline in Iran's crude oil production. This ultimately plunged the country into myriads of economic problems. Indeed, from the empirical evidence presented above it can be inferred that sanctions often lead to severe economic consequences domestically.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reveals that sanctions, while intended to influence state behaviour, often have unintended consequences. Broad economic sanctions disproportionately harm civilians, leading to humanitarian and political crises and stunted development, while elites and authoritarian regimes remain resilient. In many cases, sanctions fail to achieve their political objectives and instead exacerbate poverty, restrict access to basic needs, create conflicts, and weaken economic growth in the targeted states. To make sanctions effective, it is recommended that sanctions should focus on isolating elites- through measures like freezing assets and restricting travel- rather than imposing broad, economy-wide restrictions that exacerbate poverty and suffering of the entire citizens, this is because targeted sanctions on elite networks could weaken regimes while minimizing harm to the general population. Furthermore, ensuring access to essential goods and services like food, medicine, and education is critical when sanctions are not restricted to elites. Additionally, linking sanctions relief to improvements in governance and human rights can help align sanctions with long-term developmental goals. This approach ensures that sanctions pressure regimes while safeguarding the welfare of the population.

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