

## AN ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SANCTION AS A TOOL FOR DIPLOMATIC DETERRENCE

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### **Abstract**

*The use of sanctions as tool for deterrence has witnessed exponential growth in recent times. The last three decades in particular has witnessed a surge in the number of sanctions used as medium in responding to numerous international confrontations. Interestingly, these sanctions have been both multilateral and unilateral in form and have mostly been evoked by NATO forces, the United States and the United Nations. The watershed references of South Africa, North Korea, Venezuela and most recently Russia comes to mind as countries afflicted by sanctions. The increasing demand by academics and the diplomatic community to interrogate sanction as a last resort of diplomatic uproar and its overall effectiveness as a diplomatic tool for deterrence is the main aim of the paper. The methodology utilized includes, content analysis and case study. The paper finds that conventional or traditional sanctions are not necessarily effective. This has been made even so, considering the bi-multipolar structure of the international system and trends in the unfolding world order, drawing insights from the case of recent unilateral sanctions from NATO forces against Russia. The paper recommends amongst other things, the need to refine sanctions to be smart enough for efficiency and to seek alternatives in the face of diplomatic uproar.*

**Keywords:** *Effectiveness, Sanction, Tool, Diplomatic Deterrence.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

For thousands of years, sanctions have been a tool for statecraft, that shapes economic, military, diplomatic, security and other relations. The historical record of sanction shows that its first use was in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. by Pericles, a statesman in Athens who ordered a trade ban

between the Athenian Empire and Megra, one of the city-states' that had sided with Sparta, which was a staunch enemy of Athens. The intent was to show to the rest of the Greek city states that without engaging in a war Athens had the instrument to punish those who challenged her authority. The sanction would eventually lead to a 30-year war, (Thucydides, 1972). It is obvious that for the most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sanctions were not very popular. This became the case during the Cold War, when the duo of the United States and NATO on the one hand and the USSR on the other tried to out-do each other. They each supported corrupt regimes thereby making sanctions an ineffective tool. Prior to this time and in the period before the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were only two UN-approved sanction, against Rhodesia and South Africa.

In the years after the Cold War, the highest body of international security, the Security Council of the United Nations, gave several orders to sanction a number of countries on the grounds of various charges, ranging from, external and internal aggression, sponsor and support of terrorism related offences and also suppression of democracy, amongst others. These countries included; Angola, Somalia, Sudan, Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti, etc, (Chan & Drury, 2000). This was the time when Pax-Americana began to wax into an unprecedented superpower, paving the way for it to garner authority to issue unilateral sanctions. It relied on its economic strength, acting as the self-acclaimed international economic policeman of the world and dwarfing its military presence in forestalling greater moral, economic or even political problems in other parts of the world, to further push for more sanctions, particularly against its adversaries. So much so that, in 1998, it was estimated that about two thirds of the world's population was subject to some sort of US sanctions, (Dunne, 1998). In recent times the United States has not been the only power that invokes the use of economic sanctions, the EU has also been sponsoring its own brand of sanctions. This is in addition to numerous single-nation bans and proposals.

### **Goals of Sanctions**

As mentioned earlier, sanctions are policy steps taken towards restricting economies of countries or entities that may have 'broken' certain international norms or practices. As rightly captured by Simon (1976), the aim of sanction is to put in place alternative measures that results in the more preferred of all the possible consequences. Scholars and pundits differ on the aim of sanctions as it pertains to the expected outcomes. Nonetheless, there are some shared motives behind invoking and use of sanction by the international community and individual

state actors. These motives include; deterrence, signalling, coercion, destabilization, symbolic tool, demanding compliance, sending message etc. For purpose of clarity, we will elaborate further on some of the points noted above.

➤ **Deterrence:** Sanction implies the use of non-military approaches to address a situation and get a required response, particularly in cases where the cost of using military force is too high, Lorber et al (2015). Hence the international community – either under the auspices of an international regime or unilaterally – resorts to the use of sanctions against the aggressor or defiance state as a deterrence tool for its deviant behaviour. Deterrence can be contextualised as a measure to prevent or in the least discourage unpleasant behaviours through the show of readiness and capability to suppress such through punitive punishment in a bid to decrease such actions. Instances of such measures abound in history, some of which have been woeful while others have recorded some measure of success. Examples of these would be the 1954-55 sanction imposed against China for the Quemoy-Matsu crisis, which may be considered as a deterrent success. Other instances are the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962 and sanctions against Saddam Hussain of Iraq in 1991 and the Venezuelan sanctions from Hugo Chavez through to the administration of Nicholas Maduro in 2022. All of which could be considered failure of deterrence.

➤ **Signalling:** Usually, the imposition of sanction is a way of signalling or sending a message to a deviant state, showing or indicating the capability of the enforcing state. In essence, enforcing state or international regime proves to the deviant state, that it can find itself becoming more isolated, less prosperous and less secure. This demonstrates a threat of even more punitive actions in future dealings if the defaulting state continues along the part that is dimmed unacceptable. Signalling therefore connotes the persuasion of one country or international regime over another, which is dimmed a threat, to desist from certain unacceptable behaviour in a bid to avert a military altercation. The event of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010, is a case in focus that may illustrate how signalling works to prevail on a country acting counter to the acceptable international norms and practices. The obvious intent behind the Act was to increase international pressure on Iran and to demonstrate the capability of the adversary, in this case, the United States. Yet, some opponents of this will argue that the signalling value of sanctions are weak regardless of the severity. In the case of unilateral sanctions through signalling by the United States and its NATO allies against the Russian Federation as a result of its supposed aggression towards Ukraine, those who make this argument against signalling may be right. In the instance of the

ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and its allied forces, the Russian Foreign Minister has been quoted on several occasions saying, “the signalling measure is an ineffective tool. Threats, sanctions and pressure in the current circumstance would be counterproductive” Lavrov (2023). This has indeed proven to be right. As we will come to disclose further, the sanctions against Russia have only proven that signalling to a country as an avenue for deterrence is futile.

➤ **Coercion:** The use of coercion against an aggressor is to demand compliance and deter from undesirable actions. The goal is to seek a behavioural change from a party that intends to carry out a certain objectionable action or is in the process of doing same. This way, the target state is required to fulfil the demands of the sender by meeting some set conditions. Hence, the idea of coercive diplomacy is to make it possible for states to achieve their political objectives and instigate their interests without being obliged to wage war literally, (Imam, 2021). Coercive diplomacy has been seen to have recorded some successes in past events, one of such cases would be, the 1961 US President Kennedy’s order to prevent and protect the Royal Laos government from falling to what the US termed as the Chinese communist aggression. Thus, Kennedy had to invoke a threat of military intervention to leave an impression on his rival. Nonetheless, the use of coercive diplomacy has also been woeful in some instances. A classic case of the failure of the coercive diplomacy tool would be the case of the Gulf War in 1990. Most of the international community called on Saddam Hussain to retreat from the invasion of Kuwait, this led the then Bush administration in the US to invoke the threat of a military incursion dubbed ‘the Desert Storm’. Although, this operation did not stand, leading Saddam Hussain to call the bluff of the US. A number of economic sanctions followed on Iraq, yet, that did not deter the Iraqi regime. The same can be said of Venezuela under Hugo Chavez and Nicholas Maduro and very recently, Russia against Ukraine and China against Hong Kong and Taiwan.

➤ **Subversion:** The act of destabilization as a sanction mechanism happens to be the most prominent. In most cases, this is done through economic pressure, aimed at destabilizing the leadership of the target state. The intent of which is to put the leadership under immense economic pressure, hence, causing them to lose their office. Kramer (2015), appears to support this model, in his argument; negative economic conditions tend to force the majority of people in the target country to blame their government for the hardships and sometime rise up against it. Examples of vulnerability confronting target states as a result of economic sanction would be the case of the US expropriating its enterprises from Chile, under the administration of Allende Salvador in 1970. Nonetheless, the reality of subversion and application of economic

sanctions tend to work in a reverse order, meaning the populace tend to suffer the worst economic impact where these sanctions are invoked. The reality of Allende is that the propaganda machinery was utilized alongside the sanction. There were also the external interferences and it was obvious that majority of the people stood with his administration until the end. As observed by Escriba-Folch (2008), authoritarian regimes are very less likely to be exposed by economic sanctions because aside being supported by the loyalty coalition, they have access to government treasury and will utilize the limited resources to benefit themselves and their cronies at the expense of the people. Failure of economic sanctions can be seen in the case of South Africa where the people were ready to support the opposition regardless of how hard the sanctions hit. There is also the case of North Korea where the people are the hardest hit by the sanctions which appear to have zero effect on the leadership for which it was invoked. The cases of Venezuela, Cuba and most recently Russia, are all very clear indications of the failure of economic sanctions.

## **2. THE DEBATE**

There is little doubt about recorded successes of sanctions as observed earlier on. Such cases include, the bombing of a plane in December of 1988 in Scotland, which the Ghaddafi regime in Libya was accused of orchestrating. Two suspects were identified as having carried out the attack, Amin Fhimah and Abdelbaset al-Megrahi. The United States led the UN Security Council in passing a resolution threatening the Libyan government with economic sanctions including military embargoes and the prohibition of sales of industrial equipment to Libya unless she hands over the suspected culprits. For years the Libyan government resisted, but eventually handed over the suspects in 1999 after intense global pressure. Other instances of partial gains by sanction include the case of South Africa, where threats of sanctions and international pressure contributed to bringing an end to the apartheid regime. Similarly, is the case of Serbia, after the cruel campaign of Slobodan Milosevic in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Nonetheless, there are undoubtedly more significant cases of shortfalls and failings of sanctions as tools of deterrence within the international system. History is replete with such cases, some of which are worthy of mention in this case to further buttress our argument. Significant amongst these is the case of Japan and the United States. Alexander George, argues that there was a 'boomerang effect' of coercive diplomacy or sanctions when he mentioned that Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor and the subsequent involvement of the United States into World War II was all a consequence of economic sanctions. In his assessment, 'the oil embargo the

US imposed on Japan in 1941 was so credible and potent that it quickly provoked Japanese leaders into making a very difficult and desperate decision to engage in war rather than yield to the powers in Washington. Due to the demands of the US that it pulls out of China, a position it felt was extreme, implying giving up its aspirations for regional dominance over Southeast Asia'. George (1991).

The above view is shared by a good number of scholars and even practitioners. One of such is Louis Kreisberg, who asserts that sanctions usually widen the scope and range of the conflict and compounds the level of destructiveness and in most cases prolong and freeze the antagonism and aggression, Kreisberg (2012). Generally speaking, sanctions tend to be more destructive to societies than constructive. This is because the goal for which the sanctions are put in place are more often than not unrealised at the end of the day. Studies have been conducted to support this position. For example, a study conducted in 1999 revealed that sanctions from the period of the Post-Cold War have actually exacerbated the death tolls than all of the weapons of mass destruction put together, Muller and Muller (1999).

According to a report by the UN (2015), it has been estimated that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children have died between the period of 1991 and 2001, partly as a result of sanctions. This is apparently because of the negative effects the sanctions put on the political support needed for effective trade. The same can be said of the case of South Africa. The impact of sanction in the case of South Africa presented to be negative as the apartheid regime continued to use these sanctions to suppress the local populace and retain power.

Another very classic case is the case of North Korea. The case of sanction as a tool for deterrence failed very woefully in North Korea. The US and allied powers failed in bringing about deterrence, as far as getting the North Korean regime to stop its perceived aggression against the South Korean government and people. The US and UN claims that the regime in DPRK since the days of Kim Il Sung from 1972, has suppressed and impoverished its own population, while also posing a security threat to its neighbours (South Korea and Japan), and the rest of the Western World, as a result of its so-called possession of nuclear power. Hence, the imposition of economic and diplomatic sanctions. Yet, these sanctions couldn't produce any meaningful result. It failed in bringing about the desired result of deterring the regime in the DPRK. This tool did so badly that it took a Republican (Neo-con) administration, in the US under the President Donald Trump, to approach the regime in DPRK for a more diplomatic way out of the impasse.

The case of Russia and its war with Ukraine is another point in focus. A number of sanctions have been invoked by the US and a coalition of allied forces in NATO and the UN. These sanctions are meant to have prevailed on Russia to withdraw from the border area and in parts of Ukraine. Yet, this has proven to be ineffective as Russia has continued not just the offensive against Ukraine and the allied forces of NATO, but has also been able to weather the storm against all of the economic sanctions put against her economy. As a matter of fact, the sanctions against Russia have brought about a clear polarization of the blocs within the international system. It has also paved the path towards a newly unfolding world order, where alliances are beginning to shift goal-posts and countries seeking out new partners on all front. Example is the formation and consolidation of the BRICS economy shifting the world economy fast away from the dependence on the dollar. This is all a corollary of the expulsion of Russia from the SWIFT banking system.

The Russian case is a clear illustration of the failings of sanctions as tools of deterrence. The Russo-China alliance is posing a huge threat to the countries that have imposed the sanction. Hence, rather than hurt the economy of the defaulting country, it is beginning to pave the way for alternative dominant world structures. It is therefore evident that these sanctions cost the US and NATO more, because at this stage they have become more adamant in trying to follow through with their threats of punishment against Russia.

It is also logical to deduce from the on-going impasse in the case of Russia and Ukraine and its allied forces, that, threats from sanction breeds pressure, therefore putting a strain on the logical reasoning of actors to solve problems rationally. It can breed resistance as the opposing or target party would rather face a threat than capitulate, as this will create a perception of weakness. Sanctions connotes indifference and hostility and this can lead to a circle of endless aggression and antagonism. In the final analysis, where there is domestic support for the target regime, which often more than not is the case, sanctions often times generate some sense of national response and a show of solidarity, in which the local population rally round their leadership. This way, rather than having an impact on the target party, sanctions end up strengthening his domestic base and support. This is because, as Galtung puts it, “it is easier to blame the woes of an ailing economy and the thrust of political instability on an external actor”, Galtung (1967).

### 3. CONCLUSION

Rather than focus on sanctions against what is perceived as defaulting countries, it will do the world a lot better when these resources are redirected towards achieving enhancement through cooperation, support of domestic economies and providing incentives. Therefore, to avert the recurrence and recycle of old ways and return to more effective tools of deterrence where necessary, the international community needs to begin to think along the lines of tilting towards smart sanctions. This means a shift away from broad economic sanctions that hurt whole population to more specified sanctions that are aimed at governing or military bodies. This is because the human cum social cost of economic sanctions is unbearable to the common man and should therefore be discouraged and abhorred. It also makes the effectiveness of sanctions questionable.

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