

## INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS AS A TOOL OF DIPLOMACY: A HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF THEIR DETERRENT EFFECT

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### Abstract

*The first and second world war had exposed humanity to the huge cost and burden of war, hence, statesmen and world leaders have come to embrace sanctions as a potent weapon to deter or punish aggressors and bring them to knee without the actual use of military force. Despite their frequent use since the First World War, there is little consensus as to whether sanctions can be effective in deterring undesirable actions such as aggression, human rights violations or nuclear proliferation. Through a historical analysis of case studies from the League of Nations' sanctions in the interwar period to modern multilateral sanctions targeting Iran, North Korea, and Russia, this paper interrogates the effectiveness of sanctions as means to prevent threats to international peace and security. It assesses the impact of sanctions on state behaviour, exploring the complex interplay between diplomatic pressure, economic coercion, and geopolitical interests. The paper concludes that while sanctions may serve symbolic and punitive purposes, it yields limited success under specific conditions and their effectiveness as deterrent is inconsistent, context-dependent, and often accompanied by unintended consequences. By evaluating the successes and failures of sanctions in achieving their intended objectives, this paper calls for a more nuanced understanding of when and how sanctions work as instruments of international deterrence.*

**Keywords:** International sanctions, Deterrence, Diplomacy, Economic coercion, Geopolitics

### Introduction

In 1919, as world leaders met in Paris to design a new post-war system of global security, they saw the “economic weapon” as a potent tool to bring aggressors to their knees. Therefore, the use of International Sanctions was carefully provided for in Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations. The Article mandated an automatic and collective embargo against any nation that started an aggressive war. As a blunt tool of diplomacy, the use of sanctions as an instrument of statecraft accelerated after the first and second world wars; an expression of its widespread popularity among policy makers. Sanctions thus served as the centre piece of the multilateral enforcement mechanism of world

peace. It has played a pivotal role in the multilateral framework for maintaining global peace. According to a comprehensive database on sanctions episodes since 1914, their usage has seen a significant surge, nearly doubling over a span of two decades - from 103 instances in 1985 to 204 by 2007, as documented by Hufbauer and colleagues in 2008<sup>1</sup>. As at 2025, this figure has tripled.

Hence, the post-Cold War era has witnessed a notable surge in the imposition of sanctions making it a standard tool of foreign policy and global governance, used by states and international organizations to pressure targets into compliance with international norms. These measures, ranging from economic embargoes and asset freezes to travel bans, are intended to alter behaviour without resorting to

military force. However, their effectiveness in curbing the authoritarian and aggressive behaviours of leaders like Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the Kim regime in North Korea, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Iran and the Putin's aggression in Ukraine has been limited. Despite these measures, such actors have continued to defy international pressure and pursue their objectives. Therefore, the effectiveness of sanctions as a deterrent remains a subject of intense debate. Can they truly prevent undesirable state behaviour, or do they function more as symbolic expressions of disapproval? This paper conducts a historical examination of sanctions, spanning from the League of Nations' efforts in the interwar period to contemporary multilateral sanctions imposed on Iran, North Korea, and Russia. It critically evaluates the efficacy of sanctions in preventing threats to global peace and security, drawing insights from these case studies. The study also explores the political, economic, and strategic dynamics that condition their effectiveness.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **International Sanctions**

Peter Wallensteen and Carina Staibano see international sanctions as coercive measures imposed by one or more countries or international organizations to influence the behaviour of a target state, entity, or individual. These measures may include economic restrictions, trade barriers, travel bans, arms embargoes, and financial constraints, and are typically deployed to enforce international norms or respond to violations of international law<sup>i</sup>. According to Hufbauer et al., international sanctions aim to "alter the strategic decisions of state and non-state actors that threaten international peace and security"<sup>iii</sup>. Sanctions serve as a non-military tool to exert pressure,

often in response to issues such as human rights violations, nuclear proliferation, or acts of aggression.

The United Nations, particularly through its Security Council, plays a central role in legitimizing and implementing sanctions. As Joyner notes, "UN sanctions are designed to be a collective response to threats to international peace, and they function within the framework of international law"<sup>iv</sup>. While unilateral sanctions (imposed by individual states like the United States or the European Union) are also common, they often raise legal and ethical debates regarding their extraterritorial implications. Sanctions can be broadly understood as measures imposed by one party (the sender) to inflict costs on another party (the receiver) without resorting to military force. These measures encompass a range of types, targeting various aspects of interstate interactions and serving multiple purposes. The implementation of sanctions also varies, governed by different rules and approaches. Sanctions encompass a broad spectrum of measures, including economic, diplomatic, cultural and military tools, each serving distinct purposes and possessing varying degrees of impact.

### **Economic Sanctions**

Economic sanctions are the most prevalent form and include trade embargoes, asset freezes, restrictions on financial transactions, and bans on specific imports or exports. They are designed to create economic hardship that pressures a target to change its behavior. For instance, the sanctions imposed on Iran in response to its nuclear program included restrictions on oil exports and access to global banking systems<sup>v</sup>. As Hufbauer et al. argue, economic sanctions aim to "inflict sufficient economic damage to force political

compliance"<sup>vi</sup>. Brady et al., posits that economic sanctions can also take the form of capital access limitations where restrictions on investment can be used to curtail a country's access to financial resources<sup>vii</sup>. By limiting direct investment and financial transactions, these sanctions seek to hinder the country's economic and military development. Financial asset restrictions where assets of the sanctioned nation held in foreign institutions were freeze to prevent such country from utilizing these resources to support its economy or military. This measure can also be employed to deter human rights abuses and terrorism support. A comprehensive trade restriction which encompasses a total ban on trade with the sanctioned country is also an aspect of economic sanction. This is meant to limit its access to essential goods, services, and technology and consequently isolate the country economically and pressure it to alter its behaviour.

### **Diplomatic Sanctions**

Diplomatic sanctions serve as a means of restricting a country's engagement with the global community which includes reduction or suspension of diplomatic ties, expulsion of diplomats or the downgrading of diplomatic relations<sup>viii</sup>. These measures serve to isolate the targeted country politically and signal international disapproval. By signalling disapproval and exerting pressure, these sanctions aim to prompt behavioural change in the targeted nation. According to Farrall, diplomatic sanctions are often symbolic but can accompany broader punitive strategies to amplify pressure<sup>ix</sup>. Farrall also identifies various forms of diplomatic sanctions, including isolating the country diplomatically, suspending diplomatic ties, and expelling diplomatic representatives. Diplomatic sanctions involve limiting international engagement by restricting a country's participation in global forums and international organizations. This can signal disapproval and pressure for behavioural change. It also involves terminating diplomatic ties by severing diplomatic relations with a

country to demonstrate strong disapproval and prompt reform. Finally, expelling diplomats can convey displeasure and limit a country's diplomatic presence, potentially influencing its behaviour<sup>x</sup>.

### **Military Sanctions**

Military sanctions typically refer to arms embargoes, which prohibit the sale or transfer of military equipment and technology. These sanctions aim to limit a country's ability to wage war or suppress internal dissent. For example, the United Nations has repeatedly imposed arms embargoes on conflict-ridden states such as Libya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to curb violence and promote peace<sup>xi</sup>. As Wallace and Singer puts it, Military sanctions can manifest in various ways, including: arms restrictions which involves comprehensive ban on arms sales, transfers, or supplies to limit the sanctioned country's ability to pursue aggressive actions or develop its military capabilities. It can also manifest as aviation restriction which involves establishing no-fly zones to prohibit aircraft from operating in designated areas, protecting civilians or preventing military operations<sup>xii</sup>. In extreme cases, military sanctions may involve direct military intervention, utilizing ground troops, air power, or naval blockades to enforce peace or halt aggression. This measure is typically reserved for exceptional circumstances where other sanctions have proven ineffective.

### **Cultural and Sports Sanctions**

Cultural sanctions restrict participation in international cultural or sporting events. These measures, though less common, aim to deny the target nation international prestige. A notable example is South Africa's exclusion from the Olympics and other international events during the apartheid era, which helped galvanize global opposition to the regime<sup>xiii</sup>. These types of sanctions may be employed individually or in combination to enhance their effectiveness. However, their success depends heavily on factors such as the level of international cooperation, the resilience

of the targeted state, and the humanitarian consequences of the measures imposed.

### **Deterrence and International Sanctions: A Strategic Nexus**

Deterrence, as described by Mueller, involves discouraging individuals or groups from taking certain actions due to fear of negative consequences<sup>xiv</sup>. The concept of Deterrence has broad applications, including nuclear deterrence and crime prevention. However, this article specifically explores deterrence as it relates to international sanctions. Deterrence in the context of international sanctions seeks to persuade states, entities, or individuals to abstain from specific activities by threatening or imposing punitive measures.

In a classical international relations theory, deterrence is grounded in the ability to impose costs that outweigh the perceived benefits of a given action. As articulated by Thomas Schelling, deterrence operates through the "power to hurt" and the strategic communication of potential consequences<sup>xv</sup>. Sanctions serve as a non-violent expression of this principle, signalling international disapproval while imposing tangible economic, political, or symbolic costs. By leveraging sanctions, states aim to prevent adversaries from engaging in actions such as nuclear proliferation, territorial aggression, or gross human rights violations.

The deterrent power of sanctions relies heavily on credibility and consistency. The imposition of sanctions following violations must be predictable and proportionate to serve as an effective deterrent. As Baldwin notes, "for sanctions to deter, potential targets must believe that the sender is both willing and able to carry out the threat"<sup>xvi</sup>. This requires not only

a history of enforcement but also coordination among sanctioning states to prevent circumvention. Multilateral sanctions, especially those enacted by the United Nations Security Council, tend to carry more weight and legitimacy, enhancing their deterrent value<sup>xvii</sup>. However, the efficacy of sanctions as a deterrent is contested. While there are instances in which sanctions have influenced state behaviour, such as Libya's decision to abandon its weapons of mass destruction program in 2003, many cases suggest limited or delayed success. Hufbauer et al. observe that "success rates for sanctions as a tool of deterrence and coercion remain modest, with political goals achieved in roughly one-third of the cases studied"<sup>xviii</sup>.

A frequently cited example of successful deterrence through sanctions is Libya's decision to dismantle its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program in 2003. Following years of economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations and the United States in response to the Lockerbie bombing and Libya's nuclear ambitions, the Libyan government agreed to disarm and allow international inspections. Analysts argue that sanctions, combined with diplomatic incentives and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, convinced Libya that noncompliance carried unacceptable risks<sup>xix</sup>. While sanctions alone may not have driven the decision, they significantly contributed to raising the costs of defiance and showcasing the benefits of cooperation.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 countries demonstrate how sanctions can function as both a deterrent and a bargaining chip. The United States, European Union, and United Nations had imposed severe financial and oil

export sanctions on Iran in response to its uranium enrichment activities. These measures crippled the Iranian economy, leading to a nearly 20 percent decline in oil exports and severe inflation<sup>xx</sup>. The pressure brought Iran to the negotiating table, resulting in a temporary suspension of key aspects of its nuclear program. Though the U.S. withdrawal from the deal in 2018 complicated its legacy, the JCPOA remains an example of sanctions achieving deterrence through coercive diplomacy. In contrast, the case of North Korea illustrates the limitations of sanctions as a deterrent. Despite decades of increasingly stringent UN sanctions targeting its nuclear program, Pyongyang has continued weapons testing and uranium enrichment. The regime has developed mechanisms to evade sanctions through illicit trade networks, cyber operations, and support from sympathetic states<sup>xxi</sup>.

Moreover, its isolated economy and prioritization of military power over civilian welfare make it relatively resilient to external pressure. As a result, while sanctions have slowed North Korea's progress, they have failed to deter its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Another complicating factor is the role of domestic politics within the targeted state. Sanctions may inadvertently strengthen hardline elements by fostering nationalism or enabling scapegoating. In such contexts, rather than deterring malign behaviour, sanctions can entrench it. As Nephew warns, "when sanctions are not paired with clear off-ramps or diplomatic engagement, they may harden the resolve of sanctioned actors instead of deterring them"<sup>xxii</sup>. Nevertheless, sanctions remain an essential tool in the international deterrence arsenal. Their relative low cost compared to military intervention, potential for reversibility, and symbolic value makes them attractive to

policymakers. While they are not universally effective, their ability to shape behaviour, especially when part of a broader diplomatic strategy, suggests that they continue to play a vital role in global efforts to deter aggression and uphold international norms.

### **Historical and Contemporary Perspective on Sanctions**

International sanctions have long served as a pivotal instrument in the arsenal of diplomatic and strategic tools wielded by states and international organizations. These measures are typically employed to coerce, deter, punish, or shame entities that contravene international norms, laws, or expectations. The evolution of international sanctions, from rudimentary trade embargoes in the ancient world to sophisticated, targeted financial restrictions in the contemporary international system, reflects the shifting dynamics of global politics and the increasing institutionalization of international relations.

### **Early Precedents of Sanctions**

The roots of international sanctions stretch deep into antiquity. Long before the formalization of the modern state system, political entities recognized the utility of economic coercion. One of the earliest recorded instances is the Megarian Decree, instituted by Athens around 432 BCE. This decree barred Megarian merchants from accessing Athenian markets and ports, a measure widely regarded as a contributing factor to the Peloponnesian War<sup>xxiii</sup>. It exemplifies how trade restrictions were utilized not merely as economic tools but as mechanisms of geopolitical pressure. Throughout the medieval period, religious authorities such as the Catholic Church exercised forms of sanctioning power. The use

of excommunication and interdicts had profound social and economic implications, effectively isolating individuals or entire regions from the broader Christian community. These ecclesiastical sanctions were among the earliest institutionalized forms of non-violent coercion and served to underscore the inter linkage between moral authority and political power.

### **The Emergence of Sanctions in the Modern State System**

With the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and the consequent emergence of the modern sovereign state system, the use of sanctions began to align more closely with state interests and diplomatic strategies. However, it was not until the twentieth century that international sanctions began to assume a more systematic and institutionalized character. The League of Nations marked the first major attempt to codify and deploy sanctions as part of collective security arrangements. The 1935 invasion of Ethiopia by Mussolini's Italy prompted the League to impose sanctions, including arms and economic embargoes. Yet, these efforts faltered due to inconsistent implementation and the reluctance of key states to enforce critical measures, such as an oil embargo, which could have severely impeded Italy's military capabilities<sup>xxiv</sup>. The League's failure to effectively apply sanctions undermined its credibility and exposed the limitations of collective economic coercion in the absence of political will. The post-World War II era saw the establishment of the United Nations, which inherited and expanded upon the League's mandate for enforcing international peace and security through sanctions. Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the Security Council was empowered to impose both military and non-military measures; including sanctions.

During the Cold War, sanctions became a prominent feature of U.S. and Western foreign policy, particularly against states aligned with the Soviet Union. One significant example was the United States' embargo on Cuba, initiated in 1960 in response to the nationalization of American-owned properties and Cuba's growing alignment with the Soviet bloc. This embargo, which has endured in various forms for over six decades, illustrates the longevity and political entrenchment that sanctions can acquire<sup>xxv</sup>. The apartheid regime in South Africa was another target of extensive international sanctions. In 1963, the UN imposed a voluntary arms embargo, which was followed by broader measures in the 1980s including trade and financial restrictions. These sanctions, combined with internal resistance and global condemnation, played a significant role in dismantling apartheid and transitioning South Africa to a democratic political order<sup>xxvi</sup>.

The conclusion of the Cold War and the unipolar moment of the 1990s heralded a dramatic increase in the use of international sanctions. Freed from the paralyzing dynamics of superpower rivalry, the UN Security Council began to utilize sanctions more frequently and expansively. During this period, sanctions were imposed on Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Rwanda, and Haiti, among others. The sanctions regime imposed on Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was among the most comprehensive in history. It encompassed trade, financial transactions, and military equipment, effectively severing Iraq from the global economy. While initially successful in compelling Iraq's withdrawal and limiting its military capabilities, the prolonged embargo led to severe humanitarian consequences. Studies and reports documented widespread



malnutrition, lack of medical supplies, and civilian suffering, which sparked international debate about the ethical implications of broad-based sanctions<sup>xxvii</sup>. In response to these concerns, the international community began shifting towards so-called "smart sanctions" or "targeted sanctions." These aim to minimize civilian suffering by focusing on specific individuals, companies, or sectors responsible for objectionable conduct. The rationale was to preserve the coercive effect of sanctions while avoiding the humanitarian fallout witnessed in Iraq.

### **Sanctions in the 21st Century: Precision and Proliferation**

The 21st century has witnessed a proliferation of targeted sanctions as states and international organizations have refined their tools of economic coercion. These sanctions frequently target financial assets, restrict travel, and ban specific technologies or military equipment. The United States' Global Magnitsky Act (2016) exemplifies this evolution, enabling sanctions against individuals implicated in human rights abuses or significant corruption worldwide<sup>xxviii</sup>. Similarly, the European Union has developed sophisticated sanctions mechanisms, often used in conjunction with UN and U.S. measures. Examples include sanctions against Russia for its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, as well as against Iranian entities involved in nuclear proliferation activities<sup>xxix</sup>.

Moreover, sanctions have become integral to the international response to non-state threats such as terrorism. The UN Security Council has maintained lists of individuals and organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban,

subjecting them to asset freezes, travel bans, and arms embargoes.

The history of international sanctions therefore reflects the evolving nature of power, law, and diplomacy in the international system. From ancient trade restrictions to the intricately designed smart sanctions of today, sanctions have consistently served as a mechanism for exerting influence without resorting to armed conflict. Their effectiveness, however, remains a subject of ongoing debate, particularly concerning their humanitarian consequences and their capacity to achieve strategic objectives. Nevertheless, as argued in this paper, their effectiveness remains uncertain. While some sanctions have contributed to policy shifts, others have failed to deter violations and even strengthened domestic support for sanctioned regimes.

### **Case Study Analysis**

#### **Iran (Nuclear Deterrence and the JCPOA)**

International sanctions on Iran represent one of the most comprehensive and enduring cases of coercive diplomacy in recent history. These sanctions, imposed by the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and other actors, have aimed to alter Iran's behaviour, particularly in relation to its nuclear program. The sanctions regime on Iran offers valuable insights into the mechanics of international pressure, the complexities of behavioural change, and the indispensable role of diplomacy in achieving policy objectives. The modern sanctions regime against Iran began in earnest after the 2002 revelation of its clandestine nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) expressed concerns over the nature of Iran's nuclear activities, leading to a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions beginning in 2006 that demanded the suspension of

uranium enrichment and imposed progressively severe sanctions<sup>xxx</sup>.

These multilateral sanctions were supplemented by unilateral measures from the United States and the European Union, targeting key sectors of Iran's economy, such as energy, finance, shipping, and trade. U.S. sanctions, in particular, have been expansive, including secondary sanctions aimed at third-party entities engaging in commerce with Iran. The Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA) and subsequent executive orders were instrumental in isolating Iran from the global financial system, restricting its access to oil markets and impeding its economic growth<sup>xxxi</sup>. The sanctions significantly reduced Iran's oil exports, caused currency devaluation, and triggered domestic inflation.

The efficacy of sanctions in altering Iran's behaviour has been the subject of extensive debate. On the one hand, there is strong evidence that economic pressure influenced Iran's decision to enter negotiations leading to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. The cumulative impact of sanctions, especially after 2012, created internal economic distress and elite fragmentation, which in turn made the political costs of non-engagement increasingly untenable<sup>xxxii</sup>. However, critics argue that sanctions alone did not produce compliance; rather, they contributed to a complex cost-benefit calculus within Iran's leadership. Sanctions affected not just the economy but also Iran's strategic posture. While Tehran did agree to significant limitations on its nuclear program under the JCPOA, it continued to support regional proxy groups and ballistic missile development, signalling a selective compliance strategy<sup>xxxiii</sup>. Moreover,

following the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 under the Trump administration and the re-imposition of sanctions, Iran resumed and escalated its nuclear activities, thereby highlighting the fragile and reversible nature of sanction-induced compliance.

Diplomacy played a crucial role in translating coercive pressure into tangible policy outcomes. The P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) engagement with Iran from 2013 onward demonstrated the importance of coupling sanctions with credible diplomatic overtures. The JCPOA itself was a product of sustained negotiations where Iran was offered phased sanctions relief in exchange for verifiable nuclear concessions. As Byman and Waxman puts it, this approach illustrated the principle of "carrots and sticks," wherein sanctions created leverage while diplomacy offered an exit strategy<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

Moreover, the diplomatic framework established through the JCPOA facilitated trust-building measures, technical verification mechanisms via the IAEA, and institutionalized dialogue channels. It underscored that sanctions are most effective when embedded within a broader strategic framework that allows for de-escalation and reciprocal gains. Without such a framework, sanctions risk entrenching adversarial positions and incentivizing resistance rather than reform. The Iran sanctions regime illustrates both the potential and limitations of international sanctions as a tool of statecraft. While sanctions imposed significant costs that likely influenced Iranian policy decisions, their effectiveness was amplified only when accompanied by meaningful diplomacy. The JCPOA marked a rare instance where coercion and negotiation



converged to produce a significant, albeit temporary, non-proliferation achievement. This case highlights the necessity of integrating punitive measures with constructive engagement to foster durable behavioural change in international relations.

### **International Sanctions on North Korea: A Critical Analysis**

Sanctions against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) have become one of the most enduring and intensively enforced regimes of punitive measures in the modern international system. Motivated by North Korea's persistent nuclear weapons development, these sanctions aim to deter proliferation, compel denuclearization, and pressure Pyongyang to comply with international norms. Despite their breadth and intensity, these sanctions have largely failed to achieve their strategic goals, while also generating numerous unintended consequences.

According to Haggard et al., sanctions began in earnest following North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) responded with Resolution 1718, imposing an arms embargo and a freeze on assets related to the nuclear and missile programs. Subsequent resolutions, including 1874 (2009), 2087 (2013), 2270 (2016), and 2397 (2017), significantly expanded the sanctions regime to cover coal exports, oil imports, labour remittances, and maritime operations<sup>xxxv</sup>. These measures were supplemented by unilateral sanctions from the United States, the European Union, Japan, and others, targeting North Korea's financial institutions, elite individuals, and commercial

enterprises. Over time, sanctions have become increasingly sophisticated, aiming to curtail both the state's revenue-generating activities and its access to dual-use technologies. For example, Resolution 2371 (2017) banned North Korean exports of coal, iron, lead, and seafood, while Resolution 2397 imposed restrictions on refined petroleum imports and mandated the repatriation of North Korean laborers abroad<sup>xxxvi</sup>.

Despite the sweeping nature of these sanctions, North Korea has persisted and even advanced its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities. Since the implementation of the most severe sanctions, Pyongyang has conducted multiple missile tests and claimed the successful miniaturization of nuclear warheads<sup>xxxvii</sup>. The regime's ability to withstand economic pressure while accelerating weapons development has exposed critical weaknesses in the sanctions approach. North Korea's resilience is partly due to its adaptive evasion strategies, including cyber theft, illicit maritime trade, use of front companies, and cooperation with non-compliant states and actors<sup>xxxviii</sup>. The regime has leveraged its centralized control and extensive surveillance apparatus to shield its strategic sectors from economic strain while shifting the burden of sanctions to the general population. Moreover, the state prioritizes weapons development as a core component of its national identity and security doctrine, rendering external pressure insufficient to induce disarmament<sup>xxxix</sup>.

As in other cases, sanctions on North Korea have produced a range of unintended consequences that undermine humanitarian and strategic objectives. First, the civilian population has borne the brunt of economic isolation. Sanctions have impeded humanitarian

aid delivery, restricted access to food and medicine, and contributed to malnutrition and public health crises<sup>xi</sup>. Although UNSC sanctions include humanitarian exemptions, bureaucratic delays and over-compliance by foreign banks and suppliers have hindered the implementation of aid programmes. Second, the sanctions have exacerbated the regime's internal repression. Facing economic constraints, the leadership has tightened its grip on society, using the sanctions narrative to justify increased control and to rally nationalist sentiment. This has resulted in heightened human rights abuses and limited opportunities for internal reform<sup>xli</sup>. Third, the sanctions have stimulated the growth of illicit economies. North Korea has developed extensive smuggling networks and cyber operations, including crypto currency theft, to finance its regime and weapons programs. These activities not only undermine sanctions enforcement but also create transnational security threats<sup>xlii</sup>.

The failure of sanctions on North Korea can be attributed to both structural and operational deficiencies. Structurally, the regime's autarkic economy, strong control over its population, and prioritization of military development render it uniquely resistant to external economic pressure<sup>xliii</sup>. Operationally, enforcement gaps, especially among China and Russia, have allowed North Korea to circumvent restrictions through illicit trade and lax border controls<sup>xliiv</sup>. Diplomatic efforts have also been inconsistent. While the Trump-Kim summits in 2018 and 2019 initially signalled a possible shift, the absence of a sustained and credible negotiation framework led to a diplomatic stalemate. The failure to offer clear, phased incentives in exchange for compliance diminished the effectiveness of the sanctions as leverage<sup>xliv</sup>. Without a complementary

diplomatic strategy that includes security guarantees, economic incentives, and a path to normalization, sanctions alone are unlikely to alter Pyongyang's calculus.

The case of North Korea demonstrates the limitations of sanctions as a tool for achieving complex political and security objectives. While sanctions have succeeded in signalling international condemnation and constraining some aspects of the DPRK's economy, they have failed to halt or reverse its weapons development. Moreover, the humanitarian and geopolitical consequences of the sanctions regime raise ethical and strategic concerns. A rethinking of the approach, one that integrates coercion with consistent diplomacy and calibrated incentives, appears essential for any future progress toward denuclearization and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

### **Alternatives and Complementary Strategies**

As discussed in this paper, international sanctions remain a cornerstone of global efforts to deter aggression and enforce international norms, but their effectiveness is often constrained by challenges such as evasion tactics, humanitarian fallout, and inconsistent enforcement. As such, this paper advocates for integrating sanctions with alternative and complementary strategies to enhance their impact and ethical implementation.

One of the most effective alternatives to sanctions is sustained diplomatic engagement. Preventive diplomacy, such as early intervention by multilateral institutions, can address underlying causes of conflict before coercive measures become necessary. Dialogue and mediation can help de-escalate tensions, foster mutual understanding, and build pathways toward peaceful resolution<sup>xlvi</sup>.

Sanctions should thus be framed not merely as punitive tools but as part of a broader diplomatic toolkit aimed at conflict prevention and resolution.

Complementary to sanctions, offering economic incentives or conditional aid can encourage compliance with international norms. Positive inducements, such as access to trade benefits, development assistance, or debt relief, can create a dual-track approach that rewards compliance alongside penalizing misconduct. This strategy enhances the credibility of the international community and mitigates the perception of sanctions as unilaterally punitive<sup>xlvii</sup>. Public diplomacy and the strategic use of media can bolster the normative legitimacy of sanctions. By clearly communicating the rationale, objectives, and expected outcomes of sanctions, states and international bodies can garner broader international and domestic support. This normative reinforcement is essential for sustaining long-term pressure on targeted regimes while preventing the erosion of public trust in sanctions as legitimate tools of international governance<sup>xlviii</sup>.

To address sanctions evasion, states and international organizations must strengthen financial surveillance, intelligence sharing, and compliance mechanisms. This includes collaboration with financial institutions to trace illicit flows and enforce penalties against violators. Enhanced monitoring by institutions like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) can serve as a force multiplier, improving the reach and precision of sanctions<sup>xlix</sup>. Also, sanctions are more effective when coordinated across a broad coalition of actors. Regional organizations such as the African Union or the European Union can provide localized legitimacy and

logistical support. Multilateral alignment reduces loopholes and demonstrates unified international resolve, thereby increasing the reputational and economic costs for non-compliant actors<sup>l</sup>.

### **Conclusion and the Way Forward**

The study was to provide a historical analysis of case studies of international sanctions and interrogate its effectiveness as deterrent. From the analysis of state behaviour in the case studies, it could be seen that the deterrent effect of international sanctions are far from guaranteed. While sanctions can signal resolve and impose costs, they often fall short of preventing unwanted actions, particularly when strategic interests, enforcement gaps, or authoritarian insulation weaken their impact. As this article has shown, context matters: success depends on multilateral coordination, clear objectives, and credible incentives. Moving forward, policymakers must adopt a more nuanced and flexible approach to sanctions, integrating them into broader strategies that blend coercion, dialogue, and structural reform to uphold international norms and peace.

The future of sanctions policy therefore lies in adopting a hybrid strategy, balancing coercion with engagement, punishment with incentives, and isolation with dialogue. Sanctions should be embedded within comprehensive policy frameworks that include preventive diplomacy, targeted aid, legal enforcement, and strategic communication. Moreover, their design must prioritize minimizing humanitarian harm and maximizing precision. Policymakers should institutionalize adaptive review mechanisms, allowing for sanctions to be calibrated based on real-time assessments of effectiveness and unintended consequences. Finally, investments

in institutional capacity, including data analytics and compliance technologies, can make sanctions smarter, more agile, and more just. In sum, sanctions alone cannot reshape global behaviour. When combined with alternative

and complementary strategies, however, they can become a more effective and ethical component of international governance.

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