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The use of economic sanctions in international relations: between legality and instrumentalisation

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ABSTRACT

The use of economic sanctions in international relations constitutes a legal instrument recognised and governed by universal and regional norms. These measures rely on political and judicial institutions that ensure their adoption, monitoring and oversight. However, their application reveals a high degree of instrumentalisation, often driven by the interests of the major powers. Sanctions are applied selectively and characterised by double standards, disproportionately affecting the targeted states. They exacerbate economic and social vulnerabilities and help to perpetuate relationships of international domination. Despite their legality, their effectiveness and impartiality remain limited. The tension between legality and instrumentalisation highlights the

complexity of this mechanism. It therefore appears necessary to strengthen the transparency and fairness of their application in order to reconcile international regulation with justice.

Keywords: Sanctions, international relations, power, manipulation, legality.

Introduction

Presented as an alternative to the use of armed force, economic sanctions in international relations have become an indispensable feature of contemporary diplomacy. These measures aim to compel a state or a group of actors to comply with an international norm or to alter behaviour deemed contrary to international peace and security. This coercive function, which has become institutionalised within the UN system, reflects the international community's desire to use peaceful means of pressure to achieve political and legal objectives.

From a normative perspective, economic sanctions rest on solid foundations. Article 41 of the United Nations Charter empowers the Security Council to take *'measures not involving the use of armed* force' which it deems necessary to deal with a threat to the peace, a breach of the peace or an act of aggression. These measures include the partial or total suspension of economic relations, communications and diplomatic ties. This legal recognition reflects a proven legitimacy, confirmed by the history of international relations since 1945. However, this legitimacy must not obscure the increasingly vocal criticism regarding the political and selective use of sanctions. In practice, they often appear to be a tool at the service of the major powers, which use them to assert their strategic or economic interests. As Jean COMBACAU and Serge SUR point out, public international law is inseparable from a political context characterised by structural inequality between states. Thus, sanctions may be perceived not as impartial tools of international regulation, but as instruments of domination and interference.

Historically, the practice of economic sanctions dates back to the interwar period, with the League of Nations, which imposed them on Fascist Italy following the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. However, it was with the United Nations that this mechanism acquired legal legitimacy and universal scope. The sanctions imposed on South Africa as part of the struggle against apartheid are a prime example of the use of such measures to promote human rights.

Since the end of the Cold War, the use of economic sanctions has increased considerably, targeting states such as Iraq, Yugoslavia, Libya, Côte d'Ivoire, Iran, North Korea and, more recently, Russia. This proliferation reflects a normalisation of the tool, which is tending to become a reflex in the management of international crises. However, it raises questions about their actual effectiveness and, above all, their fairness. Indeed, certain flagrant violations of international law go unpunished, such as the prolonged occupation of the Palestinian territories, whilst other situations give rise to severe and long-lasting sanctions regimes. This disparity reveals a political instrumentalisation that is difficult to reconcile with the ideal of sovereign equality between states.

The consequences of these sanctions, particularly in their comprehensive form, are often catastrophic for civilian populations. The sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s led to a dramatic deterioration in living conditions, to the extent that some authors have referred to *'collective* punishment' contrary to international humanitarian law. To mitigate these adverse effects, the concept of *'targeted* sanctions' or *'smart* sanctions' was developed, aimed at directly targeting the political and economic elites responsible, rather than the population as a whole. However, even these targeted sanctions are criticised for their limited effectiveness and their tendency to perpetuate relationships of economic dependence.

The debate on the use of economic sanctions thus reveals a dual dimension. From a legal perspective, they constitute a well-established legal framework, enshrined in the United Nations Charter and reinforced by regional mechanisms. But from a political perspective, they represent an instrument of power, used selectively and often in accordance with the balance of power. Alain PELLET, for his part, believes that *'international law remains the law of states, shaped and manipulated by them according to their interests*.'

This raises the central question: does the use of economic sanctions in international relations constitute both a lawful practice and a form of instrumentalisation? The hypothesis of this study is that it does. Sanctions rest on an indisputable legal basis but are, in practice, largely instrumentalised by the major powers, which raises questions about their legitimacy and effectiveness.

To test this hypothesis, we must first examine the established legality of the use of economic sanctions, as derived from their normative and institutional enshrinement (**I**). Secondly, we shall analyse the undeniable element of instrumentalisation that accompanies their implementation, highlighting the predominance of the interests of the major powers and the resulting asymmetrical consequences for the targeted states (**II**).

I. Established legality

When examining the evolution of international law in the 20th and 21st centuries, one observation stands out: the international community has gradually institutionalised instruments of coercion that do not involve the direct use of armed force. Among these, economic sanctions occupy a central place. Over time, they have become one of the preferred tools for compelling states or non-state actors to comply with international obligations. Their legality, though sometimes contested in political or doctrinal debates, is nevertheless firmly rooted in positive law. As Jean COMBACAU and Serge SUR point out, *'the use of economic sanctions is not an exceptional derogation, but a measure expressly provided for by contemporary international law as an alternative to war*.'

This legal status stems directly from the system of collective security established by the United Nations Charter. Article 41, in particular, explicitly states that the Security Council may decide on measures not involving the use of armed force, such as the suspension of economic trade or diplomatic relations. This textual basis confers universal legitimacy on sanctions, as they form part of the UN's primary law. Pierre-Marie DUPUY emphasises that *'the sanctions provided for in the Charter are not an improvised political creation, but the normative expression of a desire to substitute legal constraint for the logic of armed power struggles*.'

The legality of sanctions is not, however, confined to the universal order. It is also manifested at the regional level, through the European Union, the African Union and ECOWAS, which have incorporated into their founding texts and practices the possibility of resorting to coercive economic measures. Mathias FORTEAU, Patrick DAILLIER and Alain PELLET note that *'the regionalisation of sanctions regimes forms part of a trend towards the appropriation of international law by integrated groups, adapting it to local geopolitical realities*.'

Beyond these textual foundations, legality is given concrete form through the establishment of specialised institutions. Political institutions, such as the UN Security Council or regional executive bodies, hold decision-making power, whilst judicial and technical institutions, such as the Court of Justice of the European Union or sanctions committees, oversee monitoring, implementation and, in some cases, the protection of fundamental rights. Dominique CARREAU rightly points out that *'the gradual judicialisation of sanctions has helped to strengthen their legitimacy by embedding them within a process of oversight and rationalisation*.'

This judicialisation, which has intensified since the end of the Cold War, has been accompanied by technical refinement: so-called 'smart' sanctions, targeting specific individuals or entities, have replaced blanket sanctions deemed too indiscriminate. This change illustrates a desire to reconcile political effectiveness with respect for fundamental rights. Olivier CORTEN points out that *'the legality of contemporary sanctions is measured by their proportionality and their targeting, which are essential conditions for their compatibility with the principles of international* law'. Thus, far from being mere instruments of arbitrary pressure, economic sanctions rest on a robust normative foundation—both universal and regional—and on a set of institutions responsible for overseeing their application. However, this legality, however sound it may appear, does not preclude a more ambiguous reality: in many cases, sanctions are diverted from their original legal purpose to serve political and strategic agendas. It is this fundamental tension between legality and instrumentalisation that our analysis must now address. In this regard, it is important to address the normative enshrinement of economic sanctions (**A**) before analysing the establishment of institutions (**B**).

A. The normative establishment of economic sanctions

The legal recognition of economic sanctions in international law is not an accidental or marginal phenomenon, but the result of a historical and normative process that has gradually established this instrument as a legitimate component of the regulation of international relations. From the very adoption of the United Nations Charter in 1945, the international community sought to equip the Security Council with an arsenal of non-military measures, enabling it to preserve peace and security without systematically resorting to the use of armed force. In this context, economic sanctions emerge as a less violent but no less restrictive alternative, designed to influence the behaviour of States or non-State actors. Jean COMBACAU and Serge SUR argue that *'the normative enshrinement of sanctions constitutes a major advance in international law, in that it reflects the will of states to provide a legal framework for coercion in order to avoid a return to the logic of total war*.'

This normative recognition operates on two levels. On the one hand, at the universal level, through instruments adopted under the auspices of the United Nations, which establish a general legal framework applicable to all member states of the Organisation. On the other hand, at the regional level, through the founding treaties of political or economic integration organisations, which adapt sanctions to the geopolitical realities and specific dynamics of each continent. The universalisation and regionalisation of sanctions are not at odds with one another, but complement each other in a process of normative diffusion, where general international law provides the framework and regional frameworks specify the detailed arrangements.

It is therefore through this dual normative framework – universal (**1**) and regional (**2**) – that economic sanctions derive their legitimacy. Far from being an improvised or exclusively political instrument, they are embedded within binding legal frameworks that determine the conditions for their adoption, their scope of application and the procedures for their implementation.

1. Universal norms

The fundamental basis for the legality of economic sanctions lies in the United Nations Charter. Article 41 expressly provides that the Security Council may decide on coercive measures not involving the use of armed force, such as 'the complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio and other communications, as well as the severance of diplomatic relations'. This text provides a clear and indisputable legal basis for economic sanctions decided by the Security Council, by incorporating them into the collective security mechanism. Pierre-Marie DUPUY observes that *'Article 41 of the Charter illustrates the international community's effort to create coercive instruments suited to the prevention and suppression of breaches of the peace, without systematically resorting to armed* force'. Since the end of the Cold War, the Security Council's use of economic sanctions has intensified considerably. They have been applied in a variety of contexts: the fight against apartheid in South Africa, armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the nuclear programmes of Iraq and Iran, and the fight against international terrorism following the attacks of 11 September 2001. These examples demonstrate the growing importance of sanctions as a universal regulatory tool.

Furthermore, changes in the Security Council's practices have led to the emergence of so-called '*targeted*' or '*smart*' sanctions, designed to minimise the humanitarian impact of blanket sanctions. This refinement reflects a desire to reconcile the effectiveness of coercive measures with respect for fundamental rights. The shift from universal sanctions towards selective measures reflects not only an awareness of humanitarian considerations, but also the requirement of proportionality that characterises the international rule of law.

Thus, universal norms provide a general legal framework that underpins the legitimacy of sanctions, whilst imposing clear obligations on states. However, this normative recognition is not limited to the UN system.

2. Regional standards

The normative recognition of economic sanctions is also evident in regional frameworks, where international organisations adapt and supplement the UN system. The European Union, for example, has developed an autonomous sanctions regime enabling it to respond swiftly to violations of international law or serious human rights abuses. These measures, which can range from arms embargoes to the freezing of financial assets, are based on Articles 21 and 29 of the Treaty on European Union. Jean-Sylvestre Bergé explains that *'the European Union has become one of the major players in the application of sanctions, by providing its external action with its own legal framework and by asserting its normative autonomy vis-à-vis the Security Council* '.

Similarly, on the African continent, the African Union has provided in Article 23 of its Constitutive Act for the possibility of suspending the rights and privileges of member states that fail to fulfil their obligations, and of imposing economic sanctions on them in the event of a serious breach of the organisation's principles. ECOWAS, for its part, has frequently resorted to economic sanctions – notably against Mali, Guinea and Niger – in response to coups d'état and breaches of the constitutional order. African organisations have incorporated the concept of sanctions into their collective governance frameworks, adapting it to their regional priorities, in particular the fight against unconstitutional changes of government.

These regional mechanisms complement the universal framework by offering greater responsiveness and proximity, enabling local crises to be addressed with appropriate instruments. They also demonstrate that the normative enshrinement of economic sanctions is not merely a global phenomenon, but also a reality rooted in regional dynamics.

Consequently, the normative enshrinement of economic sanctions, whether universal or regional, confers on these measures a solid legal legitimacy. The foundational texts, institutional practices and the diversification of enforcement mechanisms illustrate the international community's determination to endow international law with a regulated and legally grounded coercive instrument. However, this proclaimed legality must not obscure the ambiguities in their application: sanctions are often used in a selective and targeted manner, serving the interests of the major powers. It is this critical aspect – that of instrumentalisation – which must now be examined.

B. The establishment of institutions

The effectiveness and legitimacy of economic sanctions rest not only on their normative enshrinement, but also on the existence of institutions capable of ensuring their adoption, supervision and monitoring. Without these bodies, the norms would remain a dead letter and lose their binding authority within the international order. The establishment of institutions thus reflects the desire of states and international organisations to provide a legal and political framework for the use of economic sanctions. It also serves to channel coercive practices into collective structures that limit abuses and promote a minimum degree of consistency in the application of these measures.

In his analysis of the role of international institutions, Georges ABI-SAAB asserts that the institutional dimension constitutes the essential guarantee of the juridification of contemporary international relations.

In the specific field of sanctions, two types of institutions can be distinguished: political institutions (**1**), which decide on and guide their use, and judicial and technical institutions (**2**), which ensure their regulation and, in some cases, their judicial review.

1. Political institutions

Political institutions play a role in the implementation of economic sanctions. At the global level, the United Nations Security Council plays a leading role. Under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, it has exclusive authority to decide on binding sanctions applicable to all Member States when international peace and security are threatened. The adoption of sanctions against South Africa during the apartheid era, or against Iraq following the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, illustrates the significance of this authority. However, as Jean COMBACAU and Serge SUR point out, this power is both legal and political, as it depends on the balance of power between the permanent members, who hold the right of veto.

At the regional level, political institutions such as the African Union Peace and Security Council, the European Council and the ECOWAS Council of Ministers also have decision-making powers regarding sanctions. These bodies make it possible to adapt coercive measures to regional realities and to strengthen the legitimacy of their application. Thus, ECOWAS has on several occasions resorted to sanctions in response to military coups, such as in Mali and Guinea, demonstrating that regional political institutions constitute a necessary extension of the universal framework.

Nevertheless, the central role of political institutions poses a twofold challenge: on the one hand, the risk of excessive politicisation of decisions on sanctions; and on the other, unequal treatment between states due to the influence of major powers. This situation leads some authors, such as Rosanvallon, to criticise the fragility of the principle of sovereign equality within the decision-making mechanism.

2. Judicial and technical institutions

Alongside political bodies, judicial and technical institutions play a part in regulating economic sanctions. Judicial institutions, such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) or regional courts (for example, the Court of Justice of the European Union), play a regulatory and supervisory role. They enable the legality of sanctions to be challenged, their scope to be clarified, and a certain balance to be maintained between coercive measures and respect for fundamental rights. The case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, notably in the 2008 Kadi case, illustrates how judges can assess international sanctions against the requirements of the rule of law.

Technical institutions, for their part, comprise specialised bodies such as the sanctions committees established by the UN Security Council. These committees are responsible for monitoring, evaluating and, in some cases, adapting sanctions regimes. Their remit is to oversee compliance with the measures adopted, examine requests for humanitarian exemptions and propose technical adjustments. According to Monique CHEMILLIER-GENDREAU, these committees contribute to the 'technicisation' of international law by transforming political decisions into operational mechanisms.

The existence of these judicial and technical institutions helps to give sanctions genuine normative and institutional substance. It enables the process to move beyond mere political decision-making to achieve concrete, regulated implementation subject to appeal. However, despite these advances, the framework remains incomplete due to the absence of a universal, binding mechanism guaranteeing the effective enforcement of sanctions. As Michel VIRALLY points out, *'international law remains characterised by the pre-eminence of politics over law, which limits the actual authority of institutions*.'

Thus, the normative enshrinement of economic sanctions and the establishment of political, judicial and technical institutions confer on these measures an indisputable legality within the international system. Nevertheless, this legitimacy, whilst real, does not fully capture the complexity of the phenomenon. For beyond their legal and institutional foundations, sanctions are often characterised by a form of instrumentalisation that reveals the asymmetry of power relations and the prevalence of the interests of the major powers. It is this critical dimension that must now be analysed.

II. A clear element of instrumentalisation

Since the end of the Cold War, the use of economic sanctions has become established as one of the preferred instruments for regulating international relations. Presented as a peaceful alternative to the use of armed force, they aim to compel recalcitrant states to comply with international norms and United Nations resolutions. However, behind this normative façade lies a deeper logic of instrumentalisation serving the geopolitical and strategic interests of the dominant powers. According to Jean-Baptiste DUROSELLE, *'the history of international relations is the history of the powerful's quest for* order'. This observation remains highly relevant in the contemporary era, where sanctions have become a lever for influence and pressure.

In practice, the imposition of economic sanctions rarely reflects an impartial application of international law. Rather, it follows a selective and hierarchical logic, whereby the most influential states impose their will, whilst countries of the Global South face increased vulnerability. This reality has led several African and Congolese researchers to question the true purpose of these measures. Jean-Paul KAYEMBE, for example, highlights the profoundly asymmetrical nature of sanctions and their role in perpetuating an unequal global architecture.

Indeed, whilst purporting to defend human rights and promote peace, economic sanctions can have the opposite effect: economic collapse, the impoverishment of populations and, paradoxically, the consolidation of power amongst the ruling elites. This tension between stated objectives and actual outcomes fuels a wide-ranging debate in legal scholarship regarding their effectiveness and legitimacy.

To this end, this section will first analyse the predominance of the interests of the major powers by highlighting the selective application and double standards in the use of coercive measures (**A**). We will then highlight the asymmetrical consequences of these sanctions on the targeted states, emphasising the exacerbation of their economic and social vulnerabilities and the perpetuation of international power relations (**B**). This two-pronged approach will enable us to critically assess the actual role of sanctions in contemporary global governance.

A. The predominance of the interests of major powers

Economic sanctions, far from being mere technical regulatory tools, are above all political instruments whose use reveals the balance of power between actors on the international stage. Raymond ARON therefore points out that *'the international order is never neutral; it reflects the implicit hierarchy amongst the* powers'. This observation is illustrated by the way in which sanctions are implemented: they serve, first and foremost, the strategic interests of the great powers rather than responding to a universal imperative of justice.

The predominance of geopolitical interests is evident in the selective nature of sanctions. Powerful states – in particular the permanent members of the UN Security Council – resort to sanctions to punish adversaries who threaten their spheres of influence, whilst sparing their allies despite similar violations of international law. Jean-Baptiste Duroselle notes that *'international norms are applied according to the balance of power, and not solely on the basis of their legal* value'. This instrumentalisation highlights the profound asymmetry of the global system, in which dominant actors hold the power to define 'good' and 'bad' conduct on the international stage.

This logic is reinforced by the double standards in the application of coercive measures, which fuels a sense of injustice amongst countries of the Global South. For example, certain states benefiting from the strategic support of major powers systematically escape sanctions, even in cases of massive human rights violations, whilst others, with less influence, are swiftly sanctioned for breaches that are sometimes comparable. Bertrand BADIE emphasises that *'international law, when used selectively, ceases to be a tool of universality and becomes an instrument of* domination'. Furthermore, economic sanctions are often part of a broader strategy of containment or regime change. In this context, they function as a weapon of persuasion and pressure aimed at compelling the targeted leaders to alter their political behaviour. Sanctions are not neutral: they are an expression of the desire to impose an international order that serves the interests of the most powerful.

Finally, the critical perspective of several Congolese authors adds further insight to this observation. Jean-Paul KAYEMBE notes that Africa remains the continent most affected by multilateral sanctions, which reflects not only structural inequality within the international system, but also the tendency to use sanctions as a tool to control the internal political developments of African states.

1. The selective use of economic sanctions

One of the most striking features of the use of economic sanctions lies in their selective nature, which reflects a differentiated application of international norms according to the geopolitical interests of the powers imposing them. In theory, sanctions should be imposed whenever a state seriously violates international law, human rights or binding UN Security Council resolutions. In practice, however, their implementation often responds to a logic of political expediency rather than strictly legal considerations.

The history of international relations is littered with cases where universal principles are invoked but applied with varying degrees of rigour depending on whether the state in question is an adversary or an ally. This selectivity manifests itself as tolerance towards states that are strategically useful and increased severity towards countries whose behaviour challenges the geopolitical balance desired by the dominant powers. The United Nations Security Council, the principal body empowered to impose collective sanctions, is no exception to this logic. Owing to the veto power held by the five permanent members, decisions to impose sanctions are often the result of political compromises that favour the interests of the powerful. Raymond ARON observes in this regard that *'international institutions reflect the balance of power that gave rise to them, and their functioning remains dependent on that same balance*.'

A prime example is the sanctions imposed on Iraq in 1990, which were swift and comprehensive, whereas in other contexts – notably when dealing with certain strategic allies of the major powers – comparable violations of international law have not led to any coercive measures. This disparity reveals that the decision to impose sanctions is not based solely on the gravity of the act committed, but on an assessment of the geopolitical consequences for influential members of the international system.

This selective approach has been criticised by Bertrand BADIE, who views sanctions as *'a disciplinary tool intended to bring peripheral actors in the international system to* heel'. This criticism echoes the analysis of Susan Strange, who explains that the global economy is structured by a network of interdependencies in which the central powers have at their disposal instruments – including sanctions – to maintain their dominant position.

In Africa, several researchers emphasise that sanctions disproportionately affect countries in the Global South, exacerbating their vulnerability without bringing about the hoped-for political changes: *'Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for nearly 40 per cent of the sanctions regimes imposed since the 1990s, yet their results in terms of democratisation remain highly debatable*'.

Consequently, the selective use of economic sanctions confirms their instrumentalisation by the dominant powers. They are less a mechanism for universal justice than a foreign policy tool aimed at disciplining actors deemed to be deviant. This selectivity fuels a sense of injustice and mistrust towards the international order, paving the way for an analysis of the double standards in the application of coercive measures.

2. Double standards in the application of coercive measures

Whilst the selectivity of sanctions highlights the balance of power within the international system, the double standards in their application reveal its normative inconsistency. In theory, sanctions should promote universal values such as peace, democracy and human rights. In practice, however, their implementation betrays a differential application of international norms depending on the identity of the state concerned and its role in the global geopolitical balance.

As Jean SALMON, a specialist in international law, points out, *"the use of sanctions is not neutral; it depends on a political assessment that reflects the interests of the powerful more than strict adherence to the* law". This statement clearly illustrates how the major powers rely on international law to legitimise their actions when they serve their objectives, whilst disregarding it when its provisions become binding on their own allies.

There are plenty of *examples* to demonstrate this double standard. Violations of international law committed by certain strategic allies of major powers result in neither sanctions nor even firm condemnation, whilst states perceived as hostile are swiftly subjected to severe coercive measures. This situation is indicative of an international order in which *'the principles of justice apply only to the weak, whilst the powerful enjoy de facto immunity*.'

This much-criticised double standard points to the idea that inequality in the application of international norms fuels deep-seated resentment within the targeted societies and reinforces the narrative of structural injustice in the world order. This inconsistency contributes to the delegitimisation of multilateral institutions and encourages the emergence of protest coalitions seeking to redefine the rules of the international game.

In the African context, this perception of injustice is particularly acute. The sanctions imposed on certain states on the continent are seen as interference in internal affairs, particularly as similar crises elsewhere elicit no comparable reaction. It is evident that the international sanctions regime is applied more rigorously to African countries, reinforcing the idea of an asymmetrical world order in which Africa is more an object than a subject of international law.

This double standard also has an internal political impact within the sanctioned states: it fuels the nationalist rhetoric of leaders who present themselves as defenders of national sovereignty in the face of an international community deemed to be biased. Sanctions can have a 'rally round the flag' effect, paradoxically reinforcing the legitimacy of the targeted regime.

Thus, the analysis of this double standard confirms that economic sanctions, far from being a neutral and universal instrument, are a political tool serving relations of domination. They contribute to undermining the credibility of international institutions and to widening the divide between the countries of the North and those of the South.

B. The asymmetrical consequences for the targeted states

Whilst economic sanctions are intended to be an instrument of international regulation, their practical effects reveal a profoundly unequal dynamic. They often hit the most vulnerable states, exacerbating their economic and social vulnerabilities, whilst maintaining a global hierarchy that perpetuates relations of domination. As Hans MORGENTHAU points out, *'sanctions, as an instrument of foreign policy, reflect not so much a universal ideal as a balance of power, and their impact is measured against the relative power of the actors involved*.'

1. The exacerbation of economic and social vulnerabilities

The primary effect of economic sanctions is to reduce a state's capacity to participate in international trade, leading to a contraction in its GDP and a deterioration in its macroeconomic indicators. Susan Strange, in her analysis of global economic structures, emphasises the role of financial and trade flows as vectors of power: depriving a country of access to markets reduces its autonomy and increases its dependence.

Studies carried out by the United Nations Development Programme show that a regime of economic sanctions can cause a country's GDP to fall by an average of 5 to 10 per cent, exacerbating poverty and leading to a rise in unemployment. The humanitarian consequences are often devastating: sanctions can disrupt the import of medicines, foodstuffs and essential equipment, thereby undermining the right to health and adequate food.

This situation is consistent with Amartya Sen's analysis, which demonstrates that famine crises are not merely phenomena linked to a lack of resources, but also to the obstruction of mechanisms for access and distribution. Thus, sanctions can indirectly trigger humanitarian crises by restricting supply chains and driving up the prices of essential goods.

For developing countries, these effects are even more dramatic as they compound pre-existing vulnerabilities: dependence on a limited number of export commodities, high public debt and weak economic infrastructure. Sanctions exacerbate the structural vulnerabilities of African states and jeopardise their development trajectory.

2. The perpetuation of international power relations

Beyond their domestic effects, sanctions play a role in perpetuating a hierarchical world order. They keep the targeted countries in a position of dependence on the major powers and international financial institutions. Immanuel Wallerstein, in his world-system theory, emphasises that *'sanctions function as a regulatory mechanism enabling the centre to maintain its advantage over the periphery*.'

Furthermore, sanctions can have a paradoxical effect on the domestic political scene. Far from weakening the regimes they target, they can strengthen their legitimacy by fostering a *'rally round the flag'* effect. Targeted leaders exploit sanctions to stir up nationalist sentiment and portray the external enemy as the cause of economic difficulties.

Finally, these measures often prompt sanctioned countries to seek new alliances outside the Western sphere, thereby fostering the emergence of alternative centres of power. Excessive pressure on a state can have the effect of accelerating the formation of hostile coalitions and rebalancing the geopolitical landscape. Thus, rather than permanently isolating the targeted states, sanctions may contribute to their integration into new geopolitical dynamics, thereby reducing their strategic effectiveness.

In short, therefore, economic sanctions exacerbate the economic and social vulnerabilities of the targeted countries whilst reinforcing relations of domination within the international system.

Conclusion

An analysis of the use of economic sanctions in international relations highlights a dual reality that reflects both the complexity and the ambiguities of this mechanism. On the one hand, these measures are based on an indisputable legal basis, firmly rooted in universal and regional international law. Article 41 of the United Nations Charter confers on the Security Council the power to impose economic sanctions as an alternative to the direct use of armed force, in order to safeguard international peace and security. This normative recognition is complemented by the establishment of political and judicial institutions that provide a framework for the decision-making and implementation of sanctions. Thus, at the universal level, the Security Council, sanctions committees and technical monitoring mechanisms play a central role in the formulation, supervision and monitoring of coercive measures. At the regional level, bodies such as the African Union Peace and Security Council, ECOWAS and the European Union enable sanctions to be tailored to the specific realities of local crises whilst maintaining normative consistency with the universal framework. These institutions help to give coercive measures a legal basis, ensuring that economic sanctions are not merely arbitrary decisions, but form part of a precise normative process, subject to rules, procedures and oversight.

This apparent legality must not, however, obscure the more ambiguous reality of their application. In practice, economic sanctions are frequently exploited for political and strategic ends. The major powers, which wield considerable influence within decision-making institutions, use sanctions selectively, thereby creating a double standard in the application of coercive measures. Certain states, despite being in clear breach of international law, escape these sanctions, whilst others, less powerful, find themselves subject to strict measures. The formal legality of sanctions does not guarantee their impartiality within the international order, and their implementation often reflects existing power dynamics. This instrumentalisation is exacerbated by the absence of a universal mechanism to monitor the application of sanctions, which leaves dominant states with considerable leeway.

The consequences of this instrumentalisation are particularly evident in the targeted states. Economic sanctions exacerbate their economic and social vulnerabilities, affecting not only the targeted governments but also the civilian population. Measures such as asset freezes, trade embargoes or financial restrictions often have the effect of reducing access to essential goods, exacerbating humanitarian crises and weakening national institutions. The impact of sanctions on civil societies is often disproportionate to the political objectives pursued, raising a major ethical issue regarding the use of economic coercion. At the same time, these sanctions help to maintain and reinforce international power relations, with the most powerful states often being those capable of imposing their agenda whilst minimising the risks to their own economies.

Despite these criticisms, it would be wrong to reduce economic sanctions to a mere tool of domination. They also constitute an instrument of international regulation, enabling a response to crisis situations without resorting to war, whilst providing a normative framework for holding states to account and protecting the international community. Economic sanctions represent a compromise between the need to act in the interests of international peace and security and respect for the fundamental principles of international law. The case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, notably the Kadi case, illustrates how international and regional law can frame and moderate the effects of sanctions, seeking to reconcile political effectiveness with the protection of fundamental rights.

In this sense, the use of economic sanctions in international relations embodies a fundamental tension between legality and instrumentalisation. Whilst legal texts and institutions provide a solid normative basis and undeniable legal legitimacy, practice reveals the influence of power relations, the selective use of sanctions and the asymmetrical impacts on the targeted states. These factors necessitate consideration of mechanisms to enhance the fairness and transparency of sanctions implementation, so that they genuinely fulfil their role in international regulation rather than serving solely as a means of political coercion.

This reflection thus paves the way for a broader examination of the future of economic sanctions: how can effectiveness, legitimacy and international justice be reconciled? How can existing mechanisms be reformed to limit abuses and protect civilian populations? These questions suggest that, whilst the legality of sanctions is beyond dispute, their effectiveness and morality depend above all on the political will and collective ethics of international actors, highlighting the need for constant vigilance and the strengthening of oversight mechanisms.

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