Are Sanctions a Weakening Instrument of International Compliance?

Sanctions are commonly used by states to influence the behaviour of other countries and uphold international law without using force. By restricting access to markets, finance, technology, and trade, sanctions seek to impose economic costs on targeted states and encourage behavioural changes.[1]

Sanctions can be **primary**, where a state directly restricts its economic relations with the target, and **secondary**, where third parties are penalised for continuing to engage economically with the targeted state. Sanctions may also be **time-bound** or **indefinite.** Time-bound sanctions can signal that restrictions may be lifted if the targeted state changes its behaviour, potentially encouraging compliance while preserving existing economic relationships. Indefinite sanctions, by contrast, may demonstrate greater resolve but can also encourage targeted states to reduce their dependence on established international networks by developing alternative channels for trade, finance, and technology.[2]

The long-term consequences of sanctions for international economic interdependence are a key debate. While sanctions derive their coercive power from existing global networks, targeted states often adapt by building alternative trade, financial, and technological networks. The rise of China, the increasing role of intermediary states, and the emergence of a more multipolar global economy have facilitated this adaptation. As a result, sanctions may not necessarily lead to compliance, but instead contribute to the diversification of international economic relationships.[3]

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[1] Imran Khalid. *The decline of sanctions*. (19 January 2026). The Lowy Institute. https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/decline-sanctions

[2] Sarah Kurlikowski, U.S. International Trade Commission. (Executive Briefings on Trade, March 2024). *Economic Sanctions: An Overview*. https://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/executive_briefings/ebot_economic_sanctions_overview.pdf

[3] Ilan Kapoor. *The limits of sanctions in a multipolar era*. (9 June 2026). The Loop: ECPR's Political Science Blog. https://theloop.ecpr.eu/the-limits-of-sanctions-in-a-multipolar-era/

This raises questions about whether alternative networks signal a weakening of sanctions[4] or the evolution of international interdependence, and whether new networks affect the stability of established ones.[5]

Questions

1. Does the development of alternative trade, financial, and technological networks indicate that sanctions are weakening as tools of economic coercion, or is it simply inherent in an evolving and increasingly multipolar system of international interdependence?
2. Does the preservation of established networks of international interdependence imply limiting the development of alternative networks, or does the emergence of new networks impliedly make existing networks more volatile? Do states necessarily have to choose between the two?

[4] Christine M. Chinkin. (2002). *Alternatives to Economic Sanctions*. https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1481&context=book_chapters

[5] *Stability through balance: rethinking power in a connected world.* Speech by Christine Lagarde, President of the ECB, '*Conversations pour demain*' on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Institut Montaigne in Paris, France. 15 September 2025. https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/key/date/2025/html/ecb.sp250915_1~9d3e96b972.en.html

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5. Stability through balance: rethinking power in a connected world. Speech by Christine Lagarde, President of the ECB, 'Conversations pour demain' on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Institut Montaigne in Paris, France. 15 September 2025. https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/key/date/2025/html/ecb.sp250915_1~9d3e96b972.en.html