



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### ECONOMIC SANCTIONS AS A TOOL OF COERCIVE DIPLOMACY: EXPLORING THE CASES OF THE UNITED STATES AGAINST VENEZUELA AND RUSSIA

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#### ABSTRACT

Economic sanctions have become a central instrument of United States foreign policy, frequently used to exert pressure on adversarial states without resorting to direct military force. This study critically examines the use of U.S. sanctions as a tool of coercive diplomacy in the cases of Venezuela and Russia from 2014 to 2024. Drawing on a qualitative comparative case study methodology, the research assesses both the strategic intent behind and the outcomes of sanctions imposed on these states, focusing on political objectives, economic performance, and broader implications. Findings indicate that while U.S. sanctions have inflicted severe economic hardship including contractions in revenue, disruptions to trade, and heightened inflation they have not produced the desired political transformation in either Venezuela or Russia. In Venezuela's case, the Maduro regime demonstrated resilience, and the population endured deepening humanitarian challenges, exacerbated by restricted access to basic goods and public services. Conversely, Russia adapted to sanctions through diversification of economic partnerships and strategic alliances, limiting their coercive impact. The study highlights that sanctions often contribute to humanitarian crises and geopolitical friction without compelling targeted governments to change behavior. The paper concludes that sanctions, when implemented unilaterally and without complementary diplomatic engagement, are insufficient for effective coercive diplomacy. It recommends embracing targeted, multilateral approaches with humanitarian safeguards and flexible policy instruments to enhance policy effectiveness and align with broader strategic goals.

**Keyword:** Economic sanctions, coercive diplomacy, Venezuela, Russia, U.S. foreign policy

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## **1.0. INTRODUCTION**

As a way to change the behaviour of other countries without going to war, powerful countries are more and more likely to use economic sanctions as a tool of foreign policy and coercive diplomacy. Different kinds of sanctions, like trade embargoes, financial restrictions, asset freezes, and travel bans, are used to hurt the economy in order to achieve diplomatic goals. The United States has made sanctions a permanent part of its strategy for protecting its national interests and responding to what it sees as violations of international norms. It does this by using its power over the global financial system and important international organizations (Nephew, 2023).

In the last few decades, Venezuela and Russia have become important case studies because of the size, severity, and geopolitical importance of U.S. sanctions against them. While Nicolás Maduro's political and economic problems in Venezuela led to increasing sanctions—first targeted and then sectoral—Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, interference in elections, and invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to a wide range of coordinated economic measures led by the U.S. and its allies (Portela, 2024). These examples show how sanctions have changed from being just punishment to being strategic tools for putting diplomatic pressure on countries in complicated geopolitical crises.

Even though they are popular, the effectiveness of economic sanctions as a way to force people to do things is still up for debate. Some researchers and policymakers disagree on whether sanctions really work to achieve their goals or just make humanitarian crises worse, strengthen authoritarian regimes, and hurt civilians. The sanctions made Venezuela's already weak economy worse, which raises moral questions about punishing everyone at once (Kozul-Wright & Fortunato, 2012). Russia has also been able to deal with Western sanctions by finding new trade partners and putting money into becoming more self-sufficient economically, even as the pressure from sanctions grows (Connolly, 2023). The main question this study tries to answer is how effective U.S.-led sanctions against these two countries have been at achieving diplomatic goals through force, and what factors affect their success.

Hence, the main objective of this study is to critically look at how well economic sanctions work as a form of coercive diplomacy. To do this, it will use the United States' sanctions against Venezuela and Russia as examples. However, specific objectives are to look at the reasons behind, the ways they work, and the plans for putting U.S. sanctions on Venezuela and Russia into action; Look at how these sanctions affect politics, the economy, and people's lives in both situations; Check how well these sanctions have met their stated diplomatic goals; and Look into other ways to use coercive diplomacy in today's international relations.

Similarly, based on the aforementioned research objectives, the following three research questions were formulated to provide direction for this study. There are: (i). How have economic sanctions been used by the U.S. as instruments of coercive diplomacy? (ii). What are the key outcomes and unintended consequences of sanctions in Venezuela and Russia? (iii). What factors account for the varying degrees of effectiveness in these two cases?

### **1.1. Significance of the Study**

There are a number of reasons why this research is timely and useful. First, it adds to the ongoing discussions in international relations and security studies about the usefulness and moral implications



of using sanctions as a tool of foreign policy. Second, it gives us a look at how sanctions work in different political and economic situations, like a Latin American oil-rich state that is going through an economic collapse and a major Eurasian power that is becoming isolated in the world. Third, the results will be useful to policymakers, academics, and members of civil society who want to learn more about the pros and cons of using economic coercion in a world with many power centres. The study fills in a major gap in the literature on coercive diplomacy by looking at the effects of sanctions from both a strategic and humanitarian point of view.

## **1.2. Limitations of the Study**

The study is limited on the economic sanctions the United States imposed on Venezuela and Russia between 2014 and 2024. The focus will still be on unilateral U.S. sanctions as tools of coercive diplomacy, even though multilateral sanctions and the roles of international organisations like the EU and UN will be mentioned. The study does not look at military or covert operations that go along with these sanctions, nor does it look at how the target countries interpret sanctions in their own legal systems. The comparative method is used to find patterns and differences in how policies are put into action, how they affect people, and what the results are.

## **2.0. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Conceptual Clarifications**

#### **Economic Sanctions**

In a layman term, economic sanctions denote the situation when a country stops doing business with another country on purpose in order to change its political or strategic behaviour. Trade embargoes, asset freezes, limits on financial transactions, travel bans, and other business restrictions are some of the steps that can be taken. When a country is accused of breaking international rules, like sponsoring terrorism, abusing human rights, or being aggressive with its military, sanctions are often put in place by one or more countries (Bobarykina, 2025). The US has used a mix of targeted (smart) and broad sanctions against Venezuela and Russia. These sanctions are aimed at specific people, businesses, sectors, and strategic industries like oil and defense.

#### **Coercive Diplomacy**

Coercive diplomacy is a variant of diplomacy employed by sovereign states to get their adversary states to change their behaviour by making threats, using limited force, or making them pay for their actions, all without going to war. It uses both diplomacy and force, with pressure to make people comply and a way to negotiate (Akindoyin, 2024). When used to force political change while also hinting at the possibility of relief if certain conditions are met, sanctions are a type of coercive diplomacy. In the cases being looked at, sanctions are used to change how states act without having to directly confront them.

### **2.2. Theoretical Framework**

The study employs three related theories (realism, deterrence, and power)) from international relations to explain how economic sanctions work as tools of coercive diplomacy.



## **Realism**

Realism continues to remain one of the fundamental concepts in international relations. It is based on the idea that the world is anarchic and that countries are only out for their own interests and power. To stay alive, states often use force when diplomacy doesn't work. This way of thinking says that powerful countries like the United States use sanctions to protect their own interests and keep the balance of power in the world (Mearsheimer, 2019). Realists say that economic sanctions work when the country doing the punishing has a lot of power over the target and when the cost-benefit analysis shows that the target should comply. The U.S. uses sanctions in both Venezuela and Russia to keep regional threats in check, punish those who seem to defy them, and keep its dominant position.

## **Deterrence Theory**

Deterrence theory is the theory that emphasizes halting people from doing things they should not do by making the costs of those things too high. Deterrence has traditionally been linked to military strategy, but it has now been expanded to include economic and diplomatic tools as well. From this point of view, sanctions are meant to do more than just punish; they are also meant to warn other countries that they might face the same consequences if they do the same thing. The sanctions against Russia after it took Crimea and invaded Ukraine, for instance, are a warning to other countries that crossing international borders will result in large economic penalties (Drezner, 2024). The economic blockade of Venezuela also sends a message to governments that violate U.S. and regional norms by suppressing democracy and using authoritarian methods.

## **Theory of Power**

Power theory looks at how different types of power; military, economic, and soft, are shared and used in international politics. Economic sanctions are a way to use economic power to have an effect on people and things without using military force. Nye (2023) opined that economic tools are part of the "smart power" arsenal, which uses both hard and soft tactics to change what other people want. So, sanctions are a way for the U.S. to change the decisions of states that are seen as hostile or not following international rules without using violence. The different ways that the U.S. has used sanctions in Venezuela and Russia show how the U.S. sees its ability to change events in each area.

## **3.0. METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative comparative case study method to look at how the United States uses economic sanctions as tools of coercive diplomacy, focusing on Venezuela and Russia as main case studies. The selection of these two countries is based on their importance in world politics, the severity of the U.S. sanctions placed on them, and the different results seen in each case. The study is mostly based on looking at documents. It gets its data from a lot of different secondary sources, such as official government documents, executive orders, policy briefs, academic journals, think tank reports, and publications from international organizations. These sources give information about the reasons behind, the design of, the implementation of, and the results of U.S. sanctions policy. The time period being looked at goes from 2014 to 2024 and includes important events like the annexation of Crimea, allegations of U.S. election interference, Venezuela's political crisis, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.



We use a comparative analytical framework to look at how sanctions have been used and what effects they have had on Venezuela and Russia, both in terms of similarities and differences. Some important factors are the type of sanctions (targeted vs. comprehensive), the target state's economy, the type of government, international alliances, and the ways the target state can protect itself. This way of looking at things helps us see patterns and things that affect how well coercive diplomacy works in different situations. The study is interpretivist, which means that it focusses on the meanings, stories, and strategic calculations behind sanction policies instead of statistical measurement. In this way, it doesn't use numerical datasets; instead, it uses thematic content analysis to find common themes and strategic patterns in policy documents and expert literature.

Some of the problems are that secondary sources may be biased, there is no real-time field data, and it is hard to separate the effects of sanctions from other political or economic factors. Even with these problems, the method is good for getting a deeper, more nuanced understanding of sanctions as tools of statecraft.

## **4.0. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. Contextualizing the United States Economic Sanctions**

Economic sanctions have been an important part of U.S. foreign policy since the early 1900s. But their modern institutionalisation started during the Cold War, when sanctions were used to stop communism and change the behaviour of enemy states without going to war. The International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) of 1977 gave the president a lot more power to impose sanctions during national emergencies involving foreign threats (Biersteker & Eckert, 2018). Since then, U.S. presidents have often used sanctions as a flexible way to deal with problems related to human rights, the economy, and geopolitics.

The end of the Cold War saw a shift from broad-based embargoes to more targeted and strategic sanctions. This was made possible by globalisation and financial interdependence. In the 1990s, sanctions against Iraq, Iran, Libya, and the former Yugoslavia showed a new way to deal with regimes: using sanctions to get them to change their behaviour without starting a war (Early, 2015). The U.S. Treasury, especially the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), was able to fine-tune sanctions against people, companies, and financial networks that were involved in illegal activities or worked with hostile governments. This was possible because of advances in financial technology and the strength of the U.S. dollar.

During the Bush administration, there were a lot more counterterrorism-related sanctions because of national security concerns after 9/11. The Obama administration kept this trend going and added multilateral sanctions, like the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) against Iran, which used the promise of sanctions relief as a bargaining tool. During Trump's presidency, the use of unilateral sanctions grew a lot, especially through executive orders that targeted Venezuela and Russia (Nephew, 2017). The Global Magnitsky Act put these sanctions in place, which included restrictions on money, oil embargoes, and naming important government officials.

Current Landscape and Strategic Use: Sanctions are now a key tool for dealing with complicated international crises. The U.S. and its allies launched an unprecedented sanctions campaign against



Russian banks, sovereign debt, energy exports, and oligarchic networks in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Lira, 2023). The ongoing political crisis in Venezuela has also led to a lot of sanctions that make it harder for the Maduro regime to get foreign capital and oil revenues. This shows that sanctions are an important tool of U.S. coercive diplomacy.

### **Case Study One: U.S. Sanctions on Venezuela**

Under President Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) and his successor Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela's economy and politics got worse. Chávez pushed for a socialist agenda that included redistributing wealth, nationalising important industries, and speaking out against the US. These policies were popular at first, but they caused structural problems in the economy, made the country dependent on oil revenues, and made people feel disconnected from Western institutions. Maduro's Venezuela became more authoritarian, rigged elections, and violated human rights, which led to international condemnation and waves of U.S. sanctions (Lind, 2023).

At first, U.S. sanctions on Venezuela were aimed at specific people and groups, but they quickly grew to include more general financial and sectoral restrictions. The Obama administration issued Executive Order 13692 in 2015, saying that Venezuela was a threat to national security and punishing important people who were involved in corruption and repression. The sanctions system got a lot worse under President Trump. Executive Order 13808 (2017) made it harder for Venezuela to get into U.S. financial markets. Executive Order 13850 (2018) went after the state-owned oil company PDVSA, which cut off Venezuela's main source of income (Nguekeng, & Mignamissi, 2023). The Maduro government was pressured to negotiate political reforms through these sanctions, which were based on democratic backsliding, electoral fraud, and human rights violations.

### **Impact on Venezuelan Economy, Governance, and Humanitarian Situation**

The sanctions have made Venezuela's economy even worse, which was already suffering from bad management, hyperinflation, and falling oil production. PDVSA's inability to access global financial systems and export markets sped up the drop in oil revenues, which led to a drop in GDP and worse public service delivery. Venezuela's economy had shrunk by more than 70% since 2013, according to Rodríguez (2025). Sanctions made the country's humanitarian crisis worse by making it harder for the government to bring in food, medicine, and other necessary goods. The U.S. included humanitarian exceptions, but bureaucratic over-compliance and fear of secondary sanctions made it harder for aid to get to Venezuela and made life worse for regular Venezuelans (Hanania, 2020).

Different countries have reacted in different ways to U.S. sanctions on Venezuela. Some allies, like the European Union and some Latin American countries, supported targeted sanctions and spoke out against Maduro's government. Others, like Russia, China, and Iran, said that the U.S. actions were coercive and one-sided. These countries got more involved with Caracas's economy and strategy by giving loans, investing in energy, and supporting the government diplomatically. The United Nations and other humanitarian groups were worried about how the sanctions would affect people's lives and called for a balance between political pressure and protecting civilians' well-being (de Zayas, 2023). The geopolitical divide over the sanctions has made it harder to find a political solution through negotiation.



## Case Study Two: U.S. Sanctions on Russia

After Russia took Crimea in 2014, the U.S. imposed much harsher sanctions on the country. The international community saw this as a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and international law. The United States and the European Union worked together to respond to the move by putting sanctions on Russian people, defence companies, and banks (Charap & Colton, 2018). The situation got worse when people said that Russia had interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and, most importantly, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. These events have made Russia a clear target of U.S. coercive diplomacy.

The U.S. sanctions on Russia have gone from small diplomatic steps to one of the most complete sanctions systems in modern history. The first sanctions under Executive Order 13660 in 2014 were only asset freezes and travel bans. Over time, the U.S. put sectoral sanctions on Russia's defence, financial, and energy sectors, including banks like Sberbank, Gazprombank, and VTB (Al-Attar, 2023). President Biden gave the go-ahead for a lot of actions after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. These included freezing Russia's central bank reserves, banning technology exports, and taking major Russian banks out of the SWIFT payment system. The Global Magnitsky Act also put sanctions on important oligarchs, defence contractors, and government officials (Terry, 2024).

### Russian Response and Economic Consequences

To lessen the effects of sanctions, Russia has used a number of different strategies. These include controls on currency, import substitution, diversifying trade especially with China and India, making domestic production stronger in important areas. During the global energy crisis of 2022, the Russian ruble fell sharply at first but then stabilised because of capital controls and rising energy prices. Sanctions have made it harder for the economy to grow, for people to get access to Western capital, and for technology to develop (Aslan, 2025). Western limits on semiconductor exports and foreign direct investment have hurt Russia's defence and aerospace industries. At the same time, rising prices and the departure of global companies have made life harder for everyone.

Sanctions have made the diplomatic gap between Washington and Moscow even bigger, ending decades of post-Cold War cooperation and changing the way the world works. Russia has been moving more and more towards alliances that are against the West. It has strengthened its ties with China, Iran, and non-Western groups like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. At the multilateral level, Russia has called the sanctions "Western imperialism," and some countries in the Global South that are against unilateral coercive measures have backed this view (Char, 2024). As a result, global blocs have become more rigid and the international order has become more divided. Sanctions have become a dividing line between Western liberal democracies and authoritarian alternatives.

## 4.2. Comparative Analyses

### Similarities in Objectives and Implementation

The U.S. sanctions against Venezuela and Russia have similar strategic goals: to force changes in behaviour, stop authoritarian practices, and weaken the economic foundations of governments that are seen as hostile to U.S. interests. In both cases, the sanctions were seen as responses to serious



violations of international norms: electoral manipulation and repression in Venezuela, and territorial aggression and election interference in Russia (Nephew, 2017). There are also similarities in how they plan to carry out their plans. The United States used a layered approach, starting with targeted measures and moving up to sectoral sanctions that affected energy, finance, and defence. The Global Magnitsky Act and other laws that target people who break human rights laws and are corrupt put sanctions on both regimes.

#### Differences in Economic Impact and Resilience

Even though both countries used similar sanction strategies, the economic effects have been very different in Venezuela and Russia because their economies are structured differently and they are connected to the rest of the world in different ways. Venezuela's economy was already in trouble because of bad management and hyperinflation, and it fell apart very quickly. The sanctions made the GDP fall faster, the currency lose value, and the humanitarian situation get worse (Rodríguez, 2025). Russia's economy was bigger and more diverse, and it had better fiscal management and access to other trade partners like China and India. This made it better able to handle the first shocks (Akindoyin, 2024). Russia's previous investments in economic independence, such as its National Wealth Fund and domestic payment systems, made the situation even less bad.

#### Diplomatic and Strategic Reactions

There are also big differences in the international diplomatic scene around the sanctions. When it came to Venezuela, there was agreement in the region, with help from the Organisation of American States (OAS) and a number of Latin American governments. However, humanitarian groups criticised the sanctions for how they affected civilians. The sanctions started a new round of competition between great powers in Russia. After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. and its allies in Europe and the G7 worked together to come up with a strong sanctions response. However, many countries in the Global South did not want to follow the Western sanctions system (Char, 2024). This difference shows how important Russia is in terms of geopolitics and how it can use sanctions to show that the West is in charge.

#### Effectiveness and Unintended Consequences

Sanctions have sometimes worked to help the U.S. reach its foreign policy goals. The sanctions in Venezuela have not been able to get rid of Nicolás Maduro or force a democratic transition, even though they have caused a lot of economic problems. Instead, they may have made authoritarian control stronger by making the state weaker and making elites more loyal (Hanania, 2020). Sanctions have hurt some parts of the Russian economy and will cost the country money in the long run, but they haven't changed Moscow's strategic position. Instead, the Kremlin has strengthened strategic partnerships, deepened anti-Western narratives, and used sanctions as a way to gain political legitimacy at home. In both cases, unintended effects, such as worsening humanitarian conditions and problems with the global supply chain, have made it harder to judge how useful sanctions are.



## **5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1. Conclusion**

With an emphasis on the comparative experiences of Venezuela and Russia, this study has investigated the strategic application of economic sanctions by the US as tools of coercive diplomacy. It is evident that although sanctions are effective tools for exerting economic pressure and sending strong messages of disapproval, their ability to force political change is still debatable and context-dependent.

Sanctions did little to change the actions of the ruling class or bring about democratic reforms in Venezuela, but they did contribute to the worsening of an already dire economic and humanitarian situation. The sanctions may have strengthened internal political repression and made it more difficult for common people to bear the burden, rather than lessening Maduro's hold on power.

In contrast, Russia has proven to be more resilient. The Russian state has adjusted through strategic alliances, internal policy changes, and ideological realignment on the international scene, despite the fact that U.S. sanctions especially those imposed after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine caused serious harm to important sectors. The sanctions have strengthened Russia's narrative of resistance to Western hegemony rather than isolating it, further solidifying geopolitical divisions.

Hence, economic sanctions frequently have conflicting effects despite their symbolic and political importance. Although they have a mixed record of bringing about political compliance or regime change, they may be successful in undermining the targeted economies and sending a message about international norms. Sanctions run the risk of undermining humanitarian ideals and may have unintended negative effects that outweigh any strategic advantages.

### **5.2. Recommendations**

The study hereby makes the following recommendations;

1. **Review the Sanctions' Strategic Objectives:** Sanctions shouldn't be the go-to foreign policy tactic in every emergency. The intended results of sanctions must be precisely stated by policymakers, who should also make sure that these objectives are reasonable, quantifiable, and sensitive to the situation. Sanctions intended to bring about regime change frequently fall short and cause long-term instability, particularly when they lack multilateral support.
2. **Boost Humanitarian Protections:** More extensive humanitarian exemptions must be included in future sanctions regimes, and their application needs to be closely watched. It is best to steer clear of sectoral sanctions that impede access to essential services like food and medicine. Sanctions should, whenever feasible, target institutions and elites rather than the general public.
3. **Boost Multilateral Cooperation:** When sanctions are applied in concert with allies and international organisations, their efficacy rises. Unilateral sanctions frequently lack legitimacy and give target states the opportunity to take advantage of conflicts between superpowers. To form alliances and prevent compromising the legitimacy of the sanctions system, the United States should collaborate closely with like-minded nations.



4. Include Diplomatic Engagement: A more comprehensive diplomatic approach should include sanctions as one element. To promote behavioural change, they ought to be combined with unambiguous channels for relief and negotiation. Without diplomatic alternatives, sanctions run the risk of becoming punitive rather than corrective, which would prolong suffering and conflict.

5. Track and Modify Sanctions over Time: Sanctions cannot stay the same. Evaluations should be conducted on a regular basis to determine their effectiveness, impact, and unintended consequences. In light of shifting geopolitical dynamics, humanitarian actors' input, and changing realities, policymakers should be ready to remove, modify, or redesign sanctions.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that no conflict of interest exist in this manuscript.

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