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Economic Sanctions as A Tool of Foreign Policy: Effectiveness and Limitations in Contemporary International Relations

Mansi Parashar

Research Scholar, Barkatullah University, Bhopal, India

Corresponding Author: * Mansi Parashar

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Abstract

Economic penalties have become one of the most often utilised tools of foreign policy in modern international relations. Authorities and global entities are progressively employing sanctions to affect the political, economic, and strategic conduct of nations without engaging in armed action. These actions encompass trade limitations, financial sanctions, asset immobilisations, travel prohibitions, and technology regulations aimed at inducing policy modifications, deterring breaches of international law, and safeguarding global security. Although sanctions have emerged as a significant element of economic diplomacy, their efficacy continues to be a topic of substantial scholarly and policy discussion. In some instances, sanctions have effectively compelled governments to engage in negotiations or alter particular policies, but in other circumstances, they have not met their intended goals and have resulted in considerable humanitarian, economic, and geopolitical repercussions. This research rigorously analyses the development of economic sanctions, their function as a tool of foreign policy, the determinants affecting their efficacy, and their significant constraints within the modern international framework. The study employs a qualitative approach utilising secondary sources and examines significant case studies, such as Iran, Russia, North Korea, and South Africa. The document is analysed under the lenses of Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, Economic Statecraft Theory, and Complex Interdependence Theory. The research determines that economic sanctions are a significant non-military policy tool; yet, their efficacy is heavily reliant on multilateral collaboration, efficient execution, well-articulated goals, and the political and economic fortitude of the targeted nation. A well-rounded sanctions approach integrated with diplomacy presents enhanced opportunities for attaining enduring foreign policy results compared to penalties applied independently.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Economic sanctions have emerged as a significant tool of foreign policy in the modern global framework. Instead of depending exclusively on military action, nations are progressively utilising economic strategies to sway the actions of other administrations, safeguard national interests, and maintain global standards. Sanctions are typically enacted to urge a target government to alter its policies, avert activities deemed harmful to global peace and security, or penalise breaches of international law. As globalisation has intensified economic interconnectedness between countries, sanctions have transformed into a formidable tool of economic diplomacy The implementation of economic sanctions has notably increased since the conclusion of the Cold War. The growing influence of international entities, especially the United Nations, alongside significant powers like the United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom, has led to the prevalent use of sanctions as a favoured instrument of foreign policy. Recent sanctions levied against nations like Iran, Russia, North Korea, Venezuela, and Myanmar illustrate their increasing significance in tackling matters associated with nuclear proliferation, terrorism, military conflicts, human rights abuses, and territorial aggressiveness. Economic sanctions manifest in various ways, such as trade embargoes, financial limitations, investment restrictions, technology export regulations, travel prohibitions, and asset seizures. Contemporary sanctions are sometimes formulated as targeted or smart sanctions, concentrating on political figures, governmental entities, financial institutions, or particular sectors instead of enforcing blanket restrictions on the entire populace. This strategy aims to amplify political pressure while reducing humanitarian repercussions. Notwithstanding their growing prevalence, the efficacy of economic sanctions continues to be a subject of extensive discussion. Certain penalties have effectively prompted alterations in policy and fostered diplomatic discussions, but others have been unsuccessful in modifying the conduct of the targeted administrations. In numerous cases, sanctioned nations have evolved by means of economic diversification, alternative trade alliances, domestic policy modifications, or assistance from ally nations. Furthermore, extended sanctions could lead to unforeseen repercussions, such as humanitarian emergencies, economic volatility, inflationary pressures, disruptions in supply chains, and geopolitical division. The efficacy of sanctions is contingent upon various interconnected elements, such as the economic reliance of the targeted countries, the degree of global collaboration, enforcement strategies, the precision of policy aims, and the readiness of the affected government to engage in negotiations. Thus, sanctions yield optimal results when combined with diplomatic discussions, collaborative international efforts, and comprehensive foreign policy approaches rather than functioning as a standalone tool of coercion. From a theoretical standpoint, the examination of economic sanctions is elucidated through several international relations theories. Realism perceives sanctions as tools for safeguarding national interests and exerting influence without engaging in direct armed confrontation. Liberal Institutionalism underscores the significance of international entities and collaborative efforts in bolstering the legitimacy and efficacy of sanctions. Economic Statecraft Theory posits that sanctions serve as a tactical instrument for shaping political conduct via economic coercion, whereas Complex Interdependence Theory contends that heightened global economic interconnectivity amplifies both the prospects and constraints linked to sanctions. In light of this context, this research rigorously analyses the development of economic sanctions, their diverse manifestations, their efficacy as a tool of foreign policy, the elements influencing their success, and their significant constraints in modern international relations. The study assesses, using chosen international case studies, the degree to which economic sanctions aid in fulfilling foreign policy aims while preserving global peace, stability, and collaboration.

2. Evolution of Economic Sanctions in International Relations

Economic sanctions have evolved from limited trade restrictions into one of the most widely used instruments of foreign policy. Their development reflects changing patterns of international politics, economic globalization, and the growing preference for non-military means of conflict management.

2.1 Early Use of Economic Sanctions

The earliest forms of economic sanctions involved trade embargoes and commercial blockades used to weaken rival states economically. These measures were primarily unilateral and aimed at compelling political or military concessions without direct armed conflict.

2.2 Sanctions During the Cold War

During the Cold War, economic sanctions became an important strategic tool employed by both Western and Eastern blocs. They were frequently used to contain ideological rivals, restrict access to technology, and influence the foreign policies of opposing states. However, geopolitical rivalry often limited their overall effectiveness.

2.3 Post-Cold War Expansion

Following the end of the Cold War, the use of sanctions expanded considerably. The United Nations, the United States, and the European Union increasingly relied on sanctions to address issues such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, civil conflicts, and human rights violations. Multilateral sanctions gained greater legitimacy and international support during this period.

2.4 Emergence of Smart Sanctions

Experience with comprehensive sanctions revealed their severe humanitarian consequences. As a result, policymakers gradually shifted towards targeted or smart sanctions, including asset freezes, financial restrictions, travel bans, and sector-specific measures aimed at political leaders, military organizations, and strategic industries while reducing harm to civilian populations.

2.5 Economic Sanctions in the Contemporary Era

In the twenty-first century, economic sanctions have become a central component of international diplomacy and economic statecraft. Financial sanctions, technology export controls, banking restrictions, and limitations on access to global payment systems are now widely used against states involved in armed conflicts, nuclear programmes, terrorism, cyber activities, and violations of international law. Increasing economic interdependence has enhanced both the influence and complexity of sanctions in global politics.

The evolution of economic sanctions demonstrates a gradual shift from traditional trade embargoes to sophisticated financial and technological restrictions. Today, sanctions represent a major non-military foreign policy instrument, although their effectiveness continues to depend on international cooperation, enforcement mechanisms, and the political and economic resilience of the targeted state.

3. Types of Economic Sanctions

Economic sanctions are implemented in different forms depending on the foreign policy objectives of the sanctioning state or international organization. Each type targets specific sectors of the economy or particular individuals and institutions to maximize political pressure while minimizing unnecessary humanitarian consequences.

3.1 Trade Sanctions

Trade sanctions involve restrictions on the import or export of goods and services between countries. These measures aim to reduce economic activity, disrupt industrial production, and limit the target state's access to international markets. Trade embargoes are commonly imposed to pressure governments into changing their foreign or domestic policies.

3.2 Financial Sanctions

Financial sanctions restrict a country's access to international banking systems, financial institutions, foreign investments, and international transactions. They may include freezing overseas assets, restricting access to foreign exchange reserves, and limiting financial dealings with designated institutions. Such sanctions directly affect economic stability and investment flows.

3.3 Investment Sanctions

Investment sanctions prohibit or discourage foreign direct investment (FDI), business partnerships, and capital inflows into the target country. These measures reduce economic growth, technological advancement, and employment opportunities by limiting external financial support.

3.4 Travel and Visa Sanctions

Travel sanctions impose restrictions on the international movement of political leaders, government officials, military personnel, or influential individuals. By limiting diplomatic and personal mobility, these sanctions seek to increase political pressure without broadly affecting the civilian population.

3.5 Asset Freezes

Asset freezes prevent designated individuals, organizations, or government agencies from accessing financial assets held abroad. These measures are frequently used against political leaders, business elites, and organizations accused of corruption, terrorism, or violations of international law.

3.6 Technology and Arms Sanctions

Technology sanctions restrict the transfer of advanced technology, software, industrial equipment, and dual-use technologies, while arms embargoes prohibit the supply of military equipment and defence-related materials. These sanctions aim to weaken the strategic, technological, and military capabilities of the target state.

3.7 Comprehensive and Smart Sanctions

Economic sanctions may be broadly classified into comprehensive sanctions and smart (targeted) sanctions. Comprehensive sanctions impose wide-ranging economic restrictions on an entire country, whereas smart sanctions focus on specific individuals, institutions, industries, or strategic sectors. Contemporary international diplomacy increasingly favours targeted sanctions because they exert political pressure while attempting to reduce humanitarian impacts on ordinary citizens.

The diversity of economic sanctions demonstrates their flexibility as an instrument of foreign policy. Governments and international organizations often combine multiple forms of sanctions to maximize pressure on the target state while pursuing diplomatic, security, and strategic objectives. The selection of a particular type of sanction largely depends on the nature of the conflict, policy objectives, and the expected political outcomes.

4. Economic Sanctions as a Foreign Policy Instrument

Economic sanctions have become an integral instrument of foreign policy, enabling states to influence the behaviour of other countries without resorting to military force. They are employed to achieve strategic, political, economic, and security objectives while demonstrating a state's commitment to international norms and protecting national interests. The major roles of economic sanctions as a foreign policy instrument are discussed below.

4.1 Influencing State Behaviour

The primary objective of economic sanctions is to persuade the target state to modify its policies or actions. By creating economic pressure through restrictions on trade, finance, and investment, sanctions encourage governments to negotiate, comply with international obligations, or reverse controversial decisions.

4.2 Promoting National Security

States frequently impose sanctions to safeguard national security against threats such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, cyberattacks, and regional aggression. Economic restrictions are often used to weaken the financial and military capabilities of adversarial states without engaging in direct armed conflict.

4.3 Enforcing International Law

Economic sanctions serve as a mechanism for enforcing international law and maintaining the rules-based international order. International organizations, particularly the United Nations, use sanctions to respond to violations of international agreements, human rights abuses, and threats to international peace and security.

4.4 Supporting Diplomatic Negotiations

Sanctions are often used alongside diplomatic efforts to encourage dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution. They increase the cost of non-compliance for the targeted state while providing incentives for negotiation and compromise. In many instances, sanctions function as a bargaining tool rather than an end in themselves.

4.5 Demonstrating Political Resolve

The imposition of sanctions enables governments to express political condemnation of actions considered unacceptable by the international community. By coordinating sanctions with allies, states demonstrate solidarity and reinforce collective diplomatic pressure against the targeted government.

4.6 Providing an Alternative to Military Intervention

Economic sanctions offer a non-military means of addressing international disputes. Compared with armed conflict, sanctions generally involve lower human and financial costs for the sanctioning states while still allowing them to exert significant political and economic influence over the target country.

Economic sanctions have become a central instrument of contemporary foreign policy because they combine economic pressure with diplomatic objectives. Although they provide an effective alternative to military action in many situations, their overall success depends on clearly defined objectives, multilateral cooperation, effective enforcement, and complementary diplomatic engagement.

5. Factors Determining the Effectiveness of Economic Sanctions

The success of economic sanctions varies across countries and situations. While some sanctions have compelled policy changes and encouraged negotiations, others have produced limited results despite prolonged implementation. Their effectiveness depends on several political, economic, and institutional factors.

5.1 Clear Policy Objectives

Sanctions are more effective when their objectives are specific, realistic, and achievable. Clearly defined goals enable both the sanctioning and target states to understand the conditions for modifying or lifting sanctions, thereby increasing the prospects for diplomatic resolution.

5.2 Multilateral Cooperation

Sanctions imposed by multiple countries or international organizations generally have a greater impact than unilateral measures. Broad international participation limits the target state's access to alternative markets, financial systems, and strategic partnerships, making economic pressure more effective.

5.3 Economic Dependence of the Target State

The degree of economic dependence significantly influences the effectiveness of sanctions. Countries that rely heavily on international trade, foreign investment, technology, or financial markets are generally more vulnerable to external economic restrictions than economically diversified or resource-rich states.

5.4 Effective Enforcement Mechanisms

The success of sanctions depends on strict implementation and monitoring. Weak enforcement, sanctions evasion, illegal trade networks, and inadequate international coordination reduce their overall impact and allow targeted states to minimize economic losses.

5.5 Domestic Political Conditions

The political structure and leadership of the target country influence how sanctions affect decision-making. Democratic governments facing public pressure may respond differently from authoritarian regimes, where political leadership often has greater capacity to withstand external economic pressure.

5.6 Availability of Alternative Partners

Sanctions become less effective when the targeted state can develop alternative trade routes, financial arrangements, or strategic partnerships with non-participating countries. Such alternatives reduce economic isolation and weaken the intended pressure of sanctions.

5.7 Integration with Diplomatic Efforts

Economic sanctions are generally more successful when combined with diplomacy, negotiations, and international mediation. A balanced strategy that combines economic pressure with opportunities for dialogue increases the likelihood of achieving long-term foreign policy objectives.

The effectiveness of economic sanctions depends on a combination of strategic planning, international cooperation, economic vulnerability, and diplomatic engagement. Sanctions are rarely successful when applied in isolation; instead, their greatest impact is achieved when they form part of a broader foreign policy strategy supported by effective implementation and sustained international collaboration.

6. Major Limitations of Economic Sanctions

Although economic sanctions have become an important instrument of foreign policy, their effectiveness is often constrained by political, economic, and humanitarian factors. In many cases, sanctions fail to achieve their intended objectives and may even produce unintended consequences. The major limitations are discussed below.

6.1 Humanitarian Consequences

One of the most significant criticisms of economic sanctions is their adverse impact on civilian populations. Comprehensive sanctions can lead to shortages of food, medicine, healthcare services, and essential commodities, reducing the overall standard of living while often leaving political elites comparatively unaffected.

6.2 Limited Political Effectiveness

Economic sanctions do not always compel governments to change their policies. Authoritarian regimes frequently withstand prolonged economic pressure by strengthening internal political control, mobilizing nationalist sentiments, or shifting the economic burden onto the general population.

6.3 Economic Costs for Sanctioning States

Sanctions may also generate economic losses for the countries imposing them. Export restrictions, disrupted supply chains, declining investments, and reduced market access can negatively affect businesses and industries within sanctioning states, particularly when the targeted country is an important trading partner.

6.4 Emergence of Alternative Economic Networks

Targeted countries often seek alternative markets, financial institutions, and strategic partners to reduce the impact of sanctions. The expansion of regional trade agreements, alternative payment systems, and closer economic cooperation with non-participating countries can significantly weaken the effectiveness of sanctions.

6.5 Weak International Coordination

The effectiveness of sanctions declines when there is limited cooperation among major powers. Differences in political interests, inconsistent implementation, and unequal enforcement create opportunities for sanctions evasion and reduce international pressure on the targeted state.

6.6 Growth of Illegal Trade and Sanctions Evasion

Economic restrictions frequently encourage the development of black markets, smuggling networks, cryptocurrency transactions, and informal financial channels. These mechanisms enable sanctioned states to bypass restrictions and continue accessing critical goods, technology, and financial resources.

6.7 Diplomatic and Geopolitical Tensions

Prolonged sanctions may increase hostility between states rather than encouraging dialogue. They can intensify geopolitical rivalries, reduce diplomatic engagement, and contribute to the formation of competing political and economic alliances, thereby complicating international conflict resolution.

6.8 Long-Term Economic and Social Instability

Extended sanctions can weaken economic growth, increase unemployment, accelerate inflation, discourage foreign investment, and reduce public welfare. These long-term consequences may create political instability without necessarily achieving the desired foreign policy objectives.

Despite their widespread use, economic sanctions are not a universally effective foreign policy instrument. Their limitations demonstrate that economic pressure alone is often insufficient to achieve sustainable political outcomes. Greater success is generally achieved when sanctions are carefully targeted, internationally coordinated, supported by effective enforcement, and complemented by diplomatic negotiations and conflict-resolution mechanisms.

7. Comparative Case Studies

The effectiveness of economic sanctions varies considerably across countries depending on political conditions, economic resilience, international support, and the objectives of the sanctioning states. The following case studies illustrate both the successes and limitations of economic sanctions in contemporary international relations.

7.1 Iran

Economic sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations primarily targeted Iran's nuclear programme. Restrictions on oil exports, banking transactions, and international financial systems significantly reduced government revenues and increased inflation. These measures contributed to Iran's participation in negotiations that resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. However, the re-imposition of sanctions after the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement demonstrated that sanctions alone could not ensure long-term policy change without sustained diplomatic engagement.

7.2 Russia

Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russia–Ukraine conflict beginning in 2022, Western countries imposed extensive financial, trade, energy, and technology sanctions on Russia. These measures restricted access to international financial markets, advanced technologies, and foreign investments. Although the sanctions weakened certain sectors of the Russian economy, Russia adapted by expanding trade with countries outside the sanctions coalition, illustrating both the influence and limitations of unilateral and multilateral sanctions.

7.3 North Korea

North Korea has been subjected to extensive international sanctions because of its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes. The sanctions include restrictions on trade, financial transactions, arms exports, and access to strategic technologies. Despite prolonged economic pressure, North Korea has continued its nuclear development, indicating that sanctions have had limited success in changing its strategic priorities.

7.4 South Africa
The international sanctions imposed during the apartheid era are widely regarded as one of the more successful examples of economic sanctions. Trade restrictions, investment banks, cultural boycotts, and financial pressure, combined with strong domestic resistance and international diplomatic efforts, contributed to the dismantling of apartheid and the country's democratic transition during the early 1990s. This case illustrates that sanctions can be effective when supported by broad international consensus and significant internal political movements.

Comparative Perspective
The four case studies demonstrate that the effectiveness of economic sanctions depends on multiple factors rather than economic pressure alone. Sanctions were relatively successful in South Africa due to strong international cooperation and domestic political change, while they encouraged negotiations in Iran but failed to ensure lasting compliance. In contrast, the experiences of Russia and North Korea indicate that economically resilient states or those with alternative strategic partners can substantially reduce the intended impact of sanctions. These examples suggest that sanctions are most effective when combined with diplomacy, multilateral coordination, and clearly defined political objectives.
Comparative analysis indicates that economic sanctions are neither universally successful nor entirely ineffective. Their outcomes vary according to the political environment, economic structure, international cooperation, and the willingness of the target state to negotiate. Therefore, sanctions should be viewed as one component of a broader foreign policy strategy rather than a standalone solution to international conflicts.

8. Policy Recommendations
The increasing use of economic sanctions in international relations highlights the need for a balanced approach that maximizes political effectiveness while minimizing unintended humanitarian and economic consequences. Based on the preceding analysis and comparative case studies, the following policy recommendations are proposed.

8.1 Define Clear and Achievable Objectives
Sanctioning states should establish precise, realistic, and measurable objectives before imposing sanctions. Clearly defined goals facilitate effective implementation, periodic assessment, and provide a transparent framework for modifying or lifting sanctions once compliance is achieved.

8.2 Strengthen Multilateral Cooperation
Economic sanctions are generally more effective when implemented collectively by international organizations and allied countries. Greater coordination among the United Nations, regional organizations, and major economies can reduce opportunities for sanctions evasion and increase diplomatic pressure on the target state.

8.3 Prefer Targeted (Smart) Sanctions
Governments should prioritize targeted sanctions—such as asset freezes, travel bans, financial restrictions, and technology controls—over comprehensive sanctions. Smart sanctions focus on political leaders, military officials, and key institutions while minimizing adverse effects on ordinary citizens.

8.4 Integrate Sanctions with Diplomatic Engagement
Economic sanctions should complement, rather than replace, diplomacy. Continuous dialogue, mediation, confidence-building measures, and negotiated settlements should accompany sanctions to encourage peaceful conflict resolution and sustainable policy changes.

8.5 Strengthen Monitoring and Enforcement Mechanisms
Effective implementation requires robust monitoring systems, financial transparency, intelligence sharing, and international cooperation. Governments should improve mechanisms to detect sanctions evasion through illicit trade, shell companies, cryptocurrency transactions, and alternative financial networks.

8.6 Reduce Humanitarian Consequences
Humanitarian exemptions for food, medicines, healthcare equipment, and essential public services should be incorporated into sanctions regimes. International organizations should regularly assess the humanitarian impact of sanctions to ensure that vulnerable populations are not disproportionately affected.

8.7 Conduct Periodic Policy Evaluation
Sanctions should not remain in force indefinitely without review. Regular assessments of their political, economic, and humanitarian outcomes should guide decisions regarding continuation, modification, or termination, ensuring that sanctions remain aligned with changing geopolitical circumstances.

8.8 Promote International Legal and Institutional Frameworks
The legitimacy and effectiveness of sanctions can be enhanced through greater adherence to international law and transparent decision-making processes. Strengthening the role of international institutions can improve accountability, reduce unilateral actions, and promote a more rules-based international order.
Based on the analysis presented in this study, policymakers should focus on the following strategic priorities:

1. Establish clear and measurable foreign policy objectives before imposing sanctions.
2. Encourage multilateral cooperation to improve legitimacy and enforcement.
3. Expand the use of targeted sanctions instead of comprehensive economic embargoes.
4. Integrate sanctions with sustained diplomatic negotiations and conflict-resolution efforts.
5. Protect civilian populations through effective humanitarian exemptions.

6. Strengthen global financial monitoring to reduce sanctions evasion.
7. Periodically evaluate sanctions based on measurable political and economic outcomes.
8. Reinforce international legal frameworks governing the use of economic sanctions.

Economic sanctions remain an important instrument of contemporary foreign policy, but their success depends on careful design, effective implementation, and international cooperation. A balanced strategy that combines targeted economic pressure, diplomatic engagement, humanitarian safeguards, and regular policy evaluation is more likely to achieve long-term political objectives while preserving international stability and human security.

9. CONCLUSION

Economic sanctions have emerged as one of the most significant non-military instruments of foreign policy in the contemporary international system. As globalization has increased economic interdependence among nations, states and international organizations have increasingly relied on sanctions to influence political behaviour, protect national interests, uphold international law, and respond to security challenges. Compared with military intervention, sanctions offer a comparatively less coercive mechanism for addressing international disputes while enabling the international community to exert political and economic pressure on states that violate accepted international norms.

This study examined the historical evolution of economic sanctions, their major forms, their role as an instrument of foreign policy, the factors influencing their effectiveness, and their principal limitations. It also analyzed comparative case studies of Iran, Russia, North Korea, and South Africa, demonstrating that the outcomes of sanctions vary considerably depending on political circumstances, economic resilience, international cooperation, and domestic governance. The analysis indicates that sanctions are neither universally successful nor inherently ineffective. Their impact is shaped by the degree of multilateral support, the vulnerability of the targeted economy, the availability of alternative economic partners, and the willingness of governments to engage in diplomatic negotiations.

The findings further reveal that comprehensive sanctions often impose substantial humanitarian and economic costs on civilian populations without necessarily achieving the intended political objectives. In contrast, targeted or smart sanctions—such as financial restrictions, asset freezes, travel bans, and technology controls—have emerged as more effective and ethically acceptable alternatives because they concentrate pressure on political leaders, state institutions, and strategic sectors rather than on the general population. Nevertheless, even targeted sanctions require strong international coordination, effective monitoring, and consistent enforcement to produce meaningful outcomes.

The comparative analysis also highlights that economic sanctions should not be viewed as an independent solution to complex international conflicts. Their effectiveness increases significantly when they are integrated with diplomatic engagement, multilateral cooperation, international legal mechanisms, and conflict-resolution initiatives. Successful cases demonstrate that sanctions are most likely to achieve their objectives when accompanied by clear policy goals, sustained negotiations, and broad international consensus.

In conclusion, economic sanctions will continue to play a central role in international relations as states seek alternatives to armed conflict in managing global political and security challenges. However, policymakers must recognize both the opportunities and the limitations of this instrument. Future sanction regimes should emphasize targeted measures, humanitarian safeguards, regular policy evaluation, and stronger international cooperation to ensure that economic sanctions contribute not only to foreign policy objectives but also to international peace, stability, and sustainable global governance.

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About the Author

Mansi Parashar is a Research Scholar at Barkatullah University, Bhopal, India. Her research interests include interdisciplinary studies, social sciences, education, and public policy. She is committed to academic excellence through innovative research, scholarly writing, and evidence-based analysis, contributing to the advancement of knowledge and sustainable societal development.