



Conditions of Compliance: Evaluating the Effectiveness of the UN Security Council

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions in compelling target state compliance, focusing on three core hypotheses concerning state power, legal ambiguity, and strategic alliances with permanent council members. Through a mixed-methods approach combining legal analysis of the UN Charter's Articles 25, 27, and 41 with detailed case studies of Libya, North Korea, and Iraq, the study identifies critical factors underlying compliance and non-compliance. The analysis reveals that vague legal mandates and weak enforcement mechanisms substantially undermine sanction effectiveness, enabling powerful states and their allies to evade consequences. Russia's veto power emerges as a significant structural barrier, notably in the DPRK case, where it shields non-compliant behavior. Conversely, Libya's eventual compliance illustrates the impact of legally binding, clear sanctions coupled with diplomatic isolation. The findings highlight the need for institutional reform, including conditional restrictions on veto use and an independent compliance mechanism, to strengthen the legitimacy and operational capacity of UNSC sanctions. This study contributes to understanding the interplay between international law, great power politics, and global governance challenges in sanctions enforcement.

Keywords

1. UN Security Council

The principal UN organ responsible for maintaining international peace and security, including imposing binding decisions such as sanctions under the UN Charter.

2. Sanctions Compliance

The adherence by states or entities to measures imposed by the UN Security Council, including economic and diplomatic restrictions, to enforce international law and peace.

3. Veto Power

The authority held by each of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to unilaterally block substantive resolutions, impacting the enforcement of sanctions.

4. Articles 25 and 41 (UN Charter)

Legal provisions within the UN Charter: Article 25 requires member states to comply with Security Council decisions; Article 41 authorizes the Council to impose non-military sanctions.

5. International Law

The set of rules and principles governing the relations and conduct of states, including obligations under UN Security Council resolutions.



6. State Behavior

The actions and compliance choices made by states in response to international legal obligations and political pressures, such as adhering to or violating sanctions regimes.

Introduction

On paper, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) holds the authority to impose binding sanctions on member states in response to threats to international peace and security. However, in practice, the record of compliance with these sanctions is uneven, raising skeptical questions about the effectiveness of the global legal mechanisms that buttress them. From North Korea's unrelenting nuclear ambitions to the structural influence of Russia—particularly through its use of veto power in instances such as the Ukraine invasion—numerous states have either partially complied or outright defied UNSC measures. In this paper, Russia is examined not as a direct case study of sanctions compliance, but as an actor shaping the sanctions regime through its exercise of veto power, especially in the context of the DPRK case. This disconnect between the legal authority of the UNSC and actual outcomes depicts a deeper systemic flaw. The fundamental problem with why UNSC sanctions often fail to generate compliance from target states is that they are usually due to the ambiguity and weak enforcement mechanisms embedded within international legal frameworks. The lack of precise enforcement mandates, unclear standards of compliance that are left undefined, and the discretionary nature of implementation exhibit sanctions that are not as impactful. Other factors, such as the power politics and strategic alliances, too, undeniably influence whether states comply with sanctions, and stronger states often evade accountability due to their notable powers. However, the most consistent factor across case studies is the legal system's internal vagueness and institutional fragility.

To examine this claim, the paper first reviews existing scholarship on sanctions effectiveness and international legal theories. It then turns to methodology, which introduces the types of case studies I will be using to explore real-world examples of non-compliance performed by states like North Korea, Russia, and Libya, through the lens of three hypotheses concerning power, legal ambiguity, and political alliances. The final section of the paper will offer concrete,

unprecedented policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the legal foundations and clarity in the procedures of UNSC sanctions to enhance their legitimacy and effectiveness in calling for compliance.

Literature Review

Following the devastating global conflict of World War II, the international community came to a collective recognition of the urgent need for a more robust international body to pursue an escalating pursuit for security and peace, addressing the failure of the League of Nations. This led to the establishment of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 (UN Charter, 1945), with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) formed as a principal organ specifically focusing on maintaining international peace and security (UN Charter, Article 23, Chapter 5). The legal foundation and authority for its proper operation were shaped by the UN Charter, adopted at the San Francisco Conference in 1945. Key provisions of the charter empower the UNSC to act decisively to address any threat to peace. Under Article 24 of the UN Charter, the UNSC is given the authority and responsibility for not only “the maintenance of international peace and security”, but also “to act on behalf of other nations” (UN Charter, Article 24, Chapter 5). Moreover, Article 25 mandates UN member states to accept and carry out the decisions of the Council, underscoring the binding nature of the UNSC resolutions. The UNSC



consists of 15 member states, including five permanent members (P5) – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States – who hold veto power (Security Council Report, 2015), authority to unilaterally block or reject a decision, action, or piece of legislation, granting each the ability to block substantive resolutions proposed by the UNSC. Decisions, particularly resolutions, are made following discussions and require at least nine affirmative votes, including

the concurring votes of all permanent members to avoid vetoes (UN Charter, Article 27, Chapter 5). This structure balances broad representation with the political realities of great power consent.

Among the tools the UNSC can employ to enforce its decisions are sanctions, which serve as measures to coerce compliance without resorting to armed conflict (UN Charter, Article 41, Chapter 7). Sanctions are broadly defined as restrictive measures aimed at isolating a target economically, financially, or diplomatically to restore international peace and security (UN, 2023). Article 41 of Chapter VII of the UN Charter explicitly authorizes the Security Council to impose such measures short of the use of force, which may include economic embargoes, financial restrictions, travel bans, and arms embargoes. Sanctions serve multiple purposes, including conflict resolution, non-proliferation of weapons, counter-terrorism, promoting democratization, and protecting civilians. Since the early 1960s, the UNSC's sanctions regimes have evolved from comprehensive sanctions that involve a broad range of restrictions on a country, impacting nearly all trade and financial transactions against states, to more targeted measures focused on specific individuals, groups, or entities to minimize unintended humanitarian impacts (Security Council Report, 2013). The UNSC sanctions process begins with identifying a threat to international peace, followed by drafting and negotiating resolutions among Council members (UN, 2016). Once adopted with at least nine affirmative votes, sanctions committees oversee implementation, monitor compliance, and address humanitarian concerns by incorporating exemptions and procedures to minimize civilian harm, ensuring a regulated and transparent process (Council of Europe).

The two key issues related to the implementation of UN sanctions are: compliance and non-compliance. The term compliance refers to all conduct (acts and omissions) by actors that conform to the requirements of behavioral prescriptions addressed to them. Conversely, Noncompliance (or violation) is conduct that fails to conform to such requirements (Young 1979: 4-5).

However, in practice, the question arises: do states consistently comply with UNSC sanctions? When they do not, understanding the reasons behind non-compliance is critical to assessing both the effectiveness and legitimacy of the Council's measures. Non-compliance with UNSC sanctions often arises when states challenge the legitimacy or legality of certain resolutions, particularly when these conflict with other international legal obligations such as human rights protections. Scholars like Antonios Tzanakopoulos argue that disobeying an unlawful UNSC resolution may constitute a lawful countermeasure, reflecting a tension between Council authority and states' rights under international law (Tzanakopoulos, 2011). Despite Article 25 of the UN Charter mandating compliance, there is no binding global judicial mechanism that can enforce or review the legality of UNSC decisions (Whittle, 2015), allowing states to justify non-compliance in some cases. Additionally, concerns about the humanitarian impacts of sanctions, such as restricted access to medical supplies and threats to academic freedom, further motivate states' reluctance to comply (UN, 2022), highlighting the challenge of balancing international peace and security with human rights considerations.

Then, when do states comply with the sanctions of the UNSC? Scholars identify several key mechanisms influencing state compliance with United Nations sanctions, including reciprocity,

domestic political processes, enforcement mechanisms, legalization, and institutional design. Reciprocity, where states exchange benefits or punishments to encourage mutual compliance, is



regarded as a fundamental driver rooted in social and international relations. From a rationalist perspective, states are viewed as rational, self-interested actors who comply because they calculate that doing so maximizes their benefits or minimizes costs. They weigh potential reputational damage and direct sanctions such as economic penalties, making compliance a strategic move to serve their national interests. This explains why states might comply when sanctions serve their goals but violate them when costs outweigh potential gains. Conversely, norm-based (constructivist) theories emphasize the role of social norms, legitimacy, and legal obligation, arguing that compliance occurs because states internalize shared norms and view international law as binding beyond mere strategic calculations. According to this view, compliance is influenced by a state's perception of the legitimacy and fairness of sanctions, reflecting deeper internalized commitments rather than external coercion alone (Raustiala et. al., 2007).

Hypotheses

Hypothesis #1: Target states with substantial economic or military capabilities may perceive themselves as sufficiently powerful to resist UNSC sanctions, reducing their incentive to comply due to a belief that the Council lacks the authority or leverage to compel their behavior.

Hypothesis #2: Sanctions regimes with vague objectives, poorly defined legal terms, or weak monitoring mechanisms significantly decrease the likelihood of compliance, as target states exploit these ambiguities to claim partial adherence or justify non-compliance.

Hypothesis #3: States are less likely to comply with UNSC sanctions when they have strategic or economic alliances with one or more permanent members of the Security Council.

Methods

This research will adopt a mixed methodology, combining legal textual analysis and case study analysis. Case studies are a robust way to explore the complex and specific reasons behind compliance or non-compliance with UNSC sanctions, as they provide an elaborate overview of the realistic circumstances behind compliance. Because compliance is shaped by diverse political, economic, and strategic contexts, case studies allow for a nuanced examination of motives, state behavior, and the effectiveness of sanctions in different geopolitical environments. In addition, a legal analysis of the UN Charter and relevant Security Council resolutions will be conducted to understand the legal authority of sanctions, the mechanisms for enforcement, and the structural limitations that might hinder compliance.

The case study component will include three selected examples: Libya during the early 21st century as a case of compliance, and North Korea and Iraq post-1990s as cases of non-compliance. Libya's voluntary abandonment of its weapons programs under heavy international sanctions offers insight into when and why a state chooses to comply. North Korea exemplifies persistent resistance despite decades of sanctions, while Iraq's experience with sanctions in the 1990s—particularly the Oil-for-Food Programme and subsequent military actions—reflects partial non-compliance under specific contexts. Each case will be examined through primary UN documents, national policy statements, and secondary scholarly sources,

focusing on the intersection between legal frameworks, state incentives, and international pressure.

Case studies in this research serve not only to identify patterns of success and failure but also to narrow down theoretical discussions in empirical reality. By comparing cases across different states'



compliance, the research can uncover variables that influence state responses. These findings will help shed light on the broader limitations of the UNSC's sanctioning mechanism and provide insight into the role of international law in coercive decisions.

Case Studies

Case Study #1: Legal Analysis of Articles 25 and 41 of the UN Charter

This case study demonstrates that the structural vagueness and legal insufficiencies of Articles 41 and 25 of the United Nations (UN) Charter significantly hinder the effectiveness of UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions. The analysis shows that the lack of precise definitions, enforceable monitoring, and clarity in these foundational articles critically undermines the UNSC's ability to engender full compliance from targeted states. This analysis will give particular attention to why and what made, despite the Charter's legal mandates, sanctions frequently fail to achieve compliance by target states, and how it ties back to hypothesis 2: the idea that sanctions regimes lacking clear objectives, precise legal definitions, or powerful enforcement procedures tend to see lower levels of compliance. By closely examining how the United Nations Charter, through Articles 41 and 25, frames and authorizes Security Council sanctions, we can observe that the foundational legal language is often too broad and ambiguous to open the door for states to interpret their obligations loosely or partially.

This paper begins by analyzing Article 41 of the United Nations Charter, as it provides the foundational authority for the Security Council to impose non-military sanctions in response to threats to peace. Article 41 sits within Chapter VII, which governs actions with respect to threats to the peace, breaches of the peace, and acts of aggression (UN Charter, Art. 39). Thus, any Article 41 measure must relate to such threats contextually and is part of a broader enforcement regime including Article 42. The focus will be on how Article 41, despite being the primary empowerment provision for Council action, is drafted in such vague terms that it undermines the clarity and enforceability of UN sanctions. Through this analysis, the aim is to illustrate the inefficiency and legal insufficiency embedded in the current framework – a key reason why states can exploit ambiguities to justify incomplete or non-compliance.

Article 41 provides the UNSC with broad and superficial authority to implement measures “not involving the use of armed force” in response to threats to peace (UN Charter). The language of Article 41 is not strict enough and is ambiguous to some degree. For instance, the phrase “may

decide” depicts a sense of discretion, granting permission rather than creating any obligation either for the Council or its member states (López-Jacoiste). Furthermore, the phrase “call upon members” suggests obligation but relies more on member state cooperation and enforcement. Additionally, the Charter also allows the Council to carry out “interruption to economic relations and ... other means of communication, and the severance of diplomatic relations”. While these measures are powerful in theory, the lack of specificity might weaken the UNSC with potential loopholes that target states could exploit, justifying incomplete or inconsistent implementation under the pretext of ambiguity (Ogulande).

Article 25, by contrast, applies broadly to all decisions of the Security Council under the Charter. Scholarly commentary and International Court of Justice advisory opinions emphasize that Article 25's binding nature is not limited only to Chapter VII decisions but applies to all SC decisions that fall within its mandate (ICJ). The SC's primary responsibility for international peace and security situates both provisions within an imperative to maintain global order, meaning these articles are part of a collective security framework (Security Council Report). Article 25 explicitly states: "The Members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council..." On a literal extent, the



language appears unequivocal, reflecting UNSC decisions as legally binding obligations. However, this formal acknowledgment of the Security Council's powers is not paired with specific mechanisms for determining or remedying non-compliance. Although compliance is mentioned in Article 39 of the UN Charter, it allows the Council itself to determine the existence of any threat to peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression, thereby intensifying the lack of a strict legal framework, being silent on enforcement beyond the initial declaration (de la Serna Galván). In short, there is no clear provision specifying how to address disputes about the content of obligations, how to adjudicate partial compliance, or how to operationalize consequences for evasion.

The object of Article 41 is to provide the Security Council with non-military tools to enforce its decisions, thereby preserving peace through coercive but non-violent measures (Björkman). The article balances the need for effective enforcement with the Charter's broader prohibition on the

use of force except under strict conditions, such as Article 42, where it addresses forces like blockade or self-defense.

The purpose of Article 25 is to ensure UN member states' compliance with UNSC mandates. By obliging members to carry out UNSC decisions, Article 25 ensures the Security Council's role as the principal organ responsible for maintaining international peace and security is respected and

effective. The development history of Article 25, as noted in the San Francisco Conference records, indicates a deliberate rejection of limiting the obligation to Chapter VII decisions alone, reinforcing its broad purpose to support the SC's authority across its functions.

The nucleus of the issue is that the legal framework governing UNSC sanctions is fundamentally insufficient and vague as: neither Article sets out clear standards or processes for defining what constitutes compliance; there are no robust legal or procedural mechanisms for monitoring, reporting, or enforcing compliance, either by states or by the UN itself; and the absence of defined consequences for non-compliance leaves the system reliant on the political will of the Security Council, where enforcement is inconsistently applied and easily politicized (Fischer).

These weaknesses directly confirm the hypothesis: sanctions regimes built on vague and inadequate legal foundations are prone to poor compliance. Target states, when faced with imprecise obligations and limited administrative guidance, are exposed to both the legal justification and practical flexibility to claim only partial adherence to UNSC measures. Furthermore, the ambiguity within the Charter can also hinder the effectiveness of the Security Council itself; without clear definitions and guidance in the Charter, the UNSC may struggle to coordinate its response or enforce accountability or determine how to handle non-compliance, thereby undermining the intended rigor of the sanctions regime.

Case study #2: DPRK's non-compliance and Russia's veto

This case study on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)'s non-compliance with UNSC sanctions demonstrates how political dynamics within the Security Council and strategic state perceptions undermine the efficacy of UNSC sanctions, ultimately leading to their failure.

This type of case study is effective in providing reasons behind failures of the Council's sanctions and collection of compliance, because it involves a concrete example where multiple factors, including legal, political, and strategic elements, merge to create non-compliance. By examining the defiance of DPRK towards the UNSC Resolutions 1695 and 1718 regarding nuclear testing and the enforcement challenges shaped by veto power in Article 27 of the UN Charter. The analysis supports three main hypotheses:



first (H1), DPRK's perception of its strategic and military power reduces its incentive to comply; second (H2), the weaknesses in enforcement mechanisms that restrains UNSC's power wielding and exploited to evade compliance; and third (H3), the protective role of a permanent UNSC member dilutes pressure on DPRK, enabling continued defiance.

A critical context for understanding DPRK's non-compliance is the longstanding pattern of UNSC efforts to hold back its ambitions in nuclear weapons, underscoring persistent indifference and resistance. Notably, UNSC Resolution 825 (1993) was among the earliest calls on DPRK to honor its non-proliferation commitments under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) which is a multilateral international agreement aimed at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and advancing nuclear disarmament, and comply fully with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, technical measures applied by the IAEA to verify that states comply with their NPT obligations by ensuring that nuclear materials are not diverted from peaceful uses to military ones. Resolution 825 urged DPRK to return to IAEA inspections

following its announcement of withdrawing from the NPT, signaling the UNSC's consistent legal demand for DPRK's adherence to non-proliferation obligations. Simultaneously, diplomatic efforts like the Six-Party Talks (2003–2009) attempted multilateral engagement with DPRK to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula through negotiations involving China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, the United States, and DPRK (Arms Control Association). Although these talks produced intermittent agreements, they ultimately failed to secure compliance (Ko), reflecting DPRK's substantial military capabilities and the perception of existential threat diminished its incentive to comply with the Council's decisions, in line with H1 regarding the deterrent effect of perceived power.

The study would first inspect UNSC Resolution 1695, adopted in direct response to the DPRK's missile launches. DPRK's non-compliance was immediate and transparent, because despite past resolutions' demand to cease missile tests and nuclear weapons development, DPRK openly repudiated it with even more nuclear launches (BBC). As articulated in the statement that points to the resolution as a product of "hostile U.S. policy," the state asserted that its nuclear program was essential for self-defense and sovereignty. This resolution was chosen for observation because it marks a clear instance where DPRK disregarded a UNSC resolution, giving a foundational case of non-compliance.

Following the DPRK's unauthorized missile launches in July 2006 that went against past legal decisions like the NPT or IAEA, the UNSC urgently adopted another resolution, Resolution 1695, to demand that the DPRK cease all ballistic missile launches and nuclear weapons programs (UNSC Res 1695). In response, Pak Gil Yon, then DPRK's ambassador to the UN, explicitly characterized Resolution 1695 as a legitimate response to an "extremely dangerous

situation on the Korean Peninsula," portraying sanctions as politically motivated rather than legally binding—a stance that reveals how DPRK's perception of existential threat and military strength diminished its incentive to comply (H1). DPRK's own statements undermining UN authority, such as asserting "Neither the UN nor anyone else can protect us," demonstrate its view that the UNSC lacks leverage or legitimacy, confirming that weak enforcement mechanisms (H2) reduce sanction effectiveness.

Furthermore, on 9 October 2006, the DPRK conducted its first nuclear weapons test (Johnston), explicitly defying the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, especially Resolution 1695. This behavior shows that DPRK's substantial military capabilities and perceived existential threat strengthened it to resist compliance. In response, the UNSC passed Resolution 1718 in 2006, condemning the test and imposing a sanctions regime restricting the flow of military goods, as well as



establishing a Panel of Experts (PoE) to monitor compliance and report violations. (UNSC Res 1718). However, DPRK conspicuously ignored these measures, continuing nuclear and missile activities in 2009, 2013, and 2016.

Along with the DPRK's continued nuclear and missile activities, Russia exercised its veto power (Nichols) under Article 27 of the UN Charter to block renewal of the PoE's mandate, a nearly unanimous Security Council resolution (Cha et. al.). Article 27 of the United Nations Charter governs the voting procedures of the Security Council, outlining how decisions are made and laying the foundation for the veto power wielded by the five permanent members (P5). This article plays a crucial role in understanding the functioning of the Security Council, especially the legal and operational dynamics of the P5 veto power. The following is a detailed analysis of

Article 27, examining each paragraph and its legal implications for Security Council decision-making.

Article 27(1), by emphasizing the justice within their member nations, establishes the principle of formal equality among the fifteen Security Council members (five permanent and ten non-permanent) regarding voting rights. It asserts that each member has an equal voice in Council decisions, without any form of weighted voting. However, the subsequent paragraphs modify this equality in the context of substantive matters. Paragraph 2 of the article provides that decisions on procedural matters require the affirmative vote of nine members. Here, the critical legal point is that procedural decisions do not require the concurring votes of the permanent members. This means the veto does not apply to procedural votes (Security Council Report). For instance, matters that are considered procedural can be decided by a simple majority of nine votes, regardless of any opposition from permanent members. While this directly soothes the concern of excessive power that the P5 nations can wield, the third paragraph introduces a distinctive legal feature: decisions on substantive matters require not only nine affirmative votes but must also include "the concurring votes of the permanent members." This clause is the legal basis for the veto power. Although the Charter does not use the explicit term "veto," the requirement that all P5 members vote affirmatively or at least not oppose implies that an opposing vote by any permanent member prevents the adoption of the substantive resolution. The veto power applies to substantive decisions such as sanctions or peace enforcement, which are decisions that often have a great extent of international implications. This mechanism was designed as a political compromise at the UN's founding to ensure that the major powers (P5) would participate in and consent to critical decisions. This significantly reduces the chances of successful collection of state compliance towards UNSC decisions, since states other than the Council itself have the capability, sometimes stronger than the Council, to control international, political, and economic decisions.

While all members have equal votes formally, the veto power means the P5 have disproportionate influence over Security Council decisions (Alcover et. al.). A single permanent member can block substantive action, affecting the Council's ability to act collectively. This shows how the Charter itself is actually weakening the UNSC's ability to demand compliance. This privileged mechanism, rooted in Article 27, routinely paralyzes the Council in the face of pressing global security or human rights challenges, allowing the interests of a single great power to override the body's core mandate and damaging its credibility and legitimacy as an impartial enforcer of international law.

Hence, Russia's veto did not annul sanctions formally but rather incapacitated the Council's central enforcement mechanism, effectively allowing DPRK to proceed with its prohibited programs without impactful oversight or consequence. This development exemplifies the diminishing impact of sanctions where enforcement is dependent on circumstances, on unanimity among powers with competing interests, substantiating hypotheses two about weak enforcement and three, protective P5 alliances. DPRK's unchallenged continuation of nuclear tests in the following years after 2006, the year that



restrictions toward the state were issued, further highlights that its possession of nuclear capabilities exceeds the coercive power of UNSC resolutions.

Overall, DPRK's persistent indifference to UNSC sanctions showcases how the interaction of strongly militarized sovereignty, legal frameworks that rather weaken the Council, and strategic state alliances weakens global governance frameworks. This case illustrates that even when the UNSC sets out a legal framework to enforce compliance, the actual effectiveness is limited by great power politics. Legal rules and sanctions alone are insufficient unless there is unified, sustained support among all P5 members, which implies that if one of these powers uses a veto for their alliance, there is no way for the UNSC to further enforce compliance, which hinders the success of their decisions. This explicit defiance illustrates how DPRK's perception of its own strategic and military power (H1), the weaknesses in international enforcement mechanisms (H2), and the protective role of a permanent Security Council member (H3) combined to permit continued noncompliance. In the DPRK case, the alliance between DPRK and Russia deprived the sanctions regime of the enforcement necessary for compliance. The DPRK case strongly supports H3. Russia's use of the veto to block reporting and enforcement measures, combined with both Russia's longstanding political and strategic interest in preventing DPRK from instability, meant that North Korea faced little real risk of consequences despite its open defiance. This shield undermined the practical application of sanctions and signaled to the DPRK that continued non-compliance would not be seriously penalized.

Case Study #3: Pattern Analysis of Sanctioned States

The UN Security Council (UNSC) imposes sanctions, a restrictive measure forced as a means to maintain or restore international peace and security. However, the effectiveness of these sanctions in compelling compliance remains questioned. This qualitative case study aims to explore whether the economic and military strength of targeted states influences their likelihood of compliance, an underlying factor that is discoverable by scrutinizing past sanctioned countries by the UNSC. Specifically, it tests the hypothesis that powerful states are less likely to comply with sanctions due to a perception that the UNSC lacks sufficient power compared to theirs.

The United Nations Sanctions document officially reveals that the countries that have been sanctioned before are predominantly weak in terms of military and economy, with nations like Haiti, Liberia, and the Central African Republic ranked below 100th in the Global Firepower Index, which is an annual ranking of nations by military strength. And even then, most sanctions were not met with compliance but rather open defiance.

What is conspicuously absent from the list is any powerful state: neither any of the permanent members of the Security Council (P5), such as the United States, China, or Russia, nor influential regional powers like Israel or Saudi Arabia. The pattern is not that powerful states are sanctioned and resist, but rather that they are not sanctioned at all. This avoidance is not incidental: it signals the UNSC's implicit recognition of its own limitations (Borzyskowski). If the Council truly believed in its capacity to enforce norms impartially, it would not systematically exclude the most powerful from scrutiny and practice the pattern of sanctioning specifically weaker nations. The selective application of sanctions suggests an institutional calculation that powerful states will not comply, depicting enforcement as insignificant or politically hazardous (Security Council Report). This behavior directly supports Hypothesis 1, which posits that powerful target states resist compliance because they perceive the UNSC as lacking sufficient authority or coercive capacity. The UNSC's pattern of reserved action toward powerful actors indirectly validates this perception, since the UNSC also reveals its underlying awareness of its weakness, which



discourages it from sanctioning the stronger nations. Chances of compliance drop significantly due to the UNSC's passive stance and indirect granting of power assertion (Deinek). In essence, the Council confirms its own weakness by refusing to test its authority against states capable of resisting it.

Additionally, this idea may apply the same way to strategic alliances of states with P5 nations that usually represent the powerful nations. The tendency to avoid sanctioning powerful states may also stem from these alliances, as proposed in Hypothesis 3. When target states are shielded by their ties to P5 members, whether through arms deals, oil trade, or mutual political interests, sanctioning becomes diplomatically unviable and challenging. This is not a mere protection of non-compliant states but a powerful action that also signals to others that political connections, rather than violations, determine enforcement. Hence, this transition from non-binding diplomatic pressure to legally binding, specific measures under Chapter VII directly correlates with the shift in Libya's behavior. The case demonstrates how the clarity and binding nature of resolutions (H2) can be pivotal in determining compliance.

In conclusion, the UNSC's consistent refusal to sanction powerful states reveals an institutional self-awareness of its own limitations. It functions not only as evidence of the Council's weak leverage over strong states but also as a systemic failure that compromises the legitimacy, consistency, and effectiveness of the international sanctions regime. This directly confirms H1 as it indirectly proves that they empower states not to revere their legitimacy as they take on an unassertive stance in imposing sanctions. Consistently targeting only less militarily developed countries, the Council effectively signals to stronger nations that they are beyond its reach, further reducing their incentive to comply.

Cross-cutting analysis

Across all case studies, H1 is consistently validated with strong evidence: target states with substantial military or economic capabilities tend to resist sanctions, perceiving themselves as powerful enough to challenge UNSC authority. The DPRK case clearly affirms this. Its nuclear capabilities and perception of existential threat minimized the psychological and strategic impact

of sanctions. The DPRK openly ignored the legitimacy of the UNSC, continuing nuclear development with no observable behavioral change even after several resolutions were passed. The Data Analysis case reinforces this trend at a broader level, revealing that powerful states are rarely sanctioned at all, with the UNSC avoiding such confrontations to preserve its own credibility and avoid political harm, effectively admitting that powerful actors are beyond its reach. Even in the Libyan case, while the regime was resource-rich, its compliance was eventually driven by strategic vulnerability and lack of P5 protection, showing that power without alliance shielding is not always enough to resist sustained, isolated pressure. Thus, H1 holds.

The strongest trend among all case studies shows that the most universally confirmed hypothesis across all case studies is H2: vague legal terms, ambiguous objectives, and weak monitoring mechanisms dramatically reduce compliance rates. The UN Charter legal analysis case provides a foundational explanation: Articles 41 and 25 suffer from structural ambiguity, offering broad yet non-binding phrasing such as "may decide," or "call upon" that grants states wide interpretive liberty that avoids full implementation. In the Libyan case, Resolution 731's diplomatic vagueness was met with defiance, but once Chapter VII-based, legally binding resolutions like 748 and 883 were implemented with specific and measurable conditions, Libya shifted its behavior. Likewise, in the DPRK case, lack of a unified enforcement mechanism and the absence of strong oversight (especially after Russia vetoed the Panel of Experts renewal) enabled North Korea to persist unchecked. The contrast between vague and clear



sanctions in Libya emphasizes the transformational impact of precision and enforceability. Therefore, H2 not only holds across all cases, but it also emerges as the most pivotal variable explaining the success or failure of sanctions. Without clear legal standards, the UNSC framework is simply too penetrable to compel target state behavior.

H3 is also strongly confirmed, particularly in the DPRK and Libya cases. North Korea's alliance with Russia, demonstrated through the veto of the Panel of Experts, disabled the primary mechanism for tracking and enforcing sanctions with Russia's veto power. Russia's actions signaled to the DPRK that its behavior would face no serious consequences, despite clear legal violations. By contrast, Libya's compliance was possible precisely because, lacking such a shield, isolated diplomatically and without any P5 protector, it had no way to escape pressure. The Data Analysis case offers support as it implies that states with strong P5 backing are either spared sanctions entirely or are not subjected to meaningful enforcement. This confirms that great power alliances fundamentally dilute the force of UNSC actions, and where there is no P5 shielding, the UNSC can act more freely to compel behavior. Thus, H3 holds across the cases, though its effect is dependent on how active and strategic the alliance is.

All three hypotheses are validated to some degree. However, based on the overlap of evidence, H2 is the most strongly and consistently supported hypothesis. Every case, even those with contradictory behavior like Libya's eventual compliance, returns to the question of how clear, binding, and enforceable the sanctions are. While H1 explains why strong states resist, and H3 explains the protection that enables defiance, neither works independently without H2 because even weak states with no P5 alliance resist when the sanctions are unclear or unenforceable. Therefore, this collective analysis reveals that while power and alliances shape whether states

feel they can resist, it is the clarity and enforceability of sanctions and legal frameworks that determine whether they are bound.

Recommendations

To enhance the effectiveness, legitimacy, and fairness of UN Security Council sanctions for an increased likelihood of compliance, policymakers must focus on restructuring both the institutional design and political enforcement mechanisms of the current sanctions regime. The case studies examined in this paper collectively demonstrate that the UNSC's selective sanctioning behavior and inconsistent enforcement severely undermine compliance. Accordingly, this section offers three concrete recommendations: (1) the institutionalization of an Independent Compliance Review Mechanism (ICRM); (2) the conditional restriction of veto powers in sanctions enforcement; and (3) the legal codification of universal criteria for sanctions application.

1. Introduce Conditional Veto Restrictions for Sanctions Voting

The DPRK case shows how powerful nations abuse the veto sometimes to escape accountability or unilaterally benefit themselves, which tends to undermine the legitimacy of the Council. As a reformation, a conditional veto restriction mechanism should be introduced, excepting P5 members from using the veto on sanctions resolutions where (1) they are the direct subject of the sanctions or (2) the

resolution involves allegations of grave breaches of international law like war crimes or crimes against humanity. While veto reform is one of the most crucial steps for restoring fairness in the Council, it is also among the most difficult institutional changes to achieve. Amending Article 27 of the UN Charter



requires a two-thirds vote in the General Assembly and ratification by two-thirds of member states, including all five permanent members, making it highly unlikely

under current geopolitical conditions. Hence, rather than relying solely on structural reform that faces near-impossible odds, we should focus on developing mechanisms that increase accountability and legal consistency within the existing framework.

2. Establish an Independent Compliance Review Mechanism (ICRM) within the UN One of the clearest patterns across the cases is the lack of uniform compliance due to the perception that sanctions are politically motivated or unevenly applied. To address this, the General Assembly under Articles 22 and 97 of the UN Charter can authorize the creation of subsidiary organs like the ICRM, a legally mandated, moderately autonomous body composed of neutral legal scholars, international judges, and non-permanent member state representatives. Unlike the ICJ, which primarily resolves legal disputes between states and offers advisory opinions, the ICRM would operate systematically, evaluating solely sanctions as they are enacted and evolve, regardless of whether legal proceedings are initiated. It would serve as a consistent monitoring mechanism embedded in the UN structure, addressing the political inconsistencies that judicial forums like the ICJ are structurally limited in tackling. By publishing independent and publicly accessible assessments, the ICRM would enhance transparency and accountability, helping to restore the legitimacy and perceived impartiality of the UN sanctions system.
3. Legally Codify Universal Criteria for Sanctions Imposition

As shown in the Libya and DPRK cases, ambiguity in objectives and inconsistent application enable countries to delegitimize sanctions as politicized or unfair. To address this, the UNSC should adopt a binding framework that designates specific legal circumstances for when sanctions can be imposed so that it mandates the Council under law to impose sanctions not based on which country it is, but based on their actions. The UNSC can adopt a binding resolution under Articles 39 and 41 establishing a “Sanctions Code.” This code should be jointly

codified by an independent legal advisory panel appointed by the Secretary-General in consultation with the General Assembly and reviewed by the International Law Commission before adoption by the Council. This doesn’t require a Charter amendment and can be done with political will among Council members. Clear standards will reduce ambiguity, enhance compliance, and protect the legitimacy of sanctions as an essential enforcement tool, especially for states that perceive current processes as arbitrary.

Conclusion

The persistent challenge of sanctions non-compliance reveals a critical limitation in the international system: the obscurity in granted legal authority that hinders actual enforcement. While the UNSC was designed to sustain global peace through binding resolutions, repeated cases of partial or total defiance expose the limitations of its mechanisms. The analyses conducted in the paper as a whole have shown that, despite varying degrees of state power or alliance with influential veto members, it is the vagueness of legal mandates combined with inconsistent implementation that most reliably explains the failure to secure compliance.

While this paper argues that ambiguity in legal frameworks and weak enforcement mechanisms are the most decisive factors behind noncompliance with UNSC sanctions, several critiques and alternative perspectives indeed deserve attention. Some may argue that powerful states, despite



often appearing as defiant, do comply when sanctions align with their national interests, suggesting that non-compliance is not solely a function of leverage or enforcement. While it is true that not all powerful states resist compliance, this paper contends that the perception of power significantly heightens the likelihood of noncompliance. This is not to suggest an absolute

trend, but rather to acknowledge a prevailing tendency, with inevitable exceptions. Others may contend that sanctions, even when ignored, hold symbolic value and contribute to long-term reputational or economic isolation, a dynamic this paper has not fully explored. Additionally, critics could question the narrow focus on state behavior, noting that non-state actors and private entities often play pivotal roles in undermining sanctions regimes. The case selection itself may invite skepticism, as focusing on extreme outliers like Russia, DPRK, and Libya might be seen as overstating the failure of the system while neglecting more cooperative cases. Moreover, this paper has not addressed the humanitarian consequences of sanctions, a growing area of concern that may shape future resistance to compliance. These critiques do not invalidate the core thesis but reveal the complex circumstances in which sanctions operate, highlighting the need for broader, future research that includes more diverse case studies, considers non-state actors, and examines how sanctions are experienced on-site.

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