

Political Marketplace Framework: Sanctions in the Political Market

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Overview

This memo examines how targeted sanctions can operate in a political marketplace system. It argues that we should analyse the sanctions toolkit in the context of the transactional politics of elites in sanctioned countries, and specifically the logic of the political marketplace, which emerges as a powerful metric for understanding what sanctions actually do. On this basis, we can assess what are the likely impacts of sanctions (or their removal).

Targeted sanctions are one of the most attractive and promising policy tools available to address identifiable threats to peace and security. Since 1994, sanctions regimes have largely morphed from deploying the heavy artillery of comprehensive national sanctions to using a range of what are ostensibly precision instruments. However, two problems plague their application, which inhibit actionable knowledge: (1) asking whether they “work” is not the right question; and (2) the dominant assumptions underlying their imposition are wrong. This is particularly pronounced where sanctions are most often used—political marketplace systems and active and complex conflicts in Africa and the Middle East.

The relevant question is: **what do sanctions do?** Understanding this requires understanding the political rules of the game that structure elite behaviour in the systems where sanctions are imposed—that is, understanding sanctions impact within the logic of the political marketplace framework (PMF). The PMF provides a powerful set of tools for analysing the impacts of sanctions, specifically explaining how sanctions can penetrate into existing systems of transactional politics and influence the dynamics of power relations among members of the political elite. However, despite assumptions to the contrary, sanctions cannot change the rules of the game, they can only change how the game is played.

The crux is to recognise how sanctions can limit the material capabilities (e.g., money and weapons) of elite actors in the political marketplace, and how this in turn impacts intra-elite bargaining dynamics. After all, transactional elite bargains are at the heart of political market systems. Bringing these elements together allows policymakers to move to a question with more prescriptive answers: **what can targeted sanctions do?**

Depending on how sanctions are wielded, they can have positive or negative impacts—sometimes at the same time, along different dimensions. Unintended consequences are to be expected. Sanctions are never used in isolation, but are always combined with other diplomatic and conflict management tools. Their use and impact should be considered in this larger strategic context.

This memo: (1) provides a descriptive foundation of modern sanctions, (2) explains why asking *whether sanctions “work”* is the wrong question and re-orientes the discussion to *what sanctions do*, (3) describes

sanctions in the context of the political marketplace and in relation to elite bargaining; (4) concludes with a series of questions that can be posed when considering imposing, removing, or modifying sanctions in political marketplace systems to better assess potential impacts. These questions are intended to be posed in conjunction with the questions and framework presented in the PMF Methods Memo.

II. Descriptive Foundation of Modern Sanctions

Sanctions are a policy tool whereby an entity—the sender—places restrictions on another—the target. They are coercive (but short of military force) and temporary (at least in theory). They are used by states and multilateral organisations and have the greatest impact when imposed by broad coalitions, so as to mitigate sanctions busting. Sanctions imposed on friendly nations provide greater traction than those imposed on adversaries; sanctions with simple and time-limited goals are more likely to achieve those goals than more ambitious and comprehensive measures. Targets adapt; sanctions' impact weakens over time.

Senders target: states; entities of the state (e.g., specific military units or parastatals, etc.); non-state groups (e.g., armed actors, political groups, etc.); corporate/business entities and individuals. More specifically, targets often are: individuals in government (usually leadership or deputies), terrorist groups and individuals involved in terrorist activity,¹ armed groups (e.g., rebel factions) and their leaders, parties to a conflict, and the family members of the above individuals, their associates, supporters and facilitators.

Current sanctions fall into five categories, with associated specific restrictions or “measures”:

- *Individual sanctions*: asset freezes and travel bans applied to individuals and corporate entities.
- *Diplomatic sanctions*: restrictions on government activities, political entities such as by banning or limiting the number travel of diplomatic personnel, closing embassies/offices of representation, and other visa policy restrictions.
- *Sectoral sanctions*: arms embargos, restrictions on proliferation sensitive dual-use goods/technology, and transportation restrictions, such as aviation and maritime restrictions.
- *Commodity sanctions*: ban or limit trade in commodities and resources, such as oil, timber, diamonds, charcoal; can apply to luxury goods, cultural property, chemicals, etc.
- *Financial sector sanctions*: investment bans, sovereign wealth fund restrictions, restrictions on engagement with certain financial markets.

In addition to these “primary” sanctions (i.e., sanctions imposed directly on a target), through “secondary” sanctions senders seek to extend the impact of sanctions by threatening action against non-sanctioned third parties if they conduct business with the target. For example, to enhance the bite of US sanctions on Iran, the US threatened that any financial entity that conducted transactions that touched an Iranian bank would be banned from access to US financial markets.

Even with the variation described above, three clear trends emerge in the modern application of sanctions, which further justify examining how sanctions impact elite bargaining in political marketplace systems. Modern sanctions largely:

1. target elite individuals in leadership positions, and individuals and entities associated with them, not states per se;

¹ Applying sanctions as a counter-terrorism tool is common, but it is outside the remit of this memo for three reasons. First, aside from sanctions on individuals linked to ISIS and al-Shabaab, sanctions imposed on CRP countries are not related to terrorism per se. Second, terrorism-related sanctions represent a high-profile, but small percentage of all sanctions cases. Third, individual terrorists and terrorist organisations, while often linked to state sponsors or individuals and entities linked to states, only rarely attempt to function as political entities as such (with the exception of ISIS). This means that these terrorist entities do not operate in the same type of elite political context; their activity and elite bargaining dynamics follow a different logic than other sanctioned individuals.

2. aim to alter domestic political dynamics inside target political systems;
3. focus on African and Middle Eastern countries.

Looking across all cases, sanctions are predominantly imposed on systems that are either full-fledged political market systems (e.g., Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Liberia, etc.) or systems that exhibit a degree of political marketisation (e.g., Eritrea, Syria, Iraq, Venezuela, Myanmar, etc.)

III. The Problem of Asking Whether Sanctions “Work”

“Do sanctions work?” is the “holy grail” question and is almost always the wrong one. It is overly simplistic, misleading, generates false controversy, and inhibits actionable understanding of what sanctions actually do. Two points drive this home.

1) *Tangled Causality, and Confusion of Tactics and Strategy*

Sanctions are *never* used alone. They are used in conjunction with some combination of other policy and conflict management tools, such as: public diplomatic engagement; secret, back-channel or track 2 talks; mediation; multilateral peace missions; overt or covert military action, among others. Additionally, multiple forms of sanctions are typically combined into a package of measures. Finally, circumstances in the target country and priorities of sender governments’ can shift over time, so that even when the initial goals of a specific sanction are met (in whole or part), the sanction may remain in place because of additional goals, or the difficulty of removing it when the target country remains politically ostracised. Therefore, peeling apart the unique contribution of sanctions, as a tool or any specific measure, to “success” or “failure” (however defined) is a fool’s errand (difficult, if not impossible). Think of sanctions as a hammer; rather powerful and immensely useful when wielded properly, in conjunction with other tools, with the right purpose. But, just as it rarely makes sense to ask whether a hammer works, so too is it often the wrong question to ask if sanctions work. If and when sanctions “fail” it is the overall strategy that did not achieve the desired aims. Sanctions must be analysed in the context of the other tactical tools applied to complex situations, and in relation to overall strategic objectives—however, it is the multiplicity of objectives that cause an even deeper problem.

2) *Sanctions’ Multiple Goals and Dimensions*

Whether sanctions “work” requires a clear understanding of why sanctions were imposed, which is often lacking or contested, especially since it is common for there to be multiple, simultaneous (at times conflicting) purposes of sanctions. This makes it likely for there to be successes, failures and areas of non-impact along multiple dimensions of a single use of sanctions. This is most pronounced when there are multiple senders (e.g., U.S., EU, UN), but even within a single sender state bureaucracy there are often multiple constituencies for sanctions that pursue their use—even in the same cases—for different tactical and strategic ends.

Typically, the goal is understood to be target compliance to publicly-stated sender demands—and therefore “success” is determining if the target changed behaviour in the desired way—but this strips sanctions from their context and full utility. The problems are immediately apparent by unpacking sanctions’ many goals.

Sanctions are meant to: compel behaviour changes; punish, weaken, constrain or distract adversaries; signal preferences (to allies, foes and domestic constituencies); placate domestic constituencies; support allies and deter actors that are not party to the sanctions. Analysis of existing modern sanctions regimes reveals many more specific goals, including to: encourage democracy; stop human rights violations and the suppression of internal opposition; enforce peace agreements; assist in the pursuit of individuals for prosecution before international courts; ensure compliance with treaty obligations; promote sender’s

reputation domestically and internationally; maintain international norms and structures; prevent and contain armed conflict; achieve compliance with international law; counter conflicting parties' military aggression; express outrage; build support for military action; assist in negotiations; prevent the export of sensitive technologies; embarrass the targets; limit the spread of weapons; constrain international rogue actors; bring suspected terrorists to justice.

Three other factors complicate the issues of linking goals to success.

1. The same sanctions measures are used for multiple purposes. A sender might seek to change target behaviour *by* cutting off funding, limiting access to international markets, or the purchase of weapons. Alternatively, a sender could undertake the same steps (cutting off funding, limiting access to international markets, or the purchase of weapons) without aiming to change the target's behaviour; the goal could be to send a signal or placate domestic constituencies.
2. The goals of sanctions can change while the measures remain exactly the same. Arms embargoes aimed at limiting a repressive government's access to weapons often remain in place after a democratic leader is installed, perhaps with the new goal to protect the new government during a fragile period. Because of the delays and difficulties in lifting sanctions (due to the complicated processes of making and implementing decisions within sender governments), an existing set of sanctions, imposed for one reason, may be repurposed with reference to new policy goals. The US designation of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism has remained in place long after its original goal was met, justified with reference to additional US policy preferences.
3. Sanctions are not always linked to a strategic goal at all. A travel ban on a certain individual might be punishment for past behaviour that has long-since changed or it could simply be a way to keep that individual from attending a certain meeting.

IV. Reframing the Question and Adopting a Political Marketplace Lens

Sanctions apply pressure on elite individuals. The real question, then, is: how would we expect an individual to act when sanctions (alongside other tools) are imposed (or threatened)? In other words, how do sanctions change elite individuals' calculations and incentives; what do sanctions *do*? The entire enterprise is predicated on detailed understanding of the target's political system, the logic of how actors operate, their goals, constraints and incentives. Absent this, sanctions are like throwing darts at a moving target in the dark: they might strike true, but even if they do there is no coherent explanation, and therefore no way to systematise or replicate the impact.

This is precisely where the PMF provides powerful analytical tools to help explain how sanctions can penetrate into existing systems of transactional politics and influence the dynamics of power relations among members of the political elite. The PMF is a theory of elite political organisation that takes the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. Two elements stand out:

1. the PMF's focus on de facto political arrangements: revealing as false the assumption that power flows through functional formal bureaucratic institutions, and rather assuming that personalised transactions dominate formal institutions;
2. a clear-eyed assessment of what motivates elite political behaviour: the desire to maximise political power and the transactional use of material incentives (including bribery) and violence to achieve that goal. This takes place in a context of turbulence rather than the assumed static system that lurks behind most sanctions' logics.

Sanctions in the Political Market

As an empirical matter, most sanctioned individuals are embedded in political marketplace systems or systems that feature significant political marketisation. In these systems, power is a commodity; gaining and maintaining power is the primary objective. Assumptions about the bureaucratic state do not hold and are indeed often inverted. The lines between the private and public spheres are blurred. While some power resides in the bureaucracy, personal power permeates—and usually dominates—formal institutions and bureaucratic processes, unlike in bureaucratic states that rely upon impersonal rules. Democratic institutions and practices, such as elections and mechanisms for oversight and accountability, may nominally exist, but are often substantively subordinate. Violence is inherent. Members of the elite—individuals with power to make decisions that affect populations—are the main actors. Elite bargaining—interactions among elite to determine allocations of power and resources—is the bedrock of political market systems. Coalitions are fluid—elite can compete one moment and collude the next, or indeed can do both simultaneously in different arenas of competition. Loyalty is bought and sold. Transactions are material, often violent, and usually zero-sum.

This is the superstructure organising political bargaining in these systems. It is through these channels that sanctions—if and when they bite—can impact political dynamics. This largely comes from material access to arms and money—the twin currencies of political power. These changes in elite access to arms and money impact the elite political competitors' capabilities vis-à-vis one another. Such changes in capabilities cause relative redistributions of power among elite actors in political market systems. Since elite bargaining in political market systems is based on bribery, threat and violence, individuals with relatively greater financial or coercive capabilities have greater bargaining power than those actors with relatively less capabilities.

Members of the elite, as well-informed and skillful actors with the goal to possess and maximise political power, will seek political arrangements that are the most advantageous to them. More powerful actors are likely to press their advantage by seeking political arrangements that reflect the new distribution of political power. Actors whose power is decreasing, or who anticipate their power to wane, will push against this. New actors may emerge (an example of this is how sanctions on the Assad regime in Syria pushed him toward closer and deeper alliances with Iran and Russia, thus increasing the relative political power of those actors vis-à-vis others).

The ensuing elite bargaining will be path-dependent and case-specific. It will be intimately connected to the neo-patrimonial institutional structures of the specific political marketplace.² Alliances are likely to shift. New (or old) frictions may emerge, with implications for violence, corruption, and manipulation of formal and informal institutions. Existing elite bargains—the temporary agreements among elite allocating power and resources—are likely to be upset, given the prevailing reality of turbulence.

Sanctions are unlikely to change a political system's fundamental rules, but they can disrupt the political status quo among elite actors, by pinching the political players' capabilities and the tools that are their disposal. In this way, *sanctions change how the game is played, not the rules themselves*. In other words, sanctions interact with domestic logics of political power to restructure elite power dynamics, which in turn shapes bargaining incentives, strategies and political outcomes.

The PMF Surfaces Policy Risks and Trade Offs

The PMF's theoretical vantage is particularly well-suited to assess whether sanctions' impacts might be positive or negative or in line with policy goals, as well as the stakes of particular policy actions (or inaction). This is because not only are the political impacts of sanctions most relevant in relation to transactional

² While the PMF outlines the general systemic rules, each system can contain its own particular institutional rules. For example, in some systems elite killings seem to be prohibited, but not in others. Similarly, some systems feature the widespread use of violence against civilians as a bargaining tool, while others do not.

political marketplace systems, sanctions can at times serve to *reinforce* the very mechanisms of the political market while further undermining institutional politics.

Illustrating this: it is widely known that members of an elite can benefit from sanctions politically, economically and militarily; these three issues, often functionally inseparable in the political market, can be taken one by one to make the broader point.

Sanctions can drive elite political cohesion even—and perhaps especially—in circumstances where sanctions designed to sow intra-elite divisions do in fact cause some degree of elite fracture. Widespread elite fracture is a common hope behind the imposition of sanctions. The idea is that sanctions will cause a sufficient number of elite defections (including, crucially, the military elite) to topple the system. This is rarely grounded in sound analysis and is, in effect, a one-time Hail Mary effort. If sanctions cause some defections but don't lead to regime disintegration (the most likely outcome), then the result is to have weeded out the least committed; the elite that remains in control now constitutes a smaller and tighter core. Since they no longer need to accommodate the more moderate factions (that have broken away), the remaining elite have less incentives for moderation or reform. In Venezuela, Iran and North Korea—where sanctions have been a factor in some elite defection—the post-sanction political landscape has solidified into a hardcore group committed to the system and their own joint survival. Insofar as a ruling elite collectively decides to resist or ride out sanctions rather than comply with their conditionalities—which is inevitable if those sanctions are intended to facilitate regime change—sanctions will incentivise a regime political economy based on illicit and rentier economic activities, in preference to a political economy based on licit and productive economic activities.

Travel bans can similarly cut in both directions in terms of conferring political benefits. It can be more than just an embarrassment or a nuisance for those elite who cannot walk into their international banks or meet with their partners and patrons abroad: it can empower those actors that can travel to build networks and fundraise. However, travel restrictions imposed to express disapproval over, say, a leader's human rights abuses or repression of domestic political opposition presumes the sanctioned leader cares what others think in the same way that the sender would (and shares notions of international prestige). The targets might, but often they do not, because they are enmeshed in fundamentally different political environments with different perspectives, goals and constraints. Case in point: the travel restrictions on Sudan's Omar al-Bashir boosted his domestic political support. Rather than assume the same motivations across senders and targets, it is more useful to evaluate how sanctions measures impact the sources of political power upon which targets rely in their specific political market.

Economic sanctions, commodity bans and financial measures can significantly change the political economy of sanctioned systems, but they cannot change the rules of the political market game. These measures often prohibit or push out legitimate businesses, licit actors and weaken competitive business markets. Yet, successful political entrepreneurs still need to fill their political budgets; thus, the search is on for new avenues of political finance. The most likely sources will be black markets, illicit economies and shady businesses willing to take on higher risk. Reconfiguration of central political economy drivers around illicit finance means that the benefits of these economic transformations will accrue to the most ruthless and capable members of the elite, while making them even less susceptible to outside pressures (including additional sanctions measures).

The imposition of arms embargoes particularly highlights the utility of the PMF logic as well as trade-offs associated with the use of sanctions. The common and straightforward logic of imposing arms embargoes is that violent conflict requires weapons, an arms embargo will limit access to weapons, and therefore, an arms embargo will make a conflict harder to conduct or less harmful. While intuitive, this is not necessarily correct. Empirically, arms embargoes can actually increase violence and harm against civilians, especially in the near-term as actors (in line with the PMF logic) are likely to press relative military advantages or pre-empt future disadvantages. Arms embargoes can also have further downstream consequences for violence against civilians. If, as a result of an arms embargo, an armed group can no longer control a resource rich territory, thereby losing the ability to finance itself by selling artisanal mined minerals, the armed group will seek other avenues of political finance; for example they may set up roadblocks to extort the local population, with violence including sexual violence increasing as a consequence.

Again, the point is not to assess whether sanctions “work.” It is to highlight the distributional impacts of sanctions and trade-offs. The question then becomes what those distributional impacts will be, how they will shape political market dynamics, and how elite will change their behaviour as circumstances change and in accordance with the PMF logic.

The PMF Makes Legible General Findings on Sanctions

Approaching sanctions with a political marketplace lens also makes sense of what is happening behind the curtain of statistical correlations regarding sanctions. Three examples illustrate this:

1. Economic sanctions are statistically correlated with destabilisation of political leaders under sanction.

From a political marketplace lens, leaders need to pay collaborators to stay onside and suppress competition. Sanctions can limit a leader's ability to do this, while increasing competitors' abilities to contest. This might result in decreased barriers of entry into the political market, one of many pathways toward destabilisation.

2. The *threat* to impose economic sanctions and arms embargoes, as well as the actual imposition of economic sanctions, is correlated—counter-productively and counter-intuitively—with an *increase* in the intensity of conflict violence.

A PMF analysis—according to which leaders take advantage of changes, or expected changes, in relative capabilities between their political competitors—makes this understandable. The expected change in the balance of power caused by sanctions would cause leaders to re-calculate their best options to maximise political power. The use of force could be an effort to pre-empt a decrease in their own power.

3. The imposition of arms embargoes is correlated with overall reductions in conflict violence (although there are often near-term spikes).

This is a straightforward recognition that material impacts push leaders in the political marketplace to behave differently. This is the same with the correlation between economic sanctions and shorter civil wars.

V. Questions to Guide Analysis of Sanctions' Impact in the Political Marketplace

The PMF is about how members of the political elite interact with one another, how they seek, gain, maintain and manage elite power relations, and how they react when political power dynamics change. With this in mind, the below questions help structure analysis of the impact of sanctions. The following questions are meant to be understood in conjunction with, and when appropriate applied alongside, the process and questions outlined in the PMF Methods Memo.

The overarching question is, what did sanctions do? This is different from the intention(s) of the sanctions measures and includes unintended consequences. In particular, insofar as the political system in questions functions as a political market, we can ask how sanctions impacted the key metrics of the political market. That is, as a result of sanctions, did the:

- a) Price of politics go up or down (or stay the same)?
- b) Barriers to entry go up or down (or stay the same)?
- c) Relationship change between using violence and money as a political transaction to gain and maintain political power and loyalty?

- d) Political budgets of main political entrepreneurs change (go up, down, shift from one sector/source to another)?

Sanctions can impact these metrics through the below four categories/mechanisms. Investigating these issues entails posing the above questions, as appropriate, as well as other specific questions, below, relying on a granular, expert-level understanding of the political dynamics of the system in question.

1) *Material Sources of Political Power*

Provided sanctions are well-designed and enforced, then it is likely there will be changes in relative access to material sources of political power—violent capabilities or political finance. Therefore, we can ask:

- a. Did sanctions change relative access to existing sources of violent capabilities and if so how? Did new sources emerge and if so how?
- b. Did sanctions change relative access to existing sources of political finance and if so how? Did new sources emerge and if so how?
 - i. What particular sectors and with what impact on overall political finance/political budgets?
- c. Did changes in the above affect the relative importance of particular sources of the material aspects of political power?

2) *(Re)distributions of Political Power*

Through any their material impacts, sanctions distribute political power; there are winners and losers. In a straightforward example, sanctions could increase the power of one warlord at the expense of another. However, this can happen in unexpected ways as well. In Liberia, an arms embargo that only focused on non-state actors (from 2009-16), dramatically strengthened then-President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and her government vis-à-vis political competitors. As a result, she manoeuvred to ensure basic firearms legislation (essentially a precondition for lifting the embargo) did not pass the Legislature; as a result the arms embargo remained in place far longer than it should have.

Actors “outside” of the political system are also relevant, particularly where there is no redistribution of political power. In these cases, it is likely that the principal power brokers were able to obtain support or material capabilities through other channels. Investigation how they did this, will likely illuminate other pathways for political power and highlighting other important actors. Sanctions on Bashar al-Assad and his associates increased Assad’s political reliance on Iran, and subsequently Russia, and consequently increased the clout of those two countries in Syria.

We can ask:

- d. Who were the “winners” and “losers”?
 - i. On what basis did the above win or lose, and by how much (did some actors get pushed out altogether?)
 - ii. Did sanctions affect changes in the relative control of specific elites over cash and violence?
 - iii. Were the “winners” new entrants (either internal or external to the system) or established players?
- e. If there was no (re)distribution of political power, why not?

3) *Intra-Elite Relationships*

This seeks to uncover whether and how elite relationships have changed as a result of sanctions. If changes occurred in access to the material sources of power, and there were subsequent redistributions of political power, then it is quite likely that the scope and content of intra-elite relationships and bargains have also changed.

Sanctions can fragment elite groups or can serve to cohere them, and this can happen in many context-specific ways. Sanctions in Sudan, some of the longest-lasting and most ambitious, served to consolidate the regime mostly by playing into non-material scripts as well as by tilting the field of economic competition in favour of crony capitalists to the disadvantage of the licit business sector. Russia has been similarly adept at using sanctions to shore up domestic political support. In Liberia, then-President Sirleaf convinced her competitors—many of whom were under travel and financial sanctions—that she could remove them from the lists. She then effectively bundled sanctions as part of broader political packages to keep competitors onside, often in exchange for political favours.

We can ask:

- f. Did sanctions change intra-elite relationships and if so how?
 - i. How did sanctions affect the use of cash or violence in the pursuit of political objectives?
 - ii. Were there changes in the patterns of bargaining between the different elites as a result of changes in control over sources of cash and violence?
 - iii. Did the basis for the collusion or competition change? (through violence, bribery, etc.)?
- g. Did the composition of elite coalitions change and if so how (that is did groups, cohere, fragment, see new entrants?)
- h. If sanctions did none of the above, why not?

4) *What happens when sanctions are removed?*

Imposing sanctions is only one side of the coin. Understanding the impacts of the removal of sanctions is important. Sanctions are theoretically temporary, but are often in place for quite some time (highlighting the fact that most systems under sanction are stubborn to political change). Liberia is one case where we can see how sanctions removal impacts political market dynamics. In 2009 the restrictions on timber export were eased, which re-opened an avenue for political finance that had long been used in Liberia (indeed, the very reason that this sanctions measure was imposed). Even though there were formal institutions in place to govern timber extraction and provide oversight, as a condition on the removal of the timber sanctions, Liberia snapped back to old practices—forestry exports became an avenue to fill political budgets. A lesson is that sanctions are unlikely to change fundamental patterns of political behaviour.

We can ask:

- i. How did the removal of sanctions change access to material sources of power (violent or financial)?
- j. Who stands to benefit (most/least) from the removal of sanctions?

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