Policy brief. Preventing Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: The Role of Sanctions

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Preventing Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: The Role of Sanctions

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Summary

Rising geopolitical tensions are fueling what appears to be a new nuclear arms race, marked by heightened nuclear proliferation risks and new pathways for illicit trade. Advances in cybercrime and cryptocurrency have further expanded the tools available to non-state actors and states alike, complicating global nonproliferation efforts.

Traditionally, countries have relied on sanctions to curb nuclear proliferation, often without fully accounting for the underlying drivers of such behavior. Yet, sanctions alone rarely achieve their intended outcomes and can even strengthen a targeted regime's resolve by reinforcing narratives of foreign hostility.

To reduce escalation and foster meaningful engagement, sanction-sending countries should adopt a more balanced approach that integrates sanctions with strategic inducements.

Key recommendations include:

- Provide clear, consistent and unambiguous communication regarding the policy of sanctions as well as inducements.
- Engage creatively to complement sanctions with clear and explicit policies of inducements.
- Ensure the implementation of agreements is supported by reciprocal monitoring and inspection mechanisms, with the option to reintroduce punitive sanctions if necessary.

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war, the attacks on the Iranian nuclear sites, and the likely expiration of US-Russia arms control agreements have precipitated concerns about a new nuclear arms race that can violate the spirit and content of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). These circumstances raise urgent questions on how to respond to potential nuclear arms proliferation. In this regard, sanctions are more relevant than ever, but there is an urgent need to review, revise and refine such measures. In particular, there is room to assess the delicate balancing act between coercive measures and positive inducements, as striking the right balance between them may increase the likelihood of non-proliferation. This balance is especially relevant when global emerging threats associated with illicit trade, cybercrime and cryptocurrency have amplified novel ways of circumventing sanctions. This policy brief aims to shed light onto a more creative use of sanctions which may also involve inducements, i.e., positive action.

Sanctions, between coercion and inducement

Traditionally, the United Nations (UN) has employed sanctions aiming to end civil wars, support peace processes and agreements, promote democratic rights, prevent international terrorism, and also to promote non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. The sanctions instrument has a particular role in the UN Charter and in the practice of the UN Security Council. Sanctions are also used by countries that wish to express an opinion and influence others through less expensive means than military interventions.

However, there are also a set of positive sanctions that may be used to engage with the rival party or state. They are also known as inducements, incentives or rewards for promised changes by the target state. Sanctions are mostly associated with negative, punishing behavior. However, the inclusion of inducements or positive sanctions[1] extends the concept to become a more comprehensive cache of possible actions in times of crisis.

Background research

This brief builds on the work conducted by Uppsala University's Alva Myrdal Centre for Nuclear Disarmament (AMC) (https://www.uu.se/en/centre/alva-myrdal) on sanctions related to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, as presented in Armend Bekaj and Peter Wallensteen, eds., *Sanctions for Nuclear Disarmament and Non-proliferation: Moving Forward*, (Routledge, 2024).

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and sanctions for non-proliferation

The NPT remains the most significant treaty for the promotion of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.[2] One of the cornerstones of this treaty is Article 6 which calls upon all parties to pursue negotiations in good faith towards "complete disarmament under strict and effective international control".[3] Such obligations, first and foremost, rest upon nuclear weapon states.

Some of the treaty provisions discourage states from developing nuclear weapons in exchange for inducements such as international support with developing nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.[3] To date, 37 countries have (or have had) the capacity to build their own nuclear weapons since the advent of this technology.[4] While nine of them currently possess nuclear weapons, the remaining 28 do not have nuclear capabilities because arguably they have achieved their security through other arrangements, such as joining alliances for their protection.

Furthermore, sanctions have not proven to be the panacea for preventing nuclear weapons development. Of the ten countries exposed to severe economic pressures (Table 1), only two actually gave up this option, Libya and South Africa, with the outcome for Iran still pending. Another two, Iraq and Syria, have relinquished this option following the application of sanctions combined with military action. The success rate of sanctions thus is in the typical range of 20-30% that have been reported for most other sanctions situations.[5,6] Also, the most typical effect of sanctions is the rallying-around-the-flag phenomenon, arising naturally and/or promoted by the incumbent government.

These examples show that the exposure to sanctions alone will not result in the desired outcome, except under special conditions. Instead, the focus has to be on the instrumental utilization of sanctions: sanctions policy as part of a longer process of negotiations. For this longer process to be successful, sanction-sending countries have to make it clear what the actions are meant to achieve. It could be clarified, for instance, if such measures aim at developing a possible economic rapprochement, or at offering certain security guarantees.

The power of inducements

Inducements become interesting because they include the application of praise, not only blame[7], and use soft power [8], not only coercion or military threat. There are significant dynamics when creatively using coercion versus inducements, which are often neglected or underestimated.

For example, a productive approach could be seen in the US actions in the talks with Iran leading into the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), where its concessions resulted in real negotiations.[9] It raises the question whether a state can engage in dialogue and provide incentives without being viewed as weak and naïve by its electorate as well as the target country's regime. These remain important questions to pursue while also using the insight generated from the Graduated and Reciprocated Initiatives in Tension (GRIT) reduction idea[10] and tit-for-tat drawn from game theory, which aim at reducing tensions between adversaries, thereby reversing the tide to achieve more constructive interactions. [11]

Table 1: Nuclear umbrella, sanctions and non-proliferation

Sanctions experience	Countries that acquired nuclear weapons and year of NPT deposition	Countries that did not acquire nuclear weapons and year of NPT deposition	
Not subject to negative sanctions and under nuclear defense umbrella (e.g. NATO, WP or other)	United States, 1970 United Kingdom,1968 France, 1992 Israel (no deposition)	Australia 1973 Canada 1969 Germany 1975 Italy 1975 Japan 1976 Norway 1969	Romania 1970 Saudi Arabia 1988 South Korea 1968 Spain 1987 Taiwan 1970
Not subject to negative sanctions and not under formal nuclear defense arrangement (at time of deposition)		Algeria 1995 Argentina 1995 Belarus 1993 Brazil 1998 Egypt 1981 Indonesia 1979 Kazakhstan 1994	Mexico 1969 Sweden 1970 Switzerland 1977 Ukraine 1994 Yugoslavia 1970
Known to be subject to negative sanctions and no external nuclear umbrella	USSR/Russia 1970 China 1992 India (no deposition) Pakistan (no deposition) North Korea 1985-2003	Iran 1970, NW capacity disputed Iraq 1969, NW capability eliminated Libya 1975, NW capacity ended South Africa 1991, NW capacity ended Syria 1969, NW capacity eliminated	

Source: Armend Bekaj and Peter Wallensteen, eds., *Sanctions for Nuclear Disarmament and Non-proliferation: Moving Forward*, (Routledge 2024), 178.

Additionally, the utility of shifting between different types of sanctions (negative as well as positive) for a negotiation process to be successful is an important conclusion when furthering non-proliferation. The interplay between sanctions and negotiations is quite unexplored and should be high on the policy agenda.

An additional aspect of sanctions for the targeted country has to do with the relative isolation from the rest of the international community. This repeats a finding from the general studies of sanctions: states and leaders do not relish being isolated from the rest of the world. Even if there is a "bunker mentality", as observed for instance in the way Apartheid South Africa resisted sanctions,[12] there is a desire and a need for exchanging with neighbors and other states, i.e., a need to have allies.

Moreover, no sanctions have completely sealed off a country in the way that a besieged town or smaller area could be during a war. There have always been routes around sanctions (smugglers are often seen as heroes in targeted countries, for instance), but they have seldom been sufficient to keep the economy at a 'normal' level. Novel means of illicit trade associated with international cybercrime and cryptocurrency seem to reinforce such routes.[13] Further, sanctions serve to reinforce the image of the outsiders as aggressive and uncompromising.

Inducements, on the other hand, are likely to have the opposite effect: some elements in the targeted country will see a benefit from moving beyond confrontation. They may serve to generate dissent within the targeted country and show the benefit of entering constructive discussions. The challenge for sender countries is how to strike a balance between negative and positive sanctions so as to reach the desired effect in the target country.

The ending of sanctions and the reintegration of formerly targeted states into the international community is a significant, additional issue. The promise of a return to 'normal' interactions may serve as an inducement for non-proliferation.[14] Ultimately, while coercive measures may yield some effects, lasting peace depends on eventually ending such measures and, when circumstances allow, turning toward inducements and cooperation.

Policy Implications

Current geopolitical dynamics reinforce societal concern that the world has entered a new nuclear arms race. The underlying lack of commitment of nuclear weapon states to adhere to NPT as a whole, including Article 6, can only serve to precipitate such a race. There are fears of a new phase of nuclear weapons proliferation as the US nuclear umbrella is no longer seen as credible as before. Further, Russia's war with Ukraine threatens the international sanctions regime against North Korea and Iran, as both these states have become providers of weapons and even soldiers to Russia. These circumstances increase the urgency of finding ways not only of preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons and its technology but also achieving actual disarmament.

With a deliberate, well-designed strategy, a dynamic and innovative application of sanctions as well as inducements can play a significant role in protecting the NPT and promoting the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. To achieve this end, sender countries should consider the following recommendations:

1. Provide clear, consistent and unambiguous communication regarding the policy of sanctions as well as inducements.

Past examples have shown that the sender countries have not displayed sufficient policy consistency on sanctions. For example, the US's stance vis-à-vis the development of nuclear programs in India and Pakistan veered greatly between coercion and tacit support. In addition, the sender countries need to be clear that their chief concern relates to the dangers of nuclear weapons proliferation. They need to assert that their policy is not driven by interventionist motives such as fostering regime change in the target country while at the same time it does not exclude the need for reforms.

2. Engage creatively to complement sanctions with clear and explicit policies of inducements.

Coercive measures alone may easily have the opposite effect – that of scaring off the targeted regime, of mobilizing internal support, or inadvertently pushing them to engage in clandestine proliferation activities. For this reason, the sender countries should complement sanctions with inducements as a way to initiate constructive negotiations and bring about breakthroughs in talks, including economic rapprochement and credible security guarantees from the sender and other nuclear weapons states.

3. Ensure the implementation of agreements is supported by reciprocal monitoring and inspection mechanisms, with the option to reintroduce punitive sanctions if necessary.

The post-accord period should include positive measures of the target's reintegration into the international community, such as rewards for agreements, appreciation from the sender country and a return to "normal" international interactions and even include the extension of favorable investments and development. These actions should also be followed with measures for increased transparency in the targeted society as well as in the sender country. As part of the agreement, the sender's action towards the target can also be independently monitored. Such agreements should clearly stipulate, however, the possibility of reintroducing punitive sanctions should the targeted country not hold its side of the bargain.

These findings indicate there are ways to promote non-proliferation of nuclear weapons without resorting to invasion (Iraq 2003) or military action (Iran 2025): negotiation and sanctions increase the likelihood of agreements that eliminate proliferation dangers and at the same time reduce international tension.

Endnotes

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