The party’s over for the use of sanctions? China and the Authorisation of Sanctions at the UN

Abstract

UN sanctions, their invocation and application, have never been uncontroversial. However, in the liberal heyday of the 1990s and early 2000s their use tended towards an emerging international consensus. Sanctions became more widely used and their use was increasingly being seen as both a tool of state grand strategy (Taylor, 2009) and a legitimate mechanism in seeking to achieve peace and security.

In the past two years, by contrast, the use of sanctions has attracted increasing controversy. The reporting of the mounting tensions over sanctions has focused on the role of China as the obstruction to the authorisation of sanctions at the UN. This is especially acute in the reportage of Sanctions regarding DPRK.

Does this mean that in the wake of China’s rise as a global power the party is over for the use of sanctions as a tool of international governance? This paper explores this question, drawing on the pattern of approaches of China to the authorisation of sanctions incorporating both documentary and interview data to assess whether the tool of sanctions, and the situations in which that tool may be used, are affected by the rise of China as a contributor to international governance.

Sanctions are increasingly important tools for the pursuit of peace and security. They have been used by the United Nations, European Union, and individual states, to dissuade or chastise states from particular courses of action deemed inappropriate by their peers.

Yet, despite the increasing use and significance attributed to economic sanctions, there has been remarkably little written on them. There are notable exceptions, such as the IISS paper by Brendan Taylor,1 which demonstrates both the interest and importance of a more developed analysis of their use and authorisation. David Cortright and George

---

Lopez both provide significant and important contributions to the debate in both academic and media forums.²

Indeed in looking at China’s approach to UNSC sanctions a particularly important contribution is provided by Joel Wuthnow in his book *Chinese Diplomacy and the UN Security Council*.³ In this text Wuthnow provides an elegant and clear discussion of the approach to sanctions by China across four different cases. Seeking to set out and explain why there is variance in the authorisation of sanctions across cases.

Despite the valuable contribution of Wuthnow’s work, and the existing literature and knowledge on sanctions more broadly, questions regarding China and sanctions persist. In particular, in the most recent episode of sanctions on the Democratic People’s Republic of Korean (DPRK or North Korea), newspaper reportage and TV commentaries frequently highlight the importance of China’s approach and its unpredictability. Indeed to date, contributions on China’s approach to sanctions in the academic literature focus on the cut and thrust of debate within the UNSC. Whereas, a continual stream of criticism of China’s approach in the popular press highlight that there is another compelling story – that of implementation – thus, in discussing China and sanctions it is necessary to investigate: authorisation, implementation, and intention.

This paper argues that the debates within the UNSC are only a part of the story in exploring China’s ostensible shifting stance on sanctions. There is a more difficult and complex story that emerges when attention is focused on the actions that take place after the council has authorised sanctions. In this story China’s identity as a schizophrenic power re-emerges as it needs to ‘speak’ to a number of audiences. China has to respond to calls for it to act as a responsible power, and also to a degree it has to be responsible to its ‘allies’. In satisfying these two audiences this paper argues that China is best described as a ‘learning power’. The implication of this is that the party may be over for the use of sanctions in the manner and for the purposes they have been used by liberal powers over the past two decades.

This paper is structured as follows: firstly, it sets out the approach and methods used in the paper; secondly, it sets out a brief overview of China’s approach to sanctions; thirdly, it looks at China and sanctions on the DPRK arguing that China has different aims and approaches in their use to the liberal powers; finally, it sets out implications for the future of sanctions as China becomes an increasingly important participant within the UNSC.