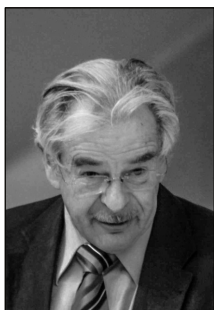


Sanctions kill silently – and miss their mark

On the credibility of neutrality

by Prof. em. Dr. Wolf Linder*



Wolf Linder.
(Picture ma)

Economic sanctions are among the most controversial aspects of the Neutrality Initiative. The false claim continues to circulate that the initiative prohibits all sanctions and deprives Swiss foreign policy of an important instrument.

Therefore, first, a clarification. The initiative does not ban

sanctions in general. However, it will in future restrict Switzerland's ability to join economic sanctions imposed by individual countries or by the EU. Only sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council will be followed: these are the only ones that can claim universal validity and consent. Switzerland is obliged to comply with these under international law. Of the 27 sanctions regimes currently observed by Switzerland, just over half originate from the UN Security Council, with the remainder mostly originating from the EU.

Does such a restriction to UN economic sanctions make sense?

The first question to ask is what sanctions are for. For those imposed by the UN, the answer is clear: economic sanctions are used to punish a country that does not adhere to the rules of the UN peace order. They are intended to persuade the sanctioned country to refrain from further violations of international law, such as the use of force or the threat of force against another country, or policies that violate human rights or facilitate terrorism.

Sanctions as the law of the strongest

Of course, it is not only the UN that imposes economic sanctions. Individual states or the EU also



Only the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council can claim universal validity and acceptance.
(Picture UN Photo / Eskinder Debebe)

resort to such measures. However, they often do not follow the logic of international law. Rather, they reflect unequal political power relations. The EU sanctions against Russia's war against Ukraine – a war in breach of international law – were imposed within days. By contrast, EU measures against Israel's decades-long violations of international law in the occupied West Bank are extremely rare.

Sanctions are often an instrument of unabashed power politics in the hands of the stronger party. The best-known example is the USA, and not just since *Donald Trump*. Since 1823, under the so-called *Monroe Doctrine*, they have assumed the right to intervene with sanctions and military action in South America to protect their own interests.

Unwelcome regimes are to be overthrown and replaced by governments that better serve US interests. A "regime change" policy such as that pursued by the US against Cuba violates international law, and the UN General Assembly has condemned it every year since 1992. This does not impress the US government in the slightest; on the contrary: in January 2026, President Trump tightened the total blockade against Cuba and justified it by citing a "state of emergency" in his country.

Other countries also succumb to the temptation to use sanctions as a means of exercising the might-makes-right principle. Human rights violations are then selectively invoked as a "duty to intervene". However, as in the case of Iran, this

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often serves only to conceal the underlying economic or geopolitical interests.

Criticism of sanctions

Sanctions policy is also criticised by academic voices, for several reasons.

- Firstly, they rarely achieve the desired success. This is demonstrated, for example, by the aforementioned case of Cuba. There, the economic boycott that the US has been waging against its small neighbour since 1962 has so far failed to achieve its goal: the regime of Castro and his successors continue to exist despite the sanctions. There are even those who argue that US sanctions have actually bolstered the regime, even though it is primarily the poorer sections of the population who have suffered greatly as a result of the economic boycott.
- Secondly: coercive measures rarely contribute to a peaceful resolution of the conflict; rather, they tend to harden positions. A notable exception is the overthrow of the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1991.
- Thirdly, as in the case of Afghanistan, economic sanctions are often merely a precursor to war.
- Fourthly, sanctions come at a high cost, not only in monetary terms but also in human lives. The renowned institute "The Lancet Global Health" estimates that over 500,000 people die each year as a result of sanctions. This exceeds the number of people killed by wars worldwide year after year.

Economic sanctions: a questionable instrument

There are therefore strong arguments against economic coercive measures. This is because they,

- if not imposed by the UN, often follow the law of the stronger state,
- affect the population rather than the government,
- lead to the population showing solidarity with the government rather than distancing themselves from it,
- rarely, if ever, achieve their goal of regime change,
- hardly ever lead to peaceful solutions, but on the contrary deepen and prolong inter-state conflicts,
- cost a great deal of money and result in many human casualties.

However, there are further reasons why a neutral country such as Switzerland should oppose economic coercive measures. For they

- jeopardise the credibility of neutrality,
- make our country an accomplice of one of the parties to the conflict,
- are detrimental to confidence in Switzerland's ability to contribute to the peaceful resolution of interstate conflicts.

The utmost restraint is therefore required when it comes to sanctions. This is why Switzerland only complies with United Nations sanctions that have universal support and which Switzerland is obliged to observe under international law.

Switzerland, however, does not comply with sanctions imposed by individual states, groups of countries or the EU, as these are supported by only a fraction of the world's nations and are mostly controversial. Unequal power relations determine who is sanctioned and who is not.

For example, serious violations of international law, such as the expulsion of Kurds or Palestinians, are condemned internationally but not sanctioned. Furthermore, national sanctions policies undermine the UN's efforts to establish a global peace order.

Under international law, Switzerland, like all other countries, retains the right to impose its own sanctions. However, the Federal Assembly has refused to include this option in the Embargo Act. This is arguably justified: such measures would be risky, hardly effective and would also contravene the peace-promoting principle of Swiss neutrality. In contrast, the text of the popular initiative "Preserving Swiss Neutrality" ensures that Switzerland does not become a profiteer of war: it takes measures to prevent the circumvention of economic coercive measures imposed by other states.

However, even a partial waiver of economic sanctions, as envisaged by the initiative, does not come without a cost. The European Union relies on its sanctions policy being followed by all, including non-members. Foreign policy pressure is to be expected, as in the case of the sanctions against Russia. Resisting it requires a steadfast government.

Conclusion

To this day, sanctions remain a political tipping point that reveals whether Switzerland is willing to pay a price for its neutrality or whether it is

prepared to abandon it. In the hands of the major powers, coercive measures are not an instrument of peace but rather reflect the logic of war.

The latter does not sit well with Switzerland. As a neutral and independent state, it is committed to non-violence, mediation and peace. Its tried-and-tested means are:

- Clear statements by the Federal Council and its representatives at the UN against viola-

tions of international law and the UN Charter of Peace;

- calling out violations, but impartially and towards all sides;
- increased efforts to resolve conflicts peacefully through mediation.

This is why we need the "Neutrality Initiative".

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")