

## **International Sanctions: Implementing a Biopolitical Vision of the International Order**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to examine the place of the use of economic sanctions in the liberal international order, and more specifically, the place of economic sanctions in the defence of the liberal international order against a foreign policy of a state deemed to be ‘deviant’. This article shows that the use of the term “sanction” – which implies the idea of punishment – instead of the realistic notion of coercive measure, manifests the use of a biopolitical vision of international relations – in which the actor who threatens the liberal order is similar to a threat to what it represents, to a *disease*. Biopolitics refers precisely to this medicalization of thinking as politicization of life in international relations. Discourses on sanctions are thus constructed using a medical vocabulary that often departs from the accepted meaning of sanctions. Analysing the discourses through the lens of biopolitics allows us to question the legitimacy of the international order and what contributes to its acceptance. Moreover, such medicalization of sanctions represents one of examples of the realness of Foucault’s concept of *neoliberalism as biopolitics*, i.e., as the process of fragmentation of *political sovereignty*.

**Keywords:** philosophy of international relations, philosophy of politics, biopolitics, medicalization of thinking, sanctions, international order, constructivism.

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**Международные санкции:  
воплощение биополитического видения международного порядка**

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**Аннотация**

В статье рассматривается роль экономических санкций в либеральном международном порядке, в частности, их применение для защиты либерального международного порядка против внешнеполитического курса государства, характеризуемого как «девиантное». Авторы доказывают, что использование термина «санкция», подразумевающего наказание, вместо более точного понятия «принудительная мера», свидетельствует о биополитическом подходе к международным отношениям, в рамках которого субъект, угрожающий либеральному порядку, отождествляется с *болезнью*. Биополитика в данном контексте представляет собой медикализацию мышления как форму политизации жизни в международных отношениях. Показано, что дискурс о санкциях конструируется с использованием медицинской терминологии, что часто противоречит общепринятому значению санкций. Анализ дискурса через призму биополитики позволяет критически оценить легитимность международного порядка и факторы, способствующие его признанию. Делает вывод о том, что медикализация санкций выступает одним из проявлений концепции Фуко о *неолиберализме как биополитике*, т.е. как о процессе фрагментации *политического суверенитета*.

**Ключевые слова:** философия международных отношений, философия политики, биополитика, медикализация мышления, санкции, международный порядок, конструктивизм.

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### Introduction

Every contemporary crisis, such as the Iranian nuclear crisis or the Russo-Ukrainian war, gives rise to the adoption of coercive measures (Kirkham, 2022). Coercion is the ability to make an actor (state, state leader, etc.) do what it does not want to do. Coercion thus includes all measures of dissuasion and constraint. The former is defined as a coercive strategy designed to prevent a target from changing its behaviour. The second refers to a coercive strategy designed to get the target to change its behaviour (Art and Greenhill, 2018: 4–5).

Faced with a policy of which they disapprove, liberal democracies thus use what is commonly called ‘economic sanctions’ to ‘punish’ the ‘deviant’ state, whether in foreign policy (Iran since 1995, North Korea since 2005, Russia since 2014) (Fayazmanesh, 2008) or in domestic policy (Myanmar since 1993, Cambodia since 2021). This use of sanctions – and in particular economic sanctions – is by no means new and dates back to the First World War, at the very moment when liberal democracy was asserting itself as the only ‘legitimate’ model to act on the international scene. Furthermore, *the use of sanctions*, this way, is *structurally interrelated with the liberal order per se*, which does not tolerate difference – and precisely its *totalitarian character appears as properly biopolitical*.

Specifically, the economic sanction in its current conception originates from the practice of the economic blockade which reached its climax between 1914 and 1917 against the German empire (Osborne, 2004). Woodrow Wilson called it “something more formidable than war” (Mulder, 2022: 1). The aim was to bring about *the total isolation* of the target state and then its asphyxiation in order to make it aware of the “right behavior” to adopt on the international scene. Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, adopted at the end of the First World War, contributed to transforming *the military policy of the economic blockade* into a *peacetime policy*, notably under the influence of the British Lord Robert Cecil and the French Léon Bourgeois. This transformation marked a turning point by opening the possibility of resorting to *coercive action in peacetime*.

This new contextual use of the blockade created a profound *ethical debate* among the Allied countries during the Great War, particularly between the United Kingdom and France. The point of tension was the question of the moral and ethical character of taking the war, or even waging it, to *the civilian populations*, who cannot be held responsible for the policies of their government. This question had arisen in relation to Hungarian and Russian affairs after 1918 (Mulder, 2022). Wilson’s idea was to use the economic blockade *to force the population to do a regime change*. From then on, the economic blockade and the population became an

integral part of *the total war: the population became both a target and an objective*. This transition from *the individual to populations* as the object of control, power and regulations is precisely the transformation of *politics to biopolitics* (Foucault, 2004). In the contemporary setting, we can observe how this concept is equally applied in the crisis in Ukraine, because the aim of Western sanctions is exactly to deprive *an entire population, i.e., of Russia*, of certain services and resources in order to make them stop supporting their own government and thus bring about a change in Russia's leadership that would lead to the end of military operations in Ukraine.

The use of economic blockade (now economic sanctions) in peacetime raises the question of whether it should be considered as an *act of war* and, further, does it, to say the least, highly contribute to *blurring of the difference between war and peace* – as a particular inversion of Clausewitz's "formula" and *implementation of biopolitics in practice*. The issue as whether it is an *act of war* first arose during the Corfu crisis of 1923 (Barros, 1965). For the British, sanctions such as the blockade constituted an act of war, whereas for the French, as long as they were not intended as such, they could not be considered as an act of war. The French position thus allows for *a constructivist interpretation* of the blockade and economic sanctions: reality does not exist as such, but is socially constructed, i.e. is the product of social interactions (Wendt, 1999). The sanction would therefore be more of *a police action* than an act of war. *Police action is always intended to serve the purposes of international order*. Hans Wehberg in his lecture at the Hague Academy writes that

It [the police] may, first of all, be used for the general or particular purposes of international administration. One thinks, for example, of the temporary occupation of a territory which is the subject of a dispute between two States, or of the lasting occupation of a territory placed under international control. Secondly, the international police can be used to enforce the provisions of international law, in particular to enforce arbitral awards; it is not necessary to ask whether the state that refuses to comply with the law is behaving belligerently. Finally, international policing can be used to maintain or restore peace without considering whether or not the war or threat of war has arisen from the violation of a requirement of international law (Wehberg, 1934: 7–8).

*Policing implies the idea that some behavior is permissible, and some is not, and this is the central point of tension that this article wishes to address*. Economic sanctions are not just about the projection of brutal force, they also *project political, social, and cultural values* and are, therefore, by no means *politically and normatively indifferent*. Moreover, it is precisely here that Foucault's elaboration on how *the police order* extends well beyond *its specialized institutions and techniques* finds its place as application of *biopolitics via neoliberalism*. In the contemporary context, Ranciere – in addition to reflecting upon the process of "*medicalization of thinking*" and the *tutorial attitude* of "democracy and its *doctors*" – goes even further in contrasting *policing to politics* (Ranciere, 2004). It is especially relevant to comprehend how this means that nothing is political in itself merely because power relationships are at work in it and that there is *a different, an entirely heterogenous, logic of politics* in comparison to *the policing logic*. Or, more accurately, *policing* refers to the *mentalities, rationalities, institutions,*

and organizations that impose order through *procedures such as coercion* and identifies groups, populations and states which need to be kept in their place. This is how the liberal international order represents a biopolitical vision in its theory and practice of policing.

In practice, when one state imposes economic ‘sanctions’ on another, there is a struggle for *legitimacy and respectability* on the international stage. The aim of the state taking the coercive economic measure is to make it appear, through the meaning conveyed by the word ‘sanction’, that the measure has been taken by *an authoritative body* (“doctors of democracy”) when in reality it is, in fact, *a unilateral measure* and, therefore, indisputably, a tool of power in the service of *a particular foreign policy*.

This tension between *the multilateral* and *the unilateral* is reflected in the Western use of the concept of “*the International Community*”. The justification for *all coercive measures* is found in the defense of the so-called “*values*” of the Community. In doing so, the discourse on ‘sanctions’ cleverly mixes and confuses the register of *legality and legitimacy*. This use of international law through the term ‘sanctions’ demonstrates the need to consider *law* as a discourse, as an instrument of legitimization, or, in other words *as an instrument of power* (Anghie, 2004; Chimni, 2017; Koskeniemi, 2004). This idea is reflected in the definition and use of the liberal international order since the end of the Cold War.

The defence of the liberal order raises the question of whether sanctions or the vocabulary of sanctions are, therefore, part of an illustration of a biopolitical vision of international relations.

The use of the term ‘sanction’, which implies the idea of punishment, instead of the realistic notion of coercive measure, shows the use of a biopolitical vision of international relations in which the actor who threatens the liberal order is similar to *a threat* to what it represents, to *a disease*. Discourses on sanctions are thus constructed using a medical vocabulary that often departs from the accepted meaning of sanctions (section 2). Analysing the discourses through the lens of biopolitics allows us to question the legitimacy of the international order and what contributes to its acceptance (section 3), even though it is the product of the interests of the most powerful (section 1).

### **1. Sanctioning reveals an international order dominated by liberal powers**

The most powerful states in the international system defend and promote their interests by establishing international institutions (Ikenberry, 2014). International institutions are the relatively stable set of formal and informal rules and norms that constitute widely recognised regulation and procedure in relation to the international system, the actors in the system (including states and non-state entities) and their activities (behaviour, cooperation, competition) (Voeten, 2021).

International institutions thus have three dimensions. In their normative dimension, they refer to international law. In their relational dimension, they concern the institutional structure of interactions between actors, particularly through international organisations. In their organisational or power dimension, they reflect the type of international order governing the

international scene. This order, the work of the great powers, enables them to protect and defend their interests by creating a legitimate authority (Lake, 2009). However, the concept of the international order can be approached from three angles: the number of poles, its nature or its logic.

The first approach, essentially linked to *the realist study of international relations*, seeks to determine, on the basis of the number of powers (poles), the type of order likely to best guarantee stability and peace (De Keersmaecker, 2017). Four types of order are then possible: apolar, unipolar, bipolar and multipolar. In this vision, the different poles are attractive to weaker states, creating blocks that will confront each other.

The second approach focuses on the nature of the international order, which can be either Westphalian, *i.e.*, based on sovereignty, the balance of power, weak institutionalization, and decentralization, or liberal, *i.e.*, based on economic openness, shared sovereignty (e.g., in practice, fragmentation of political and economic sovereignty), security, cooperation, democracy, trade, the peaceful resolution of disputes and the rule of law.

Finally, a third approach focuses on the logic of the order: stability, economic prosperity and even justice.

Consequently, any analysis of an international order, at a given moment, must take into account at the same time the realist concern of the politico-military balance, the liberal concern of the composition of international institutions, the constructivist concern of the domain of ideas and ideology, and notably the question of the existence of universally recognised common values (Sørensen, 2006).

The nature and form of the international order is thus linked to what realists call the distribution of capabilities on the international scene (Mearsheimer, 2014; Shiffrinson, 2018; Waltz, 1979), which leads to *de facto* emergence of a hierarchy between states (e.g., some being more powerful than others). It is up to these most powerful states, commonly referred to as the 'great powers', to manage the international system.

Since the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), the great powers have been self-assigned, and the international community has recognised the existence of special responsibilities, which initially consisted of preventing the emergence of new conflicts and protecting the sovereignty of states (Battistella et al., 2019). Great power status is a special kind of status: it goes hand in hand with higher expected task performance and a better capacity to solve regional and international problems (Brown, 2004; Cai, 2013; Forsberg et al., 2014; Petiteville and Placidi-Frot, 2013). The responsibilities associated with great power status have evolved with the international context (Nolan, 2006) to include the prevention (and punishment) of physical aggression (Morris, 2011) that violates international law (Jackson, 2000), to the prevention of potential human rights violations embodied in the recent concept of the responsibility to protect (R2P) (Evans and Sahnoun, 2002). The fulfilment of these roles leads to the recognition by other actors of the status of a great power. Indeed, a great power is a country that has been granted this status not only by its peers (the other great powers) but also by other countries. In exchange for assuming their responsibilities on the world stage, great powers must demonstrate their commitment to meeting these expectations, even if it is costly (Bukovansky et al., 2012; Nolan, 2006).

The international order is therefore not neutral. It must certainly maintain the stability of the international scene, but it is above all a tool for the dominant great power (or the dominant alliance) to maintain its domination (Gilpin, 1981; Kugler and Organski, 2011; Modelski, 1987). International rules can therefore be rewritten according to the interests of the dominant power (Dunne, 2003). They are accepted by some secondary powers, who are said to be satisfied with the status quo, because they are associated with the benefits of the existing order; on the other hand, they must be imposed, including by force if necessary, on secondary powers that are dissatisfied with the existing order and wish to substitute another order for it (called revisionist powers). One way for the dominant power to contain dissent is through the use of coercive economic measures, commonly referred to as ‘sanctions’.

The use of ‘sanctions’ reveals a will to power that can only be understood if one considers *the concept of power* not only in its *material dimension* (making certain resources or services inaccessible), but also in its *symbolic and ideological dimensions*, namely, *equally in reference to Foucault’s reflection on governmentality* (Foucault, 1995). This dimension of power has been used as a line of thought in critical approaches to international relations, notably by Steven Lukes (Lukes, 2004) and Robert Cox (Cox, 1983), which are, besides Foucault, also in line with Gramsci’s analysis (Gramsci, 2021). *Hegemony*, therefore, should not be analysed in conventional terms – as the domination of one military power over others – but as a *constellation of class forces, state structures and international organisations that preserve the domination of capitalism* not only by force alone but also by co-opting social movements and states that challenge the distribution of political and economic power. Thus, *economic sanctions are part of a will to ideological domination* since they contribute to *the creation and defence of a social norm*.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the idea of sanction in its semantics refers to the idea of a judged thing, a judgement rendered by an impartial court and sanctions a social behaviour considered as unacceptable. The objective is therefore twofold: *to punish an actor deemed to be deviant* (and the word “punishment” is important, as we will show in section III), but also to limit the room for manoeuvre of a rival power wanting to change the rules of the international system. Economic sanctions are thus an integral part of the tools of power available to the dominant power. However, the use of the term ‘sanction’, in an indeterminate way to encompass all measures taken against a state, hides under a legal terminology, often improper, *a will to impose its values and perpetuate the international order*.

## **2. The inappropriateness of the term ‘sanctions’ as a sign of a desire to impose liberal values**

The use of the term ‘sanctions’ in political discourse requires, in order to understand what is not said, a distinction to be made between sanctions adopted in a multilateral institutional framework (United Nations, etc.) and countermeasures decided by states (Bassett

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<sup>1</sup> The system of domination is reinforced by the preponderance of the ideas and values of the dominant. This creates a ‘false consciousness’, to use Engels’ expression, which prevents the dominated from recognising and rejecting their oppression. The power of the dominant ideology consists in making the dominated believe that they can only achieve their goal of improving their conditions within the existing system.

and Marossi, 2015). In both cases, they are coercive measures aimed at influencing the behaviour of a state deemed to be in violation of international rules.

However, the term ‘sanctions’ should be reserved for coercive measures adopted by an organ of an international organisation in accordance with its constitutive treaty (Abi-Saab, 2013; Leben, 1982). This conclusion is necessary because the measures are taken by an organ with the competence to adopt them in order to enforce the legal order of the organisation on member States. Therefore, the taking of sanctions by States derives from the decision of the organization (Sicilianos, 2004).

Article 41 of the United Nations Charter authorises the Security Council to take all measures not involving the use of force that are likely to “give effect to its decisions” and to “call upon Member States to apply such measures”. The latter are grouped under the generic term of sanctions, which are, as the report *A more secure world: our shared responsibility*

[i]n dealing preventively with the threats to international peace and security, sanctions are a vital though imperfect tool. They constitute a necessary middle ground between war and words when nations, individuals and rebel groups violate international norms, and where a failure to respond would weaken those norms, embolden other transgressors or be interpreted as consent.<sup>2</sup>

Sanctions applied may thus consist of collective measures, such as embargoes on all commodities<sup>3</sup> or arms, or targeted measures, designed to put pressure on individuals bearing primary responsibility for the outbreak and continuation of the conflict. These sanctions can be financial sanctions on the foreign assets of a country, a rebel movement, a terrorist organisation or a leader (Carnegie, 2015; Forlati and Sicilianos, 2004). They can also be restrictions on lucrative activities such as oil or diamonds. Whether individual or collective, the idea behind these sanctions is to target the activities of the actor to diminish its welfare or that *of its population* (Asada, 2020; Davis and Ness, 2022; Happold and Eden, 2016). This method of crisis resolution is, in a way, a psychological approach in that it seeks to break the will of the actors in order to impose on them a point of view that is external to them by using the symbolism that they cover as the emanation of the collective will.<sup>4</sup> The difficulty lies, therefore, in the choice of the appropriate constraint to bend the wills of the protagonists.

The logic of countermeasures is quite different: to compensate for the damage suffered by a State as a result of the breach by another of its obligations; their object is limited to putting an end to the wrongful act and, above all, they are adopted by the injured State. They thus illustrate the decentralised nature of the international scene, which is the basis for the ‘subjectivism of States in the interpretation and application of the rules concerning them’ (Sicilianos, 2004: 5).

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<sup>2</sup> ‘A more secure world: our shared responsibility’ Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, A/59/565, 2 December 2004, p. 51 par. 178.

<sup>3</sup> See for example against Iraq, S/RES/661 (1990), 6 August 1990.

<sup>4</sup> This can be read “Sanctions are a powerful expression of the collective voice and the collective will of the international community. As such, their symbolic impact is undeniable”. S/2007/734, 13 December 2007, Letter dated 12 December 2007 from the Permanent Representative of Greece to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council.



The objectives of the measures taken therefore derive from the nature of the wrongful act. Linos-Alexandre Sicilianos explains that

If the wrongful act is of a continuing nature, countermeasures are primarily aimed at putting pressure on the defaulting State to cease the conduct. If the wrongful act is instantaneous, the main objective is to obtain some form of adequate reparation. If the wrongful act is composed of a series of actions or omissions defined as a whole as wrongful, the reaction will tend to stem the repetition of the one-off acts in the future by inducing the perpetrator to break the offending chain. In the case of a serious breach of an essential obligation to the international community as a whole, countermeasures, in addition to their primary coercive purpose, may have an ancillary purpose: what is also important for States is to translate verbal condemnation into action in order to demonstrate their commitment to the transgressed norm by ‘defending’ it, as it were (Sicilianos, 2004: 16).

Having clarified the terminology, it is worth highlighting what sanctions and countermeasures have in common. Neither should be understood – contrary to what official discourse suggests – as the execution of international justice, but rather as an attempt to compensate for the absence of such justice by trying to influence the behaviour of the target state to bring it back into compliance with international rules (Sur, 2018). But whereas the decisions of international courts are based on the law, independence and impartiality of judges, countermeasures are based on the values and interests of those who take them. Far from being neutral and objective measures based on an indisputable interpretation of international law, they have a strong political dimension and are based on a *‘personal’ interpretation of the law*.

The use of the term sanctions instead of countermeasures is justified for the states that adopt them because, in addition to suggesting a collective decision, it also makes it possible to highlight the fact that these measures do not seek to compensate for personal harm, but to defend collective interests.

In order to highlight their true nature, it is preferable to use the term ‘unilateral coercive measures’. According to the definition used by Idriss Jazairy in his report, these are “economic, political or other measures imposed by States or groups of States to compel another State to subordinate the exercise of its sovereign rights to them in order to bring about specific changes in its general policy”.<sup>5</sup> However, as the Secretary-General of the United Nations pointed out in relation to the debate on economic measures used to exert political and economic pressure on developing countries, ‘international law does not provide clearly defined criteria as to what constitutes inappropriate economic measures’.<sup>6</sup> The use of unilateral coercive measures demonstrates the coexistence of competing rules in international law.

Instead of defending a generally accepted vision of international order, “sanctions” help to impose an interpretation of international order. Indeed, international law is most often understood as the capacity of international law to regulate international relations, i.e., to constrain the behaviour of states (‘the power of international law’). The power of international

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<sup>5</sup> *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the adverse effects of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights*, Mr Idriss Jazairy, A/HRC/30/45, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Note by the Secretariat of 25 October 1993, doc. A/48/345.

law can therefore affect the nature and extent of the influence of rising powers on international institutions. The hegemon uses its power to shape and reshape international law in its interests ('power in law').(Cai, 2013; Krisch, 2005).

From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the Hague Peace Conferences, the international legal order thus adopted the model of 'legalised hegemony' in which the superiority of the great powers is reflected in legal norms and institutions (Coates, 2016). The legal order then comprised a family of nations centred on Europe and a non-European zone of semi-sovereigns, unequal or uncivilised. Legalised hegemony was thus based on a certain relationship between power and culture. In Vienna, the European elite was able to come together thanks to common conceptions and the presumption of cultural superiority over non-Europeans (Heraclides and Dialla, 2015).

The reorganisation of the international order at the end of the First World War led to the adoption of *a liberal anti-pluralistic model*. This model postulated that the internal characteristics of a state were likely to determine its place in the family of nations (Fellmeth, 2000), which justified then the exclusion of an 'outlaw' like Bolshevik Russia from the League of Nations and the imposition of a punitive peace on defeated countries deemed to be criminals. Instead, at the San Francisco conference, a pluralist vision of the new international order prevailed (Simpson, 2004).

The post-Cold War era is characterised by the reintroduction of a number of postures such as democratic governance and liberal internationalism, all of which threaten the pluralist tradition of the UN Charter. This liberalism seeks to undermine the inclusive orientation of the international legal order and replace it with one in which the status of states depends on their adherence to certain individual rights and international norms. These ideologies thus lead to the construction of new categories of 'outlaws' that justify, with or without the support of the Security Council, the interventions of the major Western powers (Wagner et al., 2014). The stigmatisation of these 'outlaws' is achieved through the use of *a medical and moral vocabulary that illustrates a biopolitical vision of international relations*.

### **3. Sanctions as a revelation of a biopolitical vision of international relations**

The notion of 'sanction', because it is linked to the idea of a decision rendered by a court to punish an illicit action, implies a symbolic or even *a biopolitical dimension that can be linked to the liberal internationalist vision of international relations*. This vision of international relations relevantly comes from the interpretation of the writings of Hobbes, but likewise authors such as Montesquieu and Schumpeter (Schumpeter, 1984: 39-153). In Hobbes, the *bellum omnium contra omnes* in fact, structurally never ends, as the other is *a permanent threat* and, in consequence, *status civilis* is not all that different from *status naturalis*. Simultaneously, Paine, for instance, explains how war is intended to preserve the power and jobs of princes, statesmen, soldiers, and diplomats (Paine, 2008). War gives them the excuse to raise taxes, expand the state apparatus and their control over the population. Conversely, the people prefer peace by nature and only take part in conflicts under duress, forced by rulers they have not been able to choose. The disease of war can therefore be cured: if the disease (in the medical sense) is

the nature of government and its composition, the remedy is ‘simply’ to change them. The establishment of democratic institutions should break the power of the warrior class. In a so-called democratic government, decision-makers are accountable and owe their power only to the consent of the people. The need for the consent of the people will make war impossible, because the people do not like war. Hence the idea of Kant (Kant, 1991), the *foedus pacificum*, and liberals more generally, notably Michael Doyle (Doyle, 1986) and Bruce Russett (Russett, 1994), that international peace follows from the spread of democracy.

Russett offers two explanations for this. The first is cultural and normative. This explanation appeals to the internal political values of a democracy (the culture of compromise that characterises the resolution of political and social oppositions). When the democratic state is opposed to another country, which is also democratic, it knows that the other is also used to the peaceful settlement of internal conflicts and is sensitive to the same willingness to compromise. The opposite is not true when the other is a non-democratic state facing the risk of its adversary taking advantage of its propensity to settle conflicts peacefully, democracy rather than externalising its willingness to compromise, will prefer to demonstrate its strength and resort to it if necessary (Levy and Razin, 2004). The second is structural and institutional. In a democracy, the diplomatic-military decision-making process is characterised by the existence of constraints and of multiple actors taking part in the process (LeVeck and Narang, 2017). Before resorting to force, the government is supposed to inform public opinion, the media, face criticism, discuss with parliament, etc. However, if the adversary uses force, the government is not obliged to do so. On the other hand, if the opponent is not a liberal democracy, it is not required to be transparent or to convince its public opinion.

Democracy thus appears as the regime of peace, from which we conclude that it is not only institutionally superior, but also morally and medically superior; democracy is ‘good’ for the world, and anything that is not democratic is ‘bad’, a moral deviance, a disease to be fought. This is what made Francis Fukuyama write that liberal democracy is the end of history and that all that would happen afterwards would only be decline (Fukuyama, 2020).

This supposed moral and institutional superiority of liberal democracy would give it the right to manage world affairs and to sanction any deviant behaviour (de Broux, 2019).<sup>7</sup> This criterion of leadership is often the justification for the ‘humanitarian intervention’ policies of liberal democracies (Chesterman, 2001; Orford, 2003, 2011, 2013; Tesón, 2005; Wheeler, 2000).<sup>8</sup> There is thus a *biopolitical dimension to liberal democracy* and its actions on the international stage. According to Miguel de Larrinaga and Marc Doucet, such policies articulate governmental rationalities (and sometimes also narratives) with the stated aim of ensuring the health and well-being of populations (de Larrinaga and Doucet, 2011). This type of narrative is also built around implicit metaphor systems identified by George Lakoff (Lakoff, 2002, 2008, 2009). His study focuses on the context of American domestic politics and is structured around two main ideal types: the ‘strict father’ and the ‘nurturing parent’. The ‘strict father’ mentality is built around a punitive sensibility: individuals must follow strict rules and cultivate self-

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<sup>7</sup> This idea was found in the concept of ‘Civilised nations’ in the international law of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>8</sup> Military intervention justified in the name of moral principles: protection of civilian populations, stopping a massacre, etc.

discipline and a deep respect for authority. It is accompanied by a strong moral dimension: 'deviant' behaviour is unacceptable and must be severely punished. On the other hand, the 'nurturing parent' emphasises the need to empathise, support and protect others.

Economic sanctions are, therefore, part of this biopolitical approach to international relations. Economic sanctions serve first of all as punishment by putting the targeted state out of the international game (by limiting its access to certain resources or services; or even by seeking to disconnect it completely from international trade in the current case of Russia) in order not only to punish the state deemed deviant by liberal democracy but also to protect the international system from contagion (Gould-Davies, 2020; Kuzmarov, 2019). The purpose of sanctions is thus to exclude certain states from the international community. For liberal democracies, it is obvious that the international community can only be composed of liberal democracies and therefore consider any other form of regime as *illegitimate* (Kühnhardt, 2017; Pabst, 2019; Parsi, 2021; Sørensen, 2011).<sup>9</sup> Sanctioning would therefore allow the construction of a world composed exclusively of liberal states and, ultimately, *dissolve the distinction between liberal democracies and international society* (Buchan, 2013). Economic sanctions also allow for a response to the liberal vision of war. Indeed, war is the product of the presence in power of a bellicose government that the people have not chosen.

Therefore, economic sanction serves to show the population that their government must be overthrown, since its 'bad' behaviour deprives them of economic prosperity and well-being. The idea is that the disgruntled population will revolt and proceed to a regime change. If, on the other hand, the population does not revolt, then it is just as guilty as its government and deserves deprivation. This is especially true since there is a tendency to merge decision-makers with their population. The population must then also be defeated, punished (Lakoff's metaphor of the punitive father) so that it can then be educated in democracy and cured of its illness (Lakoff's metaphor of the nurturing parent).

However, the effectiveness of sanctions is not proven. To bend the will of the protagonists, the threat must be sufficient, credible, and serious for the targeted actor to feel that it is in his interest to comply in the face of the costs of continuing the offending behaviour. The actor must have more to lose than to gain by not following the prescriptions of external actors; indeed, Slobodan Milosevic's stance and the Rambouillet ultimatum must be analyzed in this light.

In this phase where the protagonists are testing each other, the motivations of the internal and external actors are therefore essential. The internal actors have to evaluate their change of attitude as having a higher interest than their original motivation. External actors must be determined to act more forcefully if their prescriptions are not followed (Freedman, 1998; Väyrynen, 2003). This raises the question of the effectiveness of such sanctions, as they often do not reach the targeted actor and therefore do not produce the desired results, especially, as in preventive diplomacy, in modern conflicts (Carment and Schnabel, 2003).

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<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, when the international community determines that a state is illiberal, it is not only excluded from the international community and considered illegitimate, but it is also likely to be denied its previously held sovereign rights.

The main problem with ‘sanctions’ is that in trying to reach the perpetrator of the damage, the perpetrator applies measures that, in fact, often reach the populations, or even the victims of the exactions (Cortright and Lopez, 1999; Parker, 2000; Simons, 1999). This weakness is found both in the case of the application of unarmed coercive measures and in the event that the use of armed force proves necessary. For example, the sanctions imposed on Iraq for more than ten years have had little effect on Saddam Hussein, but have caused the deaths of at least 600,000 children and undermined human security (Baram, 2000; Koc et al., 2007; Welch, 2002).

This process of coercive diplomacy gives a good conscience without risk, which Michael Mandelbaum has summarised as: “Punishing the innocent in order to express indignation at the guilty!” (Mandelbaum, 1999: 7). This highlights the fact that, in the majority of cases, political and economic sanctions do not guarantee the desired change of direction. This is all the more worrying because, in the case of massive violations of fundamental rights, the time factor is important, and sometimes there is not even time to wait for sanctions to produce their effect if we really want to protect the population; 100 days were enough to exterminate the 500 to 800,000 dead of the Rwandan genocide. Sanctions and their effectiveness are therefore assessed more on the basis of the values and emotions that underlie them than on the basis of reality (Kirkham, 2022: 7).

### **Conclusion**

This article sought to explore the issue of the use of economic coercive measures, erroneously referred to as ‘sanctions’, as a foreign policy tool. Thus, sanctions appear to be a coercive instrument linked to the liberal international order and mostly used by liberal democracies against states that they consider ‘deviant’ and that must therefore be excluded from the international game. Sanction is not only a coercive instrument, but also an integral part of a biopolitical vision of the international scene built around ideological and emotional principles. The use of sanctions is an integral part of an enterprise to legitimise strategic interests hidden behind legal and moral arguments (the defence of good against evil, the defence of the innocent victim against the aggressor).

The constructivist and biopolitical visions applied to the topic of sanctions help to illustrate their implications and the implicit visions of the international order and international law. For example, the relative silence on Azerbaijan’s aggression against Armenia and the absence of ‘sanctions’ against the United States for all its violations of international law since its ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Serbia in 1999 demonstrate the political and ideological character of coercive measures.

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