



THE DISCOURSE OF SANCTIONS: LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES IN EU AND US FOREIGN POLICY

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Abstract: This article examines the discourse of sanctions in the foreign policies of the European Union (EU) and the United States (US), focusing on the legitimization strategies employed by political leaders and institutions to justify the use of economic and political sanctions. Sanctions have become a prominent instrument of contemporary foreign policy, often presented as alternatives to military intervention and as tools for promoting international norms. Through discourse analysis, this study explores how EU and US policymakers construct narratives of legitimacy, morality, security, and international responsibility when imposing sanctions. The findings indicate that sanction discourse relies heavily on appeals to democratic values, human rights, international law, and global security. At the same time, competing interpretations of sanctions raise questions regarding their effectiveness, political motivations, and humanitarian consequences.

Keywords: sanctions, foreign policy, discourse analysis, legitimization strategies, European Union, United States.

Introduction

Economic and political sanctions have become central instruments of contemporary international relations. Governments and international organizations increasingly use sanctions to influence the behavior of states, political leaders, organizations, and individuals without resorting to military force. The European Union and the United States are among the most active actors employing sanctions as tools of foreign policy. While sanctions are often justified as mechanisms for promoting international peace, human rights, democracy, and compliance with international law, their implementation remains controversial. Supporters argue that sanctions provide a peaceful means of exerting pressure on governments that violate international norms. Critics, however, question their effectiveness and point to potential humanitarian consequences.

Sanctions as Instruments of Foreign Policy

Sanctions refer to restrictive measures imposed by states or international



organizations to influence political behavior. These measures may include economic restrictions, trade embargoes, asset freezes, travel bans, financial limitations, and diplomatic measures.

The EU and the US frequently employ sanctions in response to perceived violations of international law, threats to regional stability, human rights abuses, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation. In official discourse, sanctions are commonly presented as peaceful alternatives to armed conflict and as instruments designed to encourage compliance with international norms.

Over the past decades, sanctions have become increasingly sophisticated, shifting from comprehensive measures affecting entire economies to targeted sanctions directed at specific individuals, organizations, and sectors.

The Concept of Legitimation in Political Discourse

Legitimation refers to the process through which political actions are justified and presented as appropriate, necessary, or morally acceptable. In foreign policy discourse, governments must explain and defend their decisions to domestic populations, international partners, and global audiences.

Political communication scholars argue that legitimacy is often constructed through language, narratives, and symbolic representations. In the context of sanctions, policymakers seek to portray restrictive measures as necessary responses to international challenges rather than as acts of political coercion.

Legitimation strategies help political actors gain public support, strengthen alliances, and enhance the credibility of foreign policy initiatives.

Appeals to International Law

One of the most common legitimation strategies in EU and US sanction discourse is the appeal to international law. Political leaders frequently justify sanctions by referencing violations of international legal norms, territorial integrity, sovereignty, or treaty obligations.

By framing sanctions as responses to unlawful behavior, policymakers present themselves as defenders of the rules-based international order. Such discourse emphasizes accountability and portrays sanctions as measures designed to uphold legal standards rather than advance narrow political interests.

References to international law also strengthen the perceived legitimacy of sanctions among international audiences and partner states.

Human Rights and Democratic Values as Legitimation Strategies

Another prominent strategy involves appeals to human rights and democratic principles. EU and US officials frequently argue that sanctions are necessary to respond to human rights violations, political repression, corruption,



or attacks on democratic institutions.

This discourse constructs sanctions as moral instruments intended to protect vulnerable populations and promote universal values. By emphasizing ethical concerns, policymakers seek to establish a moral justification for restrictive measures.

Human rights narratives are particularly effective because they resonate with broader international norms and contribute to positive self-representations of democratic states.

Security Narratives and Threat Construction

Security concerns constitute another important component of sanction discourse. Governments often justify sanctions by presenting certain actors as threats to international peace, regional stability, or national security.

Through rhetorical strategies of threat construction, policymakers emphasize risks associated with terrorism, armed conflict, cyberattacks, nuclear proliferation, or geopolitical aggression. Sanctions are then framed as preventive measures necessary for maintaining security and stability.

Security narratives frequently combine legal, moral, and strategic arguments, creating comprehensive justifications for foreign policy actions.

Humanitarian Considerations and Discursive Challenges

Although sanctions are often presented as targeted measures, critics argue that they can produce unintended humanitarian consequences. Economic restrictions may affect access to food, medicine, healthcare, and essential services in sanctioned countries.

In response to such criticisms, EU and US policymakers increasingly incorporate humanitarian language into sanction discourse. Official statements often emphasize humanitarian exemptions and efforts to minimize harm to civilian populations.

This demonstrates how legitimization strategies evolve in response to criticism and changing international expectations regarding ethical foreign policy conduct.

Differences Between EU and US Sanction Discourse

While the EU and the US frequently cooperate on sanctions, differences exist in their discursive approaches. The European Union often emphasizes multilateralism, international cooperation, and collective decision-making processes.

US foreign policy discourse, by contrast, frequently places greater emphasis on national security, strategic interests, and leadership responsibilities in maintaining international order.

Despite these differences, both actors rely on similar legitimating themes,



including democracy, human rights, international law, and global security. These shared narratives contribute to transatlantic cooperation in foreign policy implementation.

The Role of Media and Public Diplomacy

Media communication plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of sanctions. Government officials use press conferences, policy statements, diplomatic speeches, and social media platforms to explain and justify sanction policies.

Public diplomacy efforts seek to influence international audiences by presenting sanctions as responsible and necessary actions. Effective communication helps policymakers maintain support for sanctions and counter alternative narratives promoted by targeted states.

Consequently, sanction discourse extends beyond governmental institutions and becomes part of broader global debates about legitimacy, power, and international governance.

The Effectiveness of Legitimation Strategies

The success of sanction policies often depends not only on economic impact but also on the credibility of the narratives supporting them. Legitimation strategies help governments secure domestic approval, strengthen international partnerships, and reinforce policy coherence.

However, the effectiveness of these strategies varies depending on political context, media representation, and public opinion. In some cases, competing narratives challenge official justifications and raise questions regarding fairness, selectivity, and geopolitical motivations.

Therefore, discourse remains a critical dimension of sanction politics and foreign policy implementation.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that sanctions are not merely economic or political instruments but also discursive constructs shaped by processes of legitimation. The European Union and the United States employ a variety of rhetorical strategies to justify sanctions, including appeals to international law, human rights, democratic values, security concerns, and humanitarian responsibility.

These narratives help policymakers present sanctions as legitimate and necessary responses to international challenges while strengthening support among domestic and international audiences. At the same time, debates surrounding effectiveness, selectivity, and humanitarian consequences illustrate the contested nature of sanction discourse.

Understanding the language of sanctions contributes to a broader



understanding of contemporary foreign policy, international legitimacy, and the role of discourse in global governance. Future research should continue examining how sanction narratives evolve in response to changing geopolitical conditions and emerging international challenges.

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