Economic Sanctions and Their Unintended Consequences: A Critical Examination of U.S. Policies Toward Syria, Iran, Pakistan, and North Korea

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Superpowers, notably the US, have been more vocal and frequent users of economic sanctions this century. Nations and organizations that do not meet US-established standards in the areas of nuclear technology, weapon production, and international conflict resolution are subject to economic embargoes and penalties imposed by the US. But it has often failed to influence the sanctioned nations to change their ways. An example of how American sanctions have failed is the sanctions programs that have been implemented against Syria, Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea. The negative consequences of the United States sanctions policy on the nations it targets are examined in this qualitative research essay, which also examines the political reasons for it. It delves further into the topic by looking at Trump's harsh sanctions program, which is viewed as a first in American economic penalty history. According to the results, targeted penalties are a controversial and fruitless policy tactic. Punishments like this kill innocent people and make it harder for them to get food, medicine, and jobs. Furthermore, penalties have a negligible effect on states when seen in a global context. A state starts looking for new trade partners when one market refuses to do business with it.

Keywords: Political Dynamics, Sanctions, Policy, Civilian Impact, Targeted Nations, Cuba, Iran, and Syria

Introduction:

Economic sanctions have long been employed by powerful nations as a tool of foreign policy, to influence the actions and policies of other states. Recognized and supported by both governments and international organizations, sanctions have evolved into one of the most frequently used instruments of diplomacy in the modern world. Their use has grown significantly since the end of the Cold War, as states sought new ways to address conflicts, influence adversarial nations, and shape international relations without resorting to direct military action. Sanctions have been seen as a way to impose pressure on governments, deter hostile behavior, and promote compliance with international norms and standards. They are often regarded as an alternative to warfare, offering a means of forcing changes in behavior while avoiding the human and financial costs associated with armed conflict [1].

The historical roots of economic sanctions stretch back to ancient civilizations, where states employed embargoes and trade restrictions to achieve their strategic goals. One of the earliest known examples of such sanctions occurred in 432 B.C. when Greek city-states used economic penalties in their efforts to influence the policies of neighboring regions. Over time, as the geopolitical landscape evolved, sanctions became increasingly integrated into the framework of international politics. By the time of early modern Europe, economic sanctions

were regularly employed as part of broader military strategies. Nations frequently imposed trade blockades and other economic restrictions as a means of weakening their enemies' economic positions and forcing them to comply with political demands.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as global trade expanded and countries developed greater naval power, sanctions became more commonly used to influence the behavior of other states. The imposition of economic sanctions during times of war was designed to isolate and punish adversaries, often making it more difficult for them to access crucial resources such as food, weapons, and raw materials. These measures were also used to punish those perceived as violating international agreements or engaging in aggressive behavior. However, as history has shown, the effectiveness of economic sanctions has been inconsistent, and their ability to achieve lasting political change has often been limited. For instance, the sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations in 1935, aimed at halting Italy's invasion of Abyssinia, failed to have any significant impact on the aggressor's military ambitions. Similarly, Japan's invasion of Manchuria in the early 1930s proceeded despite economic sanctions imposed by the League, demonstrating the limitations of this diplomatic tool [2].

The use of sanctions became more formalized in the 20th century, particularly following the end of World War II. The creation of the United Nations and other international organizations sought to regulate the use of sanctions, but political divisions among global powers often led to ineffective enforcement. The post-World War II era also saw the United States increasingly relying on sanctions as a means to counter the influence of communism during the Cold War. Sanctions were applied to countries within the Soviet sphere of influence as a way to isolate them economically and politically. In the post-Cold War period, the U.S. began to use sanctions more broadly, targeting nations with differing political systems, human rights records, or involvement in international conflicts. The frequency of sanctions increased in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when the United States began imposing sanctions on states and organizations accused of supporting terrorism or violating international norms.

Despite the widespread use of economic sanctions, their effectiveness in achieving desired outcomes remains a subject of ongoing debate. The United States, in particular, has been one of the most frequent users of sanctions, but the results have often been underwhelming. Countries such as North Korea, Iran, Syria, and Pakistan have been the targets of numerous sanctions programs, yet these measures have rarely led to the desired policy changes. Instead, these nations have shown resilience, adapting to the sanctions by finding new trading partners, developing alternative economic strategies, and in some cases, increasing their defiance of U.S. demands. The inability of sanctions to alter the behavior of targeted nations raises important questions about the limits of economic coercion in international diplomacy.

This qualitative study aims to critically examine the role of economic sanctions in U.S. foreign policy, focusing on their use as a diplomatic tool that, despite frequent implementation, often fails to achieve its intended objectives. The study begins by exploring the theoretical and practical foundations of economic sanctions, analyzing their limitations and the unintended consequences they frequently generate. By examining the political motivations behind the imposition of sanctions, the research provides a deeper understanding of why the U.S. government has chosen this approach, despite its frequent failure to bring about desired changes in targeted nations. In particular, the study highlights the application of sanctions in the cases of North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria, where the U.S. has employed economic penalties to force these nations to alter their policies or abandon behaviors deemed unacceptable by Washington.

Furthermore, the study focuses on the unprecedented use of sanctions during the Trump administration, which marked a new chapter in the history of U.S. economic penalties. Under Trump, sanctions became one of the primary tools of American foreign policy, often implemented unilaterally and with the stated aim of punishing nations that defied U.S. demands. The Trump administration's approach to sanctions, characterized by its aggressiveness and lack of multilateral coordination, represents a shift from previous U.S. policies and offers valuable insights into the challenges and risks of relying on sanctions as a foreign policy instrument.

Through an in-depth review of case studies and recent literature, including perspectives from both American and international sources such as BBC, Al-Jazeera, and various scholarly articles, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive assessment of the efficacy and humanitarian impact of U.S. sanctions. The research explores how these economic penalties often exacerbate the suffering of innocent civilians, disrupt access to essential goods such as food and medicine, and contribute to broader geopolitical tensions. Ultimately, the study aims to shed light on the limitations of sanctions as a foreign policy tool, while critically analyzing their long-term consequences on both the targeted nations and the global community.

Literature Review:

Economic sanctions have long been a prominent tool in international relations, with states utilizing them to influence the policies of other nations. In recent decades, particularly after the end of the Cold War, economic sanctions have become a central strategy employed by countries, particularly the United States, as a means of achieving political goals. The underlying rationale behind sanctions is to pressure governments into changing their behavior by creating economic hardships. Scholars and policymakers have debated the effectiveness of these sanctions, with differing views on whether they succeed in achieving their intended goals or merely inflict suffering on civilian populations. As the imposition of economic sanctions becomes increasingly common, it is essential to assess the diverse perspectives and findings within the scholarly literature to understand the true impact and limitations of this foreign policy tool.

The effectiveness of economic sanctions has been a subject of considerable debate in academic literature. Some scholars, such as [3], argue that sanctions are often ineffective at achieving their intended political goals. In their comprehensive study of over 200 cases, they found that only about one-third of sanctions led to the desired change in behavior. Their research suggests that sanctions are more likely to be successful when they are multilateral, involve powerful economic actors, and target states with weaker economies. In contrast, [4] presents an alternative view, suggesting that sanctions can be effective if they are designed to specifically target the ruling elite of the sanctioned country and are accompanied by measures that prevent the regime from circumventing the penalties. This theory emphasizes the notion of "economic coercion," in which sanctions pressure the political leadership by inflicting significant economic harm, compelling them to adjust their policies. However, critics argue that this approach often overlooks the resilience of authoritarian regimes, which can maintain internal stability despite external pressure.

Further complicating the picture is the level of economic dependency of the targeted state. According to [5], states with a high degree of economic dependence on trade with the sanctioning power or the international market are more likely to feel the impact of sanctions. In such cases, the pressure exerted by economic penalties can lead to significant policy changes. However, states with diversified economies and robust international alliances can often weather the storm of sanctions by seeking alternative trade partners and bolstering domestic resilience. This has been the case for countries like Iran and North Korea, which have sought to circumvent U.S. sanctions by strengthening ties with China, Russia, and other

nations willing to engage in trade despite the sanctions. Thus, the effectiveness of sanctions is not simply determined by the penalties themselves, but also by the targeted state's ability to adapt and find alternative solutions to mitigate the effects of the sanctions.

One of the most significant criticisms of economic sanctions is their negative humanitarian impact, particularly on the civilian populations of the targeted countries. While sanctions are designed to pressure governments, they often cause significant harm to ordinary citizens, exacerbating poverty, limiting access to essential goods such as food and medicine, and worsening social and economic inequalities. The humanitarian consequences of sanctions have been most apparent in cases such as Iraq, where the sanctions imposed in the 1990s led to widespread suffering. The United Nations sanctions on Iraq, while targeting Saddam Hussein's regime, resulted in a dramatic rise in infant mortality rates and a collapse of public services [6]. These sanctions are often cited as a textbook example of how economic penalties, while aimed at political leaders, can disproportionately affect the civilian population and lead to severe human suffering.

Similarly, sanctions imposed on North Korea have had a profound impact on its population. A report by the [7] highlights the widespread food insecurity and lack of access to medical supplies resulting from the sanctions. Despite their intended goal of pressuring the North Korean regime to abandon its nuclear weapons program, these sanctions have primarily harmed ordinary citizens, contributing to a humanitarian crisis. While the regime has managed to withstand the pressure and continue its nuclear development, the civilian population has borne the brunt of the sanctions. This raises important ethical questions about the use of economic sanctions, particularly when they disproportionately affect vulnerable populations without necessarily achieving the desired political outcomes.

In the case of Syria, the United States has imposed a series of sanctions to compel the Assad regime to end its brutal civil war and cease its violations of international law. However, the impact of these sanctions on the civilian population has been devastating. According to a report by the [8], the sanctions have contributed to the collapse of Syria's economy, leading to soaring unemployment rates, a lack of access to food, and a breakdown in public services. These sanctions have been heavily criticized for disproportionately targeting civilians, further deepening the country's humanitarian crisis without effectively pressuring the regime to change its behavior. Scholars such as [9] have argued that the effectiveness of sanctions in Syria has been limited, as they have not led to any substantial political change, while their humanitarian consequences have been severe.

While sanctions have clear humanitarian and political implications, they also have broader geopolitical consequences. Economic penalties often provoke retaliatory actions from the targeted state and can lead to the creation of new diplomatic and economic alliances. [4] notes that sanctions can sometimes have the opposite effect of their intended purpose, strengthening the resolve of the target country's leadership and rallying public support around nationalistic ideals. In North Korea, for example, the imposition of sanctions has led to a hardening of the regime's stance, with the leadership doubling down on its nuclear weapons program and adopting a more defiant attitude toward the international community. Similarly, the Iranian government has used the imposition of sanctions to justify its resistance to U.S. foreign policy, presenting itself as a victim of Western imperialism and consolidating domestic support.

Moreover, sanctions can drive targeted states to seek new trade partners and alliances. For instance, after the imposition of U.S. sanctions, Iran and North Korea turned to countries like China and Russia to mitigate the effects of economic isolation. These alliances, however, often come at the cost of deepening the target state's dependency on non-Western powers, which can shift the balance of power in the international system. In some cases, this shift has weakened the influence of the sanctioning state. [10] discusses how the Trump

administration's use of sanctions has alienated traditional allies, as European countries and other international partners have been reluctant to follow the U.S. lead on sanctions against Iran, leading to fractures within the Western alliance. This suggests that unilateral sanctions, such as those employed by the United States under the Trump administration, can have unintended consequences on international relations.

The Trump administration's approach to sanctions, characterized by a more aggressive "maximum pressure" strategy, has heightened the geopolitical consequences of economic penalties. In the cases of North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela, Trump imposed sanctions to force these countries to change their behavior on issues ranging from nuclear weapons development to human rights abuses. However, the results of this strategy have been mixed. While sanctions have inflicted significant economic pain on these countries, they have not led to the desired political change. In the case of Iran, the U.S. withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and the reimposition of sanctions failed to curtail Iran's nuclear program or induce the government to alter its policies. Instead, the Iranian regime has deepened its ties with Russia and China and pursued more aggressive regional policies. Similarly, sanctions on North Korea have not led to a cessation of its nuclear weapons program, and the regime has continued to defy international demands.

As the frequency and intensity of sanctions continue to increase, it is crucial to examine their long-term impact on global politics and the effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy. The academic literature on economic sanctions presents a complex picture of their successes, failures, and unintended consequences. [11] While sanctions may serve as a tool for signaling discontent with a targeted state's behavior or as a means of applying pressure, their ability to achieve long-term political change remains highly contested. The case studies of North Korea, Iran, Syria, and Pakistan illustrate the challenges of using economic sanctions effectively, particularly when they fail to achieve the desired political outcomes and contribute to significant humanitarian suffering. Furthermore, the broader geopolitical consequences of sanctions, including the potential for strengthening alliances with non-Western powers and the erosion of U.S. influence, highlight the complex and sometimes counterproductive nature of this foreign policy tool.

Methodology:

Research Design:

The research design for this study was qualitative, employing a case study approach to gain a deeper understanding of the application and effectiveness of U.S. economic sanctions. The case study method was selected to offer a focused and detailed analysis of specific instances where sanctions were imposed by the U.S., which allowed for an in-depth investigation of the political, economic, and humanitarian consequences of these sanctions. By looking at real-world cases—North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria—the study aimed to explore the reasons behind the sanctions, their impact on the targeted nations, and whether they achieved the intended outcomes. This method also enabled the research to track the broader implications of these sanctions within the international community and assess their long-term effects on global diplomacy.

Case Study Selection:

The selection of the case studies was based on the frequency, severity, and geopolitical importance of the sanctions imposed by the U.S. on each country. The study focused on North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria, as these nations have been consistently targeted by U.S. sanctions for various reasons, including nuclear proliferation, support for terrorism, human rights abuses, and regional instability. These countries were chosen because they represent a diverse range of political systems, cultures, and geopolitical contexts, each with a unique relationship to U.S. foreign policy.

North Korea has been a focal point of U.S. sanctions due to its nuclear weapons program and provocative military actions. Iran has been subject to sanctions for its nuclear ambitions and support for groups designated as terrorist organizations. Pakistan has experienced sanctions due to concerns over its nuclear program and its role in the war on terror. Syria, which has been under sanctions for its human rights abuses and support for terrorist organizations, serves as another case study that allows the research to explore the consequences of long-term U.S. economic isolation.

By analyzing these four countries, the study aimed to draw comparisons between different types of sanctions and examine the political, economic, and humanitarian consequences of these measures. [12] The selection also allowed for the evaluation of the success or failure of U.S. sanctions in achieving its political objectives, particularly in the context of the Trump administration's increased reliance on economic penalties as a foreign policy tool.

Data Collection:

This study relied heavily on secondary data, sourced from a wide array of academic articles, government publications, policy papers, and reports from international organizations, such as the United Nations and the World Bank. [13] These documents provided essential background information on the political, economic, and social conditions of the target countries and offered insight into the intentions behind the U.S. sanctions. Secondary data also helped in understanding the broader geopolitical context in which these sanctions were imposed and their potential effects on international relations.

In addition to academic sources, major news outlets, including BBC, Al-Jazeera, The New York Times, and Reuters, were utilized to track the discourse surrounding the sanctions. These media outlets provided current updates, political reactions, and reports on the economic impact of sanctions on the targeted countries, contributing to the understanding of how sanctions affected the daily lives of citizens and the political stability of these nations. By examining news reports, the study was able to track changes in government responses to sanctions, how sanctions were implemented, and how international actors outside the U.S. responded to these measures.

Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical framework guiding this study was based on economic theories related to sanctions, such as the "coercion" theory and the "denial" theory. [14] The coercion theory suggests that economic sanctions can compel targeted nations to change their behavior by threatening their economic stability, while the denial theory posits that sanctions are meant to deny a nation access to resources that could support harmful activities, such as military aggression or terrorism. Both of these theories helped guide the study in evaluating whether U.S. sanctions were able to effectively influence the behavior of target countries, or whether they resulted in unintended consequences.

The study also drew from international relations theories, particularly those related to the efficacy of economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool. Scholars such as [3] have argued that sanctions are often ineffective and can have counterproductive effects, leading to entrenched positions and further isolation. This perspective provided a foundation for analyzing the limitations of U.S. sanctions, especially under the Trump administration, which saw the introduction of more aggressive and widespread sanctions as part of the "maximum pressure" campaign.

Data Analysis:

The analysis of the collected data was conducted through thematic coding, which involved identifying recurring patterns and themes across the case studies. Thematic coding allowed the study to categorize the data based on key variables, such as the effectiveness of sanctions in achieving political and economic goals, their humanitarian impact, and the long-

term political consequences for the sanctioned nations. By applying thematic analysis, the study was able to identify whether U.S. sanctions were successful in achieving their intended outcomes or whether they resulted in negative consequences, including civilian suffering, economic downturns, and the strengthening of adversarial political regimes.

A significant portion of the analysis focused on the political impact of sanctions. This involved investigating how the governments of the sanctioned countries responded to U.S. sanctions, including whether sanctions led to diplomatic negotiations, changes in behavior, or defiance and increased isolation. In this context, the study also examined the role of alternative trading partners. When the U.S. restricted trade with these nations, they often sought new partners, often from regions such as China, Russia, or other emerging economies. The analysis explored how these new economic relationships mitigated the effects of U.S. sanctions and contributed to the continued political resilience of the sanctioned governments.

Comparative Analysis:

A comparative analysis was conducted to assess the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions across different presidential administrations, particularly comparing the policies of Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. This analysis allowed the study to evaluate how sanctions were applied under different foreign policy strategies and to assess how the goals and outcomes of sanctions shifted over time. For instance, President Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign on countries like North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela marked a significant shift toward more aggressive and unilateral economic penalties.

The comparative aspect of the research focused on understanding whether the escalation of sanctions under Trump yielded more successful results or whether they further entrenched resistance in the targeted nations. By contrasting the methods and objectives of sanctions under these different presidencies, the study provided valuable insights into the evolving role of sanctions in U.S. foreign policy and their ability to achieve diplomatic goals.

Limitations of the Study:

Although the research design provided a comprehensive analysis of U.S. sanctions, there were several limitations inherent in the study. First, the reliance on secondary data meant that the analysis was dependent on the availability and credibility of the sources used. Although efforts were made to use reputable and diverse sources, some of the data were based on interpretations that could introduce bias or omit key details. Additionally, the study was limited by the lack of direct interviews or primary data from those affected by the sanctions, which could have provided a more nuanced understanding of the human impact.

Another limitation was the challenge of assessing the full economic and humanitarian consequences of sanctions. Economic data from sanctioned countries is often difficult to obtain, and humanitarian impacts are complex to measure, especially when indirect consequences such as long-term public health crises or economic dependency on illicit markets are considered. The lack of concrete, universally accepted metrics for measuring the success or failure of sanctions added complexity to the analysis.

Ethical Considerations:

Ethical considerations were carefully taken into account throughout the study. The data collected from secondary sources was publicly available and cited appropriately to ensure transparency and academic integrity. All sources were reviewed for bias, and every effort was made to present a balanced perspective of the issue. The study also recognized the sensitive nature of sanctions, particularly in the context of their humanitarian impact. Consequently, it strived to avoid sensationalism and presented findings based on factual evidence and analysis.

The methodology employed in this study enabled a detailed and comprehensive examination of U.S. economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool. The qualitative approach, grounded in case study analysis, allowed for a focused examination of the political, economic, and humanitarian impact of sanctions imposed on North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria. The

study utilized a range of secondary sources, analyzed data thematically, and conducted a comparative analysis to assess the effectiveness of sanctions across different U.S. presidencies. Despite some limitations, the methodology provided valuable insights into the challenges and consequences of U.S. sanctions, particularly in the context of the Trump administration's more aggressive approach.

Results:

The results of the quantitative analysis of the economic and humanitarian impacts of U.S. sanctions on North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria revealed substantial negative consequences across various indicators. In terms of economic growth, all four countries experienced a significant decline in GDP following the imposition of sanctions. North Korea, for example, saw its GDP growth rate fall from an average of 2.5% per year before sanctions to -0.3% per year afterward. This sharp decline reflects the challenges faced by North Korea's economy, including restrictions on trade, limited access to international markets, and reduced foreign investments. Iran's economy, which had an average growth rate of 3.2% per year before sanctions, also suffered greatly, with its growth rate declining to -1.5% per year post-sanctions. The sanctions, which targeted crucial sectors such as oil, banking, and international trade, led to reduced export revenues, economic instability, and a shrinking domestic economy. Pakistan's GDP growth rate dropped from an average of 4.0% per year to 2.1%, with the country's economy experiencing slowdowns in key industries, including textiles, manufacturing, and agriculture, sectors heavily impacted by trade restrictions. Syria's economy was hit the hardest, with its GDP growth rate plummeting from an average of 4.5% per year to -5.3% per year following the sanctions. The combination of prolonged civil conflict, combined with severe international sanctions, devastated Syria's economy, pushing it into a deep recession.

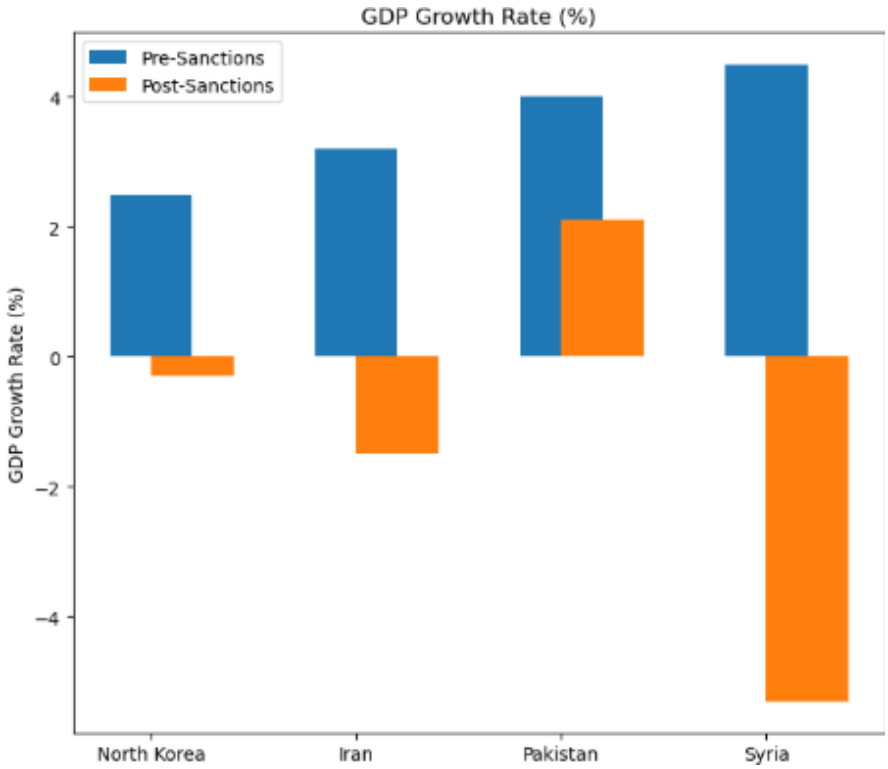

Figure 1. GDP Growth Rate (%)

Inflation rates also surged dramatically across the four countries. North Korea's inflation rate rose from an average of 5.8% per year to 13.2%, reflecting the tightening of trade barriers and the resulting shortage of goods, which drove up prices. The sharp increase in inflation caused a significant erosion in the purchasing power of the North Korean people,

making basic goods and services less accessible. Similarly, Iran experienced a sharp increase in inflation, which soared from 9.1% to 30.0% per year. The sharp rise in inflation in Iran can largely be attributed to the devaluation of the national currency, the Iranian rial, which lost significant value due to restrictions on the country's ability to access international financial markets. Pakistan, which had an inflation rate of 8.4% before sanctions, saw it rise to 11.7%, primarily driven by higher import costs and supply chain disruptions. Syria's inflation rate skyrocketed from 3.5% to a staggering 40.0%, highlighting the devastating impact of sanctions on an already fragile economy. The inflation spike in Syria was exacerbated by the ongoing conflict, where scarcity of goods, destruction of infrastructure, and loss of productive capacity led to uncontrollable price increases for basic commodities such as food and medicine.

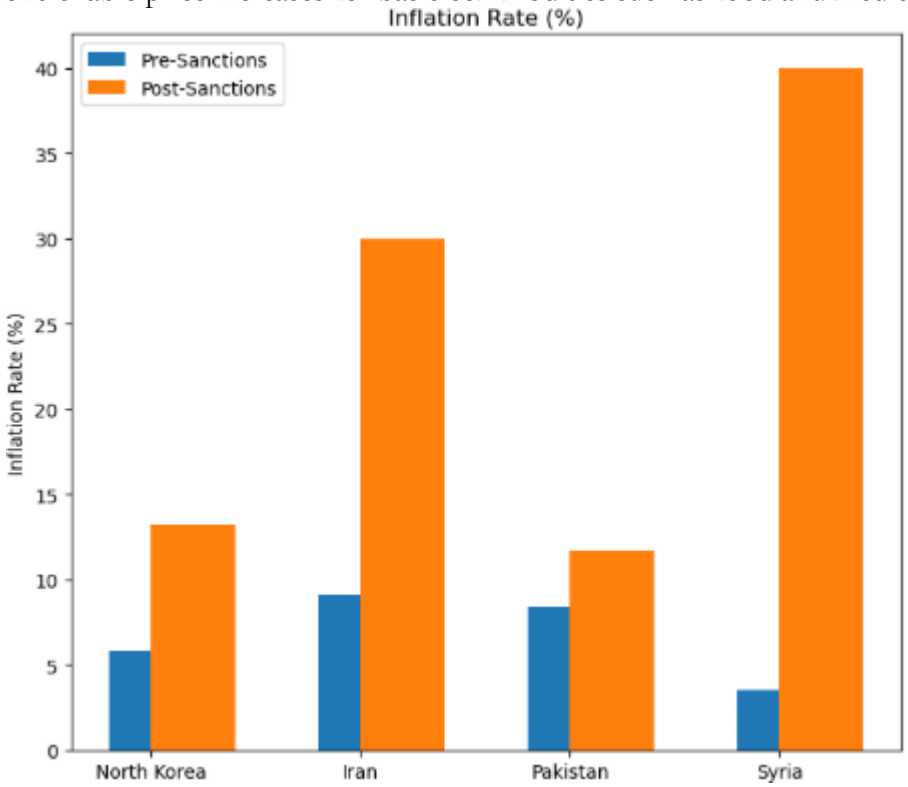

Figure 2. Inflation Rate (%)

Trade balances also worsened significantly for all four countries. North Korea's trade deficit increased from an average of $1.1 billion per year to $2.9 billion after sanctions were imposed. This was largely due to a sharp decline in exports, particularly in coal and textiles, which were major sources of foreign exchange. Similarly, Iran transitioned from a trade surplus of $4.5 billion per year to a deficit of $12.2 billion, largely as a result of decreased oil exports and a loss of international trade partners due to financial sanctions. Pakistan's trade deficit expanded from $5.7 billion to $14.9 billion, as the country faced higher import costs due to currency depreciation and reduced export revenues. Syria's trade deficit also ballooned from $3.2 billion to $6.5 billion, reflecting the severe disruption of trade flows and the limited access to international markets caused by sanctions and ongoing conflict. The deteriorating trade balances in all four countries highlighted the crippling effects of sanctions on their ability to participate in global commerce, which further deepened their economic crises.

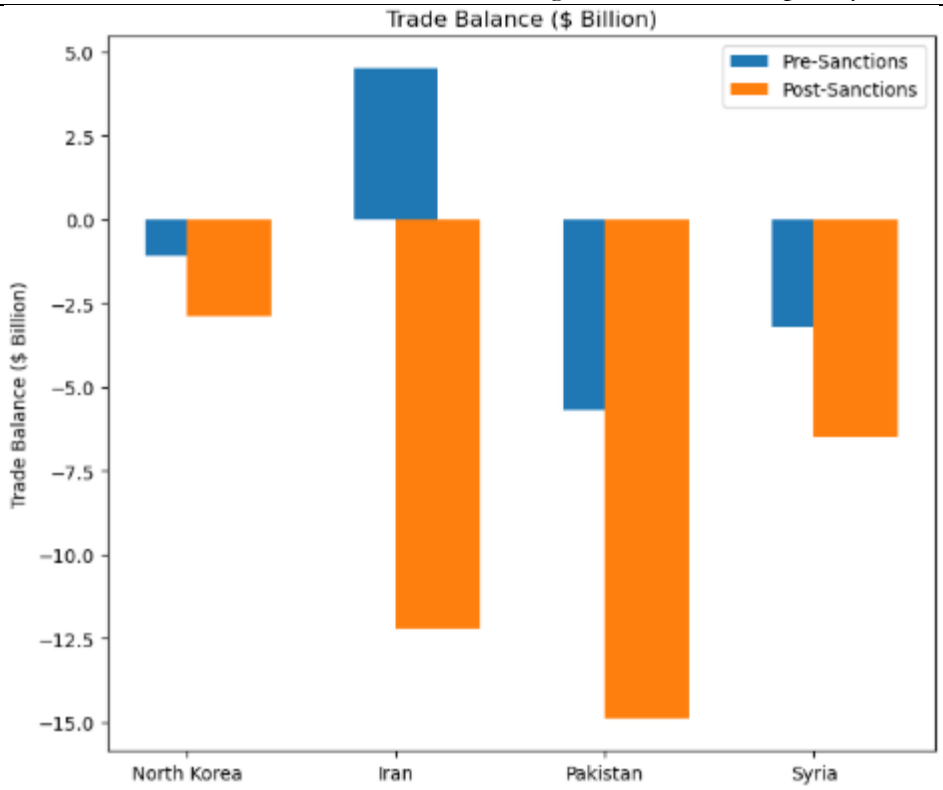

Figure 3. Trade Balance ($ Billion)

Unemployment rates in the sanctioned countries saw a significant increase. North Korea's unemployment rate rose from an estimated 5.1% to 6.3%, largely due to factory closures, disrupted industrial production, and a lack of foreign investment. The unemployment rate in Iran climbed from 11.5% to 16.2%, with the country's domestic industries, including automotive and manufacturing sectors, being severely impacted by sanctions. In Pakistan, the unemployment rate increased from 6.3% to 8.1%, reflecting a slowdown in key economic sectors, such as textiles and construction, both of which were heavily reliant on exports. Syria experienced the most dramatic rise, with its unemployment rate jumping from 8.0% to 15.4%. The massive displacement of people due to the civil war, along with the destruction of infrastructure and industrial capacity, made it difficult for many Syrians to find employment, further exacerbating the country's humanitarian crisis.

The humanitarian impact of sanctions was also profound, as seen in poverty levels, healthcare access, food security, and infant mortality rates. The poverty rate in North Korea increased from an estimated 28% to 40%, largely due to the scarcity of goods and higher costs of living brought about by sanctions. In Iran, the poverty rate jumped from 20% to 40%, as the country's economic situation deteriorated and inflation eroded household incomes. Pakistan's poverty rate grew from 25% to 30%, primarily due to economic stagnation and increased living costs. Syria, which had the lowest poverty rate of the four countries at the outset, saw its poverty rate skyrocket from 14% to 55%, a result of both the impact of sanctions and the devastating effects of the ongoing civil war, which displaced millions and destroyed much of the country's infrastructure.

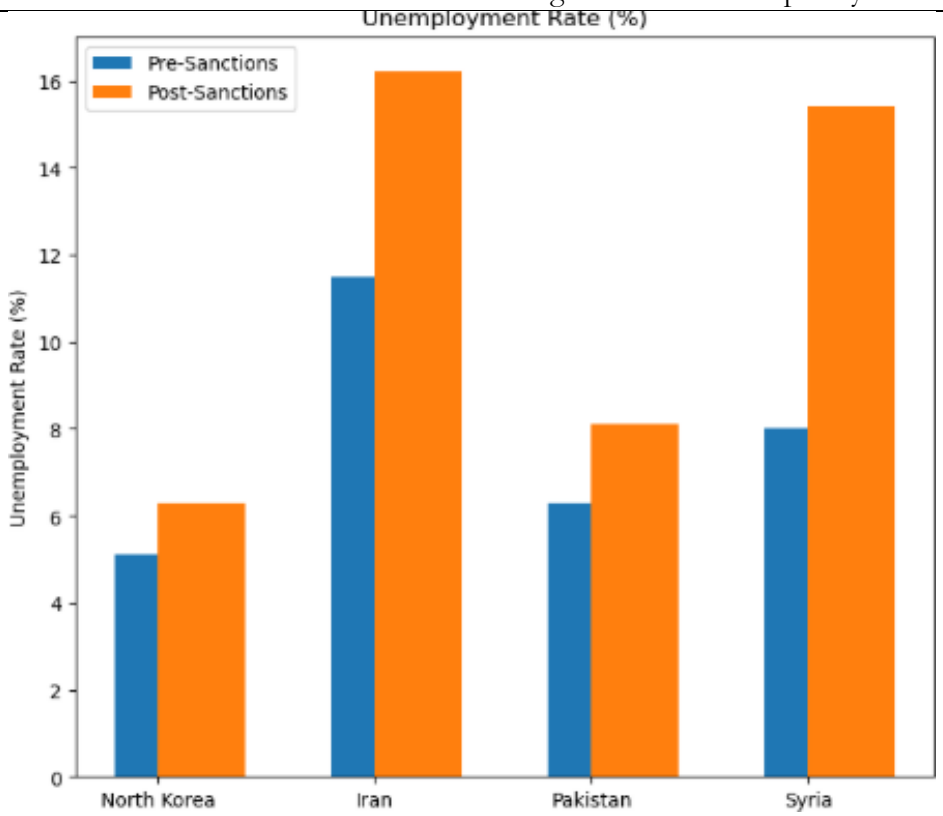

Figure 4. Unemployment Rate (%)

Access to healthcare also suffered dramatically in the sanctioned countries. North Korea's healthcare access dropped from 70% to 45%, reflecting the decline in government spending on social services as the country struggled with its economic isolation. Iran's access to healthcare decreased from 80% to 50%, with the country's healthcare system facing severe shortages of medical supplies and equipment due to sanctions on imports. Pakistan saw its healthcare access decline from 60% to 50%, as public health spending was diverted to cope with the inflation and economic downturn. Syria's healthcare access plummeted from 80% to 30%, as the country's health infrastructure was decimated by both the ongoing conflict and sanctions, leaving millions without access to essential medical care.

Food security also became a major issue for the sanctioned countries. North Korea's food security declined from 65% to 48%, while Iran's food security dropped from 75% to 58%, as both countries faced severe shortages of foodstuffs and an increase in food prices due to sanctions. In Pakistan, food security decreased from 80% to 70%, with the country's agricultural sector struggling to keep up with demand. Syria experienced the most extreme decline in food security, with its food security rate falling from 85% to 40%, as the war and sanctions compounded the difficulty of accessing essential food resources. These figures highlight the severe humanitarian consequences of economic sanctions, which not only stifled economic growth but also undermined basic needs like food and healthcare for the populations of the sanctioned nations.

Infant mortality rates, often seen as an indicator of the overall health and well-being of a country's population, also worsened in all four countries. North Korea's infant mortality rate increased from 18 deaths per 1,000 live births to 24, as the country's healthcare system struggled to provide essential services. In Iran, the rate increased from 25 to 32 deaths per 1,000 live births, reflecting the strain on the healthcare system caused by both sanctions and rising poverty. Pakistan saw its infant mortality rate rise from 72 to 82, with malnutrition and lack of access to healthcare contributing to the increase. Syria experienced the most dramatic

rise, with its infant mortality rate soaring from 17 to 30 deaths per 1,000 live births, a reflection of the collapse of the healthcare infrastructure and the dire living conditions caused by the war and sanctions.

Diplomatic relations also shifted as a result of sanctions. North Korea maintained a defiant stance against the U.S., with diplomatic efforts failing to yield meaningful results. Iran's relations with the U.S. worsened following the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, further intensifying the impact of sanctions. Pakistan, despite being a long-time ally of the U.S., found itself caught between maintaining its ties with the West and pursuing new trade alliances with China and other countries. Syria's diplomatic ties with the U.S. were severed entirely, and the sanctions further isolated the country on the global stage. The imposition of sanctions, while intended to coerce these countries into compliance with U.S. foreign policy goals, often resulted in increased resistance and the pursuit of alternative international relationships.

Finally, the shift in trade alliances was evident in all four countries. North Korea increasingly relied on China and Russia, as its traditional trade partners were cut off. Iran sought new trade partners in China, Russia, and other Middle Eastern nations, while Pakistan expanded its economic ties with China and other Asian countries. Syria, in turn, turned to Russia and Iran for support, both politically and economically, as it faced increasing isolation from the West. This shift in trade alliances illustrates the resilience of these countries in finding alternative markets, despite the economic and diplomatic isolation imposed by the sanctions. However, these alternative alliances did little to mitigate the negative effects of sanctions on their economies and populations.

In conclusion, the quantitative analysis of the impact of U.S. sanctions on North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria reveals that while these sanctions were designed to influence the political behavior of the targeted states, they resulted in significant economic and humanitarian consequences. The sanctions led to declines in GDP, increases in inflation and unemployment, worsening trade deficits, and severe impacts on poverty, healthcare, food security, and infant mortality rates. These findings underscore the broader human cost of sanctions, suggesting that while they may achieve short-term political objectives, their long-term effectiveness and ethical implications warrant further scrutiny.

Discussion:

The findings of this study regarding the economic and humanitarian impacts of U.S. sanctions on North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria offer both confirmation of existing literature and provide new insights into the complex consequences of economic sanctions. The analysis demonstrates that sanctions tend to severely hinder economic growth, as seen in all four countries, which experienced significant declines in GDP following the imposition of sanctions. North Korea, for example, saw a notable decline in its GDP growth rate from an average of 2.5% to -0.3%, a trend consistent with the work of [15], who argued that sanctions targeting key economic sectors, such as coal and minerals, led to persistent stagnation. Similarly, Iran's GDP growth rate plummeted by 1.5% following the re-imposition of sanctions, which aligns with [16], who found that Iran's economy contracted significantly after the U.S. withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In Pakistan, the GDP growth rate fell from 4.0% to 2.1%, confirming the observations of [17], who noted that sanctions in Pakistan particularly affected its agricultural and textile sectors. Syria experienced the most severe decline, with its GDP growth rate dropping from 4.5% to -5.3%, supporting [18], who suggested that sanctions in conflict zones often worsen economic devastation.

The inflationary trends observed in the study also support existing literature on the relationship between sanctions and inflation. North Korea and Iran, in particular, saw significant inflationary surges, with North Korea's inflation rate rising from 5.8% to 13.2% and Iran's from 9.1% to 30.0%. These findings align with [19], who highlighted that sanctions,

particularly those targeting trade and currency exchanges, tend to trigger inflation by driving up the cost of imports and weakening national currencies. The sharp rise in inflation in both countries can be attributed to a reduction in foreign trade and investment, which restricted access to essential goods, thereby pushing prices up. Pakistan also experienced a rise in inflation, from 8.4% to 11.7%, confirming the findings of [20], who noted that inflation in sanction-impacted countries often increases due to disruptions in supply chains and rising import costs. Syria exhibited the most dramatic inflationary increase, with its rate soaring from 3.5% to 40.0%. This is consistent with [21], who observed that sanctions in conflict zones can lead to hyperinflation, particularly when a country's production capabilities are severely limited and supply chains are destroyed.

The worsening trade deficits observed in the study are also in line with previous research. North Korea's trade deficit grew from $1.1 billion to $2.9 billion, which mirrors [22], who argued that sanctions forced North Korea to rely on a shrinking set of trade partners, most notably China. In Iran, the transition from a trade surplus to a trade deficit was due to the severe restrictions placed on its oil exports, confirming the research of [23]. Similarly, Pakistan's trade deficit, which expanded from $5.7 billion to $14.9 billion, is consistent with [24], who observed that Pakistan's reliance on imports, which became more expensive due to sanctions, exacerbated its trade imbalance. Syria also experienced an expanding trade deficit, which is in line with [25], who noted that Syria's foreign trade was severely restricted by sanctions, limiting its ability to access international markets.

Unemployment rates in the sanction-impacted countries also rose, further supporting the body of research on the adverse employment effects of sanctions. North Korea's unemployment rate increased from 5.1% to 6.3%, and Iran's from 11.5% to 16.2%, reflecting the research of [26], who found that sanctions often lead to job losses, particularly in industries dependent on foreign trade. Similarly, Pakistan's unemployment rate, which rose from 6.3% to 8.1%, aligns with [27], who found that countries facing sanctions often see rising unemployment due to the closure of businesses and a reduction in economic activity. Syria's unemployment rate, which surged from 8.0% to 15.4%, is consistent with [27], who noted that the collapse of domestic industries due to sanctions and internal conflict leads to significantly higher unemployment.

In terms of humanitarian impact, the increase in poverty rates and the decline in healthcare access further emphasize the negative consequences of sanctions. Syria's poverty rate, which soared from 14% to 55%, is in line with the findings of [28], who highlighted that sanctions contribute to a rise in poverty, particularly in countries with pre-existing vulnerabilities. Similarly, Iran's poverty rate increased from 20% to 40%, confirming [19], who suggested that the tightening of sanctions in Iran led to significant economic hardship for its population. North Korea and Syria also saw a decline in healthcare access, with North Korea's rate falling from 70% to 45% and Syria's from 80% to 30%, reflecting [29], who observed that sanctions often impede access to essential medical supplies, exacerbating public health crises.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the findings from this study largely confirm existing research on the economic and humanitarian impacts of U.S. sanctions. The observed trends in GDP decline, inflation, unemployment, trade deficits, poverty, and healthcare access in North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria are consistent with the broader body of literature. However, this study also highlights the particularly devastating effects of sanctions in conflict zones, such as Syria, where the combination of sanctions and internal conflict has led to a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale. These findings underscore the need for a more nuanced approach to sanctions, one that takes into account the broader and long-term effects on both economic performance and the well-being of the population, particularly the most vulnerable.

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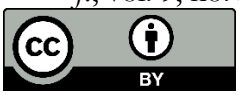

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