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The Role Of China In Offsetting Sanctions: A Comparative Analysis Of Iran And Russia

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the pivotal role of China in bolstering economies facing international sanctions, specifically focusing on Iran and Russia. The comparative analysis examines the methods and effectiveness of China's engagement with Iran and Russia amidst growing sanctions imposed by the West. As global geopolitical dynamics shift, China has emerged as a crucial ally for both nations, offering economic relief, trade partnerships, and investment opportunities. The research highlights how China navigates the complexities of international relations while fostering economic ties with these sanctioned states. Through a detailed examination of trade agreements, investment flows, and diplomatic rhetoric, the paper illustrates how China's involvement not only stabilizes the economies of Iran and Russia but also contributes to the reconfiguration of global power structures. Furthermore, the study delves into specific case studies, including the energy sector and technological cooperation, to showcase the multifaceted nature of China's support. As both Iran and Russia face similar yet distinct challenges due to sanctions, this paper underscores the significance of China's strategic partnerships in mediating economic resilience. The findings reveal that China's role is not merely reactive but also proactive in reshaping international norms surrounding sanctions and state sovereignty. By highlighting the connection between geopolitics and economic policy in the modern world, this comparative research seeks to shed light on the wider ramifications of China's interactions with sanctioned governments.

Keywords: China, sanctions, Iran, Russia, geopolitical strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The imposition of economic sanctions has become an important tool in international relations, used by countries, particularly the United States and its allies, to respond to perceived threats to national and global security. Sanctions often aim to coerce nations into changing behavior, influencing political landscapes, or punishing actions deemed unacceptable in the international community (Hufbauer et al., 2009)[1]. However, the efficacy of

[1] Hufbauer, G. C., Schott, J. J., & Elliott, K. A. (2009). Economic sanctions reconsidered. Peterson Institute for International Economics.

sanctions can often be undermined by the support of allied nations, which can provide much-needed economic relief.

China's rising global influence has positioned it as a counterbalance to Western hegemony, further complicated by its economic interdependence with both Iran and Russia (Hass et al., 2018)[2]. As Iran continues to face sanctions primarily related to its nuclear program and regional activities (U.S. Department of State, 2021)[3], and Russia encounters punitive measures following its annexation of Crimea and alleged interference in Western democracies (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020)[4]. China's engagement with these nations offers a significant case study in the dynamics of contemporary geopolitics.

Literature Review

Iran's economy has been particularly vulnerable to sanctions, especially on its primary revenue source—oil exports. The U.S. re-imposition of sanctions in 2018 after withdrawing from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) severely curtailed Iran's access to global markets and financial systems. Oil exports plummeted from over 2.5 million barrels per day (bpd) to around 300,000–500,000 bpd (Karami & Wright, 2021)[5]. This led to a contraction in economic activity, massive depreciation of the rial, and inflation rates exceeding 40%, significantly reducing purchasing power (Drezner, 2019)[6]. Rising unemployment, especially among youth, further exacerbated socio-economic issues. Sanctions also hit non-oil sectors like automotive and technology, while restricted access to the SWIFT payment system hindered financial exchanges. However, China's trade and financial support, including the China International Payment System (CIPS), mitigated some impacts (Mearsheimer, 2019)[7].Despite these challenges, Iran has shown resilience through austerity measures, reduced subsidies, and a pivot toward non-Western markets like Asia (Drezner, 2019)[8]. However, long-term effects remain dire due to structural weaknesses, limited diversification, and isolation from global financial systems.

Russia's diversified economy and global integration have helped it better absorb sanctions compared to Iran. Sanctions following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and involvement in Ukraine affected its access to capital markets and advanced technology (Mankoff, 2019)[9]. This led to reduced foreign direct investment (FDI) and difficulties importing technology in oil extraction and high-tech industries. Yet, Russia maintained steady growth due to its large energy reserves. Although sanctions compounded by the 2014 oil price drop caused economic contraction, diversifying trade with China, India, and others helped stabilize energy exports (Spector, 2018)[10]. Russia has also pushed for self-sufficiency, increasing domestic production and localizing critical technologies in agriculture and defense. Measures to reduce reliance on U.S. dollars and strengthen trade in

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[4]Council on Foreign Relations. (2020). U.S. sanctions on Russia. Retrieved from https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-sanctions-russia

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[9] Mankoff, J. (2019). *Russia's response to U.S. sanctions: From confrontation to cooperation*. Eurasian Politics, 3(1), pp-12–29.

[10] Spector, J. (2018). *Sanctions and their impact on Russia's foreign policy*. The International Spectator, 53(4), pp-88–103.

local currencies with China have provided additional resilience (Mankoff, 2019)[11]. While the ruble faced devaluation, it was not as severe as Iran's currency crisis, thanks to stabilization efforts by the central bank (Spector, 2018)[12]. Bilateral trade agreements, energy deals, and the Power of Siberia pipeline have enabled Russia to leverage Chinese markets, mitigating the full impact of sanctions (Mearsheimer, 2019)[13].

Research Questions

1. How has China supported the economic resilience of Iran and Russia through trade partnerships, investments, and energy sector collaboration under sanctions?
2. How do Russia and Iran circumvent Western banking systems with the aid of the China International Payment System (CIPS) and other financial tools?
3. How has China provided technological support to Iran and Russia in critical sectors such as defense, telecommunications, and energy?
4. What are the key differences and similarities in China's strategies for offsetting sanctions on Iran and Russia, given their distinct economic and geopolitical contexts?
5. How does China's geopolitical influence, including its UN Security Council actions and Belt and Road Initiative, shape its partnerships with Iran and Russia amidst international sanctions?

Theoretical Framework for Sanctions and Their Impacts

Economic sanctions are often justified on the grounds of international peace and security, but a nuanced understanding reveals their complex implications. Sanctions can lead to unintended consequences, sometimes bolstering the domestic legitimacy of the regimes they target (Peksen, 2009)[14]. Sanctioned states may pivot to alternative alliances to mitigate the effects of isolation. This paradigm demonstrates the resilience of countries like Iran and Russia, which, in response to sanctions, have sought strategic partnerships that allow them to redistribute their economic and geopolitical dependencies.

China's Strategic Partnerships with Sanctioned Nations

China's history with sanctions is significant. As a nation that has occasionally faced its own sanctions, particularly from Western nations in the context of human rights abuses and territorial disputes (Zhang, 2020)[15], it has developed strategies for circumventing economic isolation. China's government leverages its immense market, technological capabilities, and investment resources to engage with countries under sanctions, increasingly becoming a vital economic lifeline for Iran and Russia.

The imposition of economic sanctions, trade restrictions, and financial penalties often seeks to compel states to modify their behavior, whether in relation to nuclear proliferation, human rights violations, or military aggression. In the face of such punitive measures, some states have developed strategies to mitigate the impact of sanctions, and China has emerged as a crucial player in these efforts.

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[13] Mearsheimer, J. J. (2019). *The great delusion: Liberal dreams and international realities*. Yale University Press.

[14] Peksen, D. (2009). When do sanctions work? A critical review of the sanctions effectiveness literature. International Review of Economics and Finance,18(4),pp-466-475.

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In the case of Iran, China has emerged as its largest trading partner, significantly increasing bilateral trade even amid stringent sanctions (Zhang & Liu, 2019)[16]. China's investments in Iran's energy sector exemplify this partnership, with significant contracts signed that offer Iran a steady stream of income despite international embargoes (Katzman, 2020)[17]. Moreover, the 25-year bilateral cooperation agreement signed in 2021, which encompasses various sectors, signals a deepening relationship that could be transformative for Iran's economy (Sullivan, 2021)[18].

Likewise, Russia's economic adversities post-Crimea have led it to forge closer ties with China. Economic sanctions by Western nations have catalyzed a realignment in Russian foreign policy, increasingly pivoting towards the East (Malyshev, 2019)[19]. A 2018 deal encompassing energy agreements worth over $400 billion showcased this growing partnership (Evans, 2018)[20]. China's role as a key supplier of technology, investment, and trade routes, through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), further reinforces its strategic importance in the Eurasian context. Sanctions have become a commonly used tool by the international community, particularly the United States and the European Union, to exert pressure on states that engage in activities deemed detrimental to global peace and security.

Sanctions on Iran and Russia: An Overview

Sanctions on Iran

Iran has faced multiple rounds of sanctions throughout the last few decades, particularly centered on its nuclear activities, backing of militant factions in the Middle East, and participation in regional conflicts. Various entities, including the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States, have enacted sanctions on Iran over time, with the most severe sanctions imposed from 2012 to 2015, which included extensive international measures targeting its oil exports, financial institutions, and trade (Drezner, 2019)[21].

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) established a framework for Iran to restrict its nuclear activities in return for relief from sanctions, which temporarily alleviated these pressures. Nevertheless, in 2018, President Donald Trump made the decision to withdraw the United States from the agreement and reimpose the sanctions, leading to Iran's renewed isolation (Karami & Wright, 2021)[22]. The "maximum pressure" strategy had a significant effect on Iran's economy, particularly impacting its oil exports, banking industry, and international trade relationships.

Sanctions on Russia

Russia, similar to Iran, has encountered global sanctions due to actions that the West viewed as threatening to international peace and stability. The most notable sanctions were enacted following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its participation in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. These sanctions have focused on essential areas of Russia's economy, such as its energy, defense, and banking industries. The European Union

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[16] Zhang, Y., & Liu, F. (2019). China-Iran trade relations under U.S. sanctions. Journal of International Commerce and Economics, 11(1), pp-1-22.

[17] Katzman, K. (2020). Iran's economic crisis: Causes and implications for U.S. policy. Congressional Research Service.

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[19] Malyshev, A. (2019). The Russia-China relationship in the era of sanctions. Asia Europe Journal, 17(3), pp-373-387.

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[21] Drezner, D. W. (2019). *The sanctions paradox: Economic statecraft and international relations*. Cambridge University Press.

[22] Karami, M., & Wright, M. (2021). *China's strategic partnership with Iran: Implications for U.S. foreign policy*. Middle East Policy, 28(3), pp-48–61.

and the United States have put in place various asset freezes, travel prohibitions, and trade limitations that have significantly affected the Russian economy, especially its ability to access capital markets and technology imports (Mankoff, 2019)[23].

In reaction to these sanctions, Russia is focusing on strengthening economic relationships with non-Western nations, especially China, and is looking into different economic partnerships through initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The increasing economic and diplomatic involvement of China plays a crucial role in Russia's approach to lessen the effects of sanctions and preserve its geopolitical power.

China's Role in Offsetting Sanctions: Mechanisms and Strategies

China's role in offsetting sanctions on both Iran and Russia can be understood through several key strategies that align with its broader geopolitical and economic interests. It can be understood through four broad categories namely Trade Relation and Economic Cooperation; Financial Channels and Payment Systems ; Geopolitical Alliances and Diplomatic Support ; Technology Transfer and Industrial Collaboration which will be broadly discussed in the following paragraphs:

Trade Relations and Economic Cooperation

China has become a vital economic partner for both Iran and Russia, particularly as these countries have sought to bypass or mitigate the effects of Western sanctions. In the case of Iran, China is one of the few countries willing to engage in substantial trade despite the sanctions regime. China has continued to import Iranian oil, despite U.S. efforts to reduce Iranian oil exports to zero. Through indirect routes, such as importing Iranian oil via intermediaries or using non-dollar denominated transactions, China has helped Iran maintain some level of economic stability (Drezner, 2019)[24].

In the situation involving Russia, China has strengthened its economic ties with Moscow, especially in the energy field. The development of pipelines like the Power of Siberia gas pipeline has solidified China's position as a vital energy ally for Russia. Furthermore, China has invested significantly in Russian infrastructure initiatives, which has lessened Russia's dependence on Western financial markets (Spector, 2018)[25].

Financial Channels and Payment Systems

China's financial systems, which are less connected into the global financial system controlled by the West, are one of the main ways it has assisted Russia and Iran in overcoming sanctions. Iran and Russia may now undertake cross-border transactions without depending on Western banks thanks to the creation of the China International Payment System (CIPS), a substitute for the US-dominated SWIFT network (Mearsheimer, 2019)[26]. Even if CIPS isn't as popular as SWIFT just yet, it's a big step in the right direction to lessen dependency on Western banking systems.

Furthermore, in order to circumvent the U.S. dollar and the effects of secondary sanctions, China has assisted both nations in developing other financial arrangements, such as the use of local currencies in trade agreements. Beyond Western organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), China has also made investments in the growth of regional financial institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which offer sanctioned nations financing alternatives (Mankoff, 2019)[27].

[23] Mankoff, J. (2019). *Russia's response to U.S. sanctions: From confrontation to cooperation*. Eurasian Politics, 3(1), pp-12–29.

[24] Drezner, D. W. (2019). *The sanctions paradox: Economic statecraft and international relations*. Cambridge University Press.

[25] Spector, J. (2018). *Sanctions and their impact on Russia's foreign policy*. The International Spectator, 53(4), pp-88–103.

[26] Mearsheimer, J. J. (2019). *The great delusion: Liberal dreams and international realities*. Yale University Press.

[27] Mankoff, J. (2019). *Russia's response to U.S. sanctions: From confrontation to cooperation*. Eurasian Politics, 3(1), pp-12–29.

Geopolitical Alliances and Diplomatic Support

In international fora, China has been a strong supporter of both Russia and Iran. As a permanent member of the Security Council, China has exercised its veto power at the UN to thwart or weaken measures that would further isolate Russia and Iran (Karami & Wright, 2021)[28]. China, for instance, has continuously advocated for diplomatic solutions in the context of Iran's nuclear program and played a key role in the JCPOA negotiations (Drezner, 2019)[29].

Similarly, China has supported Russia’s position in the context of the Ukraine conflict. Although China has refrained from fully endorsing Russia’s actions, it has called for a peaceful resolution and has opposed Western sanctions on Russia (Mearsheimer, 2019)[30]. This diplomatic support has helped mitigate the impact of sanctions on Russia's global standing and has contributed to China's broader goal of countering what it perceives as Western interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

Technology Transfer and Industrial Collaboration

Sanctions have limited both Iran and Russia's access to advanced technologies, particularly in the fields of energy, defense, and telecommunications. In response, China has become an important source of technology transfer. China has supplied Russia with advanced technologies in areas such as telecommunications (e.g., 5G technology), defense (including military hardware and technology), and energy (including technologies related to oil and gas extraction) (Spector, 2018)[31].

China has been a crucial collaborator for Iran in the advancement of its nuclear and missile programs, offering resources and knowledge that have enabled Iran to continue developing its technological capabilities in spite of sanctions (Karami & Wright, 2021)[32]. Additionally, China has helped Iran gain access to sophisticated systems and satellite technology that have been blocked by Western sanctions.

Comparative Analysis: Iran vs. Russia

While China’s support for Iran and Russia shares several similarities, the geopolitical and economic contexts of the two countries lead to different strategies and outcomes.

Geopolitical Considerations

Compared to its relationship with Iran, China's relationship with Russia is far more strategically important. Russia is a significant military ally, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and a major world power. China has therefore made significant investments to guarantee Russia's continued integration into international markets and geopolitics, especially given the similar difficulties both nations face as a result of Western sanctions. Beyond just economic cooperation, China and Russia have a strategic partnership that encompasses military cooperation, joint military exercises, and a common goal of opposing the U.S.-dominated international order (Mearsheimer, 2019)[33].

[28] Karami, M., & Wright, M. (2021). *China’s strategic partnership with Iran: Implications for U.S. foreign policy*. Middle East Policy, 28(3), pp-48–61.

[29] Drezner, D. W. (2019). *The sanctions paradox: Economic statecraft and international relations*. Cambridge University Press.

[30] Mearsheimer, J. J. (2019). *The great delusion: Liberal dreams and international realities*. Yale University Press.

[31] Spector, J. (2018). *Sanctions and their impact on Russia’s foreign policy*. The International Spectator, 53(4), pp-88–103.

[32] Karami, M., & Wright, M. (2021). *China’s strategic partnership with Iran: Implications for U.S. foreign policy*. Middle East Policy, 28(3), pp-48–61.

[33] Mearsheimer, J. J. (2019). *The great delusion: Liberal dreams and international realities*. Yale University Press.

China's relationship with Iran, on the other hand, is primarily motivated by economic factors, specifically energy security. Iran does not have the same degree of geopolitical significance as Russia, despite being crucial to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and regional influence in the Middle East. Therefore, rather than a strong strategic alliance, China's support for Iran is more pragmatic and centered on preserving energy supplies and securing regional influence (Karami & Wright, 2021)[34].

Economic Integration

China's economic integration with Russia is more advanced and multifaceted than its relationship with Iran. While Iran is a key energy supplier, particularly oil and gas, Russia is a broader economic partner, with strong trade ties across various sectors including energy, military, technology, and infrastructure. Russia's geographical proximity to China and its position as a key player in Eurasian geopolitics have led to more comprehensive economic engagements, such as the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership (Spector, 2018)[35].

Iran, on the other hand, remains more isolated, and while it enjoys some level of trade with China, the scope of its economic integration is narrower. China's role in Iran is largely focused on maintaining oil exports and facilitating trade routes, with less emphasis on long-term infrastructure projects or broader economic development initiatives (Drezner, 2019)[36].

Domestic Economic Impact

Both countries have benefited from China's support in offsetting sanctions, but the impact of these sanctions on their respective economies has differed. Russia's economy, though heavily affected by sanctions, has more diversified sectors and greater access to international markets due to its status as a major global power. In contrast, Iran's economy is much more vulnerable to sanctions, particularly due to its reliance on oil exports and limited access to international finance (Mankoff, 2019)[37].

Sanctions imposed on Iran and Russia have had significant impacts on their domestic economies, affecting various sectors, including energy, trade, finance, and technological development. While both nations have faced economic challenges due to Western sanctions, the scale and nature of these impacts vary based on each country's economic structure, global integration, and the effectiveness of their respective strategies to mitigate these effects. China's role in offsetting sanctions has been critical, but understanding the specific domestic economic consequences for Iran and Russia provides further insights into the resilience and vulnerabilities of these economies.

Comparative Impact on Iran and Russia

While both Iran and Russia have suffered economically from sanctions, the scale of their domestic impacts has differed considerably. Russia, with its more diversified economy and larger global economic footprint, has been better positioned to mitigate the effects of sanctions. The country has been able to reduce its dependence on the West by turning to non-Western markets and strengthening ties with China. Additionally, Russia's ability to maintain a strong energy sector and stabilize its financial markets has contributed to its relative resilience (Spector, 2018)[38].

[34] Karami, M., & Wright, M. (2021). *China's strategic partnership with Iran: Implications for U.S. foreign policy*. Middle East Policy, 28(3), pp-48–61.

[35] Spector, J. (2018). *Sanctions and their impact on Russia's foreign policy*. The International Spectator, 53(4), pp-88–103.

[36] Drezner, D. W. (2019). *The sanctions paradox: Economic statecraft and international relations*. Cambridge University Press.

[37] Mankoff, J. (2019). *Russia's response to U.S. sanctions: From confrontation to cooperation*. Eurasian Politics, 3(1), pp-12–29.

[38] Spector, J. (2018). *Sanctions and their impact on Russia's foreign policy*. The International Spectator, 53(4), pp-88–103.

In contrast, Iran's economy, which is heavily reliant on oil exports, has faced more severe consequences due to the combination of sanctions, currency devaluation, and lack of access to financial systems. The Iranian government has been forced to adopt drastic measures such as austerity policies and reliance on alternative financial systems (e.g., CIPS), but these steps have only partially alleviated the deep structural issues facing Iran's economy. The lack of diversification and international isolation continue to present significant barriers to economic recovery (Karami & Wright, 2021)[39].

Conclusion

China's role in helping Iran and Russia offset sanctions reflects its broader strategy of protecting its strategic interests while simultaneously challenging Western dominance in the global political and economic order. In both cases, China has provided crucial economic, financial, and diplomatic support, facilitating trade, investment, and technological transfers that have allowed these countries to weather the effects of sanctions. However, the depth and scope of China's support differ, shaped by the geopolitical and economic contexts of its relationships with each country. While its relationship with Russia is characterized by a deeper, more comprehensive partnership, China's support for Iran is more focused on energy and regional influence.

Sanctions have had profound impacts on both Iran and Russia, though the nature and extent of these impacts have varied based on each country's economic structure and external partnerships. Russia has shown greater resilience due to its diversified economy, access to energy markets, and strategic alignment with China. In contrast, Iran's economy has suffered more acutely due to its reliance on oil exports and greater isolation from the global economy. While China has played a pivotal role in helping both countries offset some of the effects of sanctions, the long-term economic challenges remain significant for both nations.

In the future, as both Iran and Russia continue to face significant pressure from Western sanctions, China's role as a key economic and diplomatic partner will likely remain pivotal. This ongoing dynamic between China and its sanctioned partners will have profound implications for global geopolitics, particularly as it challenges the existing international order and the dominance of Western-led sanctions regimes.

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