



# The Study of UNSC Structure and Reform for Effective Imposition of International Sanctions

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the structural flaws of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and their impact on the effectiveness of international sanctions. It focuses on the rivalry among permanent members (P5), particularly China and Russia, and examines how veto misuse and conflicting national interests hinder the UNSC's ability to enforce sanctions effectively. Through case studies of North Korea and Russia, the research demonstrates how P5 self-interest undermines collective decision-making, reducing UNSC sanctions to unilateral state actions. The paper concludes that reforms, such as revising the veto system and addressing power rivalries, are crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of UNSC sanctions and strengthening global governance.

## I. Introduction

The rivalry between superpowers has reduced the effectiveness of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in recent years. However, the Security Council must remain effective, as it can impose economic sanctions on state-level aggressors. Currently, sanctions imposed by the Security Council are more impactful than those imposed by most individual states and further legitimize sanctions of the United States. This section compares two case studies to demonstrate why reforming the Security Council is necessary for effective economic sanctions.

Economic sanctions generally fall into two categories: comprehensive embargoes, which prohibit all commercial activities with a country, and smart sanctions, which target individuals as sanctions can block trade transactions and impose expo



rt restrictions. There are also smart sanctions that mitigate these issues by focusing on individuals or organizations responsible for global harm. They include measures like travel bans, asset freezes, arms embargoes, capital controls, reductions in foreign aid, and targeted trade restrictions.<sup>1</sup>

## **II. Literature Review**

Before the United Nations (UN), many international crises caused tension worldwide. The first attempt at an international order was the League of Nations, which ultimately failed because of its lack of authority and its internal structure that incentivizes strong states to join. After the outbreak of the Second World War, countries felt that there should be a powerful union that aimed to protect the world's peace. These countries gathered, and the UNSC was formed to maintain international peace and security.<sup>2</sup> The Security Council is one of the six leading organizations of the United Nations established under the UN Charter. The primary purpose of the Security Council is to maintain international peace and security.<sup>3</sup>

There are many ways that the UN can stop acts that disrupt international security. The UN can do whatever it wants except force the individuals or the states, which causes adverse effects on global peace and security.<sup>4</sup> Five countries are called permanent five (P5): China, Russia, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and France. They were selected to be a P5.<sup>5</sup> When laws or sanctions are brought to the UNSC, nine agreements out of 15 countries, P5 and Non-permanent members (E10), must be passed.

Sanctions coerce, deter, punish, or shame entities that endanger their interests or violate international norms of behavior.<sup>6</sup> First is an implicit power that was given exclusively to P5. The UNSC establishes sanctions if all P5 agree and the number of E10s agreeing together exceeds the majority. However, when one of the P5 vetoes, the sanctions are invalidated. As a result, there are many arguments about the power of P5. The article by Raymond Lopez says P5 members are using their powers selfishly and not for the world's peace. They only work for their benefit a

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<sup>1</sup> Brent Redcliffe, "How Economic Sanctions Work," *Investopedia*, January 17, 2024, <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/10/economic-sanctions.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> *UN Charter*, Article 1(1).

<sup>3</sup> "What is the Security Council?" *United Nations*, [https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/about\\_test1](https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/about_test1).

<sup>4</sup> *UN Charter*, Article 41.

<sup>5</sup> *UN Charter*, Article 23(1).

<sup>6</sup> *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2024.



and not aiding countries that need assistance the most.<sup>7</sup> Also, there are rivalries between P5 members, which makes P5 and UNSC inefficient. The problem is that changes have not been made to resolve this issue. Stewart Patrick mentioned that since the UN was formed 80 years ago, there have been no changes in P5 and the structures of UNSC.<sup>8</sup> Many developed countries, like Brazil and India, have influenced the world in almost the same way as P5 after the Second World War. The most frustrating thing is the P5 is abusing its power, especially with its veto power. This leads to frequent paralysis of the council, as seen with Russia's actions regarding the Ukraine issue, which has exacerbated the geopolitical rivalry between Western democracies and the authoritarian countries of China and Russia.<sup>9</sup> Not to mention, many good ideas, laws, or even sanctions are ignored because of vetoes. And this often causes problems.

Economic sanctions are a tool used to prevent individuals or countries from threatening international peace and security. They can block trade, enforce embargoes, and impose export restrictions. Sanctions are divided into two types: comprehensive embargoes, which prohibit all commercial activities with a country, and smart sanctions, which target specific individuals. While traditional sanctions often impacted entire populations, including innocent citizens, smart sanctions were developed to mitigate these effects. These targeted measures include travel bans, asset freezes, arms embargoes, capital controls, reductions in foreign aid, and trade restrictions on individuals or organizations responsible for global harm.<sup>10</sup>

### **III. Hypotheses**

There can be numerous answers to why the economic sanctions imposed by the Security Council have become less effective over the years. The Security Council has had two significant problems: misuse of veto power and the conflict among P5. These findings indicate the following problems in the UNSC. Firstly, the sanctions imposed by the Security Council have similar power and effects to those imposed by individual states. During the research, there was not much effect on states that caused sanctions by the UNSC or individuals.

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Lopez, "The Permanent 5: The Influence and Power They Hold in the United Nations," *Scholar Works*, April 2023, <https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/f365c40k>.

<sup>8</sup> Stewart Patrick, "UN Security Council Reform: What the World Thinks," *Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center*, June 28, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Brent Redcliffe, "How Economic Sanctions Work," *Investopedia*, January 17, 2024, <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/10/economic-sanctions.asp>.

Secondly, the sanctions by the Security Council are less immediate and united as the interests of P5 could greatly vary based on international issues and national interests. This research paper argues that the effect of sanctions between the Security Council and individual states could not be very effective, and the power of both sanctions is the same. In other words, they are more focused on their authoritarian interests despite being permanent members of the Security Council. As a result, China and Russia continuously exercise their veto power, with Russia exercising its veto power more than the other permanent members.<sup>11</sup>



For example, the rivalries of the P5 members have caused the Security Council to face difficulties when imposing sanctions. Since the end of World War II in 1945, Russia (Soviet Union) and the United States have had conflict because of their political and ideological differences. This, in turn, has led the world to be separated by the standard of political tendency.

<sup>11</sup> *Institute of International and European Affairs*, "Called to Account: The Permanent Five and the Veto," *IIEA*, 2022, <https://www.iiea.com/blog/called-to-account-the-permanent-five-and-the-veto>.



#### IV. Case Study

The cases of North Korea, Russia, and China are important examples for this research. North Korea is a notable case in which the Security Council has imposed sanctions. Another case is how Russia, as a permanent member of the Security Council, vetoed sanctions against itself, preventing the Council from imposing them. China, another permanent member, has played a supportive role for both North Korea and Russia while they were under sanctions.

#### Case study: UN Security Council’s Economic Sanctions on North Korea for its Use of Nuclear and Ballistic Missiles

This research paper will primarily focus on the economic sanctions related to trade, as the most widely used economic sanctions involve banning trade. The first case study is on North Korea. Since 2006, North Korea has been under UN economic sanctions for its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.<sup>12</sup> These sanctions were imposed to condemn and pressure North Korea to halt its nuclear missile development program. Over the years, these measures have been unanimously strengthened, but the 15-member Security Council is currently deadlocked as China and Russia advocate for easing the sanctions.<sup>13</sup>

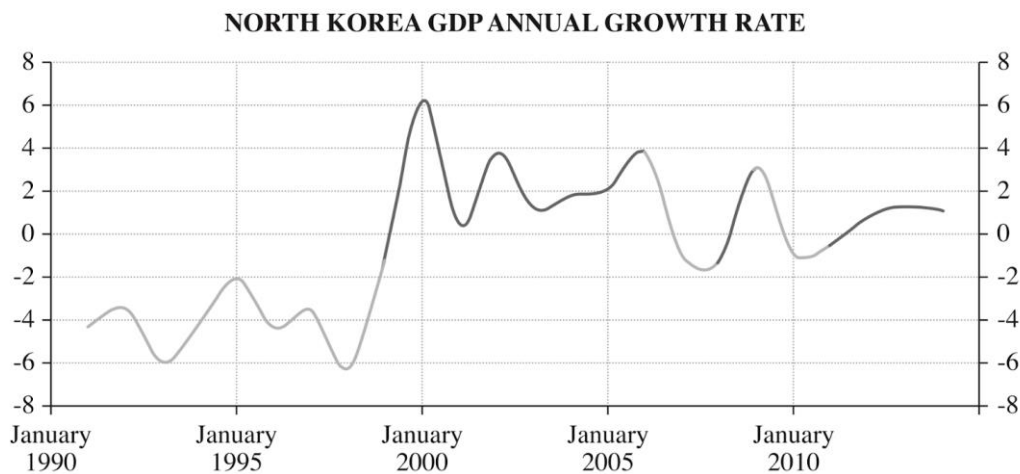


Figure 3. North Korea’s GDP Annual Growth Rate

The graph (Figure 3) shows that North Korea’s GDP has increased steadily since reaching a low point in 2006 and 2009. It indicates North Korea’s annual GDP growth rate was approximately -1.0 during 2006-2007 and 2009-2010 after major UN Security Council sanctions were imposed. Except for 2006 and 2010, North Korea’s GDP

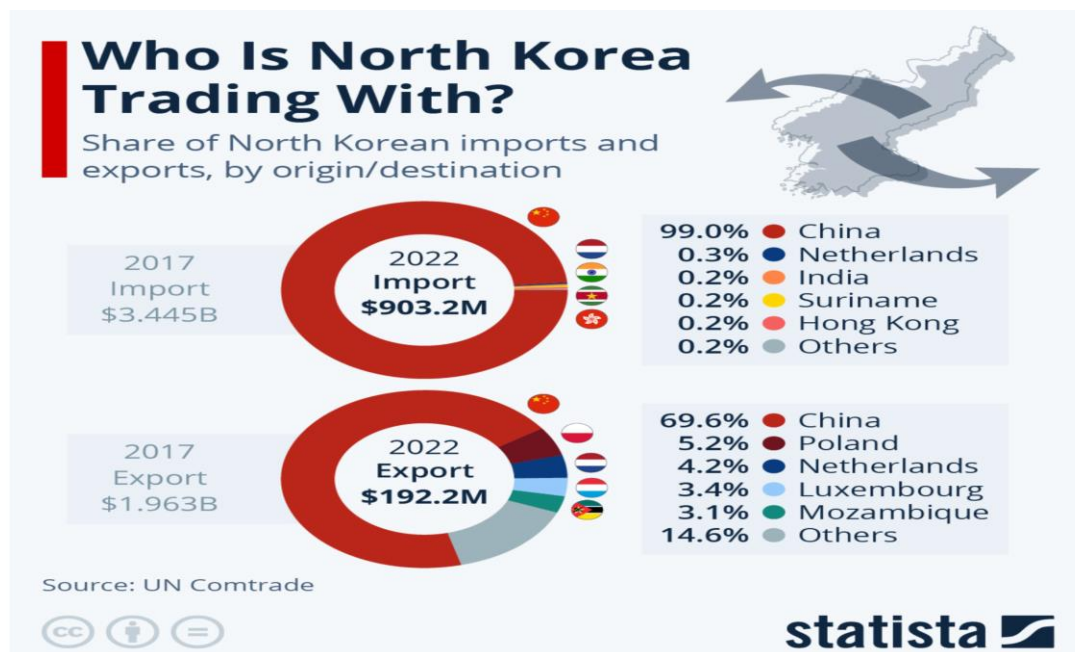
<sup>12</sup> Michelle Nichols, "North Korea Developing Nuclear Weapons, Evading Sanctions in 2023," *Yahoo News*, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

DP had never fallen below 0.<sup>14</sup> This is mainly because of China and Russia's strong voice in easing the sanctions.

Officially, according to Graph 4, North Korea only has a handful of trading partners, with China as its leading export destination. Thus, its GDP is not reliant on global partners. Even though there were efforts to diversify trade partners, graph 4 shows that almost 85 percent of North Korea's total exports go to China.

<sup>15</sup> Although experts believe that China will need to cut off its oil exports for an



extensive period, Beijing is hesitant to make this risky move. To better approach North Korea's diplomatic position, it is necessary to differentiate the economic impacts of UNSC sanctions on the civilian population versus the government. Despite comprehensive sanctions targeting North Korea's trade, especially its nuclear and missile programs, the regime has shown resilience from the continued support from China and, to a lesser extent, Russia. The burden of sanctions falls heavily on civilians, leading to widespread food shortages and poverty. Meanwhile, less affected by these strategic partnerships, the ruling elite maintain their grip on power and control over resources. This contrast highlights the limited effectiveness of the UNSC sanctions.

<sup>14</sup> Bo Ram Kwon, *The Conditions for Sanctions Success: A Comparison of the Iranian and North Korean Cases*, 2016, <https://www.statista.com/chart/10683/north-korea-trading-partners/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



Also, to impose significant pressure on North Korea, experts say that China would need to cut off its oil exports to North Korea for an extended period, a move that would be very risky for Beijing.<sup>16</sup> China has pledged to ship less oil to North Korea but has hesitated to curtail exports. (ibid)<sup>17</sup> It is also difficult to police China's oil shipments to North Korea because China does not provide customs data. (ibid)<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the North Korean premier, Kim Jong Un, has also attempted to import more oil from Russia as a substitute energy provider for its military and other industries. (ibid)<sup>19</sup> This is a clear example of the Security Council's permanent members not adhering to the terms of the economic sanctions due to their self-interests. As stated before, the power of the permanent members allows them to prioritize their self-interests above the Security Council's decisions, causing the economic sanctions to be less effective. Yahoo News said that the 15-member body is deadlocked as China and Russia push them to be eased to convince Pyongyang to return to denuclearization talks.<sup>20</sup>

The Security Council is an important security action platform in the world. It was created to protect human rights, international peace, and security. However, the fundamental structural flaws of the Security Council are causing the economic sanctions to be less effective, to the extent that its sanctions have a similar effect to the sanctions imposed outside the United Nations.

### **Case Study: Economic Sanctions Imposed Outside the UN on Russia for its Invasion of Ukraine**

Russia has vetoed almost every recent sanction against North Korea. This reflects deeper strategic cooperation with Pyongyang that has emerged as a result of North Korean support for Putin's war in Ukraine.<sup>21</sup> The second study concerns Russia and the sanctions imposed on it after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Before discussing this topic, it is essential to note that Russia is a member of P5, meaning it can veto any sanctions imposed against it. This forced the international community to impose sanctions individually, highlighting its fundamental structural flaw. For instance, The United States and the European Union have frozen Russian financial assets and excluded Russian banks from the international payment system (SWIF

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<sup>16</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, "Putin Rejects Cutting Off Oil to North Korea," *The New York Times*, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> ibid

<sup>18</sup> ibid

<sup>19</sup> ibid

<sup>20</sup> Michelle Nichols, "North Korea Developing Nuclear Weapons, Evading Sanctions in 2023," *Yahoo News*, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2024.

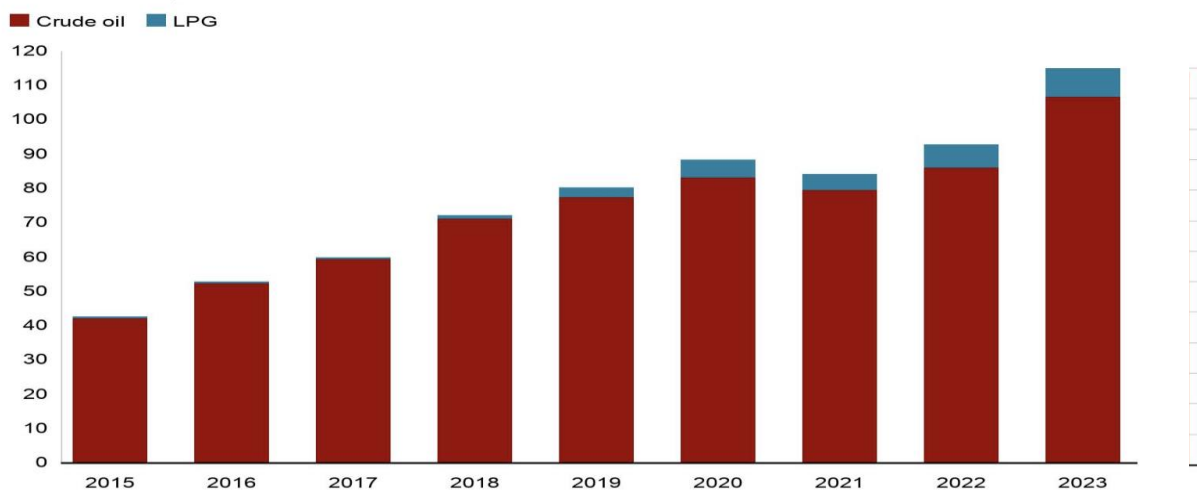


T), severely impacting the Russian economy. They have also restricted energy exports, reducing Russia's revenue.<sup>22</sup>

<https://www.kamumedia.com/what-is-xi-jinping-prepared-to-pay-for-putin-s-war-532552.html>

This graph shows the trade between Russia and China. China is exporting dual use-items to Russia, which includes a drone, knife, etc. Trade between China and Russia reached a record \$240 billion (£191 billion) in 2023, which is an increase of 64% since 2021-before Russia invades Ukraine-according to official figures from China. According to the statistics, Russian imports from China were \$111 billion, and its exports to China were \$129 billion. At their meeting in Beijing in May, Xi and Putin highlighted that the two nations now use their currencies for 90% of trade instead of US dollars. Mr Putin also said he welcomed Chinese carmakers to Russia after the US announced a quadrupling of tariffs on China's electric vehicles to 100%. The export of Chinese cars and parts to Russia reached \$23 billion in 2023 - up from \$6 billion the previous year.<sup>23</sup> More specifically, China is mitigating the impact of sanctions on Russia by providing Moscow with an alternative currency for transactions".<sup>24</sup>

**Chinese imports of Russia oil and LPG (liquefied petroleum gas)**  
2015 to 2023, millions of tonnes



Source: China Customs



<sup>22</sup> Noah Berman, "Two Years of War in Ukraine: Are Sanctions Against Russia Making a Difference?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2024, <https://www.kamumedia.com/what-is-xi-jinping-prepared-to-pay-for-putin-s-war-532552.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Kelly Ng and Yi Ma, "How is China Supporting Russia After it Was Sanctioned for Ukraine War?" *BBC*, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60571253>.

<sup>24</sup> Nikoladze, Meng, and Yin, "How is China Mitigating the Effects of Sanctions on Russia?" *Atlantic Council*, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60571253>.

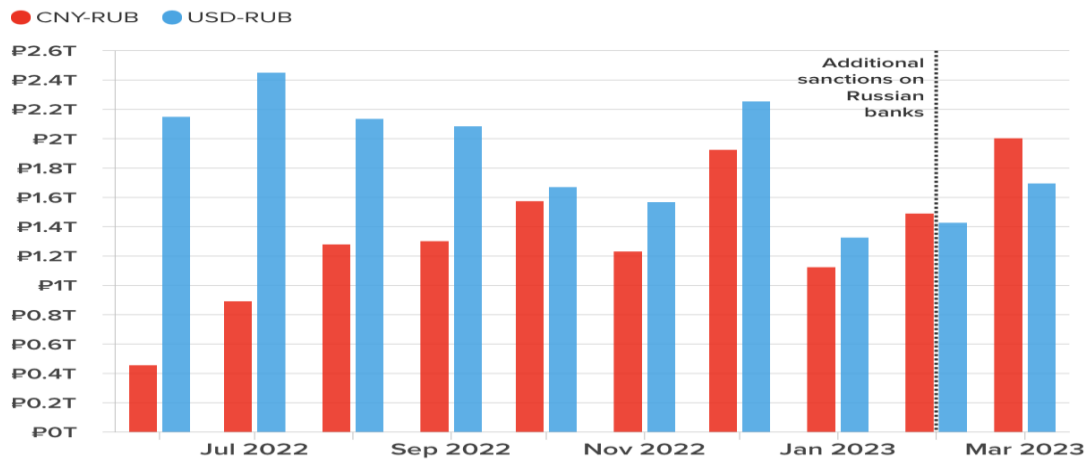




This is the graph that explains the amount of gas China bought. In 2023, China imported eight million tonnes of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) from Russia, a 77% increase from 2021.<sup>25</sup>

### **Yuan becomes Russia's most traded currency after sanctions**

Yuan-ruble and dollar-ruble trading volume on the Moscow Exchange

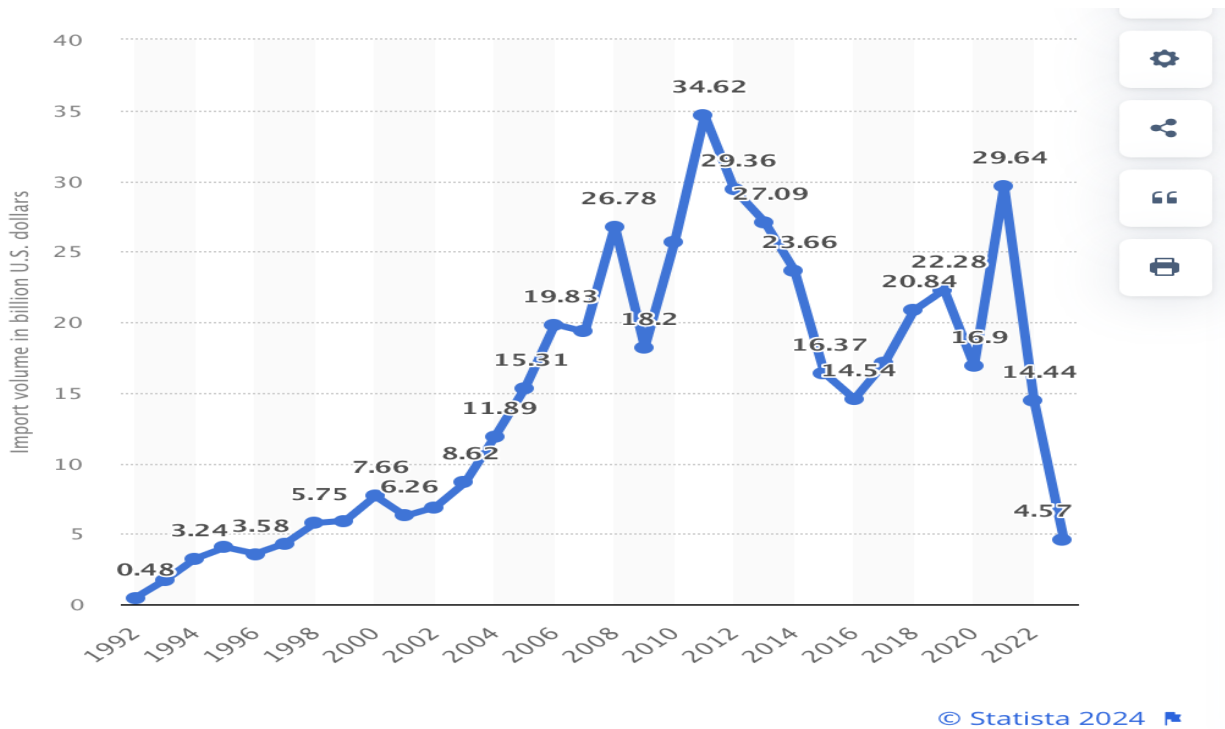


Source: Moscow Exchange, Bloomberg, US Treasury Department

The graph demonstrates that China is helping Russia during sanctions imposed by individual states. This is a critical case of ignoring sanctions because Russia is vetoing many sanctions, which makes it seem there is a rivalry between Russia, China, and other P5 members. This problem is compelling because it means a crack among the P5 creates rivalry. Such findings help us better understand sanctions' less obvious yet adverse effects.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> BBC, "China Imports Eight Million Tonnes of Liquefied Petroleum Gas from Russia," 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60571253>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



This graph shows the amount of trading between the USA and Russia. Two points had decreasing points, which were in 2016 and 2022. In 2016, Russian interference occurred in the 2016 United States election. In 2022, the US imposed sanctions because of the Ukraine war. The graph shows that Russia experienced a decrease in trading with the USA after the economic sanctions were imposed. These two graphs demonstrate the rivalry among the Security Council's permanent members.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the Security Council can't impose sanctions on Russia for several reasons. "The most significant differences between the economies and financial sectors of China and Russia are their size, importance to international firms and investors, and degree of integration into global supply chains."<sup>28</sup>

## V. Relationship with Hypothesis

The following findings are drawn from the study of the relationship between the case studies and the hypotheses proposed in this section. First, the sanctions imposed by the Security Council have demonstrated limited impact in the case studies, failing to compel aggressors to cease their immoral actions. Second, member states such as China and Russia have undermined the effectiveness of sanctions by pr

<sup>27</sup> Tugba Sabanoglu, "Volume of U.S. Imports of Trade Goods from Russia from 1992 to 2023," *Statista*, 2024.

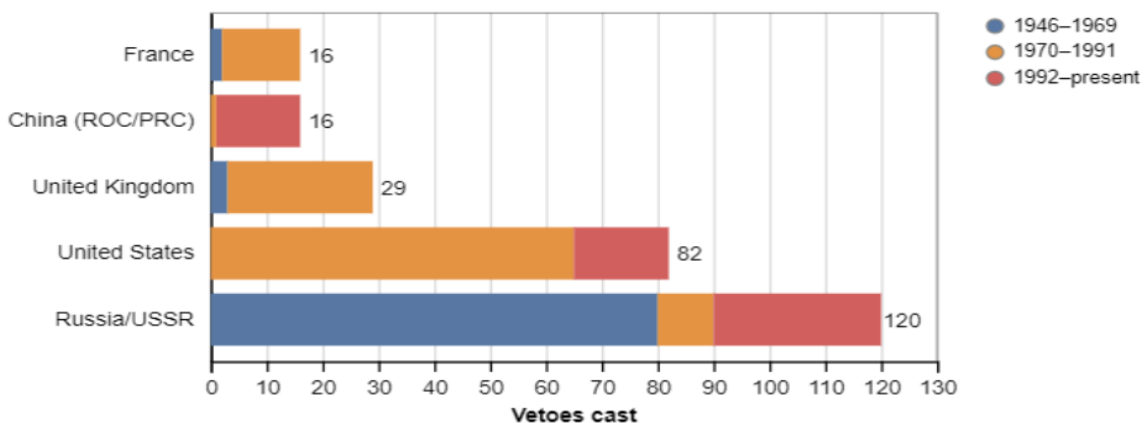
<sup>28</sup> Gerard DiPippo and Andrea Leonard Palazzi, 2023.



ioritizing their self-interests over their responsibilities as Security Council members. For example, despite pledging to cut off exports to Pyongyang, China continued trading with North Korea, exemplifying how a permanent member can undermine Council decisions to serve its interests. Finally, the rivalries among P5 members have significantly hindered the Security Council's ability to impose effective sanctions. In Russia's case, despite violating the UN Charter, the ongoing divide between democratic and non-democratic states has prevented the Council from taking unified action.

## VI. Recommendation

Recently, the Security Council has had two major problems that need to be solved: The power of veto and the rivalry between the P5 members. Of course, there would be many other problems, but the research on sanctions has indicated that these two problems are causing the most critical effects. The Security Council sanctions having the same power and impact as those imposed by individual states could be addressed by changing the voting structure to a simple majority system. Currently, when a single permanent member exercises its veto, sanctions are blocked. In the early years of the UN, privileges such as the veto power in the UNSC were necessary for strong states to join the international order. As countries have witnessed the failure of the League of Nations, supporting the UN system in which P5 has greater authority made sense. As of 2024, however, almost all states are part of the UN and use the international organization as a diplomatic communication channel. Under such conditions, a more reasonable and constructive decision-making process could be discussed even in the UNSC.



*Image from Wikipedia: Voting history until February 2022*



According to the graph, many vetoes have been exercised, which means many vetoes have been abandoned.<sup>29</sup> The veto power hampers the Security Council's ability to respond effectively to global conflicts. However, economic sanctions could become more effective with structural reforms, including increasing members and adopting a simple majority voting system. These changes could also address another issue: the influence of power rivalries. By introducing a neutral permanent member between Russia and the U.S., the Security Council could achieve a more balanced power distribution, ensuring more equitable decision-making for all countries.

## **VII. Conclusion**

This research highlights a serious issue with the current structure of the Security Council, suggesting it needs to move in the right direction. While the number of sanctions the Council imposes increases, adverse international events continue to rise. As the case studies demonstrate, the effectiveness of sanctions imposed by individual states is comparable to those imposed by the Security Council. The primary goal of sanctions is to maintain international peace and security; however, the research shows that their impact has been less effective than expected. This indicates a structural problem within the Security Council that needs to be addressed. Additionally, it is important to improve relations with Russia and China, as they are central to these challenges.

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<sup>29</sup> Wykensegrave, 2022.



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