

International Economic Sanctions and Conflict Prevention in Self-determination Disputes

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Can international sanctions prevent civil war? Despite the increased scholarly and policy focus on conflict prevention, we lack an understanding of the impact of a commonly used tool of the international community—economic sanctions. We examine the impact of sanctions targeted against states with self-determination (SD) disputes. We argue that the threat of sanctions leads states to decrease repression and increase accommodation in these disputes, thus decreasing the likelihood of civil war. The imposition of sanctions, however, incentivizes the state to increase repression and makes the state a more attractive target for dissidents. Both dynamics make civil war more likely in the short term. Over time, however, states can adapt to the new economic reality created by a sanctions regime, and the risk of escalation to civil war will decrease. We conduct a series of statistical tests of the effect of threatened and imposed sanctions against the state on armed conflict onset in SD disputes, accommodation of SD groups, and repression. We find that threatened sanctions decrease the likelihood of armed conflict onset, make government accommodation of SD groups more likely, and lead to overall decreases in repression by the state. Imposed sanctions, meanwhile, increase the risk of civil war in the next year, but this effect dissipates over time. These results suggest that sanction threats can be a useful tool of conflict prevention, but failed threats can increase the risk of escalations of violence in SD disputes.

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Keywords: sanctions, civil war, conflict prevention, self-determination disputes

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Economic sanctions are a common, and increasingly used, tool that states and international organizations employ to compel and deter a range of state behavior. The complex and sophisticated economic sanctions the US and other Western states have deployed against Russia since its invasion of Ukraine show how extensive they can be. A large scholarly literature examines the effect of sanctions on regime stability, human rights practices, political protest, and the duration and outcome of civil conflict. We know much less, however, about whether and how international economic sanctions can affect the likelihood that civil wars occur. Can economic sanctions serve as a tool of conflict prevention?

In this article, we address the question of whether a state being targeted by sanctions—either threatened or imposed—makes it more or less likely that that state experiences civil war. We do this by examining self-determination (SD) disputes from 1960 to 2005. SD disputes provide a good arena in which to examine the effect of sanctions both theoretically and empirically. Because these disputes typically exist in countries long before a sanction against a state is considered, we can examine theoretically how a threatened or imposed sanction affects the status quo between states and groups that are currently not in civil war but could be. Empirically, there is variation both across and within SD disputes in whether and when civil wars occur, allowing us to treat them as a set of potential civil wars and examine whether sanctions affect the likelihood that they become active armed conflicts.¹

We present a theoretical argument examining how the threat and imposition of sanctions affect decision-making by states and organizations representing self-determination groups—even when the sanctions do not directly address the dispute. Economic sanctions are primarily targeted against the state, and we argue that when sanctions are threatened against the state, this threat can lead states to be less repressive and more conciliatory toward dissidents, including self-determination

¹ In examining conflict prevention in SD disputes, we follow on Beardsley et al. (2017).

groups. This shift by states means organizations representing SD groups are less likely to escalate their demands, and together these shifts make civil war less likely.

When threats fail and sanctions are imposed, they inflict direct costs on states which can affect their military, repressive, and bureaucratic capacity. This effect is not dispute-specific, and even if the sanctions were not intended to specifically address the self-determination dispute, the resultant reduction in state capacity is relevant across disputes and issue areas. States may respond by increasing repression of dissidents before the costs of sanctions begin to affect their capacity to do so. This increased repression can make civil war more likely. In addition, the anticipated impact of sanctions on the state's repressive capacity can change the balance of power and makes the state a more attractive target for organizations representing self-determination disputes. These dynamics mean that imposed sanctions can actually increase the risk of civil war in the short-term. Over time, however, states adapt to the economic realities of sanctions and the costs for states diminish, meaning that the increased risk of civil war from imposed sanctions is a short-term effect.

We test implications of this argument through statistical analysis using the Threat and Imposition of Economic Sanctions (TIES) dataset to identify instances of threats and imposition of sanctions and data from Cunningham (2013) to measure the occurrence of civil war in self-determination disputes, as well as factors affecting the likelihood of civil war in these disputes. We find that when sanctions are threatened against the state in one year, the likelihood of civil war onset in self-determination disputes in that country in the next declines, while when sanctions are imposed, the likelihood of onset in the subsequent year increases. When we examine the effect of sanctions over time, we find that this increase goes away after the first year, and imposed sanctions actually decrease the risk of civil war in subsequent years.

In further analyses, we find that governments are more likely to grant concessions to SD groups and that governmental repression generally declines following sanctions threats. These

additional analyses illustrate important effects of international sanctions and provide support for the theoretical mechanisms advanced.

The argument and analysis in this article show that international economic sanctions, even when not directed specifically at intra-state disputes, can impact whether those disputes become violent—an under-appreciated externality of sanctions. This impact of sanctions is likely to be particularly important in the future, as the use of tools such as large peacekeeping missions and high-profile mediation efforts may be hampered by paralysis in the United Nations Security Council stemming from increased tensions among the Council’s Permanent 5 members. We conclude with more discussion of these implications and a roadmap for further research.

Sanctions and civil war

A large literature examines how international economic sanctions affect instability and conflicts within states. Several studies find that sanctions can lead to increased protest, because the material costs of sanctions increase deprivation among the population (Lektzian and Souva, 2007), sanctions signal to dissidents that they have international support (Grauvogel et al., 2017), and/or sanctions create a period of perceived regime vulnerability leading to greater dissent (Liou et al., 2021). Wood (2008) and Peksen (2009) show that sanctions can also lead to greater governmental repression, as governments feel threatened both by the costs of the sanction and the protests which follow.

Studies focused on civil war generally find that the threat and imposition of economic sanctions tends to increase the intensity of ongoing civil war—except for sanctions which specifically target arms imports; these tend to reduce the capacity to wage war (Hultman and Peksen, 2017). Large-scale economic embargoes reduce the length of civil wars (Escribà-Folch, 2010). Lektzian and Regan (2016) meanwhile, find that economic sanctions lead to shorter civil wars and civil wars that end in a

negotiated settlement, but only when they are combined with military interventions by third parties—especially great powers.

Collectively, these studies show that both the threat and imposition of sanctions can have substantial effects on state-dissident interactions. Yet, there is much less research on the impact of sanctions on the outbreak of civil war. Beardsley et al. (2017) do examine the impact of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions authorizing international sanctions on civil war onset—finding that UNSC resolutions authorizing sanctions against a country for reasons other than those directly pertinent to a self-determination dispute make it less likely that disputes escalate to armed conflict. This demonstrates support for an important element of our theoretical argument—that even when not specifically directed at a particular intra-state dispute, broader sanctions directed against a state have externalities to the disputes within those states. Importantly, though, sanctions authorized by UNSC resolutions represent a limited subset of possible sanctions. In addition, their study does not examine the impact that sanctions authorization has on state and dissident behavior, so we lack an understanding of the process leading to a reduced likelihood of civil war.

Sanctions and preventing civil war in self-determination disputes

Disputes over self-determination take place in many countries across all regions of the world. In these disputes, an ethnonationalist group makes demands for greater self-rule on the basis of group identity. Some SD groups demand secession, while others make more limited demands such as autonomy, language rights, or control over regional education policy. SD groups are not homogenous in their preferences, and there is often political competition between organizations seeking to represent the group and making different demands on the state (Cunningham, 2013).

We focus on the effect of sanctions on SD disputes that are not currently in civil war. Disputes over self-determination are a common cause of civil war, and several SD groups—including the Kurds

in Turkey, Somalis in Ethiopia, and Moro in the Philippines—have fought long-running civil wars. Yet, many self-determination disputes do not escalate to civil war, and those that do frequently have periods of relative peace (Cunningham, 2013). When they are not in civil war, these disputes are generally still politically active. The lack of civil war also does not mean that these disputes are ‘resolved,’ but rather that SD groups and governments are not choosing to use violence at that point. As such, we can examine theoretically the effect of sanctions on disputes that are not currently in civil war but where bargaining over the status of the group is occurring.

Civil war occurs in these disputes when governments and/or SD groups decide to use violence to achieve their goals. We follow Fearon (1995) and Cunningham (2013) and take a bargaining approach, viewing civil war in SD disputes as arising from bargaining failure. In this approach, organizations representing SD groups and governments evaluate the costs and benefits of fighting vs. not fighting. Because violent conflict is always costly, there should be a range of agreements that both sides prefer to fighting. In general, from the bargaining approach, we can view armed conflict as occurring under two main conditions—when states and SD groups see the costs and benefits of violence relative to compromise as being more advantageous, and when they are unable to reach compromises that avoids violence. A large literature has identified factors, such as the number of organizations making claims on behalf of the group (Cunningham, 2013), the number of SD groups (Walter, 2006), and the presence of ethnic kin (Jenne, 2007), as impacting state-SD group bargaining.

We anticipate that sanctions that generally target the government will impact the bargaining dynamics and behavior between states and SD groups, even when these sanctions are not threatened or imposed in regard to the dispute specifically. The material costs which *would* result from threatened sanctions and *do* result from imposed sanctions impact the state broadly, because state capacity is fungible across the different disputes that it faces (i.e., if state capacity to repress is affected generally, this should apply across all intra-state disputes). In addition, sanctions send signals about international

disapproval of the state which are visible to both the state and SD groups. Following on much of the literature on sanctions, we argue that the threat and imposition of sanctions can have differential effects on the dynamics of SD disputes and present a theoretical argument examining how each affects civil war onset.

The threat of sanctions and civil war onset in self-determination disputes

When international actors threaten states with sanctions, they send a signal that they will impose costs on the state if it does not change course. These costs can come directly from the sanctions, or they can come from other actions (such as military interventions) that might accompany or follow the sanctions (Lektzian and Sprecher, 2007). Governments have to make decisions whether or not to change their behavior in response to this signal.²

Governments will decide whether to change behavior in part based on whether they view sanction threats as credible (Krustev, 2010). Sanction threats can be seen as cheap talk, and governments may not view the threatening state as sufficiently resolved to follow through. While some threats are indeed incredible, we know that, empirically, threats of sanctions are frequently followed by imposed sanctions³, and that imposed sanctions increase the likelihood of more costly action such as military intervention (Lektzian and Sprecher, 2007). And sanctions threats expected to impose greater costs on the target and coming from democracies or states with which the target has greater

² This focus on the costs that sanctions impose on states and dissidents and the impact these costs have on bargaining is consistent with Lektzian and Regan (2016). They examine the impact of sanctions on conflict duration and argue that sanctions alone are unlikely to impose the degree of costs necessary to convince states and rebel groups to stop fighting. We are focused on sanctions and conflict prevention and anticipate that fewer costs are needed to convince governments and SD groups not to escalate to armed conflict than to convince actors already fighting to stop.

³ In our data, of the sanctioning state-target dyads that occur multiple times, 16 only ever see threatened sanctions and never imposed sanctions, whereas 90 dyads experienced a threat and imposition when they had previously been threatened and imposed. Even in those 16 cases, we do not know that the threatened sanctions are incredible, because sanctions may not have been imposed because the target governments adjusted their behavior in response to the threat.

diplomatic ties tend to be the most credible—with states often changing their policies in response to them (Walentek et al., 2021; Whang et al., 2013).⁴

Even if governments view sanction threats as credible, they have to decide whether the potential costs are sufficient for them to change their behavior. In some cases, states decide to accept these costs, either because they are sufficiently committed to their course of action, or because the anticipated costs are not sufficient to deter them. Some governments may be more sensitive to costs than others. Escribà-Folch and Wright (2010, 2015) argue that personalist regimes and monarchies see more decline in state capacity from sanctions, because they are more dependent on foreign revenues and are therefore more likely to change behavior as a result of sanctions.⁵ Governments may also anticipate that they can adapt to the costs of sanctions over time. Long-running sanctions may allow for some regimes to devise schemes to weather the sanctions or even use the scarcity created by sanctions as another lever with which to control the population (Grauvogel, 2015; Jones, 2015; Niblock, 2001; Woertz, 2019).

In general, however, we assume that, on average, governments anticipate some costs following a threat of sanctions if they do not change their behavior to some degree. We argue that, for governments deciding how to interact with their populations (including self-determination groups), a shift in the expected costliness of repression can lead them to lessen repression and increase accommodation, at least in the short-term. Clay (2018), focusing specifically on human-rights based sanctions, shows that the threat of these sanctions leads to better human rights protection both in the governments which are the target of the threats, and in non-threatened countries that have similar human rights practices. This argument is consistent with ours that sanctions that reduce state capacity

⁴ The most consistent finding in the literature with regards to threat credibility is that threats perceived to inflict greater costs on the target tend to be more effective. We explore in the subsequent section the specific impact of high cost threatened and imposed sanctions.

⁵ We explore differences in the effect of sanctions across autocratic regime types in the empirical analysis.

and increase the cost of repression and control generally will increase the cost of repression in all intra-state disputes within the state, including SD disputes.

We anticipate, then, that governments will look for ways to avoid the costs of threatened sanctions by reducing the likelihood that the threat is followed by the imposition of sanctions. Where threatened sanctions relate to broader issues of political participation, repression and human rights, or intra-state conflict, states are likely to do this both by reducing their use of repression and by being more accommodating of dissidents across all intra-state disputes, including those over self-determination—at least in the short-term. Even when sanctions threats pertain to international behavior that is unrelated to the self-determination group, they can indicate that the international community is paying attention to the target country and its conduct, both internal and external. This broader implicit notice can serve to compel greater adherence to international norms and laws related to human rights and repression. We anticipate that sanctions threats generally will have the indirect effect of reducing repression and political exclusion—state behaviors which make civil war more likely.⁶

The role of sanctions threats in improving state behavior toward self-determination groups can be seen in the case of Indonesia and East Timor in 1998-2000. President Suharto's government took a hard line with Timorese groups seeking independence, refusing to grant any consideration of greater self-rule. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 left Indonesia in a difficult financial situation, and the implementation of International Monetary Fund-mandated reforms increased economic pain in the short-term, leading to dissent and protest throughout the country. The government responded to this dissent with military force, and the US (which had been a close ally of Suharto) threatened to withhold

⁶ One potential dynamic that could counter-act governmental decreases in repression following sanction threats is that dissidents may increase protest because they anticipate international support (Grauvogel et al., 2017). While governments often respond to dissent with repression, we anticipate that states will hesitate to do so when they are under the threat of sanctions, and so threatened sanctions will generally lead governments to improve their human rights protection even if they also lead to greater protest activity.

financial assistance and military cooperation. In May 1998, Suharto resigned, and his successor—Habibie—agreed to allow a referendum on East Timor’s status in 1999 (Southgate, 2019).

In that referendum, East Timorese voters overwhelmingly rejected a proposal to remain in Indonesia under a special autonomy arrangement, which meant independence. Following the referendum, militias on the island engaged in massive violence against civilians. This violence led to a further threat of sanctions against the Indonesian government if it did not stop the violence, as well as a military intervention by Australia. The Australian intervention provided protection for civilians, and the sanction threats led the Indonesian government to take some efforts to disarm militias, reducing the violence and leading to the emergence of an independent East Timor in 2002.

This discussion leads to our main prediction about the relationship between sanction threats and civil war:

Hypothesis 1: Civil war onset will be less likely in SD disputes following a threat of international sanctions.

As described above, we expect civil war to be less likely following sanction threats because governments become less repressive and more conciliatory. We do not generate hypotheses for these specific expectations, but we explore them in the empirical analysis.

Imposed sanctions and civil war onset in self-determination disputes

Threatened sanctions are designed to signal to the government that not changing its behavior will become costly. When international actors follow through and impose sanctions on the government, these costs become real. At the same time, the imposition of sanctions suggests that the threat itself has failed at deterring this behavior. When we observe imposed sanctions the government either miscalculated the credibility of the threat or was sufficiently resolved to bear the anticipated costs

(Drezner, 2003). This means that there is a selection effect for imposed sanctions, and that we would not generally anticipate imposed sanctions to lead the government to improve its behavior (because if it was willing to do so, it would have done so in response to the threat).

We argue instead that the imposition of sanctions can lead both governments and organizations representing SD disputes to escalate in the short-term, making bargaining more likely to break down, and thus increasing the likelihood of civil war. Governmental increases in repression following imposed sanctions are driven by two mechanisms. First, sanctions impose immediate costs on governments, but the impact of these costs on the state's military and repressive capacity more generally takes time to develop. Governments may increase repression following sanctions out of fears that their capacity to effectively stymie opposition movements will diminish over time as the sanctions' impact is felt. The imposition of sanctions may cause governments to perceive that they have a limited window in which to effectively repress dissidents. Dissidents are likely to respond to this escalation in repression with violence of their own (Lichbach, 1987; Moore, 1998), which can lead to an escalation to civil war.

This dynamic is likely to have been at play in the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia in October 2021. In September 2021, the United States issued broad sanctions applying to a range of combatants in the separatist Tigray region of Ethiopia--including the Ethiopian government (Executive Office of the President, 2021). While these sanctions were intended to compel the combatants to seek a lasting ceasefire, within three weeks of the sanctions, the government launched a massive series of air strikes and ground offensives against separatists. These included air strikes on the city of Mekele that resulted in civilian deaths (BBC News, 2021). Concerns about the imminent impact of sanctions intended to hinder the country's military capacity may have contributed to a perception on the government side that it faced a narrow window in which to launch an effective offensive. Indeed the 2021 offensive was likely intended specifically to create 'facts on the ground,' such as captured territory, which would

allow the government to more effectively push back against international efforts to compel a more conciliatory policy (Aboudouh, 2021).

Second, even if governments do not want to increase repression following sanctions, they may be unable to avoid doing so. When sanctions are imposed, the most immediate impact on state capacity is in the government's ability to monitor and control armed agents. A reduction in state capacity will decrease the ability of the state to oversee its agents. These agents are those in the position to commit repression, and the reduction in capacity can lead to a principal-agent problem in which armed agents are freer to engage in repression (Liou et al., 2021).

Both of these mechanisms can result in increases in governmental repression of dissidents, including those representing SD groups. In addition, the imposition of sanctions can create short-term economic advantages for dissident groups. When sanctions are imposed on developing countries, these sanctions often lead to the growth of the black market, as people seek to buy goods that they otherwise cannot and as firms seek to continue their economic activity despite the sanctions regime (Early and Peksen, 2019). Dissident groups are often well positioned to profit from the black market, as they often operate outside of state control even in periods without civil war. This can increase the capacity of dissident groups—such as organizations representing SD groups—leading them to escalate the demands they make on the state.

All three of these mechanisms make bargaining between governments and dissidents more likely to break down following the imposition of sanctions. The anticipated impact of imposed sanctions on state capacity will eventually shift the bargaining range in favor of the dissidents—as the imposed sanctions reduce the state's ability to impose costs. The government then has an incentive to increase repression or prosecute a war while it still has the capacity to do so (Powell, 2006). This increased repression, and the perception of regime vulnerability, can lead organizations representing

SD groups to escalate the conflict as well. As such, bargaining between states and SD groups in the aftermath of imposed sanctions is more likely to break down, leading to an increased risk of civil war.

This discussion leads to our prediction of the relationship between imposed sanctions and civil war, which is opposite that of threatened sanctions:

Hypothesis 2: Civil war onset will be more likely in SD disputes following an imposition of international sanctions.

As with sanction threats, we expect this prediction to be partly driven by changes in governmental accommodation and repression. We do not generate specific hypotheses for those expected changes but explore them in the empirical analysis.

While we expect sanctions to increase the likelihood of civil war after they are imposed, we expect these effects to diminish over time. While sanctions impose immediate costs on governments, some of the costs of sanctions take time to develop, such as costs that come from loss of investment, blocked technology transfers, etc. These costs mean that the government's military capacity will diminish, decreasing its ability to repress dissidents. The anticipated future costs also provide an incentive for governments to adjust their behavior enough to get the sanctions lifted, which can include being less repressive and more accommodating. If sanctions lead to a loss of control of repressive agents by the state (Liou et al., 2021), over time that control may be reestablished and excess repression may be curtailed. Indeed, governments may achieve—at least partly—their repressive goals early-on in a sanctions episode, and then begin to reduce repression later on.

At the same time, as sanctions regimes develop, governments often work to increase their participation in and control over the black market, finding work-arounds to imposed sanctions, and taking advantage of shortages to increase their control over the population (Woertz, 2019). This can somewhat counteract the costs of sanctions to governments and also diminishes the economic benefit

SD groups can gain from the black market. This dynamic can mean the increased likelihood of civil war following the imposition of sanctions is a short-term effect, and that it diminishes (or even reverses) over time.

Hypothesis 3: The positive effect of imposed sanctions on civil war onset will diminish over time.

Threatened and imposed sanctions in self-determination disputes

We conduct a series of statistical analyses of the effect of threatened and imposed sanctions on the dynamics of self-determination disputes. In all analyses, we examine active self-determination groups from 1960 to 2005. These data come from Cunningham (2013), who drew her list of self-determination groups from the Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) Peace and Conflict Report. SD groups include all ethno-nationalist groups with organizations making demands for greater local control, up to and including (but not limited to) secession. Using these data, we analyze 138 SD groups from 76 different countries. SD dispute-years when the SD group is not active (meaning there are no organizations making claims related to self-determination)—as indicated in Cunningham (2013)—drop from the sample. Our unit of analysis is the SD dispute-year—of which there are 3,692.

To measure the threat and imposition of sanctions on countries in which self-determination disputes take place, we use the Threat and Imposition of Economic Sanctions (TIES) dataset (Morgan et al., 2014). There are several datasets which include information about economic sanctions, including the recently released data from Attia and Grauvogel (2023). The advantage of the TIES data for our analysis is that it includes both threatened and imposed sanctions, whereas most other datasets only include information on imposed sanctions. The EUSANCT data (Weber and Schneider, 2022) does

include threatened sanctions, but has a shorter time frame and includes fewer sanctioning actors than the TIES data.

The TIES data identify all instances in which one or more countries either limit or cease altogether their economic activity with a target state to convince the state to change its behavior. Using this baseline definition, a sanctions threat is defined as when a state takes steps towards limiting economic activity that fall short of actual imposition, such as verbal statements or drafting legislation detailing the potential sanctions. The TIES data records important information for sanction episodes, including the issue area to which the episode is related. There are 15 different issue areas in the TIES data, ranging in specificity from ‘improv[ing] human rights’ to ‘contain[ing] political influence’ to ‘trade practices.’

For our argument, sanctions need to reliably pressure the state to change its behavior outside of economic policy areas. One of the 15 issue areas identified in the TIES data are those related to ‘trade disputes.’ To be coded in this category, the sanction only impacts the trading practices of the country. If a sanction is issued to stop trade with another state for political reasons, the sanction episode would be labeled as addressing one of the other issue areas. The most common example of sanctions coded as relating to trade practices are import tariffs, either due to safety concerns or to improve the local economy. Given the limited scope of these trade sanctions, we do not expect them to impact state behavior in the way we hypothesize. In our main analyses, we include all sanctions in the other 14 issue areas, but exclude sanctions threatened or imposed solely due to trade disputes. In additional analyses we include all sanctions and present the results in the Online Appendix.

We use these data to create binary measures of the threat and imposition of sanctions in each country-year. Each variable is coded as ‘1’ for the first year in which sanctions are threatened or imposed, respectively, against the government, and ‘0’ each year thereafter (even if the sanction threat or imposition are ongoing). This means that our data captures the onset of the threat or imposition

of sanctions. In years in which sanctions are threatened and also imposed, both the threat and imposition variables are coded as '1'. Because sanctions are targeted against the government, each SD group in a particular country will have the same binary measures for threat and imposition of sanctions for each year. In our sample, there are 76 unique states and 60 of them received a sanction threat between 1960 and 2005, while 55 states faced imposed sanctions. This equals to 423 SD-years in which there is a threatened sanction and 306 SD-years where a sanction is imposed, out of our total sample of 3,692 SD-years. Table A2 in the Online Appendix presents descriptive statistics for all variables included in all statistical analyses.

Analyses of armed conflict onset

Our first analyses test Hypotheses 1 and 2, about the impact of threatened and imposed sanctions on armed conflict onset. Our dependent variable in these models is a dichotomous measure of whether an SD group-government dyad sees the onset of a new internal armed conflict in the year. Armed conflict onset is defined as a year when at least twenty-five battle-related fatalities occur after at least three prior years of peace, and is coded from the Uppsala Conflict Data Project/Peace Research Institute Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD, Gleditsch et al., 2002; Davies et al., 2023). We exclude years when an active conflict is ongoing for the SD group, so as to examine the effect of our independent variables on the beginning of a new conflict episode rather than its continuance. In our data there are 76 internal armed conflict onsets across the 138 SD disputes. Table A8 in the Online Appendix lists all threatened and imposed sanctions against countries with self-determination disputes and indicates whether a civil war onset occurred in the year after the threat or imposition.

We begin by identifying a baseline model of the risk of onset without including the sanctions variables. We start with a logistic regression with 14 variables pulled from the literature on ethnic conflict and civil war in self-determination disputes. All variables in this 'kitchen sink' model are listed

in the Online Appendix, and the results are presented in Table A1. Using a combination of model diagnostic measures and prediction error rates, we reduce our model to the covariates that provide the strongest fit to estimating civil war onset by removing variables that reduce the effectiveness of the model. The subsequent model has seven variables, which we use as controls in our analyses of the effect of threatened and imposed sanctions.

These control variables include four measured at the country-year level. The first is a dichotomous measure for democracy, coded as ‘1’ for countries with a Polity score greater than 6 (Marshall et al., 2002). The second is a binary measure of whether there is a neighboring civil war, generated from the ACD.⁷ Third, we include a count of the number of SD groups in the country. Also, at the country-year level is a measure of state repression. To measure repression, we use the latent measure of human rights from Fariss (2014).⁸

We also include two control variables measured at the SD group-level. The first is a count of the number of organizations representing the group that are using violence in the year (Cunningham et al., 2020). The second is a binary measure of whether any faction representing the group has made a demand for full independence in the year (as opposed to less extreme demands for autonomy or greater political representation). Finally, in line with Carter and Signorino (2010), we include a cubic polynomial of time since the last civil war onset to account for duration dependence. Following Beardsley et al., (2017), to avoid left censoring, for groups that existed before 1960 we begin the risk-time polynomials in 1946, or the end of armed conflict episodes after 1946, or the date the movement was founded if after 1946.

⁷ Neighboring civil war is defined as one occurring in a country whose minimum distance is within 900 kilometers of the country in which the SD dispute occurs (Buhaug and Gleditsch, 2008).

⁸ His measure takes into account multiple types of governmental repression—including torture, imprisonment and disappearance, and killing. The measure is drawn from a range of data sources and corrects for changes in reporting practices for human rights violations over time. These data are preferable to using the unadjusted Political Terror Scale (PTS, Gibney et al. 2023) or the CIRI Human Rights Data (Cingranelli et al., 2014), because they explicitly model changes over time in reporting practices and standards in the sources on which the data is based, such as reports by the United States State Department and Amnesty International.

After establishing our model of the likelihood of civil war onset, we add our dichotomous variables for threatened and imposed sanctions. This approach allows us to see how threatened and imposed sanctions impact the baseline risk of civil war in each dispute. To address the potential endogeneity of sanctions and armed conflict, we lag the measure of threatened and imposed sanctions (as well as the control variables) by one year. These models, presented in Table 1, include robust standard errors clustered at the SD group level and do not include sanctions that were threatened or imposed solely in response to a trade dispute, as described above.⁹

Model 1 in Table 1 shows a pattern consistent with the expectations of Hypotheses 1 and 2. The sign on the sanctions threat variable is negative and statistically significant, suggesting that civil war onset is less likely in self-determination disputes in years following those in which sanctions were threatened. The opposite pattern holds with the imposed sanctions variable, suggesting that civil war onset is more likely in disputes in the year following the imposition of sanctions.

Threatened and imposed sanctions have a large substantive effect as well. We calculated the predicted probabilities of the onset of armed conflict in self-determination disputes when there are threatened and imposed sanctions, setting other right-hand side variables to their observed values (Hanmer and Kalkan, 2013). We plot these predictions in Figure 1. Threatened sanctions reduce the likelihood of armed conflict onset in self-determination disputes on average from around a 3.3% chance to about a 0.6% chance. This represents an average marginal effect of -2.7 percentage points.¹⁰ Imposed sanctions approximately quadruple the likelihood of armed conflict onset from 3.3% to around 11.6%, representing an average marginal effect of about 8.3 percentage points. The imposed sanctions range of predicted probabilities is quite large, reflecting the rarity of these events. Figure 1 displays the predicted probabilities at 95% confidence levels, this shows statistical significance for

⁹ We tested the 14 other issue areas to see if one type of sanction was driving our model. Our results remain the same when any one issue area is taken out as well as with random combinations of issues.

¹⁰ This was developed with the margins package in R.

threatened sanctions but not imposed. Thus, while Figure 1 shows that imposed sanctions have a larger substantive effect in increasing the risk of civil war than threatened sanctions do in decreasing it, we interpret the effect of imposed sanctions with some caution.

Table 1. Predicting civil war onset.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Civil war onset	
	(1)	(2)
Threatened sanctions		-1.667*
		(0.717)
Imposed sanctions		1.345**
		(0.390)
Democracy	-0.936*	-0.853*
	(0.412)	(0.415)
Neighboring civil war	-0.758*	-0.769*
	(0.355)	(0.358)
Number of SD groups in country	0.134**	0.134**
	(0.049)	(0.049)
Human rights protection score	-0.439*	-0.426*
	(0.175)	(0.173)
Factions using violence	0.647**	0.642**
	(0.137)	(0.134)
Group demanded independence	0.905**	0.913**
	(0.287)	(0.289)
Risk time	-0.048	-0.055
	(0.056)	(0.056)
Risk time ²	0.003	0.003
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Risk time ³	-0.00004	-0.00005
	(0.00003)	(0.00004)
Constant	-4.439**	-4.458**
	(0.427)	(0.440)
Observations	2,668	2,668
Log Likelihood	-253.949	-249.272
Akaike Inf. Crit.	527.898	522.543

All independent variables lagged by one year.

**p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; +p < 0.1 (two-tailed);

Standard errors clustered on SD group.

Figure 1. Armed conflict onset in self-determination disputes and economic sanctions.

[Figure 1 about here]

The control variables in Table 1 generally show patterns consistent with the literature. The democracy and human rights protection scores are negative and statistically significant, suggesting that countries that are democracies and which have better human rights records in one year are less likely to see civil war onset in the next. An increase in the number of SD groups in the country, more organizations using violent tactics, and a group demanding independence are all significant and associated with increasing the likelihood of conflict onset. Neighboring conflict is significantly associated with a reduced likelihood of armed conflict onset, an unexpected result.

The models in Table 1 and predicted probabilities in Figure 1 show that threatened and imposed sanctions have substantial impacts on the likelihood of civil war onset in self-determination disputes. We use Receiver Operator Characteristic (ROC) plots and measure the area under the curve (AUC) to investigate whether the threat or imposition of sanctions adds to our predictive power of civil war onset (Ward et al., 2010). Figure 2 shows ROC plots for both models in Table 1. The dotted curve represents the model with only the controls, while the solid line adds our sanction variables. As we can see from Figure 2, the model including threatened and imposed sanctions improves our model's ability to predict civil war onset in the next year. The AUC score of our model with the sanctions variables is 0.855, compared to the AUC of the model with only controls at 0.838.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2. ROC plots of models with and without sanctions variables.

Threatened and imposed sanctions and state repression/accommodation

The analyses in Table 1 provide strong support for the overall pattern between the threat and imposition of sanctions and armed conflict onset predicted by our theory. The next series of analyses probe the theoretical mechanisms behind that pattern. We argue that sanction threats will lead states to increase accommodation and reduce repression in the hopes that shifting their behavior will lead international actors not to impose sanctions. However, once sanctions are imposed, we argue that states will increase their use of repression, at least in the short term. We explore these mechanisms in two different analyses, the first examining state accommodation and the second state repression.

Governmental accommodation

To measure accommodation, we use the Strategies of Resistance Data Project (SRDP), which includes information on every instance in which governments have accommodated the demands of organizations representing self-determination groups (Cunningham et al., 2020). Accommodation involves the government making concessions to give greater power to the self-determination group. This can include granting greater representation in the national-level government, giving greater

authority to the local-level government over some policy areas, or policy or legal changes that provide greater identity protection for the group. These concessions can be the result of direct or indirect negotiations between the government and SD groups but can also be made unilaterally by governments.

We use two different variables to measure governmental accommodation of SD groups. The first is an indicator of whether any accommodation relating to that SD group and its interests occurs in the year, excluding monetary donations to the region and land transfers.¹¹ Even with this broad definition, incidences of accommodation are quite rare, happening in 189 of 3,692 SD-years. The second measure only includes accommodations which are endorsed by the central government and codified through legislation. This represents a more binding concession, and occurs in 68 SD-years. Table 2 reports the results of logistic regression analyses of these measures of accommodation.

Our control variables remain the same as in Table 1, as Cunningham (2013) argues that many of the factors that affect concessions also affect civil war. To model the dependence of future accommodations on recent concessions we add a previous concession variable which includes accommodation granted in the previous three years. To exclude concessions that are largely a result of civil war, we exclude all active civil war years.

The coefficient on the sanctions threat variable is positive and statistically significant in Model 1, which includes all concessions (excluding monetary and land transfers) and Model 2, where concessions are limited to those endorsed by the central government and codified through legislation. We see a larger effect size for threatened sanctions for legislative accommodations. In these cases, substantively, using the observed values approach, accommodations codified by law are very rare with

¹¹ Direct monetary transfers are excluded from the SRDP accommodations data because they do not relate to a group's identity and do not represent a longer-lasting shift in favor of group demands. We choose to exclude land transfers because it is broadly defined to include a wide set of outcomes, ranging from fishing rights being granted to the wholesale transfer of land to a self-determination group.

a baseline probability of 0.76%, but the occurrence of sanction threats in the year prior increases the probability to 2.99%, a 293% increase.

The coefficient on the imposed sanctions variable is negative in both models, but only significant at the 0.1 level in Model 1, and insignificant in Model 2. So, the analyses do not show clear support for our expectation that imposed sanctions would decrease governmental accommodation of SD groups.

Table 2. Accommodation of SD Groups.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Accommodation (excluding land transfers)	Accommodation codified by law
	(1)	(2)
Threatened sanctions	0.892** (0.292)	1.390** (0.378)
Imposed sanctions	-0.808+ (0.457)	-0.730 (0.581)
Previous accommodation	0.480* (0.211)	0.273 (0.353)
Democracy	0.193 (0.278)	0.686 (0.493)
Neighboring civil war	-0.087 (0.210)	-0.071 (0.321)
Number of SD groups in country	-0.046 (0.055)	-0.076 (0.109)
Human rights protection score	0.186 (0.122)	0.402* (0.156)
Factions using violence	0.189 (0.138)	0.183 (0.301)
Group demanded independence	-0.276 (0.203)	0.091 (0.294)
Risk time	-0.081+ (0.043)	0.024 (0.069)
Risk time ²	0.003+ (0.002)	-0.002 (0.003)
Risk time ³	-0.00004+ (0.00002)	0.00003 (0.00003)
Constant	-2.514** (0.312)	-4.484** (0.598)
Observations	2,668	2,668
Log Likelihood	-525.772	-238.948
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,077.545	503.896

All independent variables lagged by one year.

**p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; +p < 0.1 (two-tailed);

Standard errors clustered on SD group.

Governmental Repression

We are unable to conduct a parallel test of governmental repression to that in Table 2 because we do not have data on governmental repression targeted at SD groups specifically. Instead, we examine the effect of threatened and imposed sanctions on the overall levels of repression at the country level in our sample of countries that have SD disputes. This is in line with our theoretical argument that states will generally decrease repression across political disputes in response to threatened sanctions and increase it in response to imposed sanctions.

We include two measures of governmental repression from Fariss (2014)—the same source used in the models in Tables 1 and 2. The first is the overall measure of human rights protection we use in those analyses, and the second focuses only on the most egregious human rights violations—mass killing and one-sided violence. The control variables we include follow from Hill and Jones' (2014) analyses of determinants of human rights violations—we exclude potential control variables that relate to institutions that might be changed in response to sanctions, such as an independent judiciary as well as economic conditions that might change as a result of sanctions. We omit these controls to avoid controlling for intermediate processes between sanctions and repression. We follow Fariss' recommendation and use Ordinary Least Squares and interact the lag of the latent measure with a year counter to control for temporal dependence and changes in reporting practices over time. To parallel our main analyses of civil war onset, we exclude country-years in which there is an ongoing civil war. Table 3 provides the results of two models for each dependent variable. The first and third models are more limited, and the second and fourth include additional control variables.

Table 3: Sanctions and state-level repression

	Latent HR		Latent OSV	
Threatened sanctions	0.035*	0.020	-2.174*	-2.518+
	(0.014)	(0.022)	(0.919)	(1.369)
Imposed sanctions	0.013	0.020	0.965	0.226
	(0.011)	(0.018)	(1.522)	(1.801)
Common law system		-0.018		-3.078*
		(0.012)		(1.403)
Executive constraints (Polity)		0.017**		-1.776**
		(0.003)		(0.675)
Population (log)		-0.011**		1.545**
		(0.003)		(0.564)
Lagged DV	0.998**	0.966**	-0.098	-0.095+
	(0.003)	(0.009)	(0.063)	(0.056)
Year counter	0.001**	0.001*	-0.438+	-0.436
	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.242)	(0.275)
Year counter * Lagged DV	-0.001**	-0.000	0.006+	0.006+
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Constant	0.016**	-0.034**	14.355*	19.131*
	(0.003)	(0.011)	(5.790)	(8.882)
Observations	7,549	3,690	2,744	2,209

Robust standard errors clustered on SD group

** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1 (two-tailed)

Across three of the four models in Table 3, threatened sanctions in the prior year are both positively associated with better human rights practices in general and negatively associated with one-sided violence by the state. Specifically, the first model suggests that on average and holding other factors constant, a threat of sanctions in the prior year is associated with an increase of 0.035 in the latent measure of human rights practices¹²—though the effect of sanctions threats is not significant when control variables are included.¹³ The final model (with controls) suggests that, on average, the threat of sanctions in the prior year corresponds to approximately 2.5 fewer deaths from government-initiated mass killing or one-sided violence (this effect is only significant at the 0.1 level). These effects

¹² Farris' latent measure ranges from -3.028 to 5.254 in the estimation sample. The average is 0.326.

¹³ The lack of significance may stem from the more than halving of the sample size with the inclusion of control variables and years in which government transitions or interregnums are dropped from the analysis due to missingness with the Polity Executive Constraints variable.

sizes for threatened sanctions on repression are comparable to the effect of the country being under a common law legal system, which has been shown to be a major driver of state repression (Hill and Jones, 2014). Generally, we take these results as providing some support for the expectation that states decrease repression of opposition groups in response to the external pressure of threatened international sanctions.

The effect of threatened and imposed sanctions over time

Our final set of statistical analyses examine the effect of imposed sanctions over time (Hypothesis 3). In Table 4, we present a series of models that are the same as Model 2 in Table 1, adding measures of whether sanctions were imposed two, three, four, or five years previously. The results for the threat and imposition of sanctions in the previous year are consistent across these five models, showing that the effect of sanctions in the following year is not driven by sanctions behavior in prior periods. The patterns for the imposition lags are interesting. All of the other lags show a sign switch as compared to the one-year lag, suggesting the imposition of sanctions first dissipates in its positive effect—neither increasing nor decreasing the likelihood of civil war onset—and then decreases the likelihood of civil war onset—at three years prior, there is a statistically significant (at the 0.1 level) decrease in the likelihood of civil war onset. These results are consistent with our expectation in Hypothesis 3, and our argument that, while the imposition of sanctions incentivizes governments to increase repression and dissidents to escalate demands in the short-term, these incentives diminish over time. This can happen because sanctions push states to pursue more repressive policies in the short term—while they still have capacity—but over time, the impact of sanctions is felt as states deplete vital material and financial resources and lose access to sources of replacements, and short-term workarounds are

no longer effective. These results suggest that, while sanctions may increase the risk of civil war, initially, they may actually play more of a preventive role over time.¹⁴

¹⁴ Because we exclude years of ongoing civil war, the analyses with the longer lags only includes cases where civil war did not start one year after the imposed sanction and then continue after that.

Table 4: Impact of sanctions over time

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Civil War Onset			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Threatened sanctions ($t-1$)	-1.663* (0.713)	-1.610* (0.701)	-1.605* (0.708)	-1.523* (0.684)
Imposed sanctions ($t-1$)	1.345** (0.393)	1.498** (0.410)	1.624** (0.430)	1.661** (0.431)
Imposed sanctions ($t-2$)	-0.461 (0.540)	-0.446 (0.548)	-0.330 (0.553)	-0.275 (0.565)
Imposed sanctions ($t-3$)		-1.819+ (1.010)	-1.799+ (1.025)	-1.736+ (1.032)
Imposed sanctions ($t-4$)			-1.071 (0.701)	-1.076 (0.696)
Imposed sanctions ($t-5$)				-0.354 (0.603)
Constant	-4.716** (0.480)	-5.095** (0.538)	-5.550** (0.593)	-5.789** (0.580)
Controls included?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,559	2,448	2,343	2,241
Log likelihood	-235.601	-208.591	-186.682	-177.631
Akaike Inf. Crit.	497.202	445.182	403.363	387.262

**p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; +p < 0.1 (two-tailed); standard errors clustered on SD group.

Additional analyses

We conducted additional analyses to further examine the relationship between sanctions and civil war onset. We describe the analyses briefly here and present tables in the Online Appendix. Table A3 presents a model where the sanctions measures include all sanctions episodes from the TIES dataset, including those regarding trade practices. In Table A3, the threat of sanctions is negatively associated with civil war but not statistically significant while the imposition of sanctions is positive and statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. This suggests that sanctions related to trade disputes do not entirely impact the dynamics of civil war in the same way those pertaining to the other

14 issue areas do. Since trade-related sanctions are quite different than the other sanction issue areas we do not see the lack of significance here as problematic for our argument.

The next set of analyses (Table A4) further probe the effect of different types of sanctions. We created four different measures of the threatened and imposed sanctions variables, following Liou et al. (2023). Each measure comes directly from the TIES data. The first limits sanctions to ‘high cost’ sanctions, defined as those with the potential to create significant changes in the target state’s economy (increases of over 5% in inflation or unemployment). The second measure only includes sanctions threatened and imposed by multiple senders, the third only includes sanctions related to human rights (issue area ‘8’ in the TIES data), and the fourth only includes sanctions targeted against individuals (defined as sanctions that are designated to freeze assets). The threatened sanctions variable is negative in all four models, and statistically significant (with a very large coefficient) in all but the model limited to multilateral threats. The imposed sanctions variable is positive in all models, but only statistically significant in the models where sanctions are limited to targeted sanctions or those related to human rights (at the 0.1 level). The lack of significance is likely due to a substantial reduction in the number of sanctions episodes included in each measure but may also indicate some differences across types of sanctions. In particular, the difference between multilateral and unilateral sanctions could be an area of future research.

Table A5 in the Online Appendix provides a replication of the models in Table 2 using the EUSANCT data (Weber and Schneider, 2022). The EUSANCT data records sanction episodes from 1989 to 2015, and only include sanction episodes from the EU, US, and UN. As such, while they include more recent sanctions (since the TIES data ends in 2005), they include fewer sanctions overall. Our results for the imposition of sanctions still hold as the coefficient is positive and statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. Our findings for the threat of sanctions are in the expected direction but not significant. The loss of significance may be because of a substantial decrease in our

sample, but may also indicate that sanctioning practices have changed over time and may suggest that threats are less effective in the more recent period. We see these differences as interesting but leave further exploration of them to future research.

We test the impact of sanctions in combination with the state's regime type to understand the capacity of the state to function in the face of sanctions in Table A6. We interact our threatened and imposed sanctions variables with a dichotomous variable indicating if the regime is a personalist regime or monarchy. In our model of sanction threats, the results remain the same when interacted with our regime type variable. However, when looking at imposed sanctions, we see that when imposed sanctions are implemented in a personalist regime or monarchy, the sanctions significantly decrease the likelihood of civil war onset. This pattern is in line with the argument of Escribà-Folch and Wright (2010; 2015) that personalist regimes and monarchies are more sensitive to sanction costs.

Finally, to address potential unobserved factors that could be influencing both the type of states targeted with sanctions and the likelihood these countries' SD disputes escalate to civil war, we conduct bivariate probit models of sanctions (both threatened and imposed) and civil war onset (Table A7a and A7b). Bivariate probit models have a joint error term to allow for the potential correlation in errors between the two equations. These models show the same patterns for the effect of threatened and imposed sanctions as in Table 1, suggesting that the impact of sanctions on civil war onset is not driven by some unobserved factor leading to both sanctioning and civil war.

Conclusion

Sanctions are a tool international actors frequently use to try to convince governments (and, in some cases, non-state actors) to change their behavior. The analyses in this article provide important insight into the role these economic tools can play—even in disputes that may not be the direct target.

Following the literature on sanctions efficacy, we differentiate between threatened and imposed sanctions and find that while threatened sanctions are associated with a decreased likelihood that self-determination disputes escalate to civil war, imposed sanctions have a positive association with the escalation of these disputes to armed conflict.

The evident ameliorative impact of threatened sanctions suggests that economic actions can have a broader preventive impact than the specific target of those sanctions. Governments may improve their behavior generally in response to the threat of sanctions, not only in the specific area to which the sanctions threat is targeted. The finding that governments both decrease country-level repression and increase accommodation of SD groups following sanction threats show the positive impacts sanction threats can have on state behavior.

The finding on imposed sanctions suggests, however, that when these threats fail to change behavior, and sanctions are imposed, they can actually promote escalation. This finding is in line with our theoretical expectations, and also with findings that imposed sanctions lead to more severe armed conflicts (Hultman and Peksen, 2017) and greater repression and worsening human rights abuses (Liou et al., 2021). These patterns suggest that sanctioning countries can have unintended consequences of violence escalation in intra-state disputes.

Further statistical analyses, however, show that imposed sanctions can decrease the likelihood of civil war over time. We see this as evidence that the period immediately around the imposition of sanctions is likely to be a particularly volatile one for SD (and potentially other) disputes in the country. This could mean that, when sanctions are imposed, international actors should consider other tools such as mediation and peacekeeping to try to lessen the potential for escalation around these sanctions. Further research examining the interaction between economic sanctions, diplomatic, and military tools of conflict management would enhance our understanding of the way these actions affect each other and the role they can play in conflict prevention.

In addition, further research could help to shed light on what type of sanction regimes have the biggest effect on state and SD group behavior. Our analyses largely treat the threat and imposition of sanctions as dichotomous, and examine how they broadly affect civil war onset, state repression and accommodation. Sanctions vary substantially in how widespread they are and who imposes them, and further research on variation across sanctions would provide more insight into their effectiveness.

The incredible range and sophistication of economic sanctions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the paralysis of the UN Security Council suggest that sanctions will continue to be tools used by international actors. Studying how sanctions influence the behavior of states and non-state actors will add to understanding of whether and how violent conflicts such as civil war can be prevented.

Replication Data

The dataset, R-scripts, and do-files for the quantitative analysis in this article, along with the Online Appendix, can be found at <http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets>.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the editors and two anonymous reviewers for their feedback on this article. An earlier version was presented at the 2023 meeting of the International Studies Association. Thank you also to Susanna Campbell and Jacob Kathman for their feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript.

Funding

Data used in this article were collected with support from a National Science Foundation Grant (#SES-1948669). This article does not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation or the US Government.

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