

1. Introduction

Economic sanctions have acquired the political function within the world community of registering protest against the behaviour of other states, at times of deflecting pressure for other forms of action and at others of crystallizing a collective response to violations of international peace and morality. The decision to impose a sanctions regime may be the result of compliance with public demand, which may have been expressed in the form of petitions, demonstrations and lobbying over a prolonged period of time. Imposition of sanctions may also be formative of public attitudes. Agreement by national governments at the United Nations to implement a sanctions regime establishes the fact of collective action, and tests public determination within member states. These political and symbolic functions of sanctions, however, tend to defeat the ostensible purpose of providing a non-violent means of managing world affairs.

Perhaps most disturbing is the idea that the imposition of sanctions could become nothing more than a political formula to overcome a public reluctance to countenance official violence. This cynical approach to sanctions appeared to some to have been employed in the 1990 Kuwait crisis. The disjunction between means (including what some saw as inadequate time allowed within which to judge the effectiveness of sanctions) and declared ends suggested a thesis that the underlying political purpose of coalition diplomacy was to ensure that the opportunity was not lost of destroying Iraq's military potential. Sir Crispin Tickell, the British Ambassador to the United Nations until mid August 1990, specifically denied that this was the intent when he addressed the Security Council on 6 August: "economic sanctions should not be regarded as a prelude to anything else. Here I obviously refer to military action."¹ Abu Hassan, the Foreign Minister of Malaysia, was not convinced. He asked whether the United Nations was "moving at this speed to make sanctions effective, or are we readying ourselves early for a situation where we will conclude that sanctions are not effective and that other measures must therefore be taken?"² The public was not provided with any evidence by the 15 January 1991 deadline, set by Security Council resolution 678 of 29 November 1990, which could support a belief that economic sanctions were having a coercive effect on the Iraqi government. This could be taken either as support for, or as a convincing case against, the belief that sanctions were manipulated by the great powers. Whatever the intent, however, sanctions did in fact, as they not infrequently do, constitute a transitional phase before resort to violence.

¹ United Nations, Security Council Verbatim Reports, hereafter SCVR, Provisional, 6 August S/PV 2933 - discussion of document S/21441

² SCVR, Provisional, 25 September 1990, S/PV.2943