



## Resolution on Sanctions

### An action of the 225th General Assembly (2022)



Approved by the 225th General Assembly (2022)  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Developed by  
The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP)  
of the General Assembly Mission Council/Presbyterian Mission Agency  
[www.pcusa.org/acswp](http://www.pcusa.org/acswp) or [www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/acswp](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/acswp)  
See also [www.justiceUnbound.org](http://www.justiceUnbound.org) for current discussion



## Recommendations

The 225th General Assembly (2022) approves the following recommendations:

1. Direct relevant agencies within the PC(USA) to review all current and future PC(USA) policy endorsing the use of sanctions to determine that said sanctions do not cause undue harm to civilian populations, and to withdraw support from any sanctions regime that does not meet this standard.
2. Support legislation to restore congressional approval and oversight over the sanctions powers of the U.S. president under the National Emergencies Act and International Emergency Economic Powers Act.
3. Support legislation that allows the export of certain equipment and material to a territory that is controlled by a power that is otherwise subject to sanctions if the material is intended for civilian health-care facilities; civilian energy infrastructure; or primary or secondary educational facilities.
4. Support legislation that requires the U.S. president, when exercising any international emergency economic powers, to issue a report detailing the goals and outcomes expected to be achieved by such actions; other tools considered and the reasons for the chosen response; a list of countries imposing similar sanctions; and the strategy to provide compliance guidance to entities in the private sector, humanitarian organizations and peace-building organizations.
5. Support legislation that requires mandatory impact studies to be conducted before and after the implementation of sanctions and additional reporting on whether or not sanctions regimes are helping achieve goals and benchmarks set by our government.

## Rationale

Since the passage of the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act and the 1976 National Emergencies Act, the executive branch has made extensive use of economic sanctions as a tool of international diplomacy. The use of sanctions has increased drastically over the past decade, often without any approval from the legislative branch. During the Trump administration, broad sanctions were imposed on Iran, Venezuela and North Korea with documented negative health and economic consequences for millions of inhabitants of these countries.

A [Human Rights Watch report](#) on the economic sanctions imposed on Iran after U.S. withdrawal from the U.S./Iran Nuclear pact notes, “Open-ended and comprehensive sanctions, such as those that the Trump administration has imposed on Iran, have negatively impacted the humanitarian needs and the enjoyment of human rights of Iran’s general population.”

The pressure brought to bear on other countries attempting to alleviate health and other humanitarian crises in Iran has also had a chilling effect. [Jan Egeland, secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, notes](#), “We have now, for a full year, tried to find banks that are able and willing to transfer money from donors [for our humanitarian operations]. But we are hitting a brick wall on every side. Norwegian and other international banks are afraid of U.S. sanctions to transfer the money that governments have given for our vital aid work.”

Regarding the current sanctions regime imposed by the United States against the Taliban, [Paul Spiegel, the director of the Center for Humanitarian Health at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public](#)



[Health, writes](#), “After spending five weeks in Afghanistan working as a consultant for the World Health Organization on an emergency surge team, I can clearly state that if the United States and other Western governments do not change their Afghanistan sanction policies, more Afghans will die from sanctions than at the hands of the Taliban.”

Speaking about the sanctions regime imposed on the government of Venezuela by the United States beginning in 2015, [Human Rights Watch notes](#), “[We are] deeply concerned that recent U.S. sanctions on Venezuela will further exacerbate the suffering of the Venezuelan people. While the purchase of food and medicine is in theory excluded from the sanctions, foreign providers fearing punishment under the sanctions may limit their transactions with Venezuelan authorities in ways that could seriously harm even more Venezuelans’ economic and social rights.”

In its report “[The Case Against Economic Sanctions](#),” the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) states, “a growing body of research shows that economic sanctions have dire consequences for human populations, causing many deaths — sometimes more than armed conflicts — and increases in preventable disease. Experts argue that they violate international law. Studies show that they are generally not effective in achieving desired results.”

The CEPR report outlines the following objections to the use of broad economic sanctions as a tool of foreign policy:

1. ***Ordinary people, not governments, are the main victims of economic sanctions.*** The most devastating effect of sanctions is to limit the import of essential goods to a targeted country, including at times essential medicines and infrastructure necessary for clean water and food. The effects of these shortages impact citizens more directly and more devastatingly than they do governments.
2. ***U.S. sanctions have global spillover effects.*** Because of the interconnected nature of global finance, sanctions imposed by the United States often become much wider, because they can impact the lending behavior of banks doing business with the United States. Thus, U.S. sanctions can have impacts far more dire than anticipated.
3. ***Sanctions kill.*** Sanctions imposed by the United States on North Korea and Venezuela are estimated to have [caused thousands of deaths in those countries](#) due to the disruption in supplies of medicines and other essential goods.
4. ***Sanctions cause economic and social crises.*** In Iran, U.S. sanctions have led to [spikes in unemployment, depression of incomes and unsustainable living costs](#).
5. ***Sanctions negatively impact civil society, women and labor movements.*** Studies show that [sanctions disproportionately impact the most socioeconomically vulnerable populations in targeted societies](#). For women in particular, sanctions have been shown to negatively impact economic and social status.
6. ***U.S. economic sanctions violate international law.*** The use of unilateral sanctions by the United States violates numerous international treaties and U.N. resolutions, according to [expert findings by the U.N. Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and rulings by the International Court of Justice](#).

7. ***Sanctions generally don't work.*** [Numerous studies on specific sanctions regimes](#) have shown that sanctions rarely achieve their desired results, and even when they do achieve some results, the success is only partial.
8. ***Humanitarian exemptions provide only limited relief.*** While many sanctions regimes do include exemptions for specific humanitarian goods, such exemptions generally fail to counteract the overall economic impact of sanctions, and thus provide only limited relief from the negative effects of sanctions noted above.
9. ***The U.S. president imposes sanctions without congressional approval.*** Most sanctions imposed by the United States under the 1976 International Economic Emergency Powers Act have been [enacted without any congressional approval or oversight](#).

Because of these realities, a growing number of religious and other concerned groups have begun to challenge the use of sanctions as currently practiced by the United States and have called for a reappraisal of how, when and why sanctions are used. In February 2020, an [open letter](#) to Congress was drafted urging support for the Congressional Oversight of Sanctions Act (COSA). Many of the reforms called for in COSA are represented in the recommendations above. Signatories include the American Friends Service Committee, the Mennonite Central Committee, the Chicago Religious Leadership Network, the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries, the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Presbyterian Peace Network for Korea.

A change in our sanctions policy in the United States is a pressing need. With citizens of a growing number of countries currently experiencing the effects of sanctions regimes, the human rights challenges we have created cannot be ignored. Advocating for a different approach to our foreign policy is consistent with the theological positions expressed in our denominational policies. In particular, this resolution draws upon the spirit of the Matthew 25 Initiative. While much of the focus of congregations and other groups committed to the Matthew 25 Initiative has been domestic, we are clearly called to engage with the wider world as well.

In particular, this resolution speaks to two foci of the Matthew 25 Initiative.

- [Dismantling structural racism](#) by advocating and acting to break down the systems, practices and thinking that underlie discrimination, bias, prejudice and oppression of people of color.
 

The majority of sanctions imposed by the United States have been fallen upon countries whose populations are overwhelmingly people of color. While the stated, and perhaps the intended, effect of these sanctions is often to challenge structures of oppression in these countries, the effect is often the opposite, as noted above. Sanctions can, and often do, participate in structures of racism.
- [Eradicating systemic poverty](#) by working to change laws, policies, plans and structures in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor.
 

The effect of sanctions falls disproportionately on the most socioeconomically distressed populations in targeted countries. While targeted governments can, and usually do, find their way through sanctions regimes intact and in some cases strengthened, the poorest and most vulnerable members of these societies are most often the victims.



We live out our Reformed theology when we speak out against practices that violate our collective conscience. The more evidence we gather on the use of sanctions and on their effects on civilian populations, the more it becomes apparent that uncritical, under-evaluated and unmonitored use of sanctions can constitute a collective failure to love our neighbors. Our theology calls us to speak. As the PC(USA) policy statement “[Honest Patriotism](#)” reminds us:

*“Bearing our civic responsibilities as Christians in mind, we must also at times, in our role as active Christian members of a civil community, take seriously our prophetic role. Because we understand the state as ordained by God we must, in all humility and acknowledging our own propensity for error, call the state to task when it fails in its obligations.”*





PDS #10-2301-22-008  
Copyright © 2022  
The Office of the General Assembly  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40202

*A policy statement is an excerpt from the Minutes of the  
General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

