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Snapback; legal fiction deployed as geopolitical weapon

By Kamran Yeganegi
Foreign policy expert

O P I N I O N
E X C L U S I V E

The re-imposition of sanctions through the so-called "snapback" mechanism has once again become the focal point of political and legal disputes surrounding Iran and the 2015 nuclear deal. Enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 2231, the mechanism is ostensibly a legal tool intended to ensure compliance with commitments. Yet, experience shows that such a mechanism functions less as a guarantor of international law and more as an instrument of political pressure and the recalibration of geopolitical balances.

This raises a critical question: is snapback a legitimate mechanism under international law, or only a "legal fiction" that has been weaponized for geopolitical purposes?

From the standpoint of international law, snapback is riddled with fundamental flaws including:

Principle of proportionality and necessity: Coercive measures in international law must be proportionate to the alleged breach. The wholesale reinstatement of all UN sanctions is grossly disproportionate, serving not to restore negotiations but to advance a strategy of maximum political pressure.

Absence of neutral arbitration: Most international legal regimes, such as the WTO, provide independent dispute-settlement mechanisms. Snapback, however, lacks any impartial forum for adjudicating claims. This structural vacuum turns it into a tool of political coercion rather than a genuine dispute-resolution mechanism.

From an academic perspective, snapback represents a deficient legal architecture. Rather than strengthening the international legal order, it corrodes it—spreading legal uncertainty and contractual instability, particularly in the critical domains of energy and investment. The ambiguities and contradictions inherent in snapback have led many jurists to describe it as a legal fiction. Cloaked in legal terminology, it operates less as law and more as political theater. The assertion of reinstated sanctions, without genuine consensus within the Security Council, exemplifies the instrumentalization of international law for unilateral agendas.

Despite its shaky legal foundations, snapback has proven effective as a geopolitical weapon. It sends a stark warning to global markets that is long-term cooperation with Iran is high-risk. This discourages foreign investors, disrupts financial flows, and renders energy contracts fragile.

The impact is not confined to Iran. Snapback destabilizes energy contracting across the Middle East. Buyers in Asia and Europe have grown more cautious, while regional competitors—such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE—have capitalized on the vacuum. In effect, snapback redistributes energy power within the region and threatens the stability of global markets.

Snapback's repercussions extend to the multilateral system itself. The UN Security Council, ideally a neutral arbiter, is perceived as politically biased by endorsing such a mechanism. This perception risks alienating much of the Global South, encouraging states to pursue parallel alliances and alternative institutions. Consequently, snapback undermines not only energy and economic stability but also the very foundations of international law and multilateral trust.

Snapback of sanctions embody not the authority of law but its instrumentalization. In essence, they are a "legal fiction" deployed as a "geopolitical weapon."

Their consequences are clear: Destabilization of global energy markets, intensification of regional rivalries, chilling effects on foreign investment, and erosion of confidence in multilateral institutions.

Yet, for Iran, even this pressure can be turned into an opportunity. Through strategic diplomacy, legal innovation, and technological resilience, snapback can serve as a catalyst for redefining Iran's role in the international system. History has shown that in moments of external pressure, Iran has tapped into its capacity for renewal. The message is evident. Although snapback was designed to isolate Iran, in practice it could mark the beginning of a new chapter—one in which Iran strengthens its national independence, reshapes its regional role, and asserts a more active influence in the evolving architecture of international law.

Armed Forces well-prepared to confront any adventurism: *Top commanders*

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Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Abdolrahim Mousavi (L) meets with Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Chief Commander Mohammad Pakpour in Tehran, Iran on September 28, 2025.

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China's tools, appetite for trade with Iran defy snapback of sanctions

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INTERVIEW
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Iran's relations with China, its largest trading partner and top buyer of Iranian oil, have gained even greater weight considering sweeping Western sanctions. Beijing has become a vital pillar of Tehran's foreign policy and can pave the way for deeper international engagement in today's multipolar world. Minister of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Sattar Hashemi underscored the future of this partnership during the 76th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, held last week at the Chinese Embassy

in Tehran. Praising the strategic bonds between Tehran and Beijing, Hashemi placed particular emphasis on expanding technological and digital cooperation. The minister also stressed the "convergent approach" of the two countries on global and regional issues, pointing to greater opportunities for collaboration in international bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS and the United Nations. Such a diplomatic harmony suggests the partnership goes far beyond trade, encompassing deeper strategic dimensions. Against this backdrop and amid growing Tehran-Beijing ties, Iran Daily spoke with Hamed Vafaei, head of the Asian Research Center of the University of Tehran, to examine various aspects of this cooperation, the challenges ahead and its prospects. See page 3 to read the interview.

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