An anti-suit injunction in support of an arbitration agreement in light of the EU Sanction against Russia

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On 24th September 2024, Mimmie Chan J handed down the judgment of the Court of First Instance of the High Court of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in *Bank A v Bank B* [2024] HKCFI 2529. In this case, the Plaintiff (*Bank A*) with its base of operation in Germany was under the supervision of the German Federal Financial Supervisory Authority (BaFin). Its majority shareholder was the Defendant (*Bank B*) who held 99.39% shares. In turn, the Defendant was a Russian bank whose majority shareholder was the Government of the Russian Federation.

Between the predecessor of Plaintiff (as, at the time before the court in Hong Kong, the Plaintiff bank was already in voluntary liquidation) and Defendant, there existed an ISDA agreement dated 23 July 2023. Following the war between Russia and Ukraine which broke out in February 2022, Germany followed the "Council Regulation (EU) No 269/2014 of 17 March 2014 concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Ukraine" which Article 2 provides:

> "1. All funds and economic resources belonging to, owned, held or controlled by any natural persons or natural or legal persons, entities or bodies associated with them as listed in Annex I shall be frozen.
>
> 2. No funds or economic resources shall be made available, directly or indirectly, to or for the benefit of natural persons or natural or legal persons, entities or bodies associated with them listed in Annex I."

As a result, BaFin barred Plaintiff from making payments or other transfers of

assets to companies, including Defendant. Moreover, it also barred Plaintiff from accepting new deposits, granting loans, or making payments to Russian borrowers. The defendant was subsequently listed in the Annex I of the EU Regulation. On that same day, Plaintiff and Defendant entered into a Termination and Settlement Agreement (TSA) under which Plaintiff was to pay Defendant EUR 112, 634, 610. The TSA contained a choice of the English law clause and an arbitration clause for any dispute to be resolved by the Hong Kong International Arbitration Centre (HKIAC) arbitration.

After the defendant was added to Annex I, BaFin denied the defendant's right to vote in the plaintiff's meetings and also barred the plaintiff from taking any instructions from the defendant. Defendant tried to demand payment from Plaintiff according to the TSA but Plaintiff denied that, citing the infeasibility due to the EU Regulation.

The defendant hence commenced proceedings before the courts in Russia. Among other things, the Russian Court granted a 'Freezing Order' prohibiting any transfer of securities that Plaintiff had in its account with Defendant's bank. The plaintiff's attempt to challenge the jurisdiction of the Russian Court based on the arbitration clause contained in the TSA was unsuccessful. Hence, on 27 October 2023, the plaintiff sought an interim anti-suit junction from the court in Hong Kong.

Regardless of the interim anti-suit injunction, the defendant commenced again the proceedings in Russia where the Russian Court issued an anti-suit injunction prohibiting the plaintiff from continuing any proceedings in Hong Kong, and subsequently the defendant obtained another injunction prohibiting the plaintiff from initiating arbitration proceedings at the HKIAC.

In late 2023, the Russian Court gave judgment in favor of the defendant to seek the settlement payment under the TSA and granted the final injunction restraining the plaintiff from pursuing the HKIAC arbitration.

The plaintiff hence came to the court in Hong Kong seeking a final injunction to restrain the defendant from pursuing or continuing any proceedings in Russia. The defendant resisted that by raising the arguments based on Article 19 and Article 13 of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (Adopted at the Third Session of the Seventh National

People's Congress on 4 April 1990 Promulgated by Order No. 26 of the President of the People's Republic of China on 4 April 1990 Effective as of 1 July 1997) (hereinafter the "Basic Law") (*which is effectively a mini-constitution for Hong Kong) SAR):*

"Article 13

> *The Central People's Government shall be responsible for the foreign affairs relating to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.
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> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China shall establish an office in Hong Kong to deal with foreign affairs.
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> The Central People's Government authorizes the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region to conduct relevant external affairs on its own in accordance with this Law.

Article 19

> The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall be vested with independent judicial power, including that of final adjudication.
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> The courts of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall have jurisdiction over all cases in the Region, except that the restrictions on their jurisdiction imposed by the legal system and principles previously in force in Hong Kong shall be maintained.
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> *The courts of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall have no jurisdiction over acts of state such as defence and foreign affairs. The courts of the Region shall obtain a certificate from the Chief Executive on questions of fact concerning acts of state such as defence and foreign affairs whenever such questions arise in the adjudication of cases. The certificate shall be binding on the courts. Before issuing such a certificate, the Chief Executive shall obtain a certifying document from the Central People's Government."

Mimmie Chan J summarised the rule concerning the anti-suit injunction which has been established through authorities in Hong Kong at [34]:

> "Foreign proceedings initiatied in breach of an arbitration agreement will ultimately be restrained by the grant of an injunction, unless there are strong reasons shown to the contrary … For contractual anti-suit injunctions, the courts have emphasized that there is no need to prove that the arbitral tribunal is the most convenient forum … Nor is there need for the Court to feel diffidence in granting the injunction, or to exercise the jurisdiction sparingly and with great caution, for fear of giving an appearance of undue interference with proceedings of a foreign court. The restraint is directed against the party which has promised not to bring the proceedings otherwise than in accordance with the arbitration agreement, and effect should ordinarily be given to the agreement in the absence of strong reasons for departing from it…"

> So far as the argument based on the act of state in Article 19 of the Basic Law is concerned, the judge found there was no proof that the defendant was a state entity despite its majority shareholder being the Government of the Russian Federation. Neither the defendant's argument that Germany was somehow involved in the plaintiff convinced the judge because, as she found in [50], Bafin was a regulatory authority. Its act was not that of the state. Since there is no doubt about neither party in the case, there is no basis to obtain the certificate from the Chief Executive according to the third paragraph of Article 19 of the Basic Law (citing the Court of Final Appeal in *Democratic Republic of Congo v FG Hemisphere Associates LLC (No 1)* (2011) 14 HKCFAR 95).

The judge then came to conclude in her *ratio decidendi* at [59] and [60]:

> "In my judgment, what is pertinent is that the question for determination by the Court in this case is simply whether there is a valid and binding arbitration agreement between the Plaintiff and the Defendant, which covers the scope of the dispute between the two parties and the claims made by them in these proceedings and in the two sets of Russian proceedings, and whether to grant the injunctions on the Plaintiff's application. It is trite, that the arbitration agreement contained in the Arbitration Clause is severable from and separate to the underlying TSA between the parties. Any illegality of the TSA, and any alleged impossbility to perform the TSA, cannot affect

> the validity and operation of the arbitration agreement. Nor does the impossibility of performance of any award obtained in the HK Arbitration affect the validity and enforceability of either the arbitration agreement, the HK Arbitration itself, or the award obtained …
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> … It is simply not necessary for the Court to decide whether the issue and application of the EU Sanction confers a good answer to the Defendant's claim for payment under the TSA, whether the Plaintiff can be excused from payment, and the effect of the EU Sanction on the TSA are all matters which go to the merits of the claim in the HK Arbitration, and it should not be forgotten that the Court does not consider the merits of the underlying dispute when it decides the Plaintiff's claim for the injunctions – which are made solely on the basis of a valid arbitration agreement. This is also a reason to reject the Defendant's assertion that by granting the injunctions to the Plaintiff, the Court is implementing or facilitating the EU Sanction. Any injunction which the Court grants in this case is to facilitate the arbitration agreement between the parties, and nothing else".

The judge also denied that the EU Regulation is in any way contradictory to the public policy of Hong Kong or that of the People's Republic of China since it does not affect the rights or property of any Chinese entity or Hong Kong entity.

Overall, this is a fair case that the judge chose to uphold the effect of the arbitration agreement. It was somewhat curious that the parties agreed to the English law in the TSA agreement, knowing that, under the English law, the EU Regulation is likely to be effective. It is not known for what reason the Court in Russia found for the defendant regarding its entitlement to the payment under the TSA. For sure, a hard burden falls on arbitrators at the HKIAC (as per the TSA, the tribunal should consist of 3 arbitrators). There has been much discussion on the impact of any unilateral sanction upon arbitrators in recent years. Arbitrators will continue facing this challenge so long as the conflict remains, being that between Russia and Ukraine or that in the Middle East.