



WHAT SANCTIONS ACCOMPLISH
EVEN WHEN THEY FAIL

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Why do political leaders rely on coercive policies that so often fail? Economic sanctions are policies that seek to compel changes in their targets' behavior by harming their economic welfare. The most optimistic assessments of sanctions' effectiveness assert that they are only successful approximately a quarter to a third of the time.¹ A recent assessment of the United Nations' targeted sanctions found they only achieved their coercive objectives ten-percent of the time.² If policymakers, and especially those in the United States and United Nations, keep using sanctions, again and again, they must think they achieve some benefits from their use even if they fail at their intended objectives. As we explain, employing economic sanctions can help policymakers accomplish other objectives even if they often fail at coercion.

There are a myriad of reasons why economic sanctions fail. Economic sanctions may fail because the target of sanctions cares far more about the issue under dispute than the state(s) imposing them.³ They may fail because

they are poorly enforced, or the target countries receive assistance from third parties.⁴ Another reason why sanctions fail is that the economic pressure they create fails to translate into political pressure on a target state's leaders. That is especially true in authoritarian states, where leaders can use the sanctions as justification to marginalize opposition forces and consolidate power.⁵ The fundamental challenge of sanctions is that it is really hard to force leaders of sanctioned states to make politically-costly concessions by only targeting aspects of their economic welfare. The answer to why policymakers keep employing economic sanctions despite their low success rate, then, must be that they achieve something else by employing them.

There are several broad explanations for why policymakers adopt economic sanctions knowing that they are likely of being ineffective. The first reason is that adopting economic sanctions provides a low-cost option for demonstrating to domestic constituencies that policymakers are taking "real" action to address a problem. In response to political pressure for leaders to "do something," imposing sanctions allows policymakers to show that they have responded with deeds and not just words. Indeed, compared to taking no action at all, imposing sanctions will raise the chances of the target making desired concessions beyond what it otherwise would.⁶ Particularly with respect to targeted sanctions (i.e., freezing assets, travel bans, arms embargos) that may entail few costs for senders, imposing sanctions may be the lowest-cost coercive option available to policymakers that still has the possibility of accomplishing something.



Sanctions may thus be an attractive option when sender policymakers feel obligated to respond forcefully, but do not care enough about the issues under dispute to bear significant costs in order to succeed. This can explain why U.S. and European policymakers often respond to horrific instances of political violence in places like Africa, South America, and the Middle East with sanctions instead of more robust measures. Notably, research has shown that public opinion responds favorably when leaders adopt sanctions in response to foreign policy challenges.⁷

Policymakers may adopt economic sanctions because they have secondary goals that they are seeking to fulfill through the use of sanctions beyond just coercion alone.⁸ For example, economic sanctions can be used to punish targets so that they bear greater costs for their objectionable behaviors. Even if economic sanctions are not capable of forcing a target to concede, they can still impose significant costs on their targets.⁹ The U.S. and EU may have had this in mind when they imposed sanctions on Russia for its invasion and subsequent annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. The sanctions that the U.S. and EU imposed on Russia targeted strategic trade, the financial sector, and a number of prominent Russian elites. Such sanctions certainly inflicted significant economic costs on Russia, but not even close to enough to force Russian President Vladimir Putin to withdraw from Ukraine. The sanctions raised the costs for Russia's territorial aggression, though, making it harder for Russia to afford continued aggression elsewhere. The sanctions alone will never succeed in their coercive objectives, but

they still have impacted Russian behavior.

In a somewhat related way, economic sanctions can also be employed to weaken or “constrain” their targets. For example, the U.S. has imposed economic sanctions on North Korea since 1950—long before it detonated its first nuclear weapon. The coercive component of the sanctions was long rooted in changing the belligerent posture of the North Korean regime and in forcing a change in its leadership. Even though the sanctions failed to do that, the economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. weakened the regime and denied it access to strategic commodities and technologies that it could have used to enhance both its economy and weapons programs. In the case of the United Nations’ use of sanctions, a significant portion of its sanctioning efforts involves the imposition of arms embargoes against repressive governments and parties in conflict. Such measures will not necessarily compel their targets to give up, but they can make it more difficult for them to engage in violence.

Finally, leaders may employ economic sanctions in order to accomplish normative objectives, such as stigmatizing targets for violating international laws or norms. International norms comprise standards of what constitutes appropriate behavior in international society. They can be formalized into international laws when broad support exists for them, or they may be contested and frequently violated. By imposing sanctions against a target leader or country, sanctioners can signal their disapproval of the objectionable behaviors the target is

engaging in. When Syrian President Bashar al-Assad first employed sarin gas against his citizens in 2013, his country was not a signatory of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) that banned both the possession and use of chemical weapons. Powerful and longstanding norms against the use of chemical weapons existed in the international community, however, which led to the imposition of numerous sanctions by states and international organizations against Assad and Syria. While Syria responded to the international pressure by joining the CWC and giving up his dedicated chemical weapons stockpiles (i.e., sarin gas), his regime has continued to employ industrial chemicals like chlorine in attacks against civilians. At best, the sanctions were only partially successful in curtailing the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons. By sanctioning Assad's regime, though, the international community was able to send a united, symbolic message that states found the Assad regime's use of the weapons to be deplorable. While the ultimate value of engaging in symbolic action may be limited, sanctions have become a frequent tool used to shame or stigmatize targets that engage in normatively objective behaviors.

If credit is given to sanctions for what they accomplish, it is also important to consider their adverse indirect consequences as well. Economic sanctions are frequently imposed to encourage democratization and discourage human rights abuses but being sanctioned tends to be associated with a multitude of harmful consequences for civilian populations. Sanctioned regimes have been found

to engage in greater levels of repression and human rights abuses.¹⁰ They are also more likely to curb the rights of women, minority groups, and media organizations.¹¹ The economic welfare and health of civilian populations have also been found to suffer during sanctions.¹² While the international community adopts economic sanctions to protect civilians, sanctions often make their plight far worse.

The adverse consequences of economic sanctions raise a critical issue regarding whether they can be used effectively to reduce suffering instead of only inflicting it. If the coercive intent of economic sanctions is to force a target government to stop abusing human rights, are sanctions worth imposing if they can only stigmatize the offending government but do not stop its abuses? If sanctions have no adverse effects, the answer could easily be 'yes.' If sanctions cause targeted leaders to engage in even more brutal crackdowns or impoverish the targets of abuse, however, it becomes harder to justify imposing sanctions. Policymakers' instincts to respond to the objectionable behaviors of foreign states by imposing sanctions can make the plight of civilians worse irrespective of whether their actions are motivated by good intentions or represent a hollow attempt at "doing something." Given that sanctions are predominately imposed upon lesser-developed and often authoritarian states, sanctions will tend to do the greatest harm to civilian populations that already face challenging circumstances.

Critics malign sanctions because they often fail to achieve

their intended objects but can inflict a lot of indirect harms on civilians in the process. At the same time, it is important to recognize the reasons why policymakers are continually drawn to using these policies despite their flaws. As long as policymakers view sanctions as cheap options that the public generally supports, sanctions will continue to be used. Yet, it is also important to understand that even “failing” sanctions policies might be accomplishing other foreign policy objectives before automatically condemning their use. It would be helpful, though, for policymakers to be more forthright in discussing the broader objectives of their sanctioning efforts so that their constituents can better judge whether their use is appropriate.



Notes

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