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There needs to be a debate about the U.S. approach to economic sanctions

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American University professor Jim Goldgeier recently did what Jim Goldgeier usually does, which is take notice of an interesting foreign policy debate and frame it in an accessible way for the rest of us. After reviewing recent exchanges among conservatives and progressives on rethinking American foreign policy, he concluded in an essay for the War on the Rocks website that, “the humility induced by failed military interventions provides a huge opening to those who seek to build a more restrained American attitude toward the use of force than existed at the height of American power two decades ago.” Goldgeier expressed hope that a new bipartisan consensus might exist to craft a more restrained but far-from-isolationist foreign policy.

The whole essay is worth reading, but what struck me was a passage he quoted from Cato Institute’s Emma Ashford: “Restraint is an approach to the world that is fundamentally internationalist, but that de-emphasizes military means of foreign engagement in favor of diplomacy and other tools of statecraft.” This is an important point. Debates about foreign policy often descend into dichotomies of when force should be used or not. That neglects, however, the notion that the United States can advance its interests and values using measures well short of the use of force.

There is a slight complication, however, because other forms of statecraft are usually a polite way of saying “economic sanctions,” and the United States uses those all the time. Indeed, the case can be made that excessive reliance on economic sanctions can generate its own long-term problems. Last fall Nicholas Mulder made the progressive case against sanctions in The Nation, stating that, “A serious left foreign policy that addresses the problems of war and inequality in the 21st century must recast this flawed instrument and move beyond it.” Mulder prefers a more inducement-based approach.

Last week, however, Neil Bhatiya pushed back on Mulder’s thesis. He argued that the evolution of sanctions toward the targeted financial variety had improved their potency and reduced the collateral damage they could wreak. Furthermore, “because of their economic impacts, sanctions are a useful messaging tool, adding teeth to the ideal of a values-based foreign policy.” Bhatiya points out that proffering inducements creates long-term problems: “if the idea is to both *change* current bad behavior and *deter* future bad behavior, this seems like an inefficient way to accomplish it. Economic benefits must be accompanied with some real negative consequences to be effective.”

Late last week my Post colleague John Hudson asked me to adjudicate between Mulder and Bhatiya. As a senior scholar and someone less progressive than either Bhatiya or Mulder, I naturally grumble a lot about kids these days and find fault with both perspectives.

I do not share Mulder's skepticism about the utility of economic statecraft; Bhatiya is correct to point out the increasing potency of U.S. sanctions, and he is definitely correct to observe that the deterrent effect of sanctions should not be underestimated.

That said, Bhatiya is far too quick to dismiss the costs that modern sanctions impose. He suggests at one point that "The actual practice of sanctions policy formulation and implementation, when appropriately conceived, firmly embeds a multilateral outlook in US foreign policy." If that is true, then the United States fails to appropriately conceive of sanctions far too often. U.S. sanctions on Iran or Cuba do not look remotely multilateral. The Trump administration's recent success at coercing SWIFT into compliance on the Iran sanctions could embolden further unilateral moves.

The contrast with Venezuela, where there has been concerted international cooperation, is stark. But the Venezuela case also highlights another problem with Bhatiya's argument — when he suggests that "the use of sanctions is not about the removal of regimes." The current sanctions against Iran and Venezuela suggest that this is wrong. As sanctions have become more potent, they are asked to do more. And Mulder is correct to highlight the collateral damage that they can cause.

For decades, foreign policy watchers were worried that sanctions were too weak to coerce targets into doing anything. My worry is that now they are too strong to be haphazard in their application and removal. As Richard Nephew noted last year in the Washington Quarterly, "sanctions relief has been controversial, complicated and halting."

Most of the post-2016 debate in foreign policy has centered around the role that military statecraft should play in American foreign policy. That debate needs to extend to economic statecraft as well.