

Washington's Addictive Foreign-Policy Drug

Why economic sanctions don't help anyone.

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Congress has overwhelmingly passed legislation imposing new economic sanctions on North Korea, Russia and Iran. There was some speculation that President Trump might veto the measure, both because of concerns that it would prevent an improvement in America's troubled relations with Moscow and because of stringent limitations imposed on the president's ability to waive sanctions in the name of national security. However, the White House announced that the president would sign the bill—perhaps reflecting just how much proponents of a new cold war with Russia have intimidated the Trump team. The extent and virulence of anti-Russia sentiment has reached alarming levels. Members of Congress and other opinionleaders in both parties have branded the alleged Russian hacking of the 2016 election as an act of war, and one congressman even explicitly compared it to Pearl Harbor and 9-11.

Given such hysteria and the lopsided congressional vote in favor of the sanctions legislation, Trump's reluctance to use his veto power was not necessarily a manifestation of political cowardice. Only three House members and two senators (Rand Paul and Bernie Sanders) cast negative votes. Even Senator Mike Lee (R-Utah), who usually is sensible on foreign policy issues, joined the legislative lynch mob.

The enthusiasm for the latest sanctions initiative ignores the longtime unimpressive record of that tactic. Some three decades ago, the seminal scholarly work of Gary Hufbauer, Jeffrey Schott, and Kimberly Ann Elliott, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*, demonstrated that sanctions rarely achieve their policy goal. More recent editions of the book confirm the basic conclusion. Sanctions may inconvenience the targeted regime—and create substantial suffering for innocent people in that country—but they seldom compel the regime to capitulate or even make major concessions. That is especially true when the issue in question is a high-priority matter for the country's political leadership.

The track record in recent decades does very little to contradict that thesis. The United States and its allies have imposed ever-tightening sanctions on North Korea to force that country to give up its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. Pyongyang's repeated nuclear tests and its

recent launches of an intercontinental ballistic missile demonstrate the utter futility of the sanctions strategy.

Washington has been equally unsuccessful in using that tactic toward another adversary, Cuba. A succession of U.S. administrations, beginning with Dwight Eisenhower's, maintained that approach for more than a half century before Barack Obama began to normalize relations with Havana in late 2014. Unfortunately, President Trump rescinded several of the beneficial and realistic changes that his predecessor had made. Yet the results of the Cuba embargo were no more impressive than the outcome of sanctions against North Korea. Washington's demands that the Castro regime stop its human-rights abuses, move toward democracy, and compensate Americans for property seized following the 1959 revolution all failed to produce any discernible results. The Castro dynasty remains in power, the Cuban regime is still a communist dictatorship, there has been no compensation for seized property, and the improvement in the treatment of political dissidents is minimal, at best.

Even the alleged success stories that sanctions proponents tout turn out to be unimpressive. The Iran agreement is a prominent example. Sanctions may have played a modest role in getting Tehran to the conference table, but the agreement occurred only when the United States and the other P5+1 powers backed off of their demand that Iran capitulate and refrain from developing any capacity to enrich uranium. The resulting agreement was very much a compromise measure, and hawks in the United States vehemently condemned it as a U.S.-led surrender to Iran.

Imposing harsh measures on Russia is especially worrisome. Moscow was quick to retaliate for congressional passage of the latest punitive package. Vladimir Putin's government immediately ordered a reduction in the size of America's embassy staff in Moscow and seized several U.S. diplomatic properties. Moreover, the argument that Russia's actions were in response to the Obama administration's similar steps in December 2016 misconstrues the situation. Putin made a point of assuring President-elect Trump that he would not retaliate for the December penalties. But imposition of the new sanctions triggered a decisive policy change.

Economic sanctions appear to be the habitual favorite tool in Washington's foreign policy tool kit. It provides the illusion of a moderate, middle course between a total reliance on diplomacy and resorting to military force. Given that tactic's pervasive lack of effectiveness, though, policymakers need to overcome their obsession. That is especially so when the underlying demands are completely unrealistic.

Sanctions will not compel North Korea to give up its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Pyongyang's leadership elite believes that it needs such capabilities to deter Washington from contemplating forcible regime change. Given U.S. actions against such nonnuclear adversaries as Serbia, Iraq, and Libya, that is not an irrational conclusion.

Likewise, new sanctions against Tehran for violating "the spirit" of the P5+1 accord is thoroughly counterproductive. Even the Trump administration had to concede, however reluctantly, that Iran has abided by the actual terms of the agreement. Imposing sanctions is not likely to cause President Rouhani's relatively moderate government to become more cooperative.

Indeed, that step may strengthen the power of Iranian hardliners who wish to repudiate the agreement and move to build a nuclear deterrent.

Most worrisome of all, sanctions will only inflame Moscow and intensify an already worrisome new cold war. Russia is not likely to concede that it meddled in America's 2016 elections—and, in fact, there are serious doubts about those allegations. The chances that Russia will abandon its secessionist allies in eastern Ukraine are not much better, and there is virtually no possibility that Russia will reverse its annexation of Crimea. The chances of that happening are about the same as Israel giving up the Golan Heights or Turkey withdrawing from occupied northern Cyprus and repudiating the puppet Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

Economic sanctions have the dubious quality of being simultaneously provocative and ineffectual. The latest manifestation likely will cause serious trouble for the United States on multiple fronts. Policymakers need to overcome their addiction to sanctions before it produces an immense tragedy.

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