

The Futility And Cruelty Of Sanctions

Daniel Larison

February 18, 2020

Richard Hanania has written a new [report](#) for the Cato Institute on the ineffectiveness and immorality of sanctions:

Sanctions have massive humanitarian costs and are not only ineffective but likely counterproductive. On these points, there is overwhelming agreement in the academic literature. Such policies can reduce the economic performance of the targeted state, degrade public health, and cause tens of thousands of deaths per year under the most crushing sanctions regimes. Moreover, they almost always fail to achieve their goals, particularly when the aim is regime change or significant behavioral changes pertaining to what states consider their fundamental interests. Sanctions can even backfire, making mass killing and repression more likely, while decreasing the probability of democratization.

The futility and cruelty of sanctions will be familiar to regular readers here. We see the same story repeated over and over in Iran, Venezuela, Syria, and North Korea today just as we saw it in Myanmar and Iraq before them: authoritarian regimes grow stronger while the civilian population suffers, and regime behavior remains unchanged or grows worse. Tens of thousands of innocents die from preventable causes as a result, and nothing comes from the sanctions except widespread misery and hardship. Given this dismal and ugly track record of this economic warfare, why is it still used so frequently when all of the evidence shows that it fails and imposes horrific costs on the targeted populations? Hanania's answer is straightforward: sanctions are used because they represent a less risky form of intervention in another country's affairs and therefore they are politically convenient for politicians and policymakers that want to be able to "do something" to another country at a low cost to them. He continues:

The popularity of sanctions owes more to the domestic interests of politicians than their ability to achieve geopolitical goals. American policymakers show little interest in the empirical research on sanctions and they often do not supplement trade restrictions with diplomatic efforts that can help achieve a bargain. In contrast, sanctions make sense from the perspective of domestic politics and political psychology. They provide a middle ground between military force and doing nothing and are unlikely to cause a domestic backlash because the damage they inflict is indirect and largely unobserved.

One reason why sanctions have been more politically convenient is that they are perceived as an alternative to war and even as a means of avoiding war, but in practice economic warfare is already a kind of war being waged against the people and sanctions regimes can serve as stepping stones to further escalation. Hawks often see sanctions as paving the way for direct intervention, so we should recognize that interventionists will not be satisfied with economic

warfare. Consider how quickly tensions with Iran spiked following the start of the economic war on Iran, and we can see that sanctions can be a major cause of conflict.

It is a sorry statement about our political system and our foreign policy debates that sanctions flourish because, as Hanania puts it elsewhere, “sanctions are impractical and morally destructive but politically convenient.” Washington’s sanctions addiction is a reflection of our foreign policy at its worst: it is purely destructive, it is morally wrong, but it remains the default response to a wide range of problems. Support for sanctions allows American politicians and policymakers the opportunity to meddle and to do real harm to other nations, but they are never held accountable for the effects that their policy has on innocent people. As Hanania says, and as I have said before, the victims of our economic wars remain largely invisible and our government’s responsibility for impoverishing and killing them is easier to ignore. As a tool for changing regime behavior, sanctions are worse than useless, because they tend to provoke adverse reactions from the targeted government, but as a means of inflicting punishment for its own sake they can be effective in destroying things.

Hanania reviews the humanitarian costs of these economic wars. He notes that official humanitarian exemptions often fail in practice because of restrictions on financial institutions that prevent people in the targeted country from being able to pay for these goods. He adds:

Moreover, even if the provisions regarding humanitarian exceptions worked as intended, most sanctions regimes would nevertheless harm the living standards of those in the targeted state, including hindering access to food or medicine. Policies that work to destroy an economy but carve out exceptions cannot be expected to have no effect on the exempted industries. Lowering economic output ensures that all sectors are harmed: the food and medical sectors depend on other industries such as construction, education, transportation, and, of course, banking. Countries that suffer from poor economic performance for whatever reason thus see worse health and nutritional outcomes. This means that humanitarian exemptions, even when they “work,” should not obscure the degree to which sanctions harm the population of the targeted country.

Imposing the equivalent of a nationwide siege is bound to worsen conditions for everyone no matter what carve-outs policymakers come up with. When sanctions are destroying a country’s currency and obliterating people’s savings and earnings, it does them little good to know that a trickle of humanitarian goods are being grudgingly allowed. American politicians and policymakers tout these exemptions because they think this supposedly shows their concern for the population that they are otherwise trying to strangle, but even when the exemptions work as intended they are a reminder of the larger economic war being waged against the country for no good reason. Instead of throwing these tenuous and often interrupted lifelines, our government should stop trying to immiserate the people in the first place.

The ineffectiveness of sanctions is well-known by now, but it is worth reviewing just how useless they are. Hanania writes:

The best research indicates that not only do sanctions cause massive economic harms and ultimately cost lives, but that they also fail even by the standards set by policymakers. Moreover, research over the last few decades indicates that rather than furthering American political goals, such as democratization and respect for human rights, economic coercion is more likely to backfire.

The history of sanctions is mostly the history of failure. Hanania cites one study covering the period between 1914 and 1990 that found sanctions were at least partially successful 34% of the time. A follow-up study found that even this figure was far too high:

Although the authors claimed that sanctions were successful in 40 out of 115 cases, Pape found that only 5 of those cases could stand up to empirical scrutiny.

The only time when sanctions may have some success is when the goals are limited and do not require the targeted government to give up very much. When the stakes are high and touch on the regime's core security interests or its survival, they are bound to fail. Of course, those are the cases where extremely harsh sanctions are used most often:

If sanctions can have any positive effect, it is only when the stakes are small. The more ambitious the goal, the less likely they are to work. Yet the most crushing sanctions regimes often seek regime change: this was U.S. policy toward Cuba after Castro came to power in 1959, Saddam Hussein after the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, the government of Syria after August 2011, and the Maduro regime in Venezuela since January 2019. While regime change is not official American policy toward North Korea, the interest at stake, a nuclear deterrent, is fundamental to the survival of the Pyongyang government. Regarding Iran, the Trump administration calls for the government to give up on its most important foreign policy goals and abandon its closest allies before sanctions can be removed, which is a set of maximalist demands that Iran simply will not comply with. One of the many tragedies of the American use of sanctions is that they are most brutal and harmful when they have the least likelihood of success.

Pariah and adversary states have the least incentive to make concessions under U.S. pressure, but they are the ones most often put under the most crushing sanctions. "Maximum pressure" campaigns can't work against states like these because they see the campaign as a threat to their existence and so they respond by digging in and resisting. Sanctions are almost always ineffective, but the real failure here is setting impossible maximalist goals.

In addition to being useless and harmful to innocent people, sanctions are also an obnoxious form of interference in the affairs of other nations that ought to be stopped. Americans need to understand the massive suffering that our government inflicts on tens of millions of people through economic warfare, and we ought to repudiate these senselessly destructive policies.