



Time for Washington to Stop Sanctioning the World: US Arrogance Leaves Trail of Innocent Victims Behind

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The “Lift Sanctions, Save Lives” network is lobbying Congress to do what it should have done years ago: assess the impact of economic sanctions now routinely applied to ally as well as adversary. Such a review is long overdue.

Economic sanctions have become a new global battlefield. In July Beijing targeted several organizations and individuals, including former Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, in retaliation for earlier U.S. penalties. In January Beijing sanctioned 28 former Trump administration officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, as the Biden administration took over. In March, after the European Union penalized Beijing for suppressing political liberty in Hong Kong, the Xi regime retaliated against a number of Europeans, including members of the European Parliament.

The Chinese actions had little practical impact – preventing Pompeo and Ross from traveling to Hong Kong is not much of an inconvenience. (Ironically, they deserve to be sanctioned by Americans for their awful performance in office!) Moreover, Beijing’s action, though popular at home, backfired internationally. For instance, the European Parliament effectively killed a pending investment agreement.

Nevertheless, the whining about China’s action is striking. Americans and Europeans declared economic war on the proud, nationalistic People’s Republic of China, and were surprised when it struck back. Who knew that the PRC would dare act like ... America!?

Of course, Beijing remains but a babe when it comes to applying sanctions. The US is by far the world’s cruelest and most prolific practitioner of economic warfare, which these days mostly means starving desperate civilians under impoverished dictatorships. Congress appears to be

constantly looking for foreign peoples to target, based on the bizarre assumption that if the US punishes civilians already ravaged by civil war, political oppression, and socialist economics, the reigning autocrats will immediately apologize, disarm, liberalize, democratize, and ally with America.

Unfortunately, despite widespread expectations to the contrary, this theoretical political unicorn has yet to make an appearance. Washington currently is applying economic and/or financial sanctions on Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, Syria, Iran, and North Korea. The US also has imposed more limited penalties on states ranging from China to even Germany. Although Washington has further immiserated the victims of some of the world's worst governments, none of the oppressors has yielded. None.

Heck'uva job, Uncle Sam!

Nevertheless, Washington keeps trying. While exempting murderous allies like Saudi Arabia from penalty, hardly a day goes by without the US sanctioning another country, company, or individual. Attempts to lighten, let alone eliminate, existing sanctions are shouted down by lobbies convinced that just a little more effort, a tiny tightening of the rules, will finally bring surrender or collapse, followed by the flourishing of a new democratic Garden of Eden whose residents will be properly grateful to America for its benighted intervention.

What makes US sanctions uniquely punitive is an international financial system disproportionately dependent on America. In 1986 Congress, frustrated that a quarter century of sanctions had failed to cow the Castro brothers, targeted European firms investing in Cuba. America later pioneered in Sudan the use of financial sanctions, which were applied to anyone with the slightest connection to the US banking system.

Washington is deadly serious about sanctions. They are sometimes presented as a moderate, peaceful alternative to war, yet their consequences can be as lethal as war. Which is why US officials have turned to sanctions as the new normal. Their very harshness makes them attractive to policymakers.

This was illustrated by the infamous exchange between Leslie Stahl of *60 Minutes* and America's United Nations Ambassador Madeleine Albright. When asked to justify the death of a half million Iraqi children due to sanctions, Albright's response was chilling: "We think the price is worth it." She later acknowledged that her words were impolitic in the extreme – she won few friends in the Mideast by admitting that Washington knowingly killed hundreds of thousands of Muslim kids to advance US policy – but she never repudiated the notion that she and other US policymakers were entitled to casually sacrifice the lives of others for American geopolitical objectives.

This attitude lives on with the architects of today's starvation sanctions most brutally applied to Syria and Venezuela. For instance, James Jeffrey was a "never-Trumper" diplomat appointed by the Trump administration to deal with Syria, with predictably disastrous results. He actively undercut administration policy while channeling Albright-style cruelty. He admitted lying about the number of US troops in Syria to thwart the president's expressed desire to withdraw.

Worse, he supported sanctions on the Syrian people, victims of years of civil war, in order to use their misery – impoverishing them and preventing reconstruction – to pressure the government. The Syrian people were but a convenient way to create his desired “quagmire” for Russia. He indicated no concern for the Syrians who were suffering. After all, “the price is worth it,” in the view of Washington’s masters of the universe!

Needless to say, Jeffrey’s vicious policy failed as badly as did Albright’s. But neither were inconvenienced by their own failure or the hardship they caused others. The Washington “Blob” takes care of its own. Albright, a living symbol of sanctimonious arrogance at its worst, has become an elder stateswoman, routinely trotted out to add vacuous gravitas to various meaningless events and panels. Jeffrey left Syria a horror show but picked up the usual well-paid, high-status sinecure with one of the national capital’s venerable think tanks – filled with similar staffers, almost always pro-war, usually wrong, and never repentant, no matter how high the body count they left behind.

Indeed, the Trump proclivity for “maximum pressure” campaigns offered a significant test of the value of US economic sanctions in forcing significant political change in other nations. The experience of Russia, Venezuela, Syria, Iran, North Korea, and Cuba, all of which faced substantially increased sanctions, was US zero, adversaries six. Nor did adding in countries facing lesser sanctions, most notably China, help. In those cases Washington did enough to irritate target nations but not enough to cause them serious injury.

It is time for Washington to consider the impact of US sanctions – their failure to achieve their purported ends and terrible harm caused to the most vulnerable populations. Rep. Jesus “Chuy” Garcia advanced an amendment mandating an assessment by the Government Accountability Office that was adopted by the House to the National Defense Authorization Act.

The provision calls for: “[a] report on all comprehensive sanctions imposed on de jure or de facto governments of foreign countries, and all comprehensive and targeted sanctions imposed on non-state actors, including individuals, organizations, or other entities, that exercise significant de facto governmental control over a foreign civilian population, under any provision of law.” The required study would cover humanitarian impact, national security purpose, success rates, and enforcement prospects.

A coalition of peace, humanitarian, and related groups is pushing to ensure that the provision survives in the conference committee. The activists argue: “Impact assessments provide valuable information to ensure that U.S. foreign policy advances US interests while protecting innocent civilians and maintaining channels for humanitarian organizations to continue their work. This issue is even more important as populations around the globe continue to manage the shared threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

In fact, passage should be a no-brainer. Such assessments should be conducted regularly on all sanctions imposed by the US government. The only logical opposition would come from the Albrights and Jeffreys, who lose when their cruel yet ineffective policies are publicized. A policymaker might not mind if a half million children elsewhere are killed – in Washington such an event is viewed as the inevitable collateral damage when the great American republic, leader

of the free world and all that, selflessly acts to save humanity and Western civilization. However, few policymakers want to be known publicly to hold that view. Hence Albright's regrets over admitting the truth. It is well past time for a very public evaluation of Washington's sanctions policy.

Until recently US policymakers only restricted the behavior of Americans. No one in Washington imagined that they were authorized to regulate other peoples. However, that understanding changed as the capital turned into an ostentatiously imperial city, dedicated to world domination. Washington, D.C. now is filled with wannabe masters of the universe, determined to rule over others wherever they live.

Unfortunately, the consequences of US sanctions policy have been horrid. After two decades of costly yet largely failed endless war Washington policymakers should learn the virtue of humility. America's sanctions policy is both costly and cruel, with the gains rarely worth the resulting human harm. The Biden administration should review current policy and sharply limit the use of economic sanctions.

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