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# ECONOMIC SANCTIONS: AN OVERUSED INSTRUMENT OF U.S. POWER

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## ABSTRACT

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This study assesses the effectiveness of U.S. economic sanctions, focusing on the imposition of economic sanctions on Iraq, Cuba, and Panama. The study has two objectives: To identify characteristics common to most successful economic sanctions and to examine and assess the U.S. economic sanctions imposed on Cuba, Iraq, and Panama. The purpose of the study is to determine the utility of sanctions in support of current U.S. national strategy, given the emergence of globalization and coalition politics. U.S. leaders should seriously consider our varied political, diplomatic, intelligence, economic, military, and cultural tools that support our foreign policy. Avoiding over-reliance on sanctions, which may have become a relatively obsolescent instrument of power will be key.

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ECONOMIC SANCTIONS: AN OVERUSED INSTRUMENT OF U.S. POWER

Governments use economic sanctions to change the behavior of a targeted country by imposing "restrictions involving trade, investment, and other cross-border activities on normal commercial relations with a targeted country."[1] Historically, the United States has used economic sanctions to coerce other countries to modify certain behavior, but frequently with poor results. These sanctions have been imposed both unilaterally and multilaterally. Unilateral sanctions are enforced by a single nation, whereas multilateral sanctions are enforced by two or more nations. All sanctions are designed to send a strong signal to a targeted nation to change particular behaviors. If such changes are not forthcoming, then targeted nations should expect more stringent actions. Economic sanctions do have a place in U.S. foreign policy, yet they have proven a mostly unproductive means of achieving U.S. strategic goals.

Current U.S. policy relies heavily on unilateral sanctions, despite the fact that several studies have indicated that unilateral sanctions have cost the United States a significant amount throughout history. "One study estimated that 1995 sanctions may have cost the United States as much as $19 billion per year in exports and possibly 200,000 - 260,000 export related jobs."[2] In view of these negative effects, why do we still frequently consider unilateral sanctions as options? There are a few reasons for the popularity of unilateral sanctions.

It was not long ago that the United States produced almost half of the world's products. Therefore, most countries had to trade with the United States to some degree. Today the U.S. produces only 26 percent of the world's products. So now many countries look to other sources besides the United States for goods and material. Possibly supporters of unilateral sanctions may be overestimating the U.S. ability to encourage future cooperation through sanctions., Another explanation is that the United States now trades in a permissive international environment, one that can offer little challenge or resistance to the commerce of a given country. James Schlesinger, a three time cabinet officer and a leading defense intellectual, noted "that U.S. weaknesses include a growing hubris, reflecting the weakening of restraints and the absence of a serious challenge in the post-cold war world, and a naïve belief that assertiveness is now cost-free and does not entail serious consequences."[3]

In the current global economy, the United States cannot coerce other countries by means of simple economic sanctions to respond to its perceived interests. Targeted nations now enjoy many other options. Further, the United States no longer dominates world trade. There will always be an alternate source for required resources. Additionally, during the last few years, the United States has reduced its foreign assistance to many former trading allies. So continued U.S. use of economic sanctions gives an impression that we want to sanction those that disagree with us, but deny assistance to those that are in agreement with us. This unproductive and unhealthy environment has not evolved quickly over the last few years; rather it has developed steadily over the last thirty years.

**ECONOMIC SANCTIONS WORK BEST UNDER CERTAIN CONDITIONS**

Economic sanctions are more likely to be successful if implemented under certain conditions. Today, U.S. leaders may call upon a broad range of political, diplomatic, intelligence, economic and military alternatives to support U.S. policy. However, if they choose economic sanctions, they must acknowledge that economic sanctions are more successful when used under the following conditions:

"The target country is small, weak, unstable, and/ or highly dependent on the sanctioner(s).
The target has good relations and communications with the sanctioner(s).
The target suffers high costs from the sanctions while the sanctioner(s) endure(s) low and sustainable costs.
The change demanded of the target state is a modest one.
The sanctions are multilateral, not unilateral.
The sanctions, where possible, are financial sanctions, not trade sanctions.
The sanctions are roughly proportional to the offense.
The sanctions, where appropriate, are targeted against specific people, activities, and policies in order to reduce suffering and to prevent damage to more important aspects of international relationships..
The sanctions are imposed quickly and given time to work.
The sanctions regime includes humanitarian exceptions such as food and medicine.
The sanctions regime avoids secondary boycotts that

can inflict costs on allies and damage other strategic relationships.

The sanctions regime is flexible and can be modified or terminated when appropriate; and

The sanctions regime is, where appropriate, backed by force or the credible threat of force."[4]

In short, past experiences suggest that economic sanctions are most effective when imposed under the above conditions. Even so, there are times when sanctions are unlikely to work under any conditions. In such cases they may be imposed to signal a commitment or to prevent military action. Therefore, our decision makers believe that making a stand justifies the economic costs. The message sent by the sanctions is determined to be more significant or useful than the effectiveness of the sanctions themselves.

**UTILITY OF ECONOMIC SANCTIONS**

Economic sanctions are coercive policies or restrictions against a targeted country by another or a group of countries. To be successful, a sanction must induce a target nation to comply with the desires of the targeting nation. Nations will normally initiate sanctions to avoid a military conflict and to cause enough economic stress to force desired change in the target nation. Generally they have one or more of the following goals:

"They seek to cause a modest change in the policies of a country or government.

They seek to destabilize the target government.

They seek to disrupt military adventurism.

They seek to impair the military potential of a country.

They seek to cause major changes in the policies of the target country."[5]

Economic sanctions will normally be applied with the intent of accomplishing several of the previously mentioned goals, not just a single goal. This type of an option is normally used when other avenues have failed, are considered futile to pursue, or maybe a prelude to other more dramatic acts. Economic sanctions may block imports or exports, may deprive the target of essential commodities, may reduce industrial capacity, or may adversely affect financial and commercial dealings. These actions normally have a serious effect on a nation and may isolate the targeted nation from others.

But the initiator must as well be willing to pay some economic price. All economic sanctions will affect various interest groups, especially in countries that impose a sanction. Trade is a two-way street: When you sever ties with others, they often can find other suppliers, even though these alternatives may be more costly or distant. Subsequently, the demand for the initiator's exports may decrease. "Business firms at home may experience severe losses when sanctions interrupt trade and financial contracts. Besides the immediate loss of sales, they may lose their reputation for reliability. Such costs must be weighed against the national interest if the contested behavior is allowed to continue."[6]

Thus economic sanctions punish a targeted nation by imposing isolationism, altering its economic status, and weakening its economic power. This approach may be worthwhile, especially if it precludes the use of military force. In the final analysis, advocates of sanctions should remember that sanctions often fail for various and even contradictory reasons. "The Sanctions imposed may simply be inadequate to the task. The goals may be too elusive, the means too gentle, or cooperation from other countries, when needed, too tepid."[7] There is never any assurance that sanctions will be totally effective. There is always the reality that sanctions are costly, even if they prove cost effective.

**CURRENT POLICY ON THE USE OF ECONOMIC SANCTIONS**

It is safe to say that the United States does not have a clear policy for the use and enforcement of any economic sanction. In fact, one will find little if anything that addresses the use of sanctions in the current issue of the National Security Strategy. Sanctions are simply viewed as a tool that will be use if diplomacy fails and before making the call for bringing in the military. As previously mentioned in the introduction, a devise that is imposed haphazardly and unilaterally at times rather than well analyzed and multilaterally.

However, in defense of ongoing policy changes, "A sanctions working group of the Advisory Committee on International Economic Policy, and advisory task force to the Department of State has developed a table of more than 130 carrots (friendly, persuasive options) and sticks (hostile, coercive options)." The work being prepared by this working group speaks highly of the current administration and is definitely a positive development for future policy packages.

**THREE CASE STUDIES**

The following case studies reveal how the U.S. has violated several of the previously mentioned conditions for executing successful economic sanctions. These oversights have resulted in costly consequences. Hopefully lessons have been learned for improving our involvement in future sanctions.

**ECONOMIC SANCTIONS APPLIED AGAINST CUBA**

An example of a fruitless U.S. use of sanctions is our protracted unilateral economic sanctions on trade with Cuba. Cuba has been subjected to sanctions from the United States for 37 years. In 1962 the USSR established an alliance with Fidel Castro and positioned missiles in Cuba that posed an immediate threat to the United States. This action, coupled with the fear that this relationship would provoke the rise of Communism in Cuba, was enough to trigger a U.S. reaction that would eventually be the longest use of economic sanctions known to modern man. The United States took retaliatory action against Cuba under the rationale of preventing the spread of communism. At this time, trade was dominated by the U.S. The U.S. provided 70 percent of Cuba's imports and consumed 60% of her exports. Cuba's economic base was totally dependent on trade with its neighbor. But after years of cooperation, suddenly its trading relationship with the U.S. was gone. U.S. sanctions initially struck at sugar production, Cuba's key export to the United States. Cuba then turned to the Soviet Union to negotiate the export of sugar. The sugar sanctions were the first of many. All U.S. exports to Cuba except for food and medicine were eventually sanctioned.

"More than 60 percent of Cuba's exports went to the American market during the 1950s, but the 1961 figure fell to less than 5 percent. With regard to imports, the United States supplied roughly 70 percent of Cuba's total in 1958 and about 68 percent in 1959; since 1961, however, the two nations trade(limited to vital medical supplies or purchases by international organizations) has been almost nil."[8] These sanctions have cost Cuba billions of dollars over the years, despite the Soviet provision of billions of aid each year. As late as 1992, the United States placed added sanctions on Cuba to discourage trade. However the Cuban Democracy Act (CDA) removed the 1962 references to Marxism-Leninism and military threat, substituting the following new rationale for U.S. sanctions:

> "Congress makes the following finding: The government of Fidel Castro has demonstrated consistent disregard for internationally accepted standards of human rights and for democratic values, restricts the Cuban

people's exercise of freedom of speech, press, assembly. . . The Cuban people have demonstrated their yearning for freedom. . . The Castro government maintains a military dominated economy. . . Efforts to suppress dissent through intimidation, imprisonment, and exile have continued."[9]

Today, the Soviet Union has collapsed, the Baltimore Orioles have played in Havana, and Fidel Castro grows old as Cuba's reigning statesman. Cuba's relationship with the Soviet Union has provided her a reliable source of trade. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's last benefactor has disappeared. Yet throughout these events, the U.S. economic sanctions have remained in place.

In the later part of the 1980s, the Cuban economy was able to import and produce just enough to meet the basic needs of the population for food, energy, and water. The Cuban people recognize that their lack of basic commodities is due to the U.S. sanctions against their country. As well, they recognize that their government has been responsible for insuring that they still had enough for survival. In Cuba, the U.S.- imposed restrictions, sanctions, and embargoes are the enemy, while the Castro-led Cuban government plays the role of the hero.

In the final analysis, U.S. sanctions on Cuba have proven nothing but an embarrassing failure. While we promote economic and political stability around the globe, ninety miles off our southeastern coast human suffering in Cuba is partially due to U.S. economic sanctions. If success of these economic sanctions is based on the final demise and overthrow of Fidel Castro, then the United States has failed. Economic sanctions have done little to change the way Castro manages his country or to lessen his ability to govern his countrymen.

## ECONOMIC SANCTIONS APPLIED AGAINST IRAQ

Iraq has recently been a target of U.S. and allied economic sanctions. Multilateral sanctions imposed in 1990 looked like they were going to be successful:

"The target country was dependent on imports for two-thirds of its food supply. Petroleum accounted for 95 percent of its export earnings and other countries were willing to make available additional oil when the world stopped buying it from Iraq. All the major powers in the international economy and the vast majority of the secondary players cooperated effectively in the trade and financial embargoes."[10]

Despite their apparent effectiveness, sanctions against Iraq have not really worked for three reasons. First, the U.S. and its allies clearly underestimated the people of Iraq. Iraq's population had suffered prolonged economic deprivation during an earlier nine-year war with Iran. When the sanctions were imposed the Iraqi people were hardened and psychologically prepared to establish programs for rationing and allocating supplies. The population, in concert with the Iraqi government, established mechanisms for rationing, stockpiling goods, compensating for shortages, and allocating available supplies. Second, Saddam Hussein placed secondary embargoes against the Kurdish and Shia populations. This enabled him to protect his loyal subjects while using the sanctions to punish his domestic adversaries. Third, some critical goods made their way around the sanctions into Iraq. Jordanian compliance with the economic sanctions was half-hearted at best. This cooperation between Jordan and Iraq may have contributed to undermining the entire operation.

"In the months between Iraq's attack on Kuwait and the launching of Operation Desert Storm, on January 16, 1991, the principal question debated in Washington was whether economic sanctions alone could force Saddam to quit Kuwait if they were allowed enough time to do the job. A parade of scholars and statesmen testified that economic sanctions would work if given a chance."[11] They were wrong. Saddam Hussein's regime did not blink when it came to sanctions. It took massive military force to remove his invading army from Kuwait.

The period following the war was the time that the Iraq economy was most vulnerable to the imposed sanctions. They were at their weakest and were susceptible to the ongoing sanctions. However, donors of humanitarian assistance, commercial suppliers, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and others flooded Iraqi with foodstuffs and medicine that amounted to about six months of imports. "Some foreign governments extended credits to Iraq as did certain international banks, in some cases accepting frozen Iraqi assets as collateral."[12] We may speculate that Iraq's military defeat, had it been exacerbated with hard economic sanctions remaining in place for at least six months following the war, may have assured Saddam's cooperation with the U.N. This particular point demonstrates how important it is that military forces and civilian representatives are all working together to reach a common goal. But the reality is that the sanctions were not completely and successfully imposed at a very critical time.

In the case of the Gulf War, Saddam was able to force the Kurds and Shias to endure most of the hardships, rather than the Sunnis. In doing so, he was building his political base and punishing his enemies, all the while rallying Iraqis against the U.S. In effect, he used the sanctions to his domestic political advantage.

**ECONOMIC SANCTIONS APPLIED AGAINST PANAMA**

Traditionally, the United States security interests in Panama have focused on the operation of the Panama Canal and security of the U.S. military assigned in Panama. By February 1988, this security interest had taken an additional focus, one that concerned itself with Panama's role in drug trafficking and racketeering: "All recent U.S. administrations had worked with the military-dominated government which was in power from October 11, 1968 until midnight on December 20, 1989 under the successive control of General Omar Torrijos, Colonel Florencio Flores, General Ruben Dario Paredes, and then General Manuel Antonio Noriega."[13] For some time, the U.S. had ignored evidence that General Noriega and the Panamanian Defense Forces were involved in illegal activities.

On 26 February 1988, General Noriega and his followers took over the control of the standing governmental body. At this point, there was no threat to General Noriega and his followers; he enjoyed absolute control. But Noriega's take-over took the U.S. administration 180 degrees from where it wanted to be in December of 1987. At that time, President Ronald Reagan had signed several spending bills prohibiting all economic and military aid until a democratically elected government had been established in Panama. Therefore, in April 1988, the U.S. took the following measures against Noriega's regime:

-"Suspension of all U.S. economic and military assistance.

-Curtailment of all official loans from multilateral lending institutions.

-Suspension of Panama's sugar quota and trade preferences available under the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) and the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP)

-Assistance to Panamanian assets in the U.S. which ultimately led to the closure of domestic Panamanian banks in March 1988.

-Suspension of payments to the Noriega regime from the Panama Canal Commission (PCC), the trans-isthmus

> pipeline, and of all direct and indirect payments or purchases of goods and services by people and organizations in Panama."[14]

These sanctions had two primary objectives: to force the Government of Panama to develop a democratic elected government, and the removal of General Noriega from power. In both instances the economic sanctions proved ineffective. The sanctions adversely affected U.S. and Panama businessmen who made up the key opposition to Noriega. The bottom line is that "There were two contradictory and therefore unattainable goals for the economic sanctions.' We wanted to get Noriega out, but we did not want to hurt U.S. businesses, the people of Panama, or the Panamanian economy. In other words, we wanted to have our cake and eat it too."[15]

**WHY SANCTIONS FAILED TO WORK**

As we have seen, the track record for sanctions being used in the case studies of Cuba, Iraq and Panama is not very good. In fact in each of these cases the chances of success was very limited primarily because sanctions alone normally make for failure. But certain elements were consistent throughout each case that eventually resulted in failure.

In all cases sanctions were put into place with the purpose of dislodging a particular dictator and his following. And in each case we missed the target and inflected much pain and suffering on the countries helpless population. In a round about way we actually strengthened Noriega, Castro and Saddam by weakening some portions of the societies that formed their opposition. Therefore, the sanctions depressed a certain percentage of the countries but left the dictators and their followers comparatively unscathed.

Additionally, for any sanction to be successful, there must be a realistic expectation for success. Some type of possibility that if economic deprivation occurs then this will force an amount of change. With each of these leaders, it became apparent that there was little concern for populace and the well-being of the overall economy; therefore no equation forced a consideration for compromise. In all these cases, Noriega, Castro, and Saddam were never deprived of anything and each had demonstrated that they cared less about the hardship for their fellow man, therefore there could be no expectation for a successful resolution. The elements found in each of these cases contributed significantly to the overarching rationale for failure.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study has shown that economic sanctions do not always work. They are unsuccessful more often when outside sources get involved, resulting in reduced leverage for the initiator. Many of these failures have occurred when there is confusion concerning the overall objectives. "The more elusive and ambiguous the goal, the less are the chances of success. One can hardly succeed without knowing what one realistically hopes to accomplish."[16] Sanctions also fail due to too many global sources of supply, thereby providing access beyond controls imposed by sanctions. Thus targeted nations are not susceptible to the pressure applied. The effectiveness of a sanction can be undermined for a wide variety of concerns. Political opposition to them, international competitiveness, or simply public opinion. Many concerns also emerge after the termination of an economic sanction. If a sanction is lifted too early, such relief may signal the approval or at least acceptance of an undesirable behavior. At best, it signals a withdrawal of an ineffective action. Therefore, especially today, it may be much easier to get into a sanction than to get out of one.

One particular common thread that is exposed through all three of the examples of unilateral and multilateral sanctions (Cuba, Iraq, and Panama) is the sanction's effects on the targeted countries' innocent populations. This is a consistent shortfall of economic sanctions and must be closely monitored in the future. Sanctions need to be selectively aimed at those who are responsible for the crisis. If sanctions are not monitored closely, the people of the targeted country may rally against the country imposing the sanctions. In Iraq and Panama, the economic sanctions proved ineffective against Saddam's and Noriega's power bases, but punished those who made up the key opposition to both of them.

In the future there will be little need to use unilateral economic sanctions to signal U.S. resolve. In fact, such action would most likely be counterproductive. To such a degree that the United States could easily find itself at odds against a large percentage of foreign countries. Countries that may hold the key for our success when dealing abroad in foreign matters and trade issues. But that during recent history may have demonstrated little if any importance to U.S. interest but suddenly take on a new importance with the discovery of certain minerals, natural gas or oil, access to trade routes or possibly an establishment of a new ally against one of our ever growing threats. In light of these ever changing possibilities the current U.S. administration should seriously consider the many political, diplomatic, intelligence, military, and cultural tools that are at our disposal for enacting foreign policy:

> "When we act unilaterally, we damage relationships with our closest friends and allies-on whom we rely for support on other important foreign policy and trade issues-and we weaken our ability over the long run to protect and promote our interests... While unilateral action by the United States sometimes may be necessary to promote our interests, Congress overdoes it. We need to advance U.S. interests without being demeaning or overbearing. Style counts, and cooperation works. At a time when U.S. leadership is challenged and greatly needed, unilateralism undermines our ability to lead."[17]

During this era of globalization, the United States, like other nations, will succeed only through cooperative endeavors and through consideration of appropriate multilateral alternatives in response to a common problem. Such internationalism can only promote a greater understanding and more successful pursuit of common interests.

At the very least, the U.S. should use economic sanctions more judiciously. First, we should analyze detailed information about a particular state and its vulnerabilities before imposing sanctions. The time when economic sanctions were used simply because of our formidable status has passed. Future sanctions will require more emphasis on an intelligence cell with the specific tasks of analyzing the most reasonable means of targeting a particular vulnerability and monitoring the effects of a sanction on the population. This monitoring cell must be attuned to the ever changing effects that an economic sanction may have on a particular group of people. It must insure that sanctions are focused primarily on those responsible for an undesired action and that each sanction is given ample time to work. Any country is vulnerable in one way or another; nonetheless, sometimes finding a successful approach to a targeted country may take an extended period. Second, the United States must promote internationalism with all nations and examine second and third-order effects of our behavior. Unilateral endeavors in the future have a high probability of producing only costly and ineffective failures. Multilateral sanctions, combined with diplomatic initiatives, may have a considerable value toward the development of international relations with a future coalition member. Such emerging relationships can establish a climate where the peace process can proceed.

Finally, the effectiveness of economic sanctions can be undermined if all concerned groups are not operating under the same operations plan. In the sanctions against Iraq, many of the GOAs, domestic groups, and humanitarian sanctions against Iraq, many of the GOAs, domestic groups, and humanitarian operations were not working with the military on the ground for a common goal:

> "The months immediately following the coalition's military success were the period when the economy of Iraq was closest to collapse and, therefore, most vulnerable to the sanctions. A coherent campaign to overwhelm Iraq by stressing its economy would have tightened the screws at that moment to concentrate pressure when Iraq was weakest. Instead, by late February 1991, the International Committee of the Red Cross was permitted to send convoys to deliver medicines and foodstuffs to beleaguered Iraqis. A shift in international opinion to sympathize with war-related suffering in Iraq caused the UN Sanctions Committee in mid-March to approve several requests to ship food. As a result, the Iraqi Trade Ministry was able to double the monthly ration of food to individuals."[18]

This type of humanitarian response, coupled with the fact that 1400 UN personnel spent approximately $30 million in Iraqi government-owned hotels during the first twelve months following the war, went a long way to insure the failure of imposed sanctions. The bottom line is that for economic sanctions to be effective, they must be given the time and opportunity to work. It does little good for one party to restrict while another provides required resources.

Sanctions may still leave considerable utility as an instrument of national power. But the U.S. should consider other options as well. And when sanctions are imposed, they must be imposed smartly and judiciously:

> "The coming decades will impose new challenges to U.S. national security. As statesmen search for new strategies in the face of changing realities, the demands for creative state craft will continue. Decisions that leave too great a gap between the ends of policy and the means will leave excessive risk and the potential for failure. This has certainly been the fate of many past decisions to use economic sanctions as the principal policy tool. This need not be so. If carefully analyzed, judiciously applied and connected with other elements of national power, we may find more satisfactory results."[19]

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## ENDNOTES

[1] Joseph J. Collins and Gabrielle D. Bowdoin, Beyond Unilateral Economic Sanctions, Better Alternatives for U.S. Foreign Policy (Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data, 1999), 3.

[2] Ibid., 5.

[3] Ibid., 9.

[4] Ibid., x.

[5] U.S. Army War College, Economic Sanctions Against The Republic of Panama, AY90 (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College,1990), 2.

[6] Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffrey J. Schott and Kimberly Ann Elliott, Economic Sanctions Reconsidered, History and Current Policy (Institute for International Economics, 1990), 13.

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[11] Ibid., 50.

[12] Ibid., 56.

[13] U.S. Army War College, Economic Sanctions Against The Republic of Panama, AY90 (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, 1990), 5.

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[16] David Leyton Brown, The Utility of International Economic Sanctions, (ST. Martin's Press, INC. 1987), 306.

[17] Collins, 39.

[18] Taylor, 56.

[19] U.S. Army War College, The Tactics of Economic Sanctions Measures Short of War, AY92 (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, 1992), 27.

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