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On the Efficacy of Sanctions: Why Regimes and Motives Matter

Colette Faulkner

Pepperdine University, colette.faulkner@pepperdine.edu

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Consistently, policy makers have responded to threats of nuclear development, the rise of autocracies, mass human rights abuses, claimants over strategic regions, and more geopolitical issues with the use of economic sanctions. While governments may show an overt willingness to use sanctions as an effective tool of foreign policy, world leaders are still hotly debating the question of the efficacy of sanctions. Some have argued that sanctions will generally fail due to the fact that the sender country will not be able to extract any type of political concession from the target country. Others counter that states use sanctions as a symbolic signal of disapproval to a target country's actions, not as a tool to reverse any type of political action. What these ideas fail to take into account is that there is merit to both. Governments can use sanctions merely as symbols of disapproval or they can use them as tools of economic coercion. Used to coerce a target country into making some type of political concession, sanctions are generally more successful against more democratic regimes versus more autocratic regimes. Conversely, used as symbolic tools, sanctions are successful at increasing the reputation of the sender country and creating international norms of how states ought to act.

I. SANCTIONS AS TOOLS OF COERCION

Before diving into what is needed for economic sanctions to be effective as tools of coercion, it is important to understand the definition of a successful sanction. A common definition is “a tool for coercing target governments into particular avenues of response.”¹ Therefore, sender states often see the failure to get that particular response as a failed use of economic sanctions. Empirically, when it comes to bringing about political change, sanctions generally tend to fail more than they succeed. At their very best, when sender countries seek modest political change, sanctions succeed about half the time. Bigger goals, such as regime change, generally succeed about thirty percent of the time.² Aside from what sanctions seek to achieve and their ability to do so, it is important to understand how economic sanctions are designed to work. At their core, the purpose of economic sanctions is to harm the target country's economy, causing it pain,³ so that the country will be forced to decide whether continuing its behavior is worth the ramifications of being sanctioned or if pain of economic sanctions is great

¹ Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffrey J. Schott, Kimberly Ann Elliott, and Barbara Oegg, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered* (Peterson Institute for International Economics, 1990), 5.

² Hufbauer et al., “Economic Sanctions Reconsidered,” 158.

³ Hossein G. Askari, John Forrer, Hildy Teegen, and Jiawen Yang, *Economic Sanctions: Examining Their Philosophy and Efficacy* (Praeger Publishers, 2003), 191.

enough to concede to the will of the sender country. For the sender state, being able to recognize if the target country will choose the former or latter choice is paramount to crafting a sound sanction policy.

Any time a state decides to take an action against another state, whether that be instigating a military attack or choosing to sanction it, it is taking a gamble. In order for that gamble to be beneficial to a state they must have adequate information on the other state with whom it is interacting. Different regime types will have different responses due to “the institutional constraints of a political system [that] limit the state’s decision-making process.”⁴ Therefore, understanding how different regimes operate and how they are predisposed to threats and actions made against them is crucial to gauging the success of all types of foreign policy tools, such as economic sanctions. At face value, economic sanctions are a clear form of coercion, but in order for sanctions to be effective in extracting concessions they cannot rely solely on harming target states’ economies. Senders have to understand how economic burdens will translate into the ways target states will respond politically. Leaders, in general, have the incentive to stay in power. To do so, leaders have to maintain the favor of those who have the capacity of granting them power: the selectorate.⁵ In democracies, where multiple parties often vie to hold power in office, people perceive the winning group as the winning coalition. Democratic leaders cater towards winning coalitions because these coalitions are the people who allowed these leaders to come to power in the first place. For example, President Donald Trump is more beholden to Republican voters that won him the presidency than Democratic voters that voted against him. While these coalitions might be made up of one or more parties, they generally reflect the political opinion of the majority of people within a society. In more autocratic regimes, leaders generally focus more on a few select powerful and wealthy elites, such as the oligarchs in Russia. If sanctions have the capability to wreak economic havoc within a country, possibly destabilizing the balance of power within it, then its leaders “will be concerned with how sanctions might threaten their position”⁶ and will react in a way that protects the parties that grant them power.

Historically, democratic regimes have proven to concede more to the demands of economic sanctions. Democracies tend to be more predictable than other types of regimes due to how they are organized. Evidently, the purpose of

⁴ Susan Hannah Allen, “Political Institutions and Constrained Response to Economic Sanctions,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 4, no. 3 (July 2008): 257, <https://doi-org.lib.pepperdine.edu/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2008.00069.x>.

⁵ Allen, “Political Institutions,” 123.

⁶ Allen, “Political Institutions,” 259.

any democracy is to cater to all of its constituents. Democracies and their leaders are characterized by having a great sense of accountability, since democracies contain a large numbers of people with access to political rights. Leaders in these types of regimes have the task of choosing between providing public goods or private goods. Democratic leaders generally choose to focus more on public goods because granting privileges to a few individuals does not have as large of an impact on their popularity as providing public goods, such as healthcare or education, to the masses. In order for leaders to “win and retain office” they must have “support from ‘masses.’”⁷ Therefore, if sanctions deteriorate an economy, shrinking the resources governments have to provide for public goods, “democracies are forced either to concede quickly” or cutback on providing public goods.⁸ For example, during the Suez Crisis, the United States imposed sanctions against Egypt, Britain, and France. The democratic countries, France and Britain, understood “that the economic power of the United States (in addition to the threat to hurt the strength of the pound on the international market) could do a good deal of damage to their economies as well as their international reputations,” so they yielded to the demands of the the United States.⁹ Britain’s prime minister at the time, Anthony Eden, was even forced out of office. On the other hand, the more autocratic regime of Egypt “made limited concessions” because “sanctions ‘failed to undermine Nasser’s domestic support.’”¹⁰ Because democracies are dependent on providing for a substantial number of people, large detriments to the economy will have a negative impact on the people, making it easier for sender states to hypothesize that democratic regimes will make political concessions if sanctions are placed on them.

On the other end of the political spectrum, in autocratic regimes, it has proven harder to extract political concessions via the use of economic sanctions. As previously stated, senders rely on having adequate information about target countries in order to determine if imposing sanctions will be futile or not. The political leanings of a democracy can often be gauged by numerous measures, such as political pollings or past precedents on how citizens choose to vote. Measures like these seldom exist in autocratic regimes. Instead, the political leanings are of usually one person or one group, making it harder to pinpoint what exactly they will do in a given situation. This lack of consistent information of a target state’s behavior leads to senders being more likely to make demands that

⁷ Risa A. Brooks, “Sanctions and Regime Type: What works and When?,” *Security Studies* 11, no. 4 (September 2002): 16, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/714005349>.

⁸ Allen, “Political Institutions,” 123.

⁹ Allen, “Political Institutions,” 258.

¹⁰ Allen, “Political Institutions,” 258.

autocratic targets will refuse¹¹ resulting in a decreased likelihood of efficacy. Instead of having to cater to the masses to stay in power, autocrats usually seek to please the political elite, whom often have the same political ideology as them. These political elites are generally made up of the heads of state bureaucracies and the military. State bureaucracies, the “managers and chiefs of state-owned enterprises,”¹² are important because they are able to prevent a strong middle class from forming that might have the potential to undermine the state. Additionally, the military serves to suppress any type of opposition to the regime in exchange for privileges and political favors.¹³ These key groups and elites support the actions of the regime and work to keep it in power. So, as long as autocrats are able to satisfy the needs and wants of these people, autocrats will stay in power despite the imposition of sanctions. Since it is the autocratic leader that generally yields power over all resources within the country, this leader is able to manipulate the resources to the benefit of themselves and those that immediately support them.¹⁴ They are able to do this through the promotion of “black markets under sanctions and [by] fostering a system of corruption.”¹⁵ As a result, economic sanctions often fail against autocratic regimes because they are unable to cause enough damage to the people that control the policies and actions of the state. In 1990, the United States placed comprehensive economic sanctions on Iraq after invading Kuwait. These sanctions were placed in hopes of tearing down Saddam Hussein but did the opposite instead. Hussein was not only able to survive but was able to thrive despite the fall in quality of living for the rest of Iraqi citizens. By “diverting shrinking public resources to his supporters in the government and military,” Hussein’s regime was able to continue. The designers of the sanctions intended for the economy to be hurt, and therefore Hussein’s power to be hurt, but instead it “increased his importance as a supplier of those resources and allowed the Iraqi regime” to continue its oppressive rule.¹⁶ This was also seen in the case of Rhodesia. In 1966, the United Nations sanctioned the state of Rhodesia to bring down white supremacist Ian Smith’s regime, but the attempt was futile. Smith, with the power of the government, was able to institute a “new winning coalition” that allowed him to maintain his rule “while all other groups outside the government’s support base suffered disproportionately” from the

¹¹Allen, “Political Institutions,” 259.

¹²Brooks, “Sanctions and Regime Type,” 17.

¹³Brooks, “Sanctions and Regime Type,” 17.

¹⁴Allen, “Political Institutions,” 124.

¹⁵Allen, “Political Institutions,” 124.

¹⁶Durus Peksen and A. Cooper Drury, “Economic Sanctions and Political Repression: Assessing the Impact of Coercive Diplomacy on Political Freedoms” *Human Rights Review* 10, no 3. (February 2009): 401, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12142-009-0126-2>.

damning effects of the sanctions and “were not even able to resist the Smith government's repressive measures.”¹⁷ In this case, not only did sanctions prove to be ineffective towards an autocratic regime, they also magnified the devastating conditions that oppressed groups were already facing within the country. Additionally, sanctions often serve as a rallying point, allowing autocrats to concentrate power even more. In order to squash and prevent political dissent that might arise from the decrease in quality of life as a result of sanctions, autocrats “pinpoint the imposing state(s) as a clear external threat to the nation and therefore a common enemy to unify the state.”¹⁸ This manipulation of the narrative makes it likely that political supporters of the regime will remain loyal to it and continue to provide for it and protect it. In countries where there is severe media censorship, this is particularly true. The cases of Cuba and North Korea, two countries with heavy media censorship, prove that the power of manipulation that autocrats hold allows them to cling on to their power despite decades of harsh sanctions.¹⁹ The problem with the use of economic sanctions against autocratic regimes is that the leader will always have the ability to shield himself from any harm that sanctions may cause. Those at the bottom of society only suffer more as hits to the economy lead to funds being diverted from crucial public services. People find it harder to stay employed, making decent wages, have access to life saving healthcare, and more. As economies begin to lack the means to support all citizens, public services, and economic sectors, the people already facing poverty will only suffer more. Sanctions do more than just decrease a nation's GDP, but also magnify the atrocities that poverty and political oppression already foster. Therefore, sanctions fail in two parts: they fail to create political concessions, and they fail to create better lives for the people they seek to help.

II. SANCTIONS AS SYMBOLIC TOOLS

Sender states have consistently used sanctions as a way to coerce a state to alter its behavior, but they have also used them to simply send a message. In most cases, the sender of sanctions is usually a powerful, more developed country or a strong international coalition, and the target is often a less developed state. For these powerful countries and organizations, such as the United States or United Nations, sanctions act as a way for them to exercise their political prowess on the global playing field. Especially for the United States, whom the world often sees

¹⁷ Peksen and Drury, “Economic Sanctions and Political Repression,” 401.

¹⁸ Alireza Naghavi and Giuseppe Pignataro, “Theocracy and Resilience Against Economic Sanctions,” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 111, no. 5 (March 2015): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2014.12.018>.

¹⁹ Naghavi and Pignataro, “Theocracy and Resilience,” 10.

as the world's "police force," staying silent on objectionable policies of other states may be more harmful to its reputation than the costs of imposing sanctions.²⁰ In the past, the United States has imposed sanctions on governments to show disapproval of the violation of human rights. In 1989, the U.S. placed sanctions against China for the Tiananmen Square massacre.²¹ The United Nations has sanctioned ten states; Southern Rhodesia, Iraq, Yugoslavia, Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Sudan,²² for being guilty of mass human rights abuses. Each case has had mixed results on the efficacy of sanctions and whether or not they were able to stop or prevent further human rights abuses. One of their main objectives was to show that the U.N., an organization focused on geopolitical stability and preservation of human rights, would not stand for the violation of individuals. Overall, economic sanctions targeted at states that participate in human rights abuses have created a global norm that human rights abuses will not be tolerated, and actions will be taken against states that choose to engage in that behavior. Therefore, when questioning the validity of sanctions, the motives of the sanctions have to be accounted for. For sanctions that have the motive of coercing, it is easy to determine their success in the fact that they either create political concessions or they do not. For sanctions with the motive of simply sending a message about the sender's political ideology, the success is not as important. Senders of these types of sanctions often understand that the target country may not change its action or behavior. Instead, the sender is more concerned with showing the world that it will not stand for what it sees as immorality.

III. THE ROAD TO BETTER SANCTIONS

There are myriad factors that go into determining whether or not sanctions will be successful. Sender states have to understand their motives are to determine if their sanctions will even achieve what they want them to achieve. Additionally, sender states need to have adequate information about the target country simply to begin to craft an effective sanction design. The best way to determine if the pursuit of sanctions will be futile is to look at the regime of the sender country. Democratic leaders are easier to oust from power when they act in a way that upsets the masses, making it easier to determine how they will respond to sanctions. If sanctions are to hurt the masses, then democrats will most likely

²⁰ Hufbauer et al., "Economic Sanctions Reconsidered," 5.

²¹ Buhm Suk Baek, "Economic Sanctions Against Human Rights Violations," *Cornell Law School Inter-University Graduate Student Conference Papers* 11, (April 2008): 43.
http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1039&context=lps_clacp.

²² Baek, "Human Rights Violations," 27 - 41.

concede to the demands of the sender to have sanctions lifted, preserving their power. On the other hand, autocrats can wield power how they choose and are only obligated to meet the wants of a few, making it harder for sender states to extract concessions from them. In these particular cases, sanctions generally hurt the populations in autocratic states more than they help because sanctions harm the masses and not those in power. If states continue to use economic sanctions as legitimate tools of foreign policy, sender states will need to work towards designing sanctions that will actually affect the people within autocracies that have the power to make decisions, rather than creating heavier economic burdens against the common people within these states.

There has been an increasing trend for sender states to impose targeted or smart sanctions that have the purpose of only affecting the leader of a government and their inner circle rather than affecting the entire economy, thereby affecting the entire populace. Sanctions like these can cover multiple actions, such as freezing the assets of individuals or entities, boycotting of cultural exchanges, or banning diplomatic interchange, and more.²³ All of these are designed to have an impact on the political elite that are responsible for objectionable or immoral actions within a country and not the citizens who often do not have a say in government. These targeted sanctions are hypothesized to be effective even in autocratic regimes due to the fact that they make it a lot harder for autocrats to shield themselves and supporters from the harms of sanctions. Additionally, because they do not affect the entire economy and the people, it is harder for autocrats to manipulate sanctions into a rallying point to secure more loyalty and support. In 2005, the Council of the European Union adopted the *E.U Best Practices for the Effective Implementation of Restrictive Measures* that would help the E.U. and its member states design and use these types of sanctions.²⁴ More states should follow suit in moving towards the use of smart sanctions. It is important to remember that sender states are typically western nations and target states are usually those in the global south. For western sender states to continue to use economic, and not targeted, sanctions for the sake of stopping human rights abuses is hypocritical. Human rights abuses will not be stopped by worsening the conditions that create human rights abuses in the first place. Sanctions are integral aspects of foreign policy with strong roots in history, but for these tools to remain legitimate and function effectively, sender states need to think more about the repercussions of these sanctions on the most vulnerable around the world. Ultimately, the ills that plague global society can only be solved by actively

²³ Brooks, "Sanctions and Regime Type," 14-15.

²⁴ Baek, "Human Rights Violations," 27 - 41.

understanding the conditions that foster abuse and corruption and addressing the people that create them.

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