

The Power and Consequences of International Sanctions

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MICHAEL BRZOSKA, MAY 19 2014

The sanctions paradox

The imposition of politically motivated restrictions on trade, financial flows, the ownership of assets, communication, or travel by governments – prominent forms of international sanctions applied in the recent past – are hotly debated issues of international politics. One of the main topics in these discussions is the question of the effects of sanctions. Are sanctions attaining what those mandating them aim for? Or do they primarily have other effects? Or no effects at all?

For a long time the discussion on sanctions has been marked by a ‘sanction paradox’ (Baldwin 2000; Drezner 2000). The academic literature was dominated by the view that sanctions “do not work” – based on empirical work indicating that sanctions achieve their stated goals only rarely (Leyton-Brown 1987; Pape 1997). More recent work has shown that the record of sanctions is uneven, but larger than zero. Depending on selection of sample and method of calculation, success rates lie between ten and thirty percent, with the earlier figure measuring the attainment of the stated goal of a sanction measure, and the later noticeable policy change of the targeted state, organisation, or person in the direction desired by those imposing the sanctions (Brzoska 2013).

Humanitarian organisations, and many Non-Governmental Organisations, on the other hand, were critical of sanctions because they harmed people who had no responsibility for the sanctioned policies. The sanctions against Iraq between 1991 and 2003 clearly had major humanitarian consequences, but even in sanction regimes targeting decision-makers, side effects are likely to occur (Gordon 2009; Lopez 2009).

Still, some governments, such as the United States government, but also the United Nations Security Council, the African Union, and the European Union, have been active sanctioners. Indeed, sanctions have become a more or less automatic response to crisis by many international actors. The Ukraine conflict of 2014 is a case in point: a good part of the discussion on how the West should deal with Russia focuses on sanctions; at the same time, the Russian government threatens to cut gas supplies to Ukraine.

The sanctions paradox is less puzzling if one broadens the perspective. One aspect, emphasized by Baldwin (2000), are the pressures on policy makers “to do something” when confronted with objectionable behavior. Sanctions are, as has been repeated ad nauseam but still is true, a measure “between wars and words”. Thus where military action is out of the question, and verbal condemnations seem too weak, sanctions are often seen as the least problematic way to demonstrate determination (Groves 2007).

Three faces of power

But there is another point to sanctions which can explain their growing use by certain international actors. They are a form of international power politics, in addition to being an instrument to inflict economic damage. Particularly in the academic literature working with large data sets on sanctions and simple measures of “success”, this aspect often gets lost. Recent contributions to the literature on sanctions have, however, reminded us of the importance of seeing sanctions in such a broader perspective (Guimelli 2011; Taylor 2011).

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Famously defined by Max Weber as “the likelihood that one actor in a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance” (Weber 1921/1997, p. 152), power has many faces. A useful distinction of forms of power has been introduced by Stephen Lukes (1986). He distinguished three dimensions of power: power through directly influencing decision-making of those whose resistance is to be broken; indirect power through shaping the way in which this decision-making occurs; and ideological power, which is the power to shape norms of “proper” behavior. The latter two forms of power have some resonance with the “soft power” concept advanced by Joseph Nye (2004), but differentiate it further by taking into account what Michel Foucault (1991) has argued in his work on “gouvernementalité”: the internalization of the rules on which a particular political order rest by those governed by this order.

Traditional research on sanctions has focused on the first face of power, the influence they may or may not have on decision-making. Those targeted are seen as rational decision-makers, who will compare the benefits of actions with their costs. Sanctions which are sufficiently large to tip the balance in such a way that costs outweigh benefits will result in the changes of behavior desired by those mandating the sanctions.

The broader perspective on power provides additional rationales for sanctions. Sanctions can help to get one’s will against resistance through shaping the way in which this decision-making occurs. This second face of power is linked to the idea of shaming those responsible for the behavior that led to the sanctions and isolating them from peers and others who they are associating with. The hope is that sanctions will lead to a change in the targeted behavior not because the cost-benefit calculus is affected, but because social relationships are influenced by the sanctions. Social relationships on several levels can be relevant: relationships within the decision-makers’ family, among the elite group in a country, but also relationships among countries.

This view on sanctions, which could be called the social perspective, moves the analysis away from individualistic cost-benefit calculations into the direction of constructivist ideas about appropriate behavior shaped by norms and ideas. However, it is still more in the rationalist camp of traditional sociological and psychological theories of the importance of being part of a group, whether a group of individuals or a group of states.

Some types of targeted sanctions, which have been developed in response to the crisis of comprehensive economic sanctions in the 1990s (Brzoska 2003; Drezner 2011), directly aim at affecting social relationships. Personal sanctions against decision-makers, for instance, are often designed to isolate them, to put pressure on their families and peers, but to spare those among the elite, who have objected against the targeted policy. Again, the personal sanctions against certain persons in Russia and Ukraine in the spring of 2014 are a case in point. They are highly selective, and one of their purposes is to split the political elite in Russia.

Of course, the success of such sanctions could still be measured in terms of policy changes. However, this would be incomplete. Both in terms of design and factors likely to influence success, the social perspective on sanctions differs from the rationalist, which sees sanctions working through immediate harm for decision-makers directly. From the social perspective, effects on the relationships between decision-makers and associates are the measure. The success of sanctions should also be measured by the degree to which they pressure decision-makers because those close to him or her demand changes. However, if decision-makers choose isolation and defiance, sanctions will ultimately fail.

Sanctions aimed at exploiting social relationships require good knowledge about targeted persons, organisations, and countries, as well as careful crafting. But what is more important, they need to be consistent with other social interactions between those sanctioning and the target. If sanctions send one message, but other forms of interaction – for instance, speeches and communiques – send another one, sanctions are not likely to have the desired effect. Furthermore, such sanction can be easily discredited, for instance, if they are coming from international actors who are not deemed to be of importance by those supposed to influence the decision-maker.

Analytically, this means that it makes little sense to analyse sanctions in isolation (Guimelli 2011). Rather, sanctions need to be seen in the broader context of the totality of relationships between those imposing sanctions and those sanctioned. Sanctions become only one element of interaction between these two entities. In most cases, the power

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of sanctions depends on the consistency of sanctions with the other types of interaction. A finding, in academic work, that sanctions did not result in the desired change of behavior may have nothing to do with the sanctions themselves, but rather be the consequence of mixed messages to those targeted.

The third dimension of power is about the internalization of rules and norms of behavior. Sanctions are generally mandated in response to a crisis. But they still can be important by shaping future behavior. Extending the earlier argument about moving from rationalist to constructivist thinking, the power of sanctions here is their role in strengthening rules and norms of future appropriate behavior. Sanctioning North Korea and Iran because of nuclear proliferation concerns, for instance, sends a message not only to these two states, but also to other would-be proliferators.

Again, the likelihood that such messages will be received, and future proliferation prevented, depends on consistency, though in an even broader sense. Not only the consistency with other policies towards the target is important, but also the consistency in equally applying sanctions to counter certain types of behavior. Selective uses of sanctions in the face of similar behavior will not help to create norms. Thus the use of sanctions against some proliferators, but not all, such as Israel, undermines the usefulness of sanctions as norm-building instruments for non-proliferation.

Power and consequences

These additional perspectives on the power of sanctions help explain a good part of the growing willingness of particular international actors to use sanctions despite the low rates of success, as traditionally measured. A closer look at sanction regimes indicates that the expansion of the sanctions universe has primarily been driven by Western liberal states. Sanctions very well fit into a more liberal view of world order, emphasizing relationships, rather than anarchy, as the main link between states. These additional perspectives are also good at explaining why sanctions are now almost automatically called for when some crisis arises, because sanctions have become increasingly intertwined with norm-building and norm-maintenance. Again this is, at least up to now, a largely Western-driven enterprise.

A broader view on the power of sanctions requires assessment of their place within broader policies towards “troublemaker” and attempts to establish and strengthen international norms. The question of whether sanctions “work” becomes one of whether the type and form of sanction adopted fits the overall policies adopted to achieve a certain outcome.

Broadening the view on sanctions should not lead one to ignore their consequences, just as one has when considering power in general. Both the social and the normative perspectives on sanctions produce effects on actors, whether persons or states, who are not responsible for the targeted behavior. Sanctioning family and peers in the hope that they will pressure decision-makers is ethically problematic. So would be punishing a state particularly hard so that others, who might consider the same objectionable behavior, get the message. Indeed, what may be unintended side effects when targeted with the objective to directly shape decision-making in targeted states, here now are desired effects.

This reinforces the need to consider the humanitarian consequences of sanctions. Sanctions are different from words because they produce material harm. Looking at sanctions from a broader perspective provides a more differentiated view on where such harms may be intended and where not. In general, the call for targeting sanctions in such a way that harm for people who have no responsibility for a targeted policy is minimised needs to remain a strong ethical standard (Gordon 2009; Lopez 2009). However, this kind of analysis also indicates why targeting sanctions does not imply that this standard will be followed by those mandating sanctions.

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