

Are Economic Sanctions a Viable Strategy for Coercing Another State?

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Are Economic Sanctions a Viable Strategy for Coercing Another State? What are the Ethical Implications?

Scope, Aims and Limitations of the Essay

This essay aims to critically analyse the instrumental and ethical consequences of economic sanctions in the international system. Economic sanctions are:

'measures taken against one or more countries to attempt to force a change in policies ... or at least ... demonstrate the sanctioning country's opinion of another's policies' (Carter, 1987, p.1166).

The above delineation is by no means concrete, but it illustrates the instrumental and expressional arguments for economic sanctions; with the word 'force' indicating the punitive nature of economic sanctions that is often overlooked.

This essay wishes to deeply scrutinise economic sanctions in a hope to avoid generalisations that 'problem solving theories' espouse. Instead I will follow a "critical security perspective" which encourages constant reflection leading to a resistance of total theories such as "realism" (Cox, 1981). Whilst these critical theorists do not comprise of a singular perspective, it may be argued that they all converge on the notion that individuals should challenge popular assumptions about how the world operates.

With my analytical framework set out, section II begins by claiming that no universal ethical standard exists due to subjective interpretations of morals. However, the question paradoxically requires a subjective perspective in order to give the essay analytical rigour. Therefore the core assumption I posit is that the positive security (Bilgin, 2003) of human life is sacrosanct and can rarely be inhibited.

Section III expresses the instrumental views regarding economic sanctions whilst section IV discusses the ethical and expressionist consequences the instrumental view disregards. In true critical fashion, both sections consider realist and liberal theory and apply them to empirical realities; whilst critical theory simultaneously aims to scrutinise all the assumptions made. Finally, section V is the conclusion that pulls all the strands of the argument together to form a coherent conclusion.

Perspectives Regarding International Ethics

As noted above a definition of "ethical" cannot be prescribed without coming under considerable scrutiny. As Terry Nardin (1992, p.2) argues 'ethics involves principles, but it also involves the interpretation and application of these principles by particular persons in particular circumstances'. Therefore concepts such as "human rights" and "ethics" are essentially contested concepts (Gallie, 1956) given that different cultures and experiences create alternate opinions on language and terms (Derrida, 1976; 1983). In fact, this essay seeks to avoid a universal interpretation of

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ethics as it overlooks latent domination within the claim (Foucault, 2004). On the other hand, I do not wish to fall into relativism whereby anything cannot be condemned due to subjectivity. Atrocities such as the Rwandan genocide should be viewed as ethically appalling and condemned. Instead, criticisms and ethical opinions should have anchorages in certain principles; not an immutable framework (Booth, 2007). Therefore the anchorage of my ethical assumption is individuals have the right to be economically, socially and politically secure. However I acknowledge that it accommodates a broadly liberal approach of human rights. Whilst these values are not wholly immutable, I do not pick them out of thin air (Winkler, 1999, p.135), they are strongly reinforced by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976) which consist of 167 states. Taking this assumption as debatable [yet relatively strong], an analysis of the strategic and ethical dimension of economic sanctions can proceed.

Dominant Disputes Regarding Economic Sanctions

Threatening Sanctions: A Game Theory Model

Employing instrumental economic sanctions incorporates liberal-economic methods into a realist game theory model to achieve the best instrumental methods. By instrumental, I mean that sanctions are used to achieve explicit ends; as opposed to expressionist consequences which send implicit messages. Since the exeunt of the Cold War there has been a sharp incline in the use of unilateral and multilateral sanctions so analysing this method is crucial. However this model and method of thinking is flawed for a number of reasons.

One problem is that economic sanctions have been consistently implemented unilaterally and multilaterally in the global system since the demise of the Cold War (Hufbauer, Schott and Elliot, 1990, p.11 [HSE hereafter]). It indicates that threats do not seem to deter targeted states and they will more often than not stand firm. Even the largest UN threat of economic sanctions, enforced under Security Council Resolution 660 (1990), was still not convincing enough to unsettle Saddam Hussein. Why was this threat seen as empty? One reason is because Iraq was an autocracy. Threats of economic sanctions would not affect Iraqi policy objectives due to a combination of autocratic egoism and an entirely dominated public sphere where institutions facilitating political discussion were under Hussein's control (Lucas, 2000). Threats and uses of economic sanctions only produce improved instrumental results if the citizenry are politically antagonised to the harsh economic climate created by sanctions, or, agree with the perceived motives behind them (Hufbauer, Schott and Elliot, 1990). On the one hand, South Africa could provide a precedent for this example. Citizens actively supported sanctions [not unanimously] against the apartheid government whilst simultaneously exerting internal pressure on their oppressive regime because of crippling sanctions (Gordon, 1999, p.130). On the other hand, in reality, the majority of target states contain weak political institutions and possess unstable economies with the average sender's economy 187 times larger than that of the average target (Elliot quoted in Gordon, 1999, p.136). Therefore survival takes precedent over political participation. Furthermore, as will be highlighted later, given the recent ethical consequences of economic sanctions, it is rather unlikely citizens will openly endorse them upon their own nation.

Imposing Sanctions

Despite being touched upon above, what about when sanctions are actually imposed? Hufbauer, Schott and Elliot (1990) (HSE hereafter) state that economic sanctions work 34% of the time, but, the success rate importantly depended on the type of policy or governmental change sought. Freeing political prisoners for example achieved more success (50%) than averting minor military endeavours (20%). So economic sanctions may prove effective in small scale disputes where the stakes of losing reputation are considerably lower. In contrast Robert Pape (1997; 1998) disputes HSE's findings and argues that only 3% of economic sanctions work. Conflict between the academics emerges from the subjective interpretation the phrase 'work'. Pape (1997, p.97) uses three broad categories to define if economic sanctions which differ from HSE's problematic 14 parameters. Pape's rule are: how important were the concessions the target state yielded to; if economic sanctions were threatened/applied before the change in behaviour; and no more credible explanations are available.

In most of the instances, Pape (1997, p.99) reaffirms a realist assumption that military forced quelled the dispute. Citing the case of Biafra-Nigeria dispute, HSE (1990, p.53) interpreted that Nigeria's economic sanctions against

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Biafra made a useful contribution by rendering the target's military capability less effective. However Pape (1998, pp.70-71) counters by arguing that Biafra held out for 3 years, taking 200,000 Nigerian troops to secure the area; leading him to question the instrumental use of economic sanctions. Other difficulties Pape (1997; 1998) has with HSE's findings are: economic sanctions failed where successes were marked, economic sanctions were confused with trade disputes and the conclusions made were indeterminate. On the other hand, Euclid Rose (2005) argues that the inherent problem with sanctions is the punitive nature in which they are implemented. Rose calls for a form of smart sanctioning whereby sanctions ease up in proportion to concessions the target states make; instead of a rigid implementation which makes negotiation – the claimed end of sanctions – impossible due to dogmatism. Rose (2005, p.466) highlights that Iraq complied with a majority of conditions set out by UN Security Council Resolution 687 (1990) but the UN/U.S shifted the parameters without recognising that Iraq made considerable allowances. This is a credible idea if sanctions last an indeterminate amount of time, however, the initial impact of economic sanctions would still cause considerable destitution and destruction; an irreconcilable consequence which will be discussed in section IV.

Perhaps the most important critique arising from Pape's analysis is the realist inference that using force secures better outcomes. It implies that if the success rate is between 3-34%, why not dispense with economic sanctions altogether in favour of force? One defence is that the citizenry of most sender states is responsive of international actions. Accordingly, the populace would want their government to react to flagrant abuses of international norms which conflict against their morals. Sanctions satisfy this void between doing nothing and military force (Davies & Johns, 2011). In one survey, 5000 UK citizens were surveyed about their opinions on sanctions, leading to a conclusion that citizens generally preferred sanctions and diplomacy to military coercion, whilst finding sanctions to be a generally effective foreign policy tool.

Middle-Eastern attitudes towards economic sanctions prove to be slightly more sceptical than U.K opinions. Only Tunisia (63%) was in favour of economic sanctions against Syria whilst Jordan (41%), Turkey (40%), and Lebanon (20%) remained doubtful about the idea (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012). So from a U.K (and to some extent, Middle-Eastern states' perspective) the government is under considerable pressure to exert some sort of pressure (bar force) as they cannot do *nothing* in fear of losing confidence amongst international *and* domestic spectators. The next section explores another fallacy: economic sanctions are justified as they are an ethical substitute for engaging in military force.

Ethical Implications

Collateral Damage

The reason why economic sanctions are seen as ethical arises from a state-centric view of security (Morgenthau, 1993; Mearsheimer. 1990). This view posits that a sender-state represents its citizens' values so therefore the same goes for the target state. However this is an out-dated and hegemonic view of security (Buzan, 1983; Booth, 2007; Linklater, 1990). States comprise of different cultures, ideologies, moral parameters and communities (Bilgin, 2003) and seeing the state as a unitary collective holds the target citizenry at ransom at the expense of elitist political goals. One must remember that social contract theory (the theory behind state formation) was formed on the belief that states best represent the ideas and security of those within them. With that in mind, Garfield (2000) notes data from four studies with various time frames to illustrate the trend in mortality rates of children under five in Iraq before and during the sanctions (Garfield, 2000, pp. 36-38). In the year 1990-1991, when the initial sanctions and the war in Kuwait began, there was a steep incline in mortality rates from approximately 50-60 thousand in 1990 to 130 thousand in 1991. After UN troops pulled out of Kuwait mortality rates dropped, but as the sanctions continued the mortality rates inclined to wartime levels.

The statistics for the mortality rates in Iraq vary considerably given the lack of information and lack of trust in Iraqi home statistics. Therefore it is hard to conclusively prove the extent of damage caused by economic sanctions. Nevertheless, Richard Garfield (2000, p.35) argues that contradictory to popular belief, in times of economic contraction, child mortality rates actually declines because resources are generally reallocated to the most needy. This also indicates that the incompetence of the Iraqi government is responsible for these conditions and not just the

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UN community. Inept governance is proved by statistics in the Kurdish-UN governed regions of Iraq. During the sanctions improved literacy rates and declining mortality rates were documented (Garfield, 2000, pp.48-51) in these northern sectors. However, it must be noted the Oil for Food program and various other non-governmental organisations were more prevalent in those northerly regions because it was easier to carry out operations there.

Regardless of the internal incompetency, two conclusions can be offered suggesting economic sanctions are a flawed policy: firstly, because Saddam Hussein remained unreceptive to his population's needs, economic sanctions worsened living conditions thus being a hugely misplaced ethical policy. Secondly, it illustrates an ancillary aim of economic sanctions – specifically regarding UN supported sanctions. An economic sanction illustrates the target state's isolation from the UN community whilst reinforcing the sender states own identity. This is called the expressional or 'Indenterial Justification' for economic sanctions (Addis, 2003, p.578).

Because economic sanctions are endorsed by the Charter system under Chapter VII, it implies they are an "ethical" alternative to military action; despite Galtung (1967, p.386) arguing rightly that: 'economic sanctions tend to preserve existing power structures'. One could argue that systemising economic sanctions reflects America's economic hegemony. We increasingly see paternalistic reasons akin to the "Responsibility to Protect" being used to justify economic sanctions (Babic & Jokic, 2000); the same views which were publicly offered as reasons for engaging in colonialist adventures (Addis, 2003, pp.613-614). In this view, imposing economic sanctions reflects the sender states' disapproval of an infantile state unable to conduct their affairs in accordance with the imagined (Anderson, 1983, p.6) international community which the UN protects. So when the UN Security Council Resolutions 660 (1990), 1267, (1999) and 1970 (2011) impose sanctions condemning Middle-Eastern states on the grounds that 'serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law' were being committed, given the destruction and destitution caused by economic sanctions, it unveils the hypocrisy of international community.

Commonly a pseudo-utilitarian argument tends to follow in defence of such a claim. The argument follows that it may be 'necessary to tolerate a high level of civilian hardship in order to prevent or at least discourage future violations' (Damrosch, 1994, pp.74-75). Consequentialist ethics can only be valid until a point, and in 1996 Madeline Albright pushed them to the limit. In an interview by Leslie Stahl she admitted that half a million children dying in Iraq was 'worth it' as long as foreign policy aims were completed (Addis, 2003, p. 608). What's deeply unsettling is that Albright expresses the views of realist policy makers; our dominant state's political goal should have priority over the minor state's despite the devastating losses occurred in the target state. The ultimate purpose of the UN is to prevent the 'scourge of war' and promote international peace and security; economic sanctions seem to deeply contradict that aim.

Dominating Aspects of Economic Sanctions

However infant mortality is just the tip of the ice-berg (Garfield, 2000, p.35). Survival is being alive; being truly secure is freedom to live without domination (Booth, 2007, p.107; Foucault, 2004). Garfield (2000) argues that the education levels, water standard, health care provision and housing were all affected by sanctions in Iraq. The common view is that the mass suffering in from of economic siege exerts pressure on the ruling elite (Gordon, 1999; Addis, 2003; HSE; 1990). In reality the harsh conditions economic sanctions generate, leave populaces more susceptible to both internal and external domination thus fortifying the *status quo ante* (Babic & Jokic, 2000, p.93) For Johan Galtung (1967) and Adam Winkler, this climate enables the ruling elites to endorse rally around the flag policies and enact a counter-sanction to promote a spirit of 'conspicuous sacrifice' against external enemies. In Rhodesia, Galtung [1967] found citizens viewed the world as dichotomised: one of that is good [Rhodesia] and one that is bad [Britain and Wilson]. Therefore sanctions gave the government the political ammunition to carry out these counter-productive forces.

Babic and Jokic's observations of behaviour during the Yugoslavian sanctions lead them to argue that internal *and* external domination directly occurs because of economic sanctions. Economic sanctions espouse a type of paternalist logic similar to the rhetoric used in colonial exploitations (Addis, 2003). In fact, imposing sanctions involves an even greater degree of humiliation for the besieged than would occur had there been a change of regime brought about in some other fashion (Babic & Jokic 2000). Furthermore, as the sanctions progress and conditions

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deteriorate:

'...it becomes easier to undertake manipulation and justify paternalism if one deals with passive or servile people who are so despondent that their behaviour appears masochistic. To the sanctioner, a drop in moral standards opens up a wide and long-term opportunity for destruction and devastation that would otherwise probably be outside of its reach without manipulation and paternalistic justification.' (Babic & Jokic, 2000)

Therefore a drop in moral consciousness occurs whereby violence, mistrust and a longing for the *status quo* are the only things present. Even at this point, the demands of the sender states alter to prolong the domination and extract more concessions from the people; despite the policy having minimal effect. (Winkler, 1999). This process continues until the sender state has economically dominated the citizenry so much that when the suffering stops, the target citizenry warp it into a victory given that the *status quo ante* was long forgotten because the conspicuous sacrifice became the *status quo*. Many scholars equate economic sanctions with siege warfare or as a method that contravenes the principles of *jus in bello* (Galtung, 1967; Gordon, 1999; Winkler, 1999; Babic & Jokic, 2000; Addis, 2003). With military force or a siege, the justification relies on survival, military necessity with only combatants intended to be targeted. However, the whole ethos of economic sanctions relies on victimising non-combatants to bribe the government (Winkler, 1999, p.147).

Although the realist and liberal counter-argument posits that the sender country is not to blame; it is the leadership of the target country who is "causing" the harm by failing to comply with political demands, or by failing to distribute domestic resources in the way that would most favour the vulnerable sectors of the population (Walzer, 1977, p.173). However economic sanctions are an economic *response* to a political issue, they are not a natural right or *jus cogen* in international law. As mentioned before, they were drafted when large economic players dominated international system. Therefore this position uncomfortably attempts to shift the blame onto the target-state (Doxey, 1996, p.9).

Concluding Remarks

Rigorously analysing the international system is difficult since the international system is so complex; focusing on one aspect or theory distorts the investigation, even adhering to critical theory is guilty of this. As Clifford Geertz neatly put it: "things get lost" if individuals view things through the lens of their hypothesis (Geertz quoted in Chambers, 1996). However, it is apparent that economic sanctions do not fulfil the requirements proponents claim they do (HSE, 1990; Damrosch, 1994). Only in minor issues such as the freeing of political prisoners have economic sanctions proven to be relatively successful; with the factual basis on this claim suspect (Pape, 1997). Perhaps looking at using sanctions in a bargaining model espoused by Rose (2005) might remedy the longevity of sanctions but it will not quell the moral complacency.

Ethical considerations (as interpreted in this essay) have not been a criterion on the list for judging the viability of economic sanctions. Nations are targeted as one thus holding the population to ransom at the expense of unworried regimes. The mortality rates in Iraq and the continued racial suppression in South Africa for years are testimony not only to the inefficiency to economic sanctions but to a prioritisation of negative security (international peace) over positive security (quality of life). Yet depending on your theoretical disposition, ethical considerations may always play a secondary role in foreign policy decisions; which is ironically fostered by this negative view of security. This isn't to say that policy makers possess no moral compass, in fact, a contradictory tone is found within the dominant defences of economic sanctions. Whilst ethical considerations are relegated to secondary concern, a distorted form of consequentialist ethics is being adhered to whereby fundamental principles of the UN community are abandoned for the sake of allegedly higher ones (Babic & Jokic, 2000, p.91). Therefore a reorientation of principles is in order to recognise that causing destitution in distant nations does not securitise your own nation.

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