

# Are Sanctions an Appropriate Tool for Coercion in International Politics? Why?

Written by Adam Groves

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ADAM GROVES, DEC 3 2007

The increasing use of sanctions as an instrument of coercion in the international system has been noted with alarm by academics and humanitarian agencies alike. Despite observations that they 'do not work' (Pape, 1997) and cause intolerable human suffering (Gordon, 1999) sanctions have become the 'standard reaction to a crisis' (Mayall, 1984: 631). It appears that policymakers continue to view them as an appropriate tool for coercion in international politics despite their highlighted deficiencies.

This essay will assess what role sanctions should have in the international system. First, it argue that they are usually ineffective and can reinforce existing power structures within the targeted state; they are costly to the implementer and achieve little. 'Smart' sanctions, which aim to pressurise leaders whilst sparing society as a whole, are notoriously ineffective, both as coercive tools and as a means of minimising widespread suffering. Secondly, sanctions face numerous ethical difficulties. They are inconsistent with the just war doctrine and the Kantian principle that people are an 'ends in themselves'. Again, 'smart' sanctions do not yet offer an obvious solution to these problems. Finally however, it will be argued that despite their faults, sanctions could be considered an appropriate tool of coercion. When the alternatives of military force or diplomacy are not feasible and 'doing nothing' is not an option, sanctions may offer the least inappropriate course. Furthermore, when military force is 'on the table', sanctions play an important role in signalling states' hostile intentions (both domestically and internationally) and make a modest contribution to achieving a successful military outcome. I will therefore conclude that sanctions should remain on the 'menu' of coercive measures despite the many problems currently associated with them. Further research should consider how smart sanctions can be made more effective.

I will draw on the work of Hufbauer, Schott and Elliot, who define sanctions as the 'deliberate, government-inspired withdrawal, or threat of withdrawal, of 'customary' trade or financial relations... to achieve foreign policy goals' (1990: 2). An 'appropriate tool' is understood as both effective and ethically justifiable whilst 'coercion' is the

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process of persuading an actor to take a certain course of action. The essay will focus predominantly on sanctions' appropriateness for coercing authoritarian regimes, as coercion of democracies raises different practical and ethical questions.

## **Ineffective, Counter-productive and Costly**

As Damrosch identifies, sanctions are typically seen to 'provide a middle range of policy alternatives stronger than diplomatic or rhetorical techniques but less coercive than... military force' (1994: 73). However, numerous academics assert that sanctions are ineffectual, sometimes even counter-productive, and damaging to the economy of the implementing state.

In 1990 Hufbauer, Schott and Elliot claimed in a seminal study that sanctions were successful thirty-four percent of the time; a figure interpreted as 'respectable' (Rogers, 1996) and as evidence for their efficacy (Haass: 1997: 76). However, these relatively positive findings have been attacked as 'seriously flawed' by Pape, who argues that some cases were deemed successes despite 'no evidence [that] the target made the demanded concessions' whilst others were 'settled by direct or indirect use of force' (1997: 93). Pape concludes that sanctions actually 'work' less than five percent of the time and argues there is little basis for the claim that they are 'even moderately effective' in achieving 'major foreign policy goals' (1997: 107). Several recent studies support such views by cautioning against sanctions' use as a tool of coercion (Preeg, 1999; Kunz, 1997; Tsebelis, 1990). Some academics have even gone as far as to denounce policymakers who use them as 'fools' (Morgan and Schwebach, 1997).

Critics of sanctions argue that they can be circumvented by numerous means. Internally, decision-making elites are often able to transfer resources from wider civil society to ensure the maintenance of their personal power; thus Saddam Hussein could rebuild the military after Gulf War I despite the crushing sanctions imposed on Iraq (Weiss, 1999: 505). Ironically then, because 'funds and goods can easily be moved around' within states and governments can seize resources from the general population, sanctions tend to affect those with least power to change national policy (Haass, 1997: 79; also Buck et. al. 1998). The slow and gradual process of gaining the necessary international cooperation to impose sanctions (for example, through the UN) exacerbates this problem by allowing targeted states' leadership ample time to plan the reallocation of resources in advance. The humanitarian crises which invariably results amongst the wider civilian population often causes international sympathy and can lead to sanctions regimes being suspended or undermined by certain states (Haass, 1997: 82).

A second reason that sanctions fail, is that implementing states rarely achieve the levels of cooperation

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necessary to make them work. Haass observes that, within the context of a globalised economy, unilateral sanctions are usually little more than 'costly expressions of opposition' (1997: 77). Sanctions imposed multi-laterally but without UN backing are, according to Drezner, 'worse than useless'. The collective action problem highlights states' incentive to 'free-ride' which, in this case, often consists of dropping sanctions and taking advantage of new trading opportunities. When there is no 'organizational support' for sanctions, the 'target regime has an incentive to wait out the coalition' in the knowledge that international cooperation will likely collapse and free-riders will emerge (2000: 99). In short, target states can adapt to sanctions internally (something made easier by the cumbersome procedures of implementation organisations) and there is rarely the necessary international cooperation to impose them effectively.

A number of thinkers have gone on to argue that sanctions are counter-productive. In relation to Rhodesia, Galtung noted a nationalist reaction which promoted sanctions as an 'attack from the outside' on a nation 'as a whole' (1967: 389). Similar processes have been observed in Mussolini's Italy, Sadat's Egypt and present-day Iran (Lindsay, 1986: 168-169; Drezner, 1999). Eland concludes that 'rather than creating disintegration in the target state, sanctions... invoke nationalism and political integration', thereby strengthening decision-making elites (1995: 32).

However, even in those cases where nationalism does not emerge, leaders (especially those of authoritarian regimes) are often able to tighten their grip on power. Allen found in a recent study that when sanctions promote division in society, this may be to the detriment of 'groups opposing exclusionary regimes' (2007: 1). Leaders can channel available goods to their support whilst leaving opposition groups without the necessary resources to survive. Similarly, opposition movements may be forced to succumb to elite-patronage within the context of scarcity that sanctions create. This can inhibit 'the emergence of a middle class and a civil society' over the long term whilst benefiting elites with access to the black market – a process seen during the sanctions against Haiti (Haass, 1997: 79-80; also Klarreich, 1994).

In a broader sense, they can be detrimental by encouraging the target state to ally itself with the implementer's adversaries and they may provoke aggression, either because they're understood as a sign of weakness or as an act of war (Lindsay, 1986: 168-169). Sanctions are also expensive; a study by the 'Institute for International Economics' found that in 1995, they cost the US economy over \$20 billion and severely affected certain industries (Farmer, 1999).

In recent years ethical and practical concerns have resulted in the development of 'smart sanctions' which aim to affect only the leadership of targeted states. However, even proponents have conceded that these are less effective

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than their 'comprehensive' counterparts. Elliot dubs their record 'disappointing' (2002: 171) whilst Cortright and Lopez write that 'where [the] economic and social impacts have been greatest, political effects have also been most significant' (2002: 8). Some thinkers have attributed limited success to smart sanctions implemented by Macao financial authorities against North Korea, however, scepticism remains (Snyder, 2006). Indeed, whilst it is possible that Kim-Jong Il is bothered by the latest 'smart sanctions', which have banned i-pods and cognac following the testing of a nuclear bomb, they are unlikely to signal a major turning point (BBC, 2007). Sanctions' ineffectiveness and costliness aside, it will now be argued that there are also major ethical problems associated with their use.

## **Sanctions as an Unethical Tool of Statecraft**

Haass informs us that 'sanctions are popular because they offer what appears to be a proportional response to challenges in which the interests at stake are less than vital' (1997: 75). However, numerous thinkers are concerned that sanctions violate certain just war principles and are inconsistent with the Kantian notion that people are an 'ends in themselves'.

The just war tradition attempts to provide a framework which validates just conflicts, whilst at the same time applying limits so as to prevent unrestrained warfare. Pierce writes that the 'just war principles [can]... shed useful moral light on the sanctions case' (1996: 110). The principle of discrimination is highlighted by Walzer as 'the basis of the rules of war' (1992: 136). It 'prohibits directly intended attacks on non-combatants and non-military targets' (NCCB, 1983: 33). Damrosch draws on the principle to assert that sanctions should 'to the extent possible, target perpetrators of violence... and minimize severe adverse consequences on civilians who are not in a position to bring about cessation of wrongful conduct' (1993: 279).

However, Gordon argues that sanctions inevitably deprive 'a whole city or nation of economic resources' through 'international institutions and international pressure'; they are 'the modern version of siege warfare' (1999: 124). In sieges, surrender is achieved 'not by defeat of the enemy army, but by the fearful spectacle of the civilian dead' (Walzer in Gordon, 1999: 124). This 'suffering is not "collateral" damage, but... the primary objective of the siege strategy, or at least the foreseeable and direct result' (Gordon, 1999: 125). In one of the worst cases, UNICEF has pointed to sanctions as responsible for the death of over half a million Iraqi children (1999) leaving Richman to term the situation 'genocide' because it was 'a deliberate policy to destroy the people' (2004). It is usually inconceivable that the implementing states' leaders are not aware of the destruction that sanctions cause (Pierce, 1996: 104). Whilst knowingly killing (even hundreds of thousands of) civilians might be considered morally justified where the survival of one's own nation is at stake, it's difficult to defend such an action when relatively abstract principles such

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as human rights and international law are the issues at hand (Gordon, 1999: 127), however important these may be (see Damrosch 1994: 74-75).

To adhere to the just war tradition, sanctions must also have a 'reasonable prospect of success'. The aim of this criterion is to prevent 'futile' acts of 'mass violence' (Orend, 2005). As noted above, there appears to be substantial evidence that sanctions are rarely (and -according to Hufbauer, Schott and Elliot's study- decreasingly) effective within the context of a globalised world. Indeed, ironically, success currently appears to hold an inverse relationship to the principle of discrimination (Cortright and Lopez, 2002: 8) meaning it is unlikely that sanctions can, at any one time, fulfil all the principles necessary to be considered 'just'.

However, it is not merely the 'just war' perspective that casts doubt on sanctions' legitimacy; deontological ethics also offer an insight into their use. Kant argues that the value of humans is not conditional and therefore they may never be treated merely as a means to an end (1964). Yet sanctions often 'impose suffering on innocent[s]' to achieve non-vital foreign policy goals (Gordon, 1999: 129). Indeed, some thinkers have declared that such non-vital issues offer the only scenarios where they may conceivably have any impact (Pape, 1997; Haass, 1997). Yet if sanctions are deployed in this context, people are 'reduced to nothing more than a means to an end, where that end is something less than the lives of other human beings' thereby contravening Kant's categorical imperative (Gordon, 1999: 129).

Proponents of sanctions have sought to dampen such ethical fears. The argument is made, for example, that where sanctions are used to prevent leaders such as Saddam Hussein and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from developing WMD the end is *precisely* the lives of other human beings; namely 'Kurdish children, Saudi children, Israeli children' and maybe 'American children' (Lopez, 1999: 147). However, this justification appears somewhat fragile when one learns that more people have been killed by sanctions in Iraq alone, than by 'all so called weapons of mass destruction throughout history' (Mueller and Mueller, 1999: 51).

Ethical objections to sanctions have also been criticised by Lopez for condemning an entire foreign policy instrument merely because it is sometimes incorrectly utilised (1999: 144). However, as Lopez himself concedes, 'the idea of smart sanctions' (i.e. those which do not kill innocents) is 'more elegant in conceptualization than application at the present time' (1999: 148). Indeed, it seems almost inevitable that costs will be passed onto civilians, even if they initially hit only elites. Brzoska notes that arms embargos, for example, will shift 'government spending priorities' resulting in an eventual 'reduction in the economic well-being of the general population in the targeted state' (2002: 126). Drezener concludes, 'in short, all sanctions impose costs on innocents' (2003: 108), and

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therefore all face similar ethical problems.

Sanctions, it appears, are inconsistent with certain just war principles (the requirements of 'discrimination' and 'reasonable prospect of success') and they reduce humans to a means to an end, thereby undermining one of Kant's 'categorical imperatives'. Unfortunately, smart sanctions do not appear to offer an obvious route out of these ethical dilemmas. As a result, the question becomes, why do policymakers continue to use sanctions – are they 'fools' as Morgan and Schwebach (1997) suggest, or is there a more complex explanation? It will now be argued that sanctions can be considered an appropriate tool of coercion despite their numerous faults.

## **Sanctions as an Appropriate Tool of Coercion**

Rational policymakers are concerned not just with the effectiveness of foreign policy instruments, but with their associated political, economic and social costs as well. When compared to the alternatives, sanctions may represent the least costly and most appropriate option.

Haass asserts that sanctions should be utilised only if they will do more 'good' than the alternatives, including 'simply doing nothing'. He writes, 'foreign policy is not therapy; its purpose is not to make us feel good but to do good. The same holds for sanctions' (1997: 80). This concern is common amongst academics; namely that sanctions are used predominantly for 'rhetorical posturing' (Gordon, 1999: 142) which enables leaders to 'engage in cheap moralizing' whilst refraining 'from serious engagement' (Weiss, 1999: 500). Perhaps 'doing nothing' rather than hiding behind the ineffective and possibly harmful gesture of sanctions is the preferable option.

However, there can be a good case made for doing something (even if it will be ineffective) if doing nothing will undermine a state's international reputation and imply support for norms such as 'communism, racism, terrorism, or genocide' (Baldwin, 1999: 84; also Lindsay, 1986: 166). As Baldwin argues, using sanctions to signal a standpoint 'is not an alternative to using them as instruments of statecraft; it is statecraft' (1999: 102). 'Doing nothing' may also be unfeasible as far as the domestic electorate is concerned. Jordan notes, with reference to the Iranian hostage crisis: 'the American people [would not] be satisfied for long with meetings at the White House' (in Lindsay, 1986: 170). In short, 'crises erupt and governments have to react' (Mayall, 1984: 632).

Diplomacy is normally seen to offer the most rational option when pursuing foreign policy goals. This is because even if war or sanctions are considered likely to be more effective, the costs associated with them are far higher (de Mesquita, 1981: 183). However, there are circumstances where diplomacy may not be desirable or even feasible.

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For example, it does not offer an answer if the other parties are simply unwilling to talk. It is also questionable whether one should negotiate with a state that holds the world to ransom with WMDs. Similarly, TV images of polite UN talks proceeding with the Hutu extremist government during the Rwandan genocide remain morally repugnant to many. Maintaining traditional diplomatic relations in such crisis scenarios sets worrying precedents and may undermine fundamental global norms.

When 'doing nothing' is not an option then, and diplomacy is not desirable or feasible, one is left with a choice between sanctions (condemned as ineffective and unethical) and war. Weiss asks the question, 'If sanctions are painful and virtually certain to be unsuccessful and armed force will be required eventually, is military intervention not desirable sooner rather than later?' (1999: 506).

Whilst war may, in some cases, provide the ultimate route to 'success', this is not something that can be presumed. With hindsight, for example, the sanctions against Iraq appear to have been relatively successful at containing Saddam Hussein's WMD program (Lopez and Cortright, 2004), and for America at least, they involved nowhere near the economic, human, or political cost of war. The ethical calculations are also not clear cut. Iraq Body Count estimates that over 64,000 civilians have died in the Iraq war – a figure which pales in comparison to the hundreds of thousands that sanctions are thought to have killed – however, there is little sign of stability in Iraq, and fears remain that sectarian violence may incorporate neighbouring states and destabilise the entire region for decades to come (Saikal, 2005). Furthermore, a recent study published in the *Lancet* argues that the actual number of civilians killed during the war is over 655,000 – ten times the estimate of Iraq Body Count (Burnham et. al. 2006). Whilst the ethical criticisms made of sanctions are undeniable, wars are far from a 'clean' alternative, and they hold the potential to become globally destructive. The major conflicts of the twentieth century 'provide scant evidence that initiating a war is a useful undertaking' on any terms (Baldwin, 1999: 93).

The costs of war, economically, politically (at both domestic and international levels) and in human lives can be catastrophic. For this reason, garnering domestic and international support for war is not always possible, even when there might be a compelling ethical argument and a reasonable probability of success. Sanctions therefore provide a relatively 'un-costly' tool through which resolve can be demonstrated; they can help signal hostile intentions to the target state, whilst preparing the domestic audience for the conflict to come. Simultaneously, they can make a valuable (if modest) contribution to 'the preparation of the battlefield' by weakening 'the target government and military' thereby establishing 'strategic advantages' for the implementer in the event of war (Boudreau, 1997: 40).

Sanctions, it has been argued, may sometimes be the least inappropriate tool of coercion. Whilst leaders

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probably know 'that sanctions [are often] unlikely to force compliance or subversion' (Lindsay, 1986: 170), unless more effective and less costly alternatives are available, it does not make sense to remove them from the 'menu' of coercive tools.

## Conclusion

Sanctions increasingly seem to be understood as an appropriate tool for coercion by policymakers; they are used more frequently, and for a wider variety of issues, than ever before. This essay has argued that sanctions face major questions regarding their efficacy and ethical legitimacy. Firstly, they are often ineffective due to targeted leaders' ability to maintain access to resources and because of problems of international cooperation; furthermore, they may be counter-productive. Secondly, sanctions are ethically undermined because they are inconsistent with the just war principles of 'discrimination' and 'reasonable prospect of success'. From a deontological perspective they reduce humans to a 'means to an end'. Smart sanctions currently offer few solutions with regards either to sanctions' (in)effectiveness or the ethical dilemmas presently associated with their use.

Finally, it has been argued that despite their numerous faults, sanctions should remain on the 'menu' of coercive tools. When 'doing nothing' is not an option and diplomacy has broken down, sanctions may provide the most appropriate (or perhaps, least inappropriate) option. They are an important signalling tool and can contribute towards future military actions.

Further research should seek to resolve the ethical and practical difficulties that sanctions face. Simply observing that they 'do not work' does not appear particularly helpful within a context where there may be no better alternatives.

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