

October 2015

## The Fallacy of Nonviolent Economic Sanctions

Andrew Kovach  
*Cleveland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr>



Part of the [International Relations Commons](#)

**How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!**

---

### Recommended Citation

Kovach, Andrew. "The Fallacy of Nonviolent Economic Sanctions." *The Downtown Review*. Vol. 2. Iss. 1 (2015) .

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr/vol2/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Downtown Review by an authorized editor of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact [library.es@csuohio.edu](mailto:library.es@csuohio.edu).

## The Fallacy of Nonviolent Economic Sanctions

In the field of international relations, there has been a growing array of misgivings concerning the effects of economic sanctions—or, to put it better, economic weapons. As former UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali has stated, economic sanctions are a “blunt instrument” that cause harm to defenseless civilians, complicate the work of humanitarian aid organizations, and cause long-lasting damage to a nation’s health (Weiss, 1999, p. 499). Based on contemporary research, it is evident that the coercive power of sanctions is much more ambiguous than previously realized and that their adverse effects on civilians cast this “nonviolent” method in more injurious light.

Regularly viewed as a form of nonviolent action, economic sanctions can be regarded as a powerful form of political coercion by a state, generally referred to as the sender state, against a target state. While sanctions may commonly be viewed as an impassive action against the economy of an opposing state, there are important direct consequences that must be taken into consideration. Earlier studies of peace research and nonviolent tactics often include political and economic sanctions as smart options to create change in an aggressor and to defend a state (Sharp, 1970, p. 92). However, in the post-Cold War era, economic sanctions have been used to such an extensive degree that researchers Cortright and Lopez labelled the 1990s as the “sanctions decade” (Peksen, 2009, p. 59). One result of this increase has been more research into quantitatively understanding the effects sanctions have had and gaining insight into the effectiveness of sanctions.

In peace research, economic sanctions are often seen as the most common option when pursuing nonviolent action, as their implementation does not involve the use of physical violence. Peace advocate Gene Sharp defines nonviolent action as “a sanction and a technique of struggle involving the use of social, economic, and political power, and the matching of forces in conflict” (Sharp, 1973). According to Hufbauer et al., when specifically looking at economic power, the use of sanctions involves financial or trade restrictions used by a state in order to change another nation’s policies in some pre-specified manner (as cited in Drury, 1998, p. 499). Instead of using words or physical weapons, which innately cause harm, economic sanctions are ideally designed to create leadership transformation by depriving target state leaders of necessary resources. As a result of fewer resources, an opposition group will be able to come to power—thus completing the “peaceful” change of power.

However, the keyword in the previous description is *ideally*, as Peksen, who labels this scenario as the “naïve theory of economic sanctions,” purports that economic sanctions more often than not create violence and erode human rights through the removal of resources (2009, p. 61). The orthodox view of sanctions also suggests that targeted governments will yield to the demands of the imposing nation, however, this is also ill-founded with very little empirical data signifying such capitulation (Allen, 2008, p. 916). First, economic sanctions allow elites in the target country to increase citizens’ dependency on their control of scarce resources. An example of this can be seen with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, as U.S. sanctions reinforced allegiance of

political groups to the governing regime. Second, sanctions increase poverty, raise unemployment, and result in poorer health for citizens in the affected nation (2009, p. 62). Third, sanctions may be exploited by the targeted leadership to expand their legitimacy and validate their repression of anti-government groups as exemplified by Cuba's Fidel Castro responding to sanctions by diverting the public's attention away from internal issues. Finally, research has indicated that sanctions increase the likelihood of anti-government activity, which may include an uptick in violent action such as rioting (Allen, 2008, p. 935). It is important to note that the effect of sanctions on violent activity may vary depending on the type of sanction and the system of governance in the target nation, but Allen's study does indeed show a statistically significant positive correlation between sanctions and rioting.

Critically looking at economic sanctions, it appears as though the ends do not justify the means, since sanctions are discrepantly enacted as a nonviolent method but result in domestic violence in the target country. Thus, while these economic weapons attack international trade or finances—and not individuals—malevolent externalities on the targeted society and on civilians must still be considered as being potentially violent. That being said, however, sanctions are often levied with the thought that they are a more effective and humane method than military force. Indeed, many scholars in the field of international studies viewed sanctions with high degrees of confidence by the turn of the twenty-first century (Pape, 1997, p. 91). However, in one of the largest studies of its kind, Hufbauer, et al. found that sanctions are only partially successful in 34 percent of the cases studied (2007, p. 158).

Due to the nature of sanctions attacking broad financial systems or major trade exports, it may be easy to overlook violence in a target state since the sender nations' economic sanctions create havoc that could be attributed to other sources. Also, when sanctions are leveraged by international organizations such as the UN, the sender nation's population is unlikely to be affected, thereby possibly reducing the backlash of attacking a distant country. One result of this phenomenon is that sanctions tend to be a foreign policy tool that is all too often used by governments to appear that they are "doing something" (Rogoff, 2015). Moreover, the research by Peksen and Allen indicates that economic weaponries disproportionately affect civilians, while often shielding those in need from vital economic trade and humanitarian assistance.

There are studies of economic sanctions used hundreds of years prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One popular example is Pericles's Megarian decree in 432 BCE against Megara prior to the Peloponnesian War in ancient Greece (Hufbauer, et al., 2007, p. 9). Interestingly, the language used in playwright Aristophanes' comedy describing the Megarian decree used dramatic and violent terms such as "wrath," "thundered," and "starving" (p. 10). As illustrated by the Megarian decree case, the history of sanctions leading up to World War I typically involved economic weapons being accompanied by warfare or were a foretelling sign of direct physical conflict to come (Barber, 1979, p. 367; Hufbauer, et al., 2007, p. 10). In the past 40 years, however, sanctions have been employed for a more multifaceted foreign policy, especially by the United States (Weiss, 1999, p. 499). For instance, U.S. policy goals have ranged from using

economic boycotts and sanctions to persuade Egypt to cease supporting Yemeni rebels in the 1960s to President Jimmy Carter preventing the Soviet Union's human rights abuses and nuclear weapons proliferation.

Sanctions are commonly wielded in international affairs as a diplomatic tool for the purpose of domestic security; however, they do not always lead to desired outcomes. As Hufbauer et al. describe in their history of the practice of sanctions, the use of this supposedly nonviolent method has not prevented military activities in all instances. Jimmy Carter's embargo and boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics did not avert the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, nor did U.S. sanctions against Saddam Hussein's Iraq prevent U.S. military action in the Persian Gulf (p. 11). Despite being labelled as a nonviolent strategy, it appears that more often than not in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the use of economic sanctions led to the deployment of violent military methods. In fact, Peksen (2009) finds a significant relationship between economic sanctions leading to more human rights abuses, including increases in extra-judicial killings and physical integrity abuses (p. 69).

One key contemporaneous national security example that reflects a failed sanction policy meant to stem weapons production and human rights abuses is the U.S. relationship with Iran. Designating the Islamic Republic as a supporter of terrorism in 1984, initial economic restrictions were implemented by the U.S. soon after the U.S. Embassy attack in 1979 and were expanded under President Reagan in 1987. After attempts of a reconciliation by President Bush four years later, U.S. economic controls increased further as evidence indicated Iran was in the process of developing weapons of mass destruction; a total embargo of Iran would come in 1995 (Preeg, 1999, p. 50). The initial result of the increasingly-bitter relations between the U.S. and Iran was public fervor in Iran against the "great Satan" (Shehadi, 1981, p. 15). Another consequence was the shifting of Iran's trading partners from Western democratic nations to Eastern socialist or non-aligned countries in order to skirt the new trade restrictions (p. 16). Ties between the two would only worsen in the post-9/11 era as Iran was labelled the "Axis of Evil" for its connections with al-Qaeda and supposed expansion of its nuclear weapons program (Zagorin & Klein, 2004). Despite some of the strictest economic sanctions in the world, it appears the outcome has been increased trade with non-western nations and furthering of Iran's hardline, combative approach in the Middle East.

Another unforgettable consequence of Iranian sanctions are the devastating effects to the targeted civilians. Even though Iran has actually become a wealthier country since the first sanctions were imposed, the *Economist* notes that most of these riches have not found their way to poor or middle-class Iranians. Moreover, dramatic declines in economic activity particularly related to the construction trade have had no impact on the ruling class but have led to severe unemployment that has only led to further poverty (Midlarsky, 1988, p. 492). Furthermore, Iran has gone unabated for the greater part of the past 30 years for notorious human rights abuses including degradation of women's rights, detainment of political activists, and repression of minority rights (World Report, 2014). While it may be argued these sanctions have failed to

create meaningful political change within Iran, it may still be too soon to understand the full consequences after voters elected Hassan Rouhani as president in 2013—an apparent mandate for change. Today, some may claim the sanctions to be a success, as they have brought Tehran to the bargaining table on resolving the issue of nuclear weapons development, however, economic sanctions as a policy must be viewed in light of the tremendous time it takes to see any end results.

Sanctions are utilized not only for domestic security purposes, but also to bring about regime change as well, which Hufbauer, et al. find to actually be the most common foreign policy objective (2007, p. 67). Instances involving regime change reached a peak during the Cold War years (1945-1989), as the U.S. and Soviet Union challenged each other by influencing nations primarily in Eastern Europe and Latin America to adopt their respective ideologies. Cuba is an ideal case to examine, as U.S. sanctions against Fidel Castro's communist government have been standing since 1960. During the first three decades of the economic and financial embargo placed on the island nation, relations remained fairly stable as the Soviet Union propped up Cuba with over \$6 billion in economic support. Preeg (1999) notes that this extensive monetary aid was a factor in the USSR's collapse—which may be seen as one positive result of the sanctions from a U.S. perspective (p. 12).

By the start of the 1990s it was evident that extensive reevaluation of the U.S. policy toward Cuba would be necessary in light of the "New World Order." The U.S. Congress took the initiative to do such with the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act, which suggested three options for a new policy toward Cuba: eliminate the embargo, offer a steady relaxation of the embargo with political and economic reforms of Cuba, or strengthen the embargo (Preeg, 1999, p. 13). In the act's findings, the basis for these policy options included Cubans' "yearning for freedom" and "opposition to the Castro government by risking their lives," in addition to noting that Castro upholds a military-commanded economy "that has decreased the well-being of the Cuban people" (Cuban Democracy Act "CDA," 1992). Fatefully, the result was the acceptance of the latter two options with stress placed on the extended embargo that could one day bring about reforms. While the original goal may have been to fit Cuba into the post-Cold War world, the Cuban Democracy Act effectively led to the continuation of the same sanctions that arguably led deprived Cuban citizens to risk their lives for freedom.

Critically looking at the other adopted component of the Cuban Democracy Act, the piecemeal relaxation of the U.S. embargo in return for Cuban governmental reforms, it is important to note the failure of the sanctions to create desired regime change. As previously mentioned, Castro was able to essentially undermine the entire purpose of the sanctions by labelling them as an "imperialistic attempt" by the American government to transgress on the sovereignty of Cuba. As a result, Castro was able to distract attention from internal issues of his communist government to the external peril posed by the sanctions (Peksen, 2009, p. 63). Evidence of Cuba's pushback to U.S. sanctions may be seen in regard to Fidel Castro's long reign as president from 1976 until 2008. In addition, while Castro ended his presidency with

Americans ostensibly opposed to him, several Latin American countries and Canada viewed the communist leader in mixed or favorable terms (Rogoff, 2015). Furthermore, the communist-run government continues to this day after Raúl Castro, Fidel Castro's brother, took over as president. As it stands, U.S. sanctions following the policy recommendations from the Cuban Democracy Act have led to a failure to create peaceful political change.

Based on the previous two examples of Iran and Cuba it appears that, in certain cases at least, economic sanctions as a nonviolent foreign policy tool are far from perfect—for moral reasons and for the devastating effects on civilians. As Allen and Lektzian (2012) detail in their research, traditional logic puts the use of sanctions ahead of the implementation of military forces. In fact, it can be asserted that sanctions are intrinsically a more humane option, as there is no intent to kill innocent civilians. However, this traditional view has begun to shift as a result of the amount of new sanctions imposed throughout the 1990s that have unwittingly victimized innocents and have caused adverse effects on societal necessities such as food, water, sanitation, and medicine (p. 121; Gordon, 2002). Allen's and Lektzian's study helps shed light on just how consequential economic sanctions can be compared to military actions. Major military use is indeed more destructive due to major physical damage caused to public infrastructure and health (p. 129). However, this does not mean sanctions do not have negative consequences. Sanctions have serious damaging effects on health through the unattainability of vital resources that hamper citizens' capacity to maintain normal, healthy lives (p. 132). Although they may cause less structural damage overtime, the negative attributes of sanctions on the targeted nation's civilians, especially on their health, must not be forgotten.

When viewing foreign policy through the scope of nonviolent practice, the moral implications of economic weapons must also be taken into account. As Thomas Weiss interpreted economic sanctions, "Their efficacy is doubtful along with their moral superiority over military force" (1999, p. 499). Since sanctions do undeniably cause some sort of harm, and not just to the targeted elites and their financial systems, this strategy cannot be diplomatically used. Furthermore, sanctions violate the Just War Doctrine as there are no clear divisions by the sender nation between the "combatants and non-combatants" (Allen & Lektzian, 2012, p. 122). If with military force there is credence given to the killing of civilians, it should thus be obligatory for the crafters of economic sanctions to differentiate between those who are innocent and those who are the enemy.

In addition, how can sanctions be accepted practice when their ability to protect the sender nation and cause political change within the target nation are doubtful? In the case of the U.S. placing sanctions on Iran, for instance, potential political change was not fully realized until 2013 with hope of Rouhani's presidency making concessions to the U.S. Also, as shown in the Cuba case, the use of sanctions to inspire an internal uprising by the target country's civilians is a poor policy that shows no consideration for innocent men, women, and children. If a nation is in a position to be carrying out economic sanctions, then perhaps that nation can apply its resources toward diplomacy and international aid. By going about this, it may be possible to create less

harmful, more effective sanctions. In fact, there are already certain United Nation Security Council provisions requiring food and medicine regulations with regard to sanction implementation (Weiss, p. 504). Nevertheless, economic sanctions are a careless policy that degrades living standards while placing the burden to create change on disadvantaged civilians.

Many researchers have put forth ideas and strategies to amend economic sanctions as to perhaps make them more palatable, as was put into use with Security Council provisions. One simple change to standardize the effects of sanctions is to end justification of economic weapons when civilian living standards fall below basic survival levels (Weiss, p. 505). In addition, Weiss asserts that the “codification” of sanctions in human rights law could guarantee civilians their basic rights, in addition to tracking sanctions based on universal standards (p. 506). The result of this could allow for better monitoring of sanctions as well as make their use more regulated, similar to how military action is monitored and regulated by UN security forces and dozens of international non-governmental organizations.

Beyond changes to protect civilian rights, much policy research has outlined general best-uses of sanctions to ensure their effectiveness. It has been generally concluded that economic attacks and political change have a weak correlation, which may be seen in the rarity of civilians over-taking their targeted leadership or the perseverance of decades-long political reigns as seen in the Iran and Cuba examples (Hufbauer et al., 1990, p. 94). As may be exemplified by Cuba and Iran, sanctions tend to work best when they are aimed at allies and trading partners of the sender nation. Allies, who may be politically similar with strong economic ties, are more likely to cause successful change versus being targeted against unfriendly nation-states that have few economic ties (p. 99). Iran, for instance, responded to U.S. sanctions with a pivot away from western trading associates. Likewise, Cuba heavily relied on the Soviet Union until the end of the 1980s for economic support.

As the world becomes ever-more interconnected and globalized, the use of economic sanctions may only become a more readily viable option as it will be easier and quicker to affect another nation’s financial or trade system. At the same time, however, it is certainly possible that civilians will continue to take the brunt of the damage sanctions cause, as the ruling class further isolates itself in a dishearteningly unequal world. U.S. sanctions against Iran and Cuba are just two of dozens of examples of the disappointing results of sanctions. Furthermore, in the Iran and Cuba cases, it is telling that actual change may not be the result of sanctions but the opening up of diplomatic relations seen today by the Obama administration to allow both sides to engage in constructive dialogues. After all, sanctions are destructive and violent actions that do not create peaceful world change.

## References

- Allen, S. H. (2008). The Domestic Political Costs of Economic Sanctions. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 52(6). Retrieved from JSTOR database.
- Allen, S. H., & Lektzian, D. J. (2012). Economic sanctions: A blunt instrument? *Journal of Peace Research*, 50(1). Retrieved from JSTOR database.
- Auxier, R. C. (2008, February 19). Global Views on Castro and Cuba.
- Barber, J. (1979). Economic Sanctions As a Policy Instrument. *International Affairs*, 55(3). Retrieved from JSTOR database.
- Cuban Democracy Act ("CDA"), H.R. 5323, 102d Cong. (1992).
- Drury, A. C. (1998). Revisiting Economic Sanctions Reconsidered. *Journal of Peace Research*, 35(4). Retrieved from JSTOR database.
- Gordon, J. (2002, November). Cool War: Economic sanctions as a weapon of mass destruction. *Harper's Magazine*.
- Hufbauer, G. C., Schott, J. J., & Elliott, K. A. (1990). *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered* (2nd ed., Vol. 1). Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics.
- Hufbauer, G. C., Schott, J. J., Elliott, K. A., & Oegg, B. (2007). *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered* (Vol. 3). Washington, DC: Peter G. Peterson Institute for International Economics.
- Maloney, S. (2014, March 21). Why "Iran Style" Sanctions Worked Against Tehran (And Why They Might Not Succeed with Moscow). Retrieved from The Brookings Institution website: <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/03/21-iran-sanctions-russia-crimea-nuclear>
- Midlarsky, M. I. (1988). Rulers and the Ruled: Patterned Inequality and the Onset of Mass Political Violence. *American Political Science Review*, 82(2).
- Peksen, D. (2009). Better or Worse? The Effect of Economic Sanctions on Human Rights. *Journal of Peace Research*, 46(1). Retrieved from JSTOR database.
- Preeg, E. H. (1999). *Feeling Good or Doing Good with Sanctions*. Washington, DC: The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).
- Rogoff, K. (2015, January 2). Do Economic Sanctions Work? Retrieved from Project Syndicate website: <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/do-economic-sanctions-work-by-kenneth-rogoff-2015-1>
- Sharp, G. (1970). *National Security Through Civilian-Based Defense*. Retrieved from <http://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/NationalSecurityThroughCivilian-BasedDefense-English.pdf>
- Sharp, G. (1973). Correcting Common Misconceptions About Nonviolent Action. In *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Retrieved from <http://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Correcting-Common-Misconceptions.pdf>
- Shehadi, P. (1981). Economic Sanctions and Iranian Trade. *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*. Retrieved from JSTOR database.
- Weiss, T. G. (1999). Sanctions as a Foreign Policy Tool: Weighing Humanitarian Impulses. *Journal of Peace Research*, 36(5). Retrieved from JSTOR database.
- When will it ever end? (2012, August 18). *The Economist*. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/node/21560596>



World Report 2014: Iran. (2014). Retrieved from Human Rights Watch website:  
<http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/iran?page=3>  
Zagorin, A., & Klein, J. (2004, July 16). 9/11 Commission Finds Ties Between al-Qaeda  
and Iran. *Time Magazine*.