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Do Sanctions Work?

by Maxim Worcester

Since the end of the Second World War, international disputes have seldom been carried out without the recourse to sanctions of one sort or another. The imposition of sanctions as an attempt to coerce an adversary without the use of force is nothing new and is probably as old as states themselves. At times the border between sanctions and warfare becomes blurred as it was during the Middle Ages, when sieges of cities rather than pitched battles were the main form of combat.

With the emergence of the modern state, more powerful central Governments were able to use sanctions on a grander scale: Napoleon invoked them in his Continental System to boycott British goods. During the Cold War the West imposed sanctions on the export of high technology to the Soviet Union and her Allies, these sanctions without question helped to win the Cold War, they alone, however, were not the main cause for the fall of Communism, they did however accelerate its downfall. Above all, they took a long time to work.

More recently, in July 2010, President Obama signed into law a series of tougher bilateral sanctions against Iran intending to bolster existing UN sanctions against the regime in Tehran. The overt aim of the sanctions is to force Iran to discontinue its military nuclear programme; the covert wish is to bring about a regime change. The tough sanctions have so far had little effect – China has become Iran's largest trading partner and the German Bundesbank is party to a highly dodgy financial agreement which allows India to pay for Iranian oil without upsetting the US government. A similar picture emerges in Burma; here too sanctions have not

resulted in the regime loosing its grip on the country as once again China ignores the UN imposed sanctions quite openly and countries such as Thailand or Singapore somewhat less openly.

In short, sanctions only work if a critical number of major trading nations stick to the agreements. Rhodesia was only able to continue its white minority regime for years as countries such as South Africa continued to trade with Rhodesia.

The Rhodesian example has a number of lessons relating to the effectiveness of sanctions in the process of regime or system change. Following the Unilateral Declaration of Independence from the UK in November 1965, the Smith Government was confronted both by international sanctions and a growing guerrilla war waged by the black opposition parties ZANU and ZAPU. Support from South Africa and, until 1975 from Portugal, enabled the country to cope with international sanctions and suppress the insurgency. It was only when South African support withered away that Rhodesia was forced to negotiate a settlement and ultimately concede defeat and make way for a democratically elected Government under Abel Muzorewa in April 1979.

This example illustrates three significant points; one, that sanctions take time to work, two that they only work if they are rigorously enforced and three, that internal or external pressure (or force) is required. Internal pressure can take the form of civil disobedience or, as in the case of Rhodesia, guerrilla warfare. Sanctions on there own seem not to work, as we can see in the case of Cuba. A further lesson we can learn from sanctions is that they often do work, but not always in the way one had expected or wished. After all, we did not impose sanctions on Rhodesia in order to end up with the mess the country now finds itself in under the dictator Mugabe.

This observation leads one to question the morality of sanctions. Sanctions are not merely a matter of inconvenience and shortages, but of business failures and unemployment, energy shortfalls, uncontrolled inflation and early death. In the case of the sanctions against Iraq and the highly controversial oil for food programme, child mortality rose alarmingly, the population suffered greatly and the inner circle of power and dubious business men benefitted enormously. UNICEF data suggests that the mortality rate among children under five years more than doubled between 1990 and 1998. Critics maintain that direct victimisation of a population is a violation of the conventional rules even of ordinary warfare, and in this case makes a particularly cruel mockery of repeated assurances that the people of Iraq were not the West's enemy. They might not have been, they were, however, the victims.

Current events in Libya illustrate how ineffective sanctions are when not backed up by more robust measures. In 1996 the US Senate passed the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act which remained in place until September 2006. Sanctions were revoked against Libya following lengthy negotiations between the Libyan government and the West. Mousa Kousa, the Libyan foreign minister and former chief of the countries intelligence service, was instrumental

behind the scenes in guiding Libya from pariah status to a modicum of respectability. Libya's rehabilitation started in the wake of the September 2001 attacks on the US. The Libyan government offered extensive intelligence to the West about the activities of al-Qaida and it was Kousa who was involved in the negotiations that led to Libya agreeing to dismantle its nuclear weapon programme and pay substantial compensation payments for the downing of the Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie in 1988 and the bombing of a French airliner over Niger in the following year.

Some might see this as proof that sanctions can work. In reality the lengthy negotiations which led to the lifting of sanctions were always conducted behind the backdrop of the US air attack on Tripoli in 1986, launched in response to the bombing of a Berlin night club in which US service men were killed. This very clear signal not only forced the Libyan government to negotiate, it also forced Libya to cease funding terrorist organisations and abandon its nuclear weapon programme and the production of chemical warfare material. It can be argued that this agreement would not have been reached had the attack not taken place. The Libyan government knew exactly what would happen if they broke off the negotiations.

When the British Parliament voted overwhelmingly by 557 to 13 votes for the use of force as a response to a humanitarian emergency in March 2011, it did so as it was clear that sanctions would not save the population of Benghazi from the soldiers loyal to the Gaddafi regime. The French government and the US leadership shared this view and launched air attacks on Libya following the passing of resolution 1973 by the UN Security Council. A number of nations abstained, including China, Russia and, surprisingly, Germany.

Germany's abstention came as a surprise to many and can only be understood in the context of domestic political moves by a foreign minister who has forgotten what *Realpolitik* is and was desperate to mollify the mainly pacifist German electorate. Germany's reluctance to resort to the use of force must raise new doubts about its demand for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Those who support the position of the German government point to the successful and largely peaceful revolution in Tunisia and Egypt. They, however, conveniently forget that unlike the Libyan government the governments in both Tunisia and Egypt did not turn their armies on the people, nor did they threaten to slaughter the citizens of Benghazi.

Libya is not the only example which illustrates the inability of sanctions alone to either ensure a regime change or to force a country to comply with the basic rules of democracy. The sanctions against South Africa were half-hearted at best, during that period in South Africa's history, banks and companies from Europe traded and invested in the country. The only real benefit of sanctions was that the governments who had imposed the sanctions could at least say to the public that they were doing all in their powers to change the system. That, it would seem, was also the guiding thought behind the majority of those foreign ministers at the recent G8 meeting in Paris when the proposal for a no fly zone was shot down.

Coming to a conclusion about the effectiveness (or not) of sanctions is rather like trying to visualise an animal by touch alone. Partial knowledge does not add up to dependable generalisations. Sanctions do work, but not always in the way we expected them to. They can be a basis for international cooperation, or a target for feuding within an alliance. It can be easy to impose sanctions, but not so easy to know how or when to lift them. Sanctions can kill and cause wars, just as much as preventing them. It should also be understood that sanctions are not a substitute for policy and that sanctions can hit those citizens in a country one is trying to help. Sanctions can bring untold suffering to the population of a country. Above all, sanctions take time to work, and during that time the suffering of the innocent will increase. It is for this reason that sanctions need to be flanked by a series of measures which can be escalated in order to remain credible and accelerate change. Credibility means that any measures threatened will be undertaken and that these measures will hurt.

It was Osama bin Laden who famously remarked that if people must choose between a weak or a strong horse, they will quite understandably choose the strong horse. For once one has to agree with bin Laden. Sanctions will not work if those trying to impose sanctions are seen as the weak horse.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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