

U.S Sanctions and Trade Embargoes:  
Are They Effective Ways to Accomplish Global Change

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Since the advent of robust international cooperation, trade and commerce have evolved to become major factors in a country's overall wealth and stability. Many countries rely on importing and exporting to maintain their national standard of living. Given this, economic sanctions can be powerful tools. In general, an economic sanction is a penalty applied to a specific group in an attempt to exert control over some area. There are many types of economic sanctions, including trade embargoes. According to Britannica, a trade embargo is defined as "a prohibition on exports to one or more countries". Sanctions and embargoes are not just used to affect the economic sphere; they can also be used to exert pressure on a governing body for military, social, or political issues. According to Rawi Abdelal, "Sanctions are useful when diplomacy is not sufficient but force is too costly" (p.114). The United States, in particular, has applied sanctions to over twenty countries since the 90's. In most cases, the purpose of these sanctions seems to be the destabilization of the target country. Whether or not these have been successful is unclear in many cases. The success or failure of a sanction or embargo depends largely on the power difference between the sanctioning country and the sanctioned, the target goal of the sanction, and the availability of other options for the sanctioned country. For example, If the United States tries to impose an embargo on Russia for a good or service that Russia could easily get from another country, then the embargo would be little more than a publicity move because there is no real power to leverage. With this in mind, I believe that sanctions and trade embargoes can be effective for small scale changes, but are ineffective for larger issues.

One of the countries currently under U.S sanction is North Korea. The U.S first imposed a total embargo on exports in the 1950's. These sanctions have since been tightened and many countries in the U.N have joined the sanctions after the first nuclear testing incident in 2006. The U.S. justifies these sanctions according to North Korea's record of human right's violations and their nuclear programs. To date, the U.S has banned all trade with North Korca, with offenders being faced with the freezing of assets, a waiting period between vessels entering North Korea and entering the U.S of at least 180 days, and a secondary ban for foreign financial institutions working with North Korea being denied patronage from the United States. In spite of the global effort, none of these sanctions have made any lasting measurable effect on North Korea's foreign policy, nuclear program, or governing methods. The most that these sanctions have done is denote displeasure with a sovereign nation and remove possible business partners. In light of this, many relevant parties believe that the sanctions against North Korea to be relatively pointless in terms of enacting actual change.

Another country of note is Russia. The U.S has had a rocky relationship with Russia that could never really be called friendly. At most we could be considered grudging business partners in terms of space exploration and counterterrorism. With a slightly more involved relationship, the sanctions imposed against Russia tend to hold a bit more weight. Like North Korea, however, most - if not all - of the sanctions have yet to be successful. Most of the sanctions seem to be caused by human rights abuses. The most recent of these sanctions are in response to the Russo-Ukrainian War, which started in 2014 and came to a head in 2022. Most of the sanctions involved freezing the U.S assets and banning business exchanges of select members of the Russian government, implementing travel bans, and various other smaller items that affected Russia's ability to obtain and sell crude oil. While Russia was ostensibly open to negotiations

regarding the causal issues, neither the sanctions imposed by the U.S or the other U.N countries made a large difference in solving tensions in the region.

This is not to say that U.S sanctions have never worked. According to the Washington Post, the U.S did see success in its sanctions against the Netherlands in 1949, Sri Lanka in 1965, India in 1967, South Korea in 1976, Taiwan in 1977, El Salvador in 1988, Malawi in 1993, and Guatemala in 1993. While not all of these were technically trade embargoes, most of them involved costing the countries in question a significant percentage of their gross national product. The Netherlands, India, and Malawi sanctions all involved withdrawing aid rather than directly affecting trade, but they were greatly affecting the economy in ways that forced the governments in question to change their ways of governing. The sanctions against Taiwan involved withholding nuclear exports to force them to stop manufacturing nuclear weapons, so that was a trade embargo of sorts. While all of these sanctions are considered successful in fulfilling their associated goals, most of them are against smaller countries during times of upheaval or singular events like keeping South Korea from buying a nuclear plant.

Based on the evidence, it can be concluded that sanctions and trade embargoes have produced mixed results. Economic sanctions imposed by the United States have only seen success when four conditions are met: the country is a smaller power - typically in some kind of upheaval, the United States withholding business has a direct effect on the country's economics, the sanctioned country has no other options, and the loss caused by the sanction are greater than the cost of conceding to the demands outlined in the sanctions. Sanctions tend to be more effective tools for change when directed at smaller entities, when the resulting drop in gross national product is more damaging. They really only work when the effects of the sanctions are more costly to the given entity than giving into the United States' demands, such as in the case of

South Korea, when the loss of trade was more important than losing the singular nuclear plant. Therefore, trying to levy sanctions is going to be more effective against singular entities like corporations or individuals for singular incidents than it will be against large foreign governments or sweeping regime changes.

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