

U.S. Trade Embargoes – Are They Effective Tools to Promote Change?

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This essay is to discuss the concept of U.S. Trade Embargoes and their effectiveness in accomplishing their goals of implementing change in the international arena of sovereign states. What are embargoes? According to an article on Bloomberg News, "Do Sanctions Work? Financial Options to War Explained" by Daniel Flatley and Saleha Mohsin, embargoes or to use another synonymous term, sanctions "are economic penalties designed to hurt a target — a person, a company, a group or an entire country — through restrictions on trade, access to financial assets or the ability to process transactions in U.S. dollars or euros." They also state in their article that "Sanctions that occur between countries that are normally friendly tend to work better than those between countries that have a history of hostilities." They also go on to cite examples such as democratic led countries such as South Africa who faced embargoes back in the 1980's due to their Apartheid policy were much more affected due to the hardships inflicted on population of that country which led to political discontent and change in regimes through the electoral process. Sanctions against countries with autocratic regimes are much less effective since the dictators in power do not care if the populations they governed suffer due to international trade being severely restricted. They also can have the opposite reaction by accelerating what they are trying to prevent, an actual war of combatants which history gives us examples of.

The first recorded use of a trade embargo was by Athens in 432 B.C.E. Pericles and the Athenian Assembly passed the “Megarian Decree” to punish the fellow Greek city-state of Megara for cultivating land that was dedicated to the god Demeter as well as killing an Athenian official messenger. They forbade Megara from sending merchants to the acropolis and excluded their ships from entering the harbors of the Delian League that was headed by Athens. This led to a tragedy of errors since Megara’s ally Sparta came to her aid and the result was the Peloponnesian War.

The United States under President Jefferson used the Embargo Act of 1807 to stop Great Britain who being at war with Napoleonic France was capturing sailors from U.S. ships and impressing them for service on H.M.S vessels. All trade was restricted but it harmed the U.S. substantially more since our fledging country was dependent on international trade and this led to a downturn in the economy at that time. The embargo failed and eventually led to the War of 1812.

Since then, the United States has used embargoes against Cuba, North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. The trade restrictions against these countries have not been much of a deterrent since it is not an absolute sanction imposed by the rest of the world and they can trade with other countries who do not share the concerns or viewpoints of American policy makers. Angelo M. Codevilla, from the Hoover Institute, wrote an article, “Do Economic Sanctions Work?” discussing failure of this policy in relation

to Iraq and North Korea and he argues that it has had the opposite effect. He lists examples of how Iraq, Iran, and North Korea work around the sanctions through oppression of their own people or trading with countries such as China and Russia. The quote below from his article provides an excellent summary of the futility of sanctions.

“So long as a government can transform goods available elsewhere into the goods of which the sanctions would deprive it, and so long as governments outside the sanction’s regime buy or sell it the things that the sanction regime proscribes, there is no reason why it should do what it does not want to do. Why then does the U.S. government persist in using economic sanctions that it knows are inherently incapable of achieving the intended objective?

Economic sanctions compromise between doing whatever it takes to achieve a given objective, and doing nothing, by doing something half-heartedly. Like much of the rest of U.S. national security policy, economic sanctions are self-stroking pretense.”

I would also like to add personal discussions that I was an observant and in one a participate in. Back in the late 1990’s I was taking a Chinese history course under Professor Hawkins at William Rainey Harper College, and the subject of the Great Wall of China came up. He made the statement that barriers such as this one was ineffective and did not prove to be a deterrent for the Mongol tribes who conquered China. The Great Wall of China in a way represents embargoes since it tried to regulate relations between China and the barbarians beyond its gates and it is a now a symbol of that failed purpose. The Mongols were able to circumvent the Wall by bribing the people who manned the towers and turrets. Another discussion

I had that emphasizes the above was when a German forwarder agent of a company I once worked for came to our office before the 2nd Gulf War when there was political discussion about sanctions and avoiding war. I asked him about his opinion on the sanctions. He informed me that they exported to Turkey but after that he stated they probably bypass the sanctions and deliver to Iraq. I made a reply that I guess sanctions do not work and we are now going to war which ended up being a prophetic statement. Hopefully we will not see the same result in the current world situation whereby sanctions under the leadership of the United States and the European Union are being targeted against Russia, a nuclear-armed country, for its invasion of Ukraine and the reported war crimes associated with it. We are still waiting for the outcome of this policy a year later with no sign of cessation of hostilities by the Russian military which is being assisted by nuclear-aspirant Iran, nuclear-capable North Korea and our global competitor, China. Two of these nations, Iran, and North Korea, have had long-standing sanctions imposed on them by the United States without much success other than contributing to the starvation and economic hardships of the populations who are powerless to overthrow the autocratic regimes they find themselves under. What are the alternatives? I am not certain but instead of relying on foreign policy tools that do not work it would be prudent to use our resources to devise better ways in dealing with regimes that do

not have the International Community or their oppressed populations best interests at heart.

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