

## Rethinking sanctions

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SINGAPORE • Today, the United Nations Security Council has more sanctions regimes in place than at any time in its history. During the 1990s, the maximum was eight; in the 2000s, the peak rose to 12; now, it stands at 16. And these totals do not include sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States. Judging by this escalation, one might conclude that sanctions have proved a remarkably effective tool in promoting international peace and security. Unfortunately, that is far from being the case.

In fact, academic studies suggest that sanctions have had limited success. Professor Thomas Biersteker of the Graduate Institute in Geneva estimates that sanctions are effective only about 20 per cent of the time. According to Oxford University's Professor Adam Roberts, "there are very few cases where you can definitely identify sanctions as having had a success, except sometimes in combination with other factors". For example, while US and EU sanctions on Myanmar may have contributed to the country's decision to open up its economy and engage in gradual political reform, fear of becoming overly reliant on China may have been a bigger consideration.

But the potential problems with sanctions regimes extend far beyond ineffectiveness. There is also evidence that sanctions can be counterproductive, such as when targeted regimes enrich themselves by controlling black markets in prohibited goods. In Haiti, to take just one example, the military regime facilitated the trade of black-market oil across its border with the Dominican Republic during the oil embargo on the country in 1993 and 1994.

The risks intensify when the targeted country is in a strong position to retaliate because affected constituencies can turn against their leaders for imposing the sanctions. When the US and the EU imposed sanctions on Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea, Russia retaliated by banning food imports from Western Europe, spurring farmers in Brussels and elsewhere to protest against falling prices.



The UN Security Council has 16 sanctions regimes in place, more than at any time in its history. But academic studies suggest that sanctions have had limited success, and the potential problems extend far beyond ineffectiveness. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Even when sanctions are not having the intended impact, however, they often remain in place. One reason is that, once sanctions have been adopted, the five permanent members of the

UN Security Council can "reverse veto" attempts to lift them. Thus, although sanctions regimes are subject to periodic review, this means little as long as at least one permanent member is committed to maintaining them.

This occurred with the US-backed sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s. The sanctions had serious consequences not just for Saddam Hussein and his regime, against whom they were aimed, but also - and more important - for huge numbers of innocent people. Professor Joy Gordon of Loyola University in Chicago has estimated that the sanctions led to 670,000 to 880,000 excess child deaths.

To be sure, the international community, recognising the suffering that sanctions caused in Iraq, has moved towards targeted or "smart" sanctions. But it remains unclear whether today's targeted sanctions are actually more effective than the comprehensive sanctions of the past. As Prof Gordon has pointed out, black-market trade can still undermine arms and oil embargoes. Moreover, sanctions targeting specific industries can damage the wider economy in ways that hurt the livelihoods and well-being of ordinary citizens, though those consequences are often overlooked.

Sanctions targeting specific individuals, such as asset freezes and travel bans, do better at avoiding such broad collateral damage. But innocent people can inadvertently appear on these lists, though the process of identifying targets has improved in response to litigation brought by those affected.

Of course, sanctions do serve some purpose. As Professor Michael Doyle of Columbia University puts it, "sanctions can be justified if the alternatives of inaction or armed force are worse, which they sometimes are. Inaction might involve tolerating a human rights abuse or... engaging in purely verbal criticism ('cheap talk'). Armed force is both disproportionate to some abuses and often more costly in human and material terms".

The problem arises when leaders depend excessively on sanctions. Harvard's Professor John Ruggie frames the issue succinctly: "Sanctions are an instrument of coercive diplomacy - except that policymakers have forgotten about the diplomacy part." Indeed, it often seems that leaders, unwilling or unable to put in the time to pursue genuine political engagement, use sanctions as a kind of shortcut.

As Harvard's Professor Kenneth Rogoff has noted: "The effects of sanctions are often fairly disappointing - so much so that many scholars have concluded that such measures often are imposed so that governments can appear to domestic audiences to be 'doing something'."

That was certainly the case with the severe sanctions imposed by the US on Cuba, which were both cheap and ineffective (in fact, they may have delayed reforms).

Unfortunately, getting sanctions right has generally been a less compelling goal than getting sanctions adopted. But, given the disputed impact of sanctions, a

new approach is needed. After all, public policy should be guided by evidence, not intuition and emotion. And the evidence indicates that, in order to achieve success and avoid unintended consequences, carefully calibrated sanctions must be pursued in tandem with political engagement.

Imposing sanctions may feel good. But if they are actually to do good, we must refine how they are used.

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

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