

POLICY UPDATE

Under Pressure

BY TIM SABLİK

Economic sanctions, such as trade embargoes, have a long history as a tool of foreign policy. In the aftermath of World War I, economic sanctions were increasingly considered an alternative to war. World leaders hoped that placing economic pressure on nations by withholding access to goods or finances would allow individual countries or groups like the League of Nations (and later the United Nations) to resolve conflicts without bloodshed. Indeed, Woodrow Wilson optimistically remarked in 1919, “Apply this economic, peaceful, silent, deadly remedy and there will be no need for force.”

Economic sanctions did not end armed conflict among nations. Nevertheless, they have been used by individual countries and coalitions to apply pressure short of military force and to demand anything from humanitarian reform to complete regime change. The United States has engaged in sanctions more than any other nation, over 100 times in the last century, according to data from the Peterson Institute for International Economics. Some U.S. sanctions have fallen short of the mark, such as the long-standing embargo against Cuba. In other cases, the government declared success and lifted sanctions, such as following the collapse of apartheid in South Africa after the United States and other nations imposed sanctions in the 1980s.

Most recently, the United States lifted restrictions against investment and trade with Myanmar, also known as Burma. Myanmar has been the subject of international scrutiny and sanctions since 1990, when its military suppressed democratic elections and imprisoned opposition party members, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. In 2003, President George W. Bush signed into law a blanket ban on the importation of goods from Myanmar to put additional financial pressure on the nation’s military leaders to institute democratic reform. In November 2010, Myanmar held its first election since 1990, and in December 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited the country, meeting with political leaders and signaling a willingness to ease sanctions in response to more democratic reform. The next spring, Suu Kyi and several members of her party won election to Parliament, and Myanmar freed hundreds of political prisoners. The United States lifted most of its import restrictions in November 2012, just before President Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to visit the country.

On the surface, the sanctions against Myanmar appear to have been at least partly successful. But how successful are economic sanctions generally, and how do social scientists measure their success? Gary Hufbauer, Jeffrey Schott, Kimberly Elliot, and Barbara Oegg of the Peterson Institute

sought to answer that question in their book *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*, a comprehensive study of sanction cases over the last century, updated in 2008.

“We would say in 25 to 30 percent of cases, there has been a resolution which we classified as successful,” says Hufbauer. “Some people would say that’s low, but diplomacy seeks a lot of objectives and they’re not always achieved. So I think it is rather good for diplomacy.”

Hufbauer says they looked at whether the stated goals of the sanctions were achieved and what role sanctions specifically played in achieving those goals. Determining the influence of sanctions on final outcomes is open to some interpretation, however. Robert Pape, a political science professor at the University of Chicago, has disputed many of the cases deemed successes by the Peterson study. He argued that the true success rate is actually lower than 5 percent, painting a much less optimistic picture.

“Pervasive nationalism often makes states and societies willing to endure considerable punishment rather than abandon what are seen as the interests of the nation,” wrote Pape. “Even when ... ruling elites are unpopular, they can still often protect themselves and their supporters by shifting the economic burden of sanctions onto opponents or disenfranchised groups.”

Because of this and other factors, many critics have argued that sanctions can actually slow the pace of regime change. Hufbauer agrees that sanctions can reinforce the power of regimes that already have a large degree of control over the country. The sanctions that tend to be more successful, he says, are ones with more modest goals.

In the case of Myanmar, Hufbauer says that the Obama administration’s willingness to remove sanctions in exchange for reforms short of regime change led to success.

“It was the withdrawal of the sanctions, the carrot aspect, which was successful,” he says. “I would score it as success in a modest goal case. That’s progress in this business.”

Ultimately, it is difficult to say for certain whether the import sanctions (which the Peterson Institute estimated affected 1.7 percent of Myanmar’s gross national product) were the primary catalyst for change. It is also unclear whether the reforms will last. Although Myanmar’s government has released many prisoners, opponents claim that several hundred political prisoners are still incarcerated. In March, Myanmar declared martial law in four townships in response to sectarian violence between Muslim and Buddhist groups that began late in 2012. Additionally, reports of military strikes against rebels earlier in the year have also contributed to doubts about Myanmar’s commitment to reform.

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