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Diplomatic Sanctions as a U.S. Foreign Policy Tool: Helpful or Harmful?

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Advocates of diplomatic engagement with states of concern argue that talking to both allies and adversaries is essential for advancing U.S. foreign policy interests. President Obama has repeatedly expressed the view that the United States "should be willing to initiate diplomacy as a mechanism to achieve our national security goals" (Congressional Quarterly Transcripts Wire 2009). Critics of this approach argue that engagement with these regimes is tantamount to appeasement and signals acceptance of behavior that ought to be condemned. In their view, little can be gained by talking to these states. Thus, diplomatic sanctions are seen as a low-cost means of isolating and delegitimizing regimes. This perspective, however, fails to recognize that maintaining diplomatic sanctions may actually entail a number of substantial costs to the United States and may even undermine economic sanctions' effectiveness.

Seeking to weigh in on this debate, my doctoral dissertation focuses on two central questions: (1) What are the effects of diplomatic sanctions as a foreign policy tool? and (2) Do diplomatic sanctions increase or decrease the likelihood of target state compliance with U.S. demands? I develop and test a new diplomacy-based theory of sanction efficacy focused on the role of information, communication, and diplomatic ties. A more thorough analysis of the costs of keeping diplomatic sanctions in place is essential for crafting and evaluating U.S. policies with regard to states of concern, such as decisions about the appropriate level of engagement with Iran, re-institution of the U.S. ambassador to Syria, or engagement with the leadership in Sudan.

THE ARGUMENT

Dominant explanations for sanctions' effectiveness in the literature tend to focus on the level of costs imposed, sender state commitment, severity of demands, conflict expectations, and target state attributes (e.g., regime type, health, and stability). My new diplomacy-based theory improves upon the previous sanctions literature in two ways. First, whereas previous studies of sanctions have tended to focus on economic sanctions alone, my dissertation develops a more nuanced understanding of sanctions' success and failure through an analysis of both economic and diplomatic sanctions. This broader approach is important, because the United States has employed diplomatic sanctions in conjunction with approximately 30% of its economic sanctions episodes. Second, while the role of information and communication has been integral to theories related to bargaining, coercion, war onset, and mediation, these variables have not been comprehensively examined in the literature.

My new theory emphasizes the role of information, communication, and diplomatic representation. First, I hypothesize that diplomatic sanctions and disengagement result in unintended consequences, including a loss of valuable intelligence, increased difficulty of communication, and reduced capabilities for public diplomacy in the target state. Second, I hypothesize that when the United States is more diplomatically engaged with the target state, economic sanctions are more likely to be effective in getting the target state to comply with U.S. demands. There are a number of reasons to expect that information and communication between the sender and target state would affect the likelihood of compliance in sanctions episodes.

First, the bargaining and coercive diplomacy literature suggests that reducing information and impeding communication may undermine the ability of the sender to effectively coerce the target state (Fearon 1995, 379–414; George 1991, 4).[1] Second, the sender's lack of information about the target state may also make it more difficult to craft well-calibrated sanctions policies. Imposing effective sanctions requires knowledge of specific target state

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vulnerabilities that allow the sender to tailor sanctions in a way that is most likely to produce target state cooperation. Diplomatic sanctions may make the sender less equipped to identify particular groups, businesses, or leaders to target. Third, the absence of sender state personnel on the ground reduces the quality of the sender's intelligence and may make it difficult to gauge the target's reaction to sanctions and assess their impact. Fourth, reduced communication between the sender and target state resulting from diplomatic sanctions may hinder the sender's ability to clearly convey demands to the target state, ensuring that the target state understands what it must do to have sanctions removed.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Quantitative Analysis. The dissertation includes a medium-n quantitative analysis of U.S. sanctions episodes from 1945 through 2002 using the Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott economic sanctions database, along with new self-collected data on diplomatic sanctions (Hufbauer et al. 2007).[2] A model is developed to test the hypothesis that the presence of diplomatic sanctions and an increase in diplomatic sanction level in economic sanctions episodes will lower the likelihood of success in sanctions episodes. The dependent variable is the outcome of the sanctions episode, characterized by the degree to which the target state complies with the sender's demands. First, using basic summary statistics, I draw some general conclusions about determinants of sanctions' effectiveness. Second, using a logit model, I assess whether or not diplomatic sanctions impact the effectiveness of economic sanctions while controlling for a number of other variables associated with the alternative theories of effectiveness.

Qualitative Analysis. I selected cases to allow for both within- and across-case variation in the explanatory variables, as well as cases with variation in terms of outcomes and the type of demands being made. The cases demonstrate the variation in diplomatic engagement and gauge whether such variation contributed to enhancing or undermining compliance with demands. The primary purpose of the case studies is to unpack the causal mechanisms behind the theory and examine the hypothesis that U.S. policies based on diplomatic sanctions and isolation of the target state are likely to undermine U.S. intelligence efforts, reduce U.S. influence in the target state, enhance communication difficulties, and undermine sanctions' effectiveness. I consider two longitudinal case studies: Sudan (1989–2009) and Libya (1972–2009), as well as a series of shorter case studies in an effort to bolster the theory's broader applicability.

FINDINGS

The work conducted thus far indicates clear support for the new diplomacy-based theory of sanctions' effectiveness. The statistical analysis reveals that imposing or increasing diplomatic sanctions reduces the likelihood of economic sanction success. Using the CLARIFY software package in Stata, I hold other explanatory variables constant at their means and find that an increase in the level of diplomatic sanctions from a minimum value of 0 (no diplomatic sanction) to a maximum value of 4 (embassy closure) increases the probability of failure for economic sanctions from 42% to 73% (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2001; King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000, 347–61).

The Sudan case study, which consists of four sub-cases, lends significant support to the theory by confirming that diplomatic sanctions reduce U.S. information collection and capacity for communication with the target state and impact target state compliance with demands related to terrorism, the humanitarian situation, and the ongoing civil war. The Sudan sub-cases examined are: (1) June 1989 through August 1993: constructive engagement; (2) August 1993 through February 1996: initial disengagement; (3) February 1996 (post-embassy closure) through 1999: full disengagement and isolation; and (4) 2000 to the present: cooperative counterterrorism and renewed engagement. The strongest support for the theory is found in the third and fourth sub-cases, but the two other sub-cases yield low to moderate support as well.[3]

SUMMER RESEARCH AGENDA

While in residence at the APSA Centennial Center as a Visiting Scholar this summer, I supplemented my research with interviews and informal conversations with a number of former and current policy officials and experts in the Washington, DC, area, including individuals at the State Department, the Treasury Department, the intelligence community, and think tanks. I met with individuals with direct knowledge of both of my case studies, as well as officials with expertise in sanctions. ■

NOTES

1. This general argument is not unique and can be found in literature related to coercive diplomacy and war onset, but it has not been applied to the study of sanctions. Alexander George (1991) points out that signaling, bargaining, and negotiating play significant roles in coercive diplomacy, and that there needs to be effective communication between parties both verbally and through action, as well as coordination, to make coercive diplomacy effective. Similarly, Fearon (1995) provides a rationalist explanation for why wars occur by showing why states may be unable to find mutually acceptable outcomes that both states would prefer to war. Fearon argues this inability is due to incentives of both sides to misrepresent information and to the existence of private information.

2. The main resources used were the State Department's online databases, "Chiefs of Mission by Country 1778–2005" (http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/po/com/index.htm) and "Background Notes" on individual countries (http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/). LexisNexis searches and other major news searches were used to obtain more information on individual cases.

3. For more on the Sudan case study, see Maller (2010).

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