

Overview: “Five Lessons from a Sanctions Practitioner”

Adapted from Peter Harrell

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Economic sanctions, the steps a government takes to prohibit certain types of economic activities with a foreign country, company, or individual, have become a preeminent tool of U.S. foreign policy. They are used to combat threats ranging from nuclear proliferation in Iran or North Korea to civil strife and mass atrocities in Central Africa. In past decades, sanctions were typically “comprehensive,” in which the United States would ban nearly all trade and economic activity with an adversary. Today, most U.S. sanctions programs are “targeted,” in which the U.S. will freeze the assets of specific, named individuals and companies overseas and ban U.S. citizens and companies from doing most business with them without discontinuing trade with the countries they are located.

Done right, sanctions can deter rogue states and rogue leaders from breaking global rules. But when executed poorly, sanctions can be little more than a symbolic tool with little practical impact and, in the worst cases, can embolden the target to continue the negative activity.

“By keeping these five lessons in mind, both activists and government policymakers can maximize the odds that sanctions actually achieve their intended effect.”

-Peter Harrell

The 5 Key Lessons for Getting Sanctions Right:

1. **You need to mean it.** “Half-measure” economic sanctions are rarely effective. For sanctions to work, they must be enforced aggressively and cut off enough business and other economic activity in order that the ultimate target—a regime, armed group, etc.—feels the impact.
2. **You need to get your allies on board.** The most effective sanctions are multilateral, where the pressure is broadly applied by all the countries that have important economic and trading relationships with the sanctions target. The U.S. financial system’s preeminence, however, does give U.S. officials significant unilateral leverage and can allow for alternative avenues to create multilateral engagement.
3. **You need to pair pressure with a diplomatic track.** Sanctions can cut off a government’s sources of revenue and prod a government to the negotiating table, but without an effective negotiating track, they are essentially futile.
4. **You need to keep the lines of communication open and continue humanitarian support.** Sanctions are designed to target rogue governments, warlords, and other illicit groups. But the reality is that a tough sanctions regime, whether targeted or comprehensive may unintentionally halt legitimate, beneficial business and humanitarian relief programs. U.S. policymakers need to take the initiative to mitigate these impacts.
5. **Finally, you have to have patience.** Sanctions take time to implement. Economic pain typically needs to build before a sanctions target is willing to offer concessions. If sanctions are rigorously evaluated and regularly adjusted in response to evolving circumstances, policymakers can ensure they don’t become part of a stale, outdated policy.