

Askari, Hossein G., John Forrer, Hildy Teege & Jiawen Yang.
Case Studies of U.S. Economic Sanctions, the Chinese, Cuban, and
***Iranian Experience.* Westport, CT.: Praeger, 2003. 304pp**

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Over the past decades, economic sanctions have become an increasingly popular instrument of foreign policy (not only) in the US, for both statesmen and in the eyes of the public. Frequently, economic sanctions have become an almost standard response in an international dispute. Given America's economic dominance, economic sanctions are almost universally applicable and carry the impression that they come with little or no immediate cost to the US. What is more, there remains a widely held belief that economic sanctions, if properly implemented and enforced, are generally effective.

What is surprising, however, is that given the importance of economic sanctions in international politics, they remain a rather under-studied field in the discipline of International Relations as well as in the field of US Foreign Policy Analysis. Hence, Askari et al. deserve major credit not just for directing our attention to this topic, but for systematically analysing the economic effect of US economic sanctions vis-à-vis China, Cuba, and Iran.

Case Studies of U.S. Economic Sanctions represents an intermediary step in a larger, ongoing research project on economic sanctions by the authors. As Askari et al. point out, this particular volume builds on an earlier study by the same authors, who intend to follow up the present work with a third volume (pp.1, 266f).

Some sections include minor irritations (e.g. conversion of gallons to litres appears incorrect on p.176), unhelpful generalisations (e.g. "average American" on pp.172, 174), implicit comments (e.g. p.171: it should be clearly stated if and why the authors believes that certain individuals do not qualify as experts on Iran, rather than implying critique by using quotation marks), and some imprecision (e.g. footnote 4 on p.178). More serious might be the occasional diversion from the actual topic of the volume, either by the at least debatable remark that in 2003, Iran was America's "global enemy number one" (p.172) or the equally problematic argument that already during the Cold War, Iran "replaced the Soviet Union as America's main nemesis" (p.173). However, these side arguments are only a minor distraction from an otherwise analytically very strong chapter on Iran. This chapter in particular offers considerable insight into US economic sanctions, not the least because the author is willing to go beyond a strictly economic analysis to include broader, political aspects.

In fact, the otherwise almost complete focus of the book on the economic angle is probably its major limitation. To be sure, already the book's title makes it perfectly clear what the analytical focus of the study is. Nevertheless, some sections in the introduction, conclusion, and in particular in chapter 4 on Iran

indicate how useful it might be to broaden the analytical scope to include non-economic aspects of economic sanctions.

At the outset, Askari et al. develop an extremely useful set of categories for economic sanctions: Subdividing economic sanctions into “purposeful,” “palliative,” “punitive,” and “partisan,” they lay the groundwork for a better understanding as well as systematisation of purpose and intention of economic sanctions. Although these categories are only sketched out in the Introduction, it becomes clear how important non-economic aspects are for understanding which type of economic sanction is chosen.

While this analytical framework of categories remains somewhat under-utilised, the authors focus instead on analysing economic sanctions from a decidedly economic perspective. One consequence of this is that each chapter begins with a fairly detailed description of the particular target country’s economy. While the intention of the authors is clear – to provide the economic background to evaluate the economic impact of American sanctions – the information is sometimes not integrated well enough in the overall analysis to demonstrate cause and effect. Moreover, major sections are very general and provide information that can easily be obtained from other sources.

The second consequence of the consciously economic perspective chosen by Askari et al. is their primary reliance on quantifiable economic data to advance their arguments. For example, when analysing the impact of economic sanctions on the US, this is done by essentially equating “cost” with “economic costs” for American business. While this is certainly an immensely important aspect of economic sanctions, the authors themselves indicate the relevance of other kinds of costs, especially in the conclusion.

Moreover, a broadening of the project’s methodology to include non-economic data in a more systematic fashion, e.g. the analysis of news media, opinion polls, or the inclusion of interviews with political decision-makers etc., might shed additional light on the immensely important topic of economic sanctions.

That being said, it needs to be emphasised that this study, as it is, constitutes a cohesive, and within its chosen boundaries, a very comprehensive study of a key aspect of US foreign policy. This detailed and systematic analysis offers significant insight into US sanctions and as such is a substantial and welcome contribution to the literature.