Sanctions are now the preferred economic weapon that the United States uses to pressure, discipline and coerce enemies and even allies. Sanctions restrict targeted states from importing, exporting and receiving investments; they prohibit US corporations and banks from dealing with those countries, and they limit the economic activities of individuals in sanctioned countries. The U.S. began using sanctions widely during the Cold War and their deployment expanded greatly after its end. Sanctions have become a powerful tool in the US foreign policy arsenal, a weapon to alter the behavior of governments, bring about regime change or simply punish a state and its people. Today the US is an “empire of sanctions,” as well as an “empire of bases.” Several dozen countries are subject to US sanctions as are many individual political figures and business people and the list appears to expand daily. With growing opposition to direct US military intervention, sanctions are presented as a “more peaceful” form of coercion. Yet, they seldom change the policies of targeted countries and individuals even as they severely harm the civilian population.

The syllabus introduces general debates about the forms, legality, effectiveness and ethical or unethical character of economic sanctions. It explores a variety of case studies, past and present, from the early Cold War sanctioning of Russia, Eastern Europe, China and Cuba, to the post-Cold War targeting of Iraq, Iran and more recently Venezuela and once again Russia and China. It looks as well at cases where non-state actors have sought to have sanctions imposed—against apartheid South Africa and BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement against Israel. The syllabus draws material from a variety of disciplines—history, political science, and law among others, and from the rich journalism on sanctions. It combines analyses and first person experiences, written sources as well as videos. The syllabus seeks to educate, but it also wants to promote activism around this dangerous and counterproductive weapon of the U.S. Thus, it concludes with discussions of blowback from US sanctions coming from abroad and the growing movement against the unchecked use of US sanctions by the United States within both Congress and civil society.

The materials for each week range from short newspaper articles and web posts to academic analyses and interviews. Some weeks have videos and films. All materials assigned are available on the web. We have also suggested supplementary materials; some of these are freely available on the web; others require access through a university or college library.
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Part I. What are sanctions and how should we study them

Week 1. What are Sanctions and how prevalent are they?

This week offers an overview of the past century of sanctions and a snapshot of current sanctions imposed by the US, the UN and the EU. It explores how to define sanctions and the various forms they take: economic and financial, general and targeted/smart, primary and secondary. It compares sanctions to tariffs, asking if these are similar or different ways of trying to shape another state’s behavior. Finally, we look at whether sanctions are an alternative to war or war by other means.

_How prevalent are sanctions? A brief history and overview_


- Current European Union sanctions, [https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/#/main](https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/#/main)


_Defining sanctions_


_Tariffs and sanctions_


_Are sanctions war or an alternative to war?_

Week 2. Are Sanctions legal?

This week explores the legal bases on which US and UN sanctions rest. It listens to international lawyers who argue the unilateral coercive measures, i.e. sanctions imposed by a single state such as the US, are illegal. We examine the process by which US Presidents can decide upon and impose sanctions and the insignificant Congressional role in shaping this ever more frequently used tool to shape the behavior of foreign governments. Finally, we examine the interactions of UN sanctions and unilateral ones, above all those of the US and EU ones.

**US sanctions and US law**

- Brian O'Toole and Samantha Sultoon, “Sanctions explained: How a foreign policy problem becomes a sanctions program,” [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/feature/sanctions-explained-how-a-foreign-policy-problem-becomes-a-sanctions-program/](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/feature/sanctions-explained-how-a-foreign-policy-problem-becomes-a-sanctions-program/)

**Sanctions and international law**


**UN sanctions**

Secondary Sanctions


Week 3. Are sanctions effective? Are they ethical?

This week will look at the lively debate about what sanctions are supposed to achieve, according to those who advocate them, and whether they in fact do so. Do they change the political behavior of sanctioned states? Destabilize them? Lead to regime change? And at what cost in terms of political repression and humanitarian consequences for health, education and mortality? Spoiler alert: even those who advocate sanctions most strongly, admit that sanctions have achieved their political aims in at most one-third of the cases where they were imposed.

Do general trade sanctions change the political behavior of targeted states?


Are targeted sanctions more effective and ethical?

Part II. Sanctions and warfare, hot and cold

Week 4. Economic warfare in first half of twentieth century

There are a variety of ways in which countries can wage economic warfare; these include not only sanctions, but also blockades and sieges. Sometimes these are used in an effort to avert war, sometimes to stop a war in which the sanctioning countries or international organization are not directly involved, and sometimes they are an additional weapon deployed by states at war with one another. This week looks at examples of each of these in the period from World War I through World War II. They show that none of these forms of economic warfare prevented, shortened or stopped wars, however much damage they did to civilian populations.

**Allied blockade of Germany in World War I**


**The German siege of Leningrad in World War II**

- The Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1944
  [http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/leningrad.htm](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/leningrad.htm)
- “872 Days in Hell: 38 Chilling Photos of the Siege of Leningrad,”
  [https://allthatsinteresting.com/siege-of-leningrad](https://allthatsinteresting.com/siege-of-leningrad)

**The Failure of Sanctions to prevent or stop wars**

  [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592290802096257?casa_token=P82BXSLz2R0AAAAA%3AYy-3D0N_z8ljIky8Eb2NKfkdGScZxZi_1rvf_h3WiGiwz0N7KVGO7m5MajKw0HS8lQQ5ab6yTUBSV](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592290802096257?casa_token=P82BXSLz2R0AAAAA%3AYy-3D0N_z8ljIky8Eb2NKfkdGScZxZi_1rvf_h3WiGiwz0N7KVGO7m5MajKw0HS8lQQ5ab6yTUBSV)
- Jeffrey Record, “Japan’s Decision to go to War in 1941: Some Enduring Lessons,” Strategic Studies Institute, 2009, pp. i-ix, 12-23, 46-51.

Week 5. Sanctioning Communism in the Cold War

Economic warfare was a key part of how the United States waged the Cold War from the late 1940s until 1989. The readings explore why the US government prohibited the sale of strategic/militarily useful goods to the Soviet Union, the Communist States of Eastern Europe and the People’s Republic of China and at various times it pushed for a prohibition of all trade with these states. It examines how the US sought to mobilize, pressure or coerce its Western European allies and Japan to support
these American embargo policies via CoCom, the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls. Despite America’s hegemonic position economically and militarily, it had only limited ability to get its Allies to comply and as was so often the case, the embargos had only limited impact on Soviet and Chinese military and economic development.

**Soviet Union and Eastern Europe**


**China**


**Week 6. Cuba**

Since the Cuban Revolution of 1958, the U.S has used sanctions to curb to limit or completely block trade, travel, investment, educational exchanges and remittances between Cuba and the U.S. It has tried to limit third countries’ trade and investment with Cuba. Soviet aid limited the impact of the embargo, but after 1991 sanctions greatly hurt the Cuban economy. Nevertheless, U.S. sanctions failed to bring the regime change the U.S. has wanted for the past 60 years.

**History of US Sanctions on Cuba**


The Helms Burton Act

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helms%E2%80%93Burton_Act

Effects


PART III. SANCTIONS SINCE THE 1990s

Week 7. Iraq

This week offers an overview of UN sanctions against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, which were imposed after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 in an effort to topple the Iraqi government. The sanctions led to shortages of food and medicine and crippled essential infrastructure such as water and electricity. These sanctions have led to bitter debates about the number of children who died as a consequence, but this debate at times misses the larger humanitarian disaster that unfolded in Iraq.

Some background to the sanctions

The debate on numbers

• John Pilger, “Paying the Price: The Killing of the Children of Iraq,” 2000. View the first 30 minutes of this documentary film. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSe5QidAI3s


Beyond the numbers


Week 8. Iran

Iran has been subject to various kinds of sanctions, by the United States, the UN, the European Union, on and off since the revolution of 1979. These sanctions intensified in the early twenty-first century in an American and European effort to stop an alleged Iranian nuclear weapons program. These sanctions were relaxed after the so-called Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) of 2015, but the Trump administration withdrew from that deal and reimposed sanctions. The economic limits have been devastating for the Iranian people during the COVID pandemic of 2020.

Post-1979 sanctions


Sanctions and nukes post-2010


The triumph of diplomacy

• “Trita Parsi On the Politics Behind the Iran Nuclear Deal,” KGOU, March 9, 2018. audio interview or 7 printed excerpts from the interview with Parsi https://www.kgou.org/post/trita-parisi-politics-behind-iran-nuclear-deal

The revenge of sanctions


• “Six charts that show how hard US sanctions have hit Iran,” BBC News, December 9, 2019  

• Natasha Turak, “‘Disturbed’ and ‘disappointed’ Pompeo slams EU plan to bypass Iran sanctions,” CNBC, September 27, 2018.  

*Covid and sanctions*


**Week 9. Russia and China**

American hostility to Russia goes back to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and to China it dates from the Revolution of 1949. Sanctions against both countries were an integral part of the Cold War. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990 renewed geopolitical rivalry soon returned in which the U.S. imposed an increasing number of sanctions. The U.S. lifted sanctions on China beginning in the 1980s but as China has emerged as an economic competitor and geopolitical rival, the U.S. has engaged in both tariff wars and targeted sanctions. This week’s readings look at the varied sanctions imposed on America’s former Cold War rivals in the new, post-Cold era, the varied justifications offered for them and the economic and political consequences of them.
Why Sanctions on Russia after the Cold War?


Outcome of Sanctions on Russia


Sanctions and Chinese-American rivalry


Xinjiang—human rights or Muslim Terrorism?


**Chinese responses**

- China and Iran draft a $400 billion pact  
  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-XmKAmJ40](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-XmKAmJ40)


**Week 10. Other 21st Century Sanctions**

Latin America, long the United States’ backyard, has not been immune from the punishment of sanctions. In the twenty-first century, they have been imposed upon Venezuela and Nicaragua and the sanctions against Cuba, begun in 1961 continue. All three countries are labelled by some in the US government as the troika of tyranny. Sanctions, along with neoliberal loan and aid policies, have harmed economic development across Central and South America and increased political unrest and human suffering. The U.S. continues to sanction North Korea and Zimbabwe, has imposed sanction on several countries in the Middle East, and is currently sanctioning the personnel of the International Criminal Court and its ally Germany for building the Nordstream gas line from Russia. The readings below focus primarily on Venezuela, for it is a current flash point of U.S. interventions of all sorts, but offer a sampling of the many punishing sanctions imposed on smaller and weaker states around the globe.

**Venezuela**


- Luis Oliveros, “The Impact of Financial and Oil Sanctions on the Venezuelan Economy,”  
  *WOLA Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas* (October 2020).  

  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7aqGjwry0k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7aqGjwry0k)

- US Sanctions Venezuela Again to Prove Socialism Doesn’t Work. Video  

  [https://venezuelanalysis.com/print/14977](https://venezuelanalysis.com/print/14977)
Asia

  https://www.globalasia.org/v12no3/cover/questions-of-deterrence-can-sanctions-work-against-north-korea_stephan-haggard

Middle East & Africa

  https://fair.org/home/hiding-the-impact-of-us-sanctions-on-lebanon/

  https://thegrayzone.com/2020/12/20/ex-uk-ambassador-war-on-syria-continues-with-us-occupation-sanctions-propaganda/


Africa


International Criminal Court


Part IV. non-state sanctions, divestment and boycott campaigns

Week 11. Confronting apartheid South Africa

From 1948 through the end of apartheid in the early 1990s the UN, the US, various European countries and many non-state actors repeatedly debated whether sanctions should and could be imposed on apartheid South Africa. In addition to limited and voluntary state and UN sanctions, many corporations, churches, universities and other groups divested from South Africa and boycotted sporting events and cultural, educational and intellectual exchanges. South African liberation movements and most non-white South Africans supported such state and non-state sanctions. Whether and how much boycotts, divestment and sanctions hurt the South African economy, changed the attitudes of politicians and businessmen and contributed to the end of apartheid remains a subject of debate.
Who wanted sanctions and why


Did Sanctions undermine apartheid


Week 12. Israel-Palestine and BDS-Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions

Boycott, Divest and Sanction (BDS) is a Palestinian-led movement against Israel’s ongoing occupation of Palestinian land and in defense of Palestinian rights to return to their homes, as well as for full equality for Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel. BDS is a grassroots campaign aimed at persuading civil society and states to pressure Israel to change its policies on Palestinians. It is modeled after the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and has many allies in the U.S. and globally. Critics charge it with anti-Semitism, delegitimizing Israel as a Jewish state, and denying freedom of expression and have launched campaigns against BDS, especially on college campuses. This week’s readings provide an overview of the BDS campaign and the counter campaigns, the debates around BDS, and the parallels and differences between BDS and the anti-apartheid movement.

What is BDS

- BDS Movement website, https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds
The Debate within the American Jewish Community

- “J Street policy principles on the Global BDS Movement and boycotts, divestment and sanctions efforts” https://jstreet.org/policy/boycott-divestment-and-sanctions-bds/#.X1EavtYpDq0

Campaigns against BDS


BDS and the movement against apartheid


Anti BDS laws

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-BDS_laws#

Part V. Responses

Week 13. Blowback to Sanctions

The hardships imposed by US and UN sanctions have been well documented, continue and even increase. President George W. Bush approved over 1,800 sanctions on foreign governments, central banks, and individuals, President Barack Obama over 2,000 and President Trump over 3,700...
sanctions. It is well-known that the sanctions rarely achieve their goals of changing the regimes or even the practices of their targets. Less attention has been paid to their unintended consequences. These include encouragement of illicit trade and smuggling, the alienation of U.S. allies whose commercial and financial relationships are interrupted, and challenges to the dollar, the hegemonic currency of trade and thus of sanctions enforcement. Some countries are trading with each other in their local currencies, others are hoarding gold as a hedge, and alternative digital currencies are being created. Just as the pound sterling was slowly replaced as the dominant currency of reserves and trade by a rising dollar in the 1920s when the British Empire began its demise, so the dollar as the face of United States global dominance may be facing a similar fate, in part due to the unintended consequences, i.e. blowback, of sanctions.

General


Illicit and criminal evasions


The case of Iran

- China and Iran draft a $400 billion pact, August 10, 2020. video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x--XmKAml40

The case of Russia


**The case of world opinion**


**The case of dollar supremacy**

- Niall Ferguson, “America’s power is on a financial knife edge,” Sept. 15, 2019.  
  http://www.niallferguson.com/journalism/finance-economics/americas-power-is-on-a-financial-knife-edge

  http://www.theoverholtgroup.com/media/Articles-China/TIE-W20-DollarRoleSymp.pdf

**Week 14. Resistance**

Opposition to US sanctions has been growing. At home and abroad there are calls for rejecting all economic sanctions, for combatting secondary sanctions, and for relaxing sanctions in the face of the Covid 19 pandemic. There are bills in the US Congress to implement Congressional oversight of sanctions that are imposed by the President and to lift sanctions against North Korea for humanitarian reasons. Several peace and social justice organizations are working actively against US sanctions. There are many ways to get involved in these important efforts.

**Calls to action**


  https://ecfr.eu/publication/meeting_the_challenge_of_secondary_sanctions/


_Bills before US Congress_

  Introduced 2020


_Organization campaigning against US Sanctions_

• National Iranian American council advocates lifting sanctions against Iran. [https://www.niacouncil.org](https://www.niacouncil.org)

• Code Pink is a women-led grassroots organization working to end US wars, militarism and sanctions and redirect tax dollars to healthcare, education and green jobs. [https://www.codepink.org](https://www.codepink.org)

• Peace Action is working to promote diplomacy with Iran and North Korea and lift sanctions against these two countries. It lobbies Congress and educates the public. [https://www.peaceaction.org](https://www.peaceaction.org)

• Sanctions Kill advocates an end to all US sanctions and economic warfare. It educates about sanctions and lobbies Congress [https://sanctionskill.org](https://sanctionskill.org)
Further Readings

**Week 1. What are sanctions?**


**Week 2. Are sanctions legal?**


**Week 3. Are sanctions effective?**


**Week 4. Economic warfare in the first half of the twentieth century**


Week 5. Sanctioning communism in the cold war

  https://www.jstor.org/stable/2010342?seg=1

  https://www.nap.edu/catalog/1617/finding-common-ground-us-export-controls-in-a-changed-global


Week 6. Cuba


Week 7. Iraq


  https://gh.bmj.com/content/bmjgh/2/2/e000311.full.pdf

Week 8. Iran


  https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=philosophy-facultypubs
Week 9. Russia and China


Week 10. Other 21st century sanctions


Week 11. Confronting apartheid in South Africa

- UN 1985 Debate on the Question of South Africa. Google 85-88_08-5-The Question of South Africa and a pdf of the debate will download.
- African Activist Archive https://africanactivist.msu.edu/brouse.php
Week 12. Israel-Palestine and BDS

  https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/an-effort-to-thwart-some-boycotts-of-israel-fails-the-free-speech-test/534627/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIImar05bTN6wIVCIVCh1miwbPEAMYASAEgIDeP_D_BwE

  https://www.american.edu/cas/israelstudies/videos.cfm

- Anti BDS law
  https://en.sikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-BDS_laws#

Week 13. Blowback