

Nov 04, 2016 by [Rob Asghar](#)

Economic Sanctions as Temper Tantrums ^[1]

Harsh international sanctions against Iran are pointless and even counterproductive, members of the Iran Project argued this week in a new report. The group, consisting of a number of leading experts and former diplomats, argued that sanctions “may be sowing the seeds of long-term alienation between the Iranian people and the United States,” and advised Washington to think more creatively and realistically about the manner in which it seeks to dissuade Tehran from seeking a nuclear capacity.

Recent history would seem to make clear that sanctions tend not to make rogues behave. By now it would seem clear that citizens impoverished by economic sanctions tend not to rise up and engulf the domestic leaders who precipitated the sanctions on their nation.

But just as armed conflict persists despite the failure of most "successful" wars to establish enduring periods of peace, sanctions persist despite their own ineffectiveness. In the end, economic sanctions are simply temper tantrums on the part of powerful nations. Perhaps they are even tolerable tantrums, given many powerful nations' ability to throw nuclear tantrums if they so chose.

Much in the way that Carl von Clausewitz described war as the continuation of politics by other means, sanctions are an act of war by milder means. The nation or community of nations that does the sanctioning feels a moral superiority for having shown a nonviolent intolerance of bad behavior.

Yet Richard Haass, president of the Council of Foreign Relations, in making the case against sanctions fifteen years ago, urged restraint in this approach. "Foreign policy is not therapy, and its purpose is not to feel good but to do good. The same holds for sanctions.... Sanctions are blunt instruments that often produce unintended and undesirable consequences."

Indeed, sanctioned governments tend to win the sympathy of their citizenries, even as those citizenries bear the economic brunt of those sanctions. Yet for some reason Washington continues to believe that, if Tehran or Pyongyang or Baghdad is sanctioned, their citizenries will learn to trust Washington more than Tehran or Pyongyang or Baghdad.

Child mortality in Iraq was reported to have increased drastically during sanctions imposed after the first Gulf War. Such sanctions did not result in Saddam being toppled internally — nor did it result in Washington being welcomed as liberators by the Iraqi people when it took matters into its military hands a decade ago.

For several decades, Pakistan's leaders and its laity alike felt a need to build nuclear weapons, to keep pace with India's emerging nuclear capacity. Washington ignored the nuclear program at times and punished Pakistan at other times; this only earned it a reputation among the Pakistani people as a fickle and untrustworthy ally. (Raymond Davis was just the cherry on top

, not the main cause of widespread anti-Americanism in that nation.)

Steven Pinker, in his extraordinary 2011 work, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, attributes no small amount of civilizational progress to the expansion of "gentle commerce" among nations, which compels them to tolerate one another. "The theory of gentle commerce is not only supported by numbers from international datasets," he wrote, "but is consistent with a phenomenon long known to anthropologists: that many cultures maintain active networks of exchange, even when the goods exchanged are useless gifts, because they know it helps keep the peace among them."

Sanctions are the heavy-handed antithesis of this, and as such are the antithesis of public diplomacy.
