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T. Clifton Morgan

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Hearing the Noise: Economic Sanctions Theory and Anomalous Evidence

T. CLIFTON MORGAN
Rice University

Our understanding of economic sanctions has progressed significantly over the past three decades. Sanctions scholars have done a remarkable job at using empirical anomalies to guide theoretical developments and then using these to guide the next iteration of data collection and empirical testing. Here, I argue that mounting empirical evidence suggests it is time to develop a new theoretical perspective. I identify a number of empirical results, some unpublished, that are hard to reconcile with existing theory, and I argue that there is enough consistency in these results to suggest which way to turn.

KEYWORDS *economic sanctions, strategic interaction, theory*

Over the past two decades we have seen significant advances in our understanding of economic sanctions. Research into sanctions processes and effects has progressed in part because the community of researchers studying sanctions has done a very good job of allowing theory, data gathering, and empirical analysis to build on and guide each other. Thirty years ago, the conventional wisdom held that sanctions do not "work" in the sense that target states seldom, if ever, altered their policies in accordance with senders' wishes. We now know that sanctions are often effective, and we have identified a number of factors that contribute to, or detract from, their efficacy. We also know that sanctions threats frequently work, and we suspect that the credibility of these threats is bolstered by states' demonstrated willingness to impose them. Moreover, we are starting to develop a better understanding of who uses sanctions, against whom, and how senders design their sanctions strategies.

Address correspondence to T. Clifton Morgan, Department of Political Science, Rice University, 117 Herztein Hall, 6100 Main Street, Houston, TX 77005, USA. E-mail: morgan@rice.edu

While I, for one, have been fairly impressed with the development of our theoretical understanding and with our success at finding empirical regularities that are consistent with that understanding, I also recognize that some of our empirical findings do not support our theoretical expectations. This, of course, is the nature of science. It is a noisy world, and empirical research is constantly faced with imprecise measurement, things that correlate by chance, complex and confounding relationships, and mistakes by researchers. For that reason, we should be reluctant to abandon a theory that leads to a number of correct predictions just because we find a few anomalous results. The trick for science is in determining when to conclude that the anomalies are sufficient to tell us that it is time to find a new theory.[1] Even harder is the task of figuring out what those anomalies are telling us we should do to produce better theory.

I have come to the point in my own thinking where I believe it is time to reconsider our theoretical perspective regarding economic sanctions. Existing theory has certainly led to significant improvements in our understanding, but a number of anomalous findings have convinced me that we are a bit off. Importantly, it is not just that theoretical expectations fail to be borne out by the evidence; it is that this is happening in a fairly consistent pattern. My purpose in this brief essay is to make this case. I shall outline briefly what I believe to be the dominant theoretical perspective guiding recent sanctions research, then I will identify a number of empirical anomalies, most unpublished, that call this perspective into question, and I will try to make the case that these fairly disparate findings point in the same direction regarding where the next round of theorizing should focus.

STRATEGIC INTERACTION AND SANCTIONS RESEARCH

The vast majority of research into the instrumental aspects of economic sanctions begins from the perspective that sanctions episodes are instances of strategic interaction between the sender and target. "Strategic interaction" refers to instances in which two, or more, actors each have multiple alternative courses of action from which to choose, the behaviors chosen by each interact to affect the costs and benefits realized by all, and the actors realize this and take it into account when choosing among alternatives. Clearly, any research based on game- or bargaining-theoretic models adopts this perspective; these models were, after all, developed explicitly to capture situations of strategic interaction (Smith 1996; Wagner 1988). More to my point, *all* studies that examine whether sanctions "work" in the instrumental sense of helping persuade the target to alter its policies also view sanctions episodes as instances of strategic interaction, at least implicitly (Drury 1998; Lektzian and Souva 2007; Morgan and Schwebach 1997). Asking the question "Do sanctions work?" implies that the behavior of the target matters to the sender, that the sender can take actions that affect the target's payoffs, and that we believe each actor bases its decisions partly on its expectations of how its actions will influence the other's behavior. Thus, any study aimed at determining whether sanctions are a useful instrument of policy, which characterizes the majority of work on sanctions, clearly presumes strategic interaction between the sender and target states.

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[1] As an aside, I will add that this is complicated even further by our tendency not to publish null or negative results. Sometimes this is due to reviewers and editors, but more often, I think, it comes from our belief that null findings just aren't interesting enough to write up. It is possible that the weight of the published evidence supports some theory while the weight of the unpublished evidence contradicts it.

This point can also be made about a significant portion of the policy-relevant studies on sanctions. For example, the work on sanctions design advocating "smart" or targeted sanctions (Cortright and López 2002) is clearly based on the assumption that sender behavior affects target payoffs and that target decisions are based on expectations regarding sender actions. If the behavior of each and the payoffs accruing to each are not a product of the actors' interactions, and if they do not have expectations about this, making policy recommendations designed to influence choices makes little sense.

Research on other aspects of sanctions, such as studies trying to identify when sanctions are used and by whom, those trying to understand the duration of sanctions (Krustev and Morgan 2011), or those looking at non-policy effects of sanctions (Peksen 2009), do not necessarily assume strategic interaction, but they are often consistent with it. For example, work considering how sanctions affect the target state's economic performance need not consider the sender-target interaction at all, but such a study is completely consistent with the view that sanctions are intended to harm the target economically in order to persuade it to alter its policies. Just about the only research on sanctions that is not grounded, at least implicitly, in the idea that sanctions cases involve strategic interaction between the sender and target are those arguing that sanctions serve purely symbolic, rather than instrumental, purposes (Lindsay 1986).[2]

My goal here is not to suggest that this focus on sanctions as strategic interaction between sender and target is wrong-headed. In fact, I think it makes perfect sense to approach the study of sanctions through this lens.

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[2] I want to be clear that my points are intended to call into question our focus on strategic interaction *between sender and target states*. This is not meant to imply that strategic interaction plays no role whatsoever in sanctions. The "game" could very well be between governments and their constituents; my comments here do not address that possibility. Moreover, it is also possible that the problem is less with strategic interaction per se than with the specific models we have specified. It is, of course, impossible to dismiss all of the infinite models that could be developed. It is always possible that someone could develop a model of strategic interaction between sender and target that would address all my concerns. My goal here is not to claim to know, definitively, which direction our research should take; rather, it is to say that I believe the evidence suggests that a different path will be more fruitful.

Almost always, imposed sanctions are accompanied by demands that the target change some of its behaviors and that fact, alone, would seem sufficient to imply that the concept of strategic interaction provides an appropriate basis from which to study sanctions.

Moreover, a large amount of empirical evidence is consistent with this view. Consider just the following. A substantial portion of the recent literature on sanctions has identified a number of factors associated with sanctions "success" (Bapat, Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Morgan 2013; Drury 1998) The costs of the sanctions to the target matter, a lot, as do a number of factors that can be viewed as contributing to those costs—for example, whether the sanctions are multilateral (Bapat and Morgan 2009) or whether "black knights" can be found to bust the sanctions (Early 2011). This suggests that the sender's choices do affect the target and that the target pays attention to that. Similarly, we know that if we consider cases in which sanctions were only threatened in addition to those cases in which sanctions were imposed, the "success" rate increases significantly (Morgan, Bapat, and Krustev 2009). One might conclude from this that targets base their choices on their expectations about sender behaviors. Moreover, many of the findings that place less importance on the immediate situation also support the notion that senders and targets base their decisions on how their combined actions will affect each of them and their relationship. Drezner's (1999) findings showing that sanctions outcomes are heavily influenced by the actors' expectations regarding future conflicts are a clear example of this. All of this suggests that approaching the study of sanctions through the lens of strategic interaction has led to significant advances in our understanding.

ANOMALIES OR NOISE?

So, if approaching the study of sanctions from the perspective of strategic interaction makes so much sense intuitively, fits so well conceptually and theoretically, and is supported by a great deal of empirical evidence, what could make me believe it is time to consider another approach? Basically, there are a number of empirical findings and null findings, some unpublished, that are hard to reconcile with viewing sanctions as cases of strategic interaction between sender and target. As always, the empirical world is noisy, and it is difficult to determine whether contradictory evidence is just that—noise—or if it is telling us that we need to reconsider our theory. My point is that these anomalies fit a pattern that suggests an alternative approach, and I believe this approach can also account for the evidence that supports strategic interaction. This suggests these results are not just noise and that they are guiding us in our efforts to improve our understanding. I offer four specific examples.

First, in work I did with Glenn Palmer (Morgan and Palmer 2003; Palmer and Morgan 2006; Palmer, Wohlander, and Morgan 2002), we developed a general theory of foreign policy that, among other things, allowed us to investigate areas of foreign policy substitutability (see Most and Starr 1984) among policy instruments. The theory led to a number of hypotheses identifying interrelationships among arms expenditures, foreign aid, alliances, and dispute behavior, and we found a great deal of empirical evidence supporting these hypotheses. The theory also led us to expect relationships between the use of military force and the use of economic sanctions. It should be noted that one of the almost-conventional wisdoms regarding sanctions is that they are often seen as a substitute for the use of force. While our theory captures something that is widely believed, the expected relationship is much more nuanced. We expect that some factors should lead a state to increase both its use of sanctions and its use of force but that the inverse relationship suggested by "substitutability" would appear only after controlling for these factors. Despite our best[3] efforts over a series of attempts (Hatipoglu, Morgan, and Palmer 2007; Mattes, Morgan, and Palmer 2002; Miers, Morgan, and Palmer 2000; Zacarillo, Morgan, and Palmer 2010), we found absolutely no evidence that the expected relationships exist—with the exception that the more capabilities a state has, the more likely it is to use both sanctions and force.

It is, of course, possible that the theory is just wrong and that we should see this as evidence against it. The theory does a very good job of explaining and predicting relationships among the uses of all other instruments of foreign policy, however. Another possibility is that sanctions are just used in a fundamentally different way than are other foreign policy tools, which suggests we might need a fundamentally different theoretical approach to understand them.

Second, one significant advance in our understanding of sanctions was the realization that sanctions' apparent "ineffectiveness" could be the product of a selection effect (Morgan and Miers 1999; Smith 1996). If targets can anticipate the cost of sanctions, those that would capitulate in the face of sanctions might do so when sanctions are threatened but before they are imposed. On occasion, senders may have to impose sanctions they believe will not "work" to sustain the credibility of their threats. Thus, studies focusing only on cases in which sanctions were imposed would be led to conclude that sanctions are ineffective, even though the threat of sanctions might work in many cases. To examine this possibility, my colleagues and I developed the TIES data set that includes cases in which sanctions were threatened and/or imposed (Morgan et al. 2009; Morgan, Bapat, and Kobayashi 2014).

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[3] Doing everything one can to find an expected relationship in the data is not exactly the ideal of good science, so maybe I shouldn't use "best" to describe our efforts. The point I want to emphasize is that I am pretty certain that the expected relationship does not exist.

The key insight of the selection effects argument is supported in that sanctions are effective much more often when we include the threat-only cases in our analysis. Puzzlement comes, however, when we test other expectations derived from the theoretical argument.

Kobayashi and I (Kobayashi and Morgan 2012) have tested a number of hypotheses derived from the game theoretic model developed by Morgan and Miers (1999). This theory leads us to expect that threats often work so that "successful" sanctions will seldom be imposed. It also leads to a number of hypotheses regarding how a number of factors relate to target and sender behaviors as well as to sanctions case outcomes. This is a model of strategic interaction, so many of the hypotheses suggest that each party should condition its behavior on how the other will be affected. For example, if threatened sanctions would be very costly to the sender, the target should be more likely to capitulate. Similarly, if the issue at stake is highly salient to the target, the sender should be less likely to carry out its threat to impose sanctions, if the threat is ineffective. Kobayashi and I found essentially no evidence supporting any hypothesis based on the notion that either party was paying attention to the other party. Our use of selection models also turned up no evidence that the selection processes specified by the theory are at work.[4] It is important to note that the evidence does seem to suggest that the actors' behavior is being governed by some very sensible things. Each appears to pay close attention to its own costs—targets are more likely to acquiesce to a threat when their expected costs are high, and senders are very good at designing sanctions that are costly to the target but not to themselves. The evidence does not suggest that the actors are, in some sense, "nonrational"; rather, it suggests that they are not *interacting* strategically with each other. Each seems to be responding to environmental factors with little awareness that the environment is being partially determined by purposive actions taken by the other and with little regard for the notion that the opponent's actions can serve as signals regarding its future behavior (see also Whang and Kim [2015] for results suggesting that sanctions do not work as costly signals).

Third, McLean and Wang (2014) present an argument suggesting that sender decisions to use sanctions are heavily influenced by pressures from domestic political interests and that *different* domestic political actors influence subsequent decisions regarding how to design those sanctions. They also provide empirical evidence supporting their argument. Fourth, Krustev and Morgan (2011) examine the processes leading to the ending of sanctions. They demonstrate that leadership change in either the sender or the target is a determinant of sanctions termination—but a key requirement is that this change has to also involve a change in the sources of domestic support for the leader. In other words, a different domestic political coalition has to become influential. These two studies point in the same direction. Decisions regarding the nature of sanctions that are imposed and decisions regarding the ending of these sanctions are influenced more by the relative influence of domestic political coalitions than by considerations of the strategic bargaining situation between sender and target.

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[4] Clearly, some selection process has to be at work; some threats are effective, after all. Whatever that process is, it doesn't seem to involve the target and sender paying much attention to one another.

Now, what are we to make of this? On the one hand, approaching the study of economic sanctions through the lens of strategic interaction has a great deal of intuitive appeal, and we have a substantial amount of evidence suggesting that this approach has put us on the right track. On the other hand, we seem to have a number of findings that are inconsistent with what strategic interaction would lead us to expect. Sanctions don't seem to be used in the same way as other tools of foreign policy, and their use seems to be governed by considerations other than expectations about the opponent.

One possibility is that we should conclude that the findings that go against the strategic interaction perspective should be seen just as the noise that always occurs in empirical scientific research. Some anomalous findings will always occur for a host of familiar reasons (measurement error, model misspecification, the laws of probability). The issue, of course, is whether the anomalies are enough in number to cause concern and, more importantly, whether they point to a pattern that would lead us to a better understanding. It may be impossible to know whether there are "enough" anomalous results. Much of my case is based on empirical results that I have not published, and I have no way of knowing how many others have such findings shoved in some forgotten file. As for the second issue, I believe consistencies can be found in the anomalous results that point us in another direction.

Another possibility is to resurrect the old argument suggesting that sanctions serve a symbolic, rather than an instrumental, purpose (Lindsay 1986). That would certainly coincide with the notions that sanctions aren't being used like other tools and that domestic audiences are guiding their use. I would reject this possibility, however, simply on the grounds that it cannot also account for all the other evidence we have suggesting that sanctions do serve instrumental purposes. We know that senders claim they are guided by a desire for targets to change their policies; we know that sanctions are often successful at this, particularly at the threat stage; and we know that the probability of success is influenced by the things that it should be affected by if sanctions are being used instrumentally (like the cost to the target). Moreover, we have other findings that would be very hard to explain if sanctions were just being used symbolically. Drezner's (1999) findings regarding conflict expectations provide one example; another can be found in the set of findings suggesting that sanctions tend to worsen the human rights performance of targets *except* when the accompanying demand is specifically about improving human rights (Peksen 2009).

I believe the evidence is suggesting that sanctions are being used instrumentally in the sense that some domestic actors within the sender are trying to alter the target's behavior and that both sender and target are behaving rationally. I also believe, however, that the evidence is telling us that sanctions are *not* best viewed as part of a bargaining game between the sender and target. Neither the sender nor the target is sending signals to the other through their behavior,[5] and the main intention when sanctions are used is not to *persuade* the target to change its behavior. So, if sanctions should not be viewed as part of a bargaining game, how should we approach them?

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Again, the key feature of "strategic interaction" is that each actor understands that its payoffs are affected by the behavior of everyone, that each can use this understanding to anticipate how all will behave, and that each understands how early behaviors condition expectations about future behavior. From this perspective, the threat and imposition of sanctions, as well as any target responses, are indicators of future behavior and payoffs. In essence, this views sanctions as working indirectly—the objective of the sender is to *persuade* the target that it can expect to be better off changing its behavior. I propose that we begin to think about sanctions as having, and as being intended to have, a direct effect on target behavior. That is, rather than seeing sanctions as an effort to induce the target to act differently by manipulating the costs the target can expect to bear, we should view sanctions as an effort to have a direct effect on the environment in which the target makes its decision. All actions require resources: If sanctions reduce the resources available to the target then the target *has* to make some changes in its behavior. These may or may not be the changes the sender wanted, but that should depend at least partly on the specific design of the sanctions, especially if many types of resources are not fungible. I will note that we already view some actions, that otherwise look a lot like sanctions, in exactly these terms. A major part of the "war" on terror consists of efforts to deny terrorist organizations access to sources of income and their existing financial resources. This is not intended to persuade the terrorists that there is going to be a high cost for their actions; it is intended to inhibit directly their ability to function.

If we proceed along these lines, we probably have to begin with a decision theoretic model of how actors make decisions allocating resources over the policies available to them. The mechanism by which sanctions work or not operates through their direct effect on these decisions. Such an approach can account for many of the empirical results we have that appear to support the strategic interaction approach. Clearly, the greater the cost of sanctions to the target, the greater the effect on its policy choices. It could also explain why sanctions imposed over human rights issues lead to improvements, while sanctions imposed for other purposes tend to lead to more abuses of human rights. In the former case, sanctions would likely be targeted at those resources used to violate human rights. That may not be true for other sanctions, and one of the unintended consequences of denying something else to the target might be that it increases the resources it devotes to repressing its population. This approach is also consistent with the observation that senders are very good at selecting sanctions that are costly to targets but not to themselves, which is much harder to explain if we view sanctions as a mechanism by which senders signal targets about their own willingness to bear costs.

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[5] Or, if they are trying to send signals, these are not being heard.

The difficulty, perhaps, is in accounting for the fact that sanction threats appear to bring changes in target behavior. I do not believe it is inconsistent with the view I am advancing to believe that states can change their behavior in anticipation of a change in resource availability, much like individuals who expect a reduction in income (say near retirement) often move to smaller houses. The difference between this view and strategic interaction is that this perspective suggests that the target would pay attention only to the expected cost of sanctions to itself, whereas strategic interaction suggests that the target would condition its behavior on the costs it expects the sender to pay. As noted, we observe targets paying attention only to their own costs.

This perspective could also explain the other things we have observed that are inconsistent with sanctions as strategic interaction. The arguments and supporting findings suggesting that shifting domestic political coalitions affect behavior in sanctions cases provide one example. It makes perfect sense that changes in leader-support coalitions would lead to changes in resource allocation over policies. For this to occur, the different coalitions do not even need to want different things. It is sufficient for them merely to weight the importance of the things they want differently. It is not hard to imagine how changes in ruling coalitions in senders could lead to the end of sanctions or how similar changes in targets could lead to changes in their "offensive" policies even if each is completely ignoring the other's behavior.

Finally, this perspective provides an explanation for the findings regarding the substitutability of sanctions and military force. In the first place, if these actions are intended to serve different purposes and are understood to function differently, there is no reason to believe they are substitutable. Moreover, we would presume that sometimes sanctions would be used to support military action and other times not—the critical determinant of this would be whether the sender can impose sanctions that directly reduce the target's ability to fight. In the aggregate, we should expect to observe no relationship between the use of sanctions and the use of force.

CONCLUSION

The problem, of course, is that I have not provided a well-developed theoretical argument that leads to precise hypotheses. So, all I have really offered are conjectures that a new theoretical perspective could provide an integrated explanation for those empirical findings that are consistent with strategic interactions as well as many of those that contradict it. I would like to say I have not provided the specifics of my theory because it is beyond the scope of this short essay, but frankly, I do not yet know what this theory looks like. I think I have demonstrated that there are enough findings that are inconsistent with our dominant theoretical perspective of sanctions behavior to conclude that these anomalies are not just noise and that there are sufficiently consistent patterns to what we get wrong to tell us where we need to look for future theoretical development. As I noted at the outset, scholarly research on sanctions has been characterized by an almost ideal interplay between theory and evidence. I think we have reached a point in this process at which the theorists need to figure out where we go next.

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