

# U(nspeakably) S(adistic) Foreign Policy

If you had set out to construct a foreign policy designed to impose indescribable suffering on millions of innocent people around the world, you'd have a tough time coming up with anything more systematic and effective than U.S. foreign policy. An inventory of U.S. direct military and covert operations, aid to savage governments and murderous "rebels," and economic sanctions would easily lead one to think that the architects of this constellation of policies aimed to inflict death and maximum pain on innocent bystanders. It has been one series of crimes against humanity.

That would be an oversimplification of course. Clearly, the makers and executors of those policies have not *merely* aimed to inflict such suffering on innocents. Larger geopolitical goals have always been in play. But that by no means mitigated the results, which have been foreseeable and avoidable. Besides, the geopolitical goals are themselves to be condemned, seeing as how they flow from U.S. rulers' "exceptional nation" zeal to shape the world according to their idea of what's good.

Nor does it help to point out that the foreign regimes and other targets of U.S. policy have often perpetrated unfathomable brutality against innocents. The fact is that U.S. intervention predictably enlarges local and regional violence by orders of magnitude. So other people's crimes are no excuse for U.S. piling on.

Over many years, from Latin America to Africa, the Middle East, and throughout Asia, U.S. policymakers have imposed great hardship in a variety of forms: open combat through invasion and occupation, covert activities, and aid to allied repressive governments and insurgent groups aiming at regime change.

And then there are the economic sanctions. The U.S. government seems ready to impose sanctions on a population at the drop of a hat. (Thomas Jefferson called sanctions "peaceful coercion" presumably because shots need not be fired.) News of sanctions gets good play in the media. They may even bring sighs of relief if the public sees them as a substitute for sending American troops into yet another endless war. But detailed media follow-up is rare, and the real story of suffering is rarely told. On their own, most people won't give the sanctions on any given country a moment's thought, much less use their common sense to trace out the lethal implications. They certainly won't read sources that specialize in meticulous description of the ugly consequences.

Sanctions of course cut the target population off from global trade/finance and humanitarian assistance. The policy is *meant* to keep building materials, food, medicines, medical equipment, and other critical goods from reaching the victims of the policy. These are not unavoidable and unfortunate secondary consequences or collateral damage. They

are the prime objective. That is nothing less than policy sadism, crimes against humanity.

Often sanctions are defended on the grounds that they will cause the stricken people to rise up and overthrow their bad rulers. But does that ever happen? It appears not. (The U.S. government has had sanctions on Cuba and Iran for a very long time, to name just two stark examples.)

Instead, people rally around “their” existing government in opposition to the cruel foreign government that is making their lives miserable. That’s the most likely reaction, and it’s unreasonable to expect otherwise. (Not that the policy would be justified under other circumstances.)

As has been pointed out so often, sanctions also give the government of the target country a plausible excuse for its own home-grown economic disasters. A government that tries to centralize economic activity according to a top-down plan will always fail miserably, creating terrible hardship including starvation and disease for the public. In the absence of foreign intervention, the target public might figure out that the hardship is the government planners’ fault, and that could lead to some kind of movement for change, possibly toward a free or at least freer market-based society.

But if the country is the target of sanctions, especially imposed by the powerful U.S. government (which has the clout to force other governments to comply), the local rulers can blame their own shortcomings on the outside intervention—blockades, boycotts, and the like—and survive. The self-serving rulers may even be able to throw in credible allegations about CIA-sponsored “liberal” insurgents because this sort of thing has happened often before. Most people in the population won’t have the information necessary to understand their rulers’ crimes and so will continue to look to those rulers for assistance in hard times. Savvy governments will score points by providing some relief to at least part of the population. Meanwhile, the rulers will demonize America, perhaps even creating conditions in which terrorism takes place.

In other words, sanctions may be counterproductive even from the point of view of the U.S. government. This, however, may not be the case if it wants to sow chaos in the target country and use terrorism as an excuse to violate civil liberties at home. That, too, of course would be sadism in action.

While I’ve focused on the harm U.S. sanctions inflict on the target populations, we should also mention that they have bad consequences for Americans who are not part of the policy elite. Sanctions obviously forbid them from trading with the target populations, harming firms and their employees and shareholders. This should not be overlooked, though the primary victims are the people of the target countries.

The upshot is that in the name of the American people but without their real consent, the

political elite casually imposes unimaginable cruelties on foreign populations in pursuit of objectives that are not in the interest of Americans. The ordinary people of the target countries simply do not count in the policymakers' global gamesmanship. They are expendable. This is intolerable. Somehow the mass of the American people must be made aware of this long-standing cruelty so that they may be enlisted in a campaign to finally end the unspeakable sadism.