Busted Sanctions: Explaining Why Economic Sanctions Fail

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Book Summary

Busted Sanctions offers an explanation for why economic sanctions frequently fail even when employed by the world's most powerful countries. Economic sanctions are coercive tools of foreign policy that seek to alter the behavior of foreign actors by harming their economic welfare. The United States Government relies on economic sanctions more than any other country in the world, but the sanctions it imposes only tend to be successful about a third of the time. It is argued in this book that a major reason why U.S. economic sanctions fail so frequently is that other countries around the world undercut the sanctions' effectiveness via the international trade and aid they provide to sanctioned states.

Busted Sanctions develops a theory of sanctions-busting that argues that, when sanctioned states forged trade-based sanctions-busting relationships with other countries and are able to increase the foreign aid flows they receive, the sanctions imposed against them will rarely ever be effective. The book also explains why certain countries provide sanctioned states with extensive aid-based and trade-based sanctions-busting assistance. It is argued that while commercial motivations drive states to become trade-based sanctions busters, political motivations are primarily responsible for why they become aid-based sanctions busters. The book evaluates its theoretical predictions through a mixed-method analysis of the United States' use of economic sanctions from 1950 to present times, including in-depth analyses of the U.S. sanctioning efforts against Cuba and Iran. The cases illustrate the challenges the U.S. Government faces in obtaining domestic compliance and international cooperation with its sanctioning efforts, while also demonstrating the sophisticated strategies that sanctioned governments deploy to defeat the United States' sanctions. The complementary statistical analyses demonstrate that sanctions-busting poses a potent and pervasive impediment to the success of sanctioning efforts and the difficulty associated with dissuading trade-based sanctions busters that stand to profit extensively from undercutting U.S. sanctions.

The book's overarching findings indicate that the United States' wealthy, ideologically-motivate adversaries are most likely engage in aid-based sanctions-busting, while its commercially-competitive allies are most likely to undercut its sanctioning efforts via trade-based sanctions-busting. The reason that U.S. economic sanctions fail so frequently, then, is that they are undermined by the United States' friends and foes alike. The conclusion explores the policy implications for U.S. policymakers and the practice of economic statecraft more broadly.