Review by Alan P. Dobson, St. Andrews University

This study of the oil embargo applied by Arab states in response to the Yom Kippur War and Western support for Israel is a splendid example of a scholar grasping often overlooked aspects of embargo policies. In particular the author reveals the fallacious conclusions often reached by many political scientists and IR scholars with their obsession with the question: Do embargoes work? All too often in exploring that question the focus is far too narrow and concentrates on economic embargoes in terms of what might be described as their instrumental effects: Do they economically damage the target state? And does the harm inflicted achieve the stated objective? What such questions overlook are the facts that much more is always at stake than simply inflicting economic damage, that objectives can and usually do change over time, and that different international players from different positions and diplomatic contexts and with different agendas construe the meaning of embargoes in their several and unique ways. The notion of success is therefore a moveable feast that varies over time and from actor to actor depending on their perceptions and changing goals. All these factors, often overlooked or down-played, are wonderfully captured in this arresting article, which takes a more appropriately discursive narrative approach than is common, though it is no less analytically sharp for that. As the author puts it at the outset:

..., I will challenge the understanding of the Arab oil embargo as a failure not by arguing – as others have done – that it was in fact a success, but rather by questioning the notion of the success and failure of the oil embargo altogether. Analyzing embargoes or economic sanctions in general, and the Arab oil embargo in particular, a simple sender/target model that judges the success of an embargo by the degree to which the embargo realizes the initially formulated aims and [whether] the embargoed complies with the demands is not very useful. (186)
The author examines carefully what actually happened and in doing so reveals the range of achievement possibilities that different state actors pursued. This story is generically so similar to the findings of this writer on the evolving nature of the economic embargo applied by the West against the Soviet Bloc and China during the Cold War\textsuperscript{1} that a short diversion into those findings seems appropriate.

As peace gave way to the Cold War in 1946 and 1947, American policy-makers began to consider what they should do about trade with the Soviet Union. The Cold War was unlike anything that had gone before in two key respects: its ideological nature and the danger of mass destruction on a scale only glimpsed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. War was unthinkable and yet constantly threatened with a destructive immediacy never known before. If ever there were to be a need and justification for pre-emptive action, here it was. Part of that action was to be cold economic warfare.

What to do in these circumstances was a question that troubled Americans and their allies. From lengthy considerations there gradually emerged in Washington a strategy of cold economic warfare couched in three broad aims: first, it should prevent the Soviet Union receiving high technology transfers that would enable it to develop advanced weaponry and in particular the nuclear bomb; second, it should slow down the economic growth of the Soviet Union as military power was a function of economic power; and third, trade restrictions should attempt to exacerbate inefficiencies in the Soviet economy, particularly through causing bottlenecks in production processes, as they might eventually result in the whole system imploding. The objectives in the Arab oil embargo were different in kind but alike in their multiple and eventually changing nature.

For over a decade, with the help of sometimes rather recalcitrant allies, the USA pursued cold economic warfare. However, by the late 1950s and the early 1960s the administrations of both Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy began to question the wisdom and effectiveness of this strategy. After a lengthy review of policy the State Department concluded. “Neither full access to, nor complete denial of, trade with the U.S. can affect Soviet capabilities to wage war - either hot or cold war. Nor can either trade situation affect in any meaningful sense the performance or potentialities of the Soviet economy.”\textsuperscript{2} The situation seemed to demand revision of U.S. policy. It was not achieving its original objectives and was damaging the Western Alliance. It was also costly and it imposed a form of discrimination on U.S. firms, but, notwithstanding all these woes, there were fears that a change in stance would carry considerable meaning because the major issue now in U.S. trade control policy were political not strategic, economic or commercial.


The Kennedy Administration tussled with strategic embargo policy for months and finally determined that the embargo was now an integral part of the U.S.’s Cold War strategy and as such could not be blithely abandoned without suffering important diplomatic costs. Like any other tool in the armoury of statesmen, cold economic warfare proved to be a flexible tool. It may have failed to achieve its original objectives, but as President Jimmy Carter discovered cold economic warfare was still a vital means of policy, in 1979 as a means of conveying U.S. resolve to the Soviets after their invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. That message had to be clear. Carter agonized over the problem at length, wondering if the measures that the U.S. had taken, in particular a partial grain embargo, had conveyed America’s position sufficiently clearly. The grain embargo was costly to the U.S.: they suffered more marginal economic costs than the Soviets and it did not significantly damage the Soviet Union and in the long-term actually strengthened its ability to import grain by diversifying its market sources. In contrast, it caused difficulties and arguments, often very heated, among the Western allies. It created de facto discrimination against U.S. grain producers and U.S. companies generally. And it weakened Carter’s already dismal prospects in the presidential election of 1980. Notwithstanding all of these factors Carter still held to the grain embargo, not for any direct economic consequences in the Soviet Union, but because it helped him to get his message across. From being a punitive and coercive instrumental tool cold economic warfare had become primarily another form of expressive diplomatic discourse.3

Graf exposes the complexities involved in the Arab oil embargo and in so doing demonstrates the aptness of the claim that the sender/target model is seriously limited as an explanatory model. This is accomplished by a very scholarly narrative of ‘the communicative processes that constituted the embargo’ which provides a more nuanced picture and avoids the simplicity of the success or failure dichotomy. (189) The sub-headings provide clear signposts to how the material is navigated: ‘Firing the “Oil Weapon” and Communicating the Embargo’; Adjusting Objectives and Securing Success – The Arab Uses of the “Oil Weapon”; ‘Moving Targets’; (and ‘Conclusion’) ‘The Workings of the Arab Oil Embargo’.

The analysis is clear: the oil embargo presents us with a dynamically changing situation in response to which the international players adjusted perceptions, policies, and objectives accordingly. The embargoing nations ‘adjusted their goals and objectives throughout the duration of the embargo in order to claim its success, prevent the loss of credibility, and to sustain their “oil power” for future bargaining situations.’ (200) Furthermore, ‘three different governments used the embargo as a means of symbolic communication in order to improve their bargaining positions.’ (203) Just as with the US Cold War embargo,

inflicting economic pain gave way to foregrounding the importance of communicating more subtle messages to do with credibility and future bargaining positions.

Graf convincingly argues that “the shift and hence the content and meaning of the embargo were the products of complex communicative interactions between the embargoing and the embargoed states.” (207) One very clear result of those complex interactions was that the simple notion of success and failure in terms of failure of or compliance with the sanctions became redundant. It meant different things to different actors and had varying impacts which could not be assessed simply in terms of degrees of economic pain. So, for the states known as the Group of 77, the embargo was seen as a ‘strong argument for the establishment of a New International Economic order and a paradigm case for “third world” activism in the field of raw materials ….’ (208) In contrast, President Nixon used it to try to camouflage the Watergate scandal and present himself as strong leader:

... other actors in the industrialized countries used the oil embargo to legitimize domestic policy changes: environmentalists constructed the oil crisis as a warning foreshadowing the near end of the age of fossil fuels in order to convince people to use alternative energies or to lead less energy-consuming lives. By contrast, conservatives and advocates of the coal and atomic energy industries developed the opposite argument: because of the energy-crisis ecological considerations had to recede in order to secure economic growth. (208)

This work delivers a complex and convincing narrative, which is valuable scholarship in and of itself, but equally importantly it places economic embargoes squarely where they belong in the tool kit of diplomacy with their potential for varied and nuanced effects.


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