

The Criminality of Unilateral Sanctions*

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During Modi's visit to Ukraine (why he visited Ukraine at all at the present time remains a mystery), Zelensky asked India not to purchase fuel from Russia in violation of western sanctions, that is, to fall in line with the "unilateral" western sanctions. Let us for a moment forget the identity of the person making this suggestion, the fact that he rules Ukraine with the help of the followers of Stepan Bandera, the notorious Nazi collaborator during the second world war; let us also forget the present context there: a war brought on by NATO's insistence on extending itself eastwards right up to the Russian border in violation of the promise made by Bush to Gorbachev at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, a war moreover that could easily have been prevented if the Minsk agreements, arrived at through negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, had not been repudiated by the latter on Anglo-US "advice". Let us also forget about India's own "self-interest" in breaking the sanctions by purchasing Russian oil. Let us talk only of the ethics of "unilateral" sanctions.

Unilateral sanctions are those imposed only by some countries, namely the western imperialist countries, against those that violate their diktat; they have to be distinguished from sanctions that have the approval of the United Nations, that is, the support of the committee of nations in general, and not just of the imperialist countries. A large number of countries in the world from Cuba to Iran to Venezuela to Syria to Libya, which have earned the displeasure of imperialism by standing up to it have become victims of such unilateral sanctions and Russia is the latest to join their ranks; falling in line with such sanctions amounts therefore to endorsing the aggressive man oeuvres of imperialism.

A hallmark of such sanctions is that they hurt the people; indeed they are meant to hurt the people, their efficacy judged by the extent to which they succeed in hurting the people. They are therefore analogous in their effect to civilian bombing, which is also meant to hurt ordinary people and constitutes an act of collective punishment. But an act of collective punishment inflicted on the people at large in retaliation for actions that they did not commit, amounts to a war crime according to Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. It follows that unilateral sanctions by imperialism is nothing short of a war crime. And Zelensky's suggestion to Modi amounts to making India complicit in a war crime. The fact that sanctions do not seem to have hurt the Russian people much is entirely beside the point; what matters is the intent behind them. They are analogous to civilian bombing and amount to a war crime.

Imperialist justification for the imposition of sanctions is that the government of a sanctioned country has done something wrong; but this justification cannot stand scrutiny. If the action of the government of a sanctioned country has the support of its people, then the imposition of sanctions violates popular sovereignty; and if it is believed that the people of a country have a collective position that is palpably wrong, then sanctions against them should be able to command the support of the UN Security Council and do not have to be unilateral. On the other hand if the action of the government of the sanctioned country is deemed not to enjoy the support of its

people, then the imposition of sanctions that hurt the people constitutes a collective punishment akin to civilian bombing and becomes a war crime.

As a matter of fact, the effect of sanctions is far worse than that of civilian bombing. This is so for at least four reasons. First, such bombings, even when directed against civilian targets with no military significance, tend at least to be localised, but sanctions affect the economy as a whole, and hence the entire people of a country; one cannot escape them by changing one's location within the country. Secondly, while a war has a certain limited duration, and hence also any civilian bombing that occurs as a part of the war, sanctions can go on and on. The sanctions against Cuba for example have been in force for decades, and so have the sanctions against Iran. Thirdly, sanctions are, if anything even more lethal in terms of the casualties they inflict. While precise estimates are extremely difficult to come by for obvious reasons, to say that they take an even heavier toll is no hyperbole. The denial of food and basic medicines to the mass of the people is the obvious reason for such casualties; and almost every sanctioned country in the past has experienced food and medicine shortage with devastating impact. And fourthly, precisely for this reason, sanctions take a far heavier toll among old people, children, and expectant mothers, persons who are in greater need of medicines and who by general consent are supposed to be spared, as much as possible, the horrors of war.

There is an additional reason why people suffer, even when the targeted country can arrange for a certain amount of supplies of food and medicine from some other countries, which happen to be intrepid enough not to be intimidated into acquiescing in sanctions. This additional reason is that all targeted countries suffer from extremely high rates of inflation which put these basic requirements of life, even when available, beyond the reach of most people. Such an acceleration in inflation occurs for two obvious reasons. First, even when the country can manage to get supplies of some basic commodities from some friendly countries, there is usually some residual shortage still, which causes acute inflation. Second, the inevitable impact of sanctions is to cause a depreciation of the exchange rate of the targeted country, which occurs for a number of reasons: its exports get drastically reduced; the inflow of remittances and of financial investments into the country that would normally have occurred, dry up; and the country's foreign exchange reserves which are held partly at least in banks of the sanctioning countries are deliberately placed beyond its reach. With the depreciation of the exchange rate, even when supplies of basic goods are somehow arranged, their domestic prices shoot up because of the fixity of their international prices, making it impossible for people to access them. Sanctions in short hurt the targeted country even when that country can get the help of some friendly countries willing to break the sanctions against it.

It follows that sanctions are not only an implicit form of warfare, but a form that is even more dangerous than open military conflict, a fact hidden by its apparent benignity. Casualties occur in hospitals among people independently suffering from all kinds ailments because of the lack of essential medicines, or at home because of the paucity of food that makes people vulnerable to diseases; this makes people's suffering seem not only less horrendous than the effects of civilian bombing, but also unrelated to the sanctions in any direct causal manner. But this is clearly deceptive.

These considerations may not be applicable in the Russian case, but that is only because Russia possesses a developed and diversified economy inherited from the

days of the Soviet Union. In fact Russia happens to be the first case of a developed country against which imperialist sanctions are being imposed; not surprisingly it can withstand such sanctions better than the typical third world country that is usually targeted. Besides, the very multiplicity of countries against which sanctions are now being imposed, reduces the effectiveness of sanctions.

But the fact that sanctions are less effective because of their wider reach these days, or the fact that they are less effective against Russia than against others, does not reduce by one iota the criminality of unilateral sanctions. Such sanctions are a deadly weapon in the hands of imperialism against the people of the third world, and should be proscribed by the United Nations. True, such a ban will have little operational significance unless endorsed by the Security Council; and endorsement will not be forthcoming because the imperialist countries have a decisive voice at the Security Council. But a UN resolution opposing unilateral sanctions will have a great ethical weight.

Zelensky's suggestion to Modi therefore amounts not only to converting India into a combatant in the economic warfare against Russia, but also to making India complicit in the perpetration of a war crime.

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