Toward a Strategic Art for Sanctions

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ABSTRACT: New strategic art is required to maneuver political economies to meet the demands of future engagements and campaigns. Current discussions of the projection of political-economic power are typically abstract, high-level, and policy-focused or present singular tactical actions as strategic actions, creating a gap for campaign practitioners. This article addresses the gap by drawing on Joint Planning, Joint Publication 5-0, and Joint Campaigns and Operations, Joint Publication 3-0, to further develop the concept and methodologies first introduced in the author’s earlier article “Multidimensionality: Rethinking Power Projection for the 21st Century.”

Keywords: sanctions, political-economic power, Russia, Ukraine, China

In March 2014, Russian troops seized control of Crimea.¹ By May 2014, Russian-backed separatists in the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine had declared independence.² Shortly thereafter, armed conflict broke out between Russian-backed forces and the Ukrainian military in the southeast.³ These battle lines remained relatively static until February 24, 2022, when Russian troops invaded Ukraine in a multipronged special military operation.⁴ Over the course of almost two years of high-intensity battle, Ukraine pushed Russian forces back to the southeastern portion of the country, where they hold approximately 18 percent of Ukraine.⁵

In response to Russia’s 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine, the Council of the EU adopted 12 packages of sanctions.⁶ In turn, the United States has sanctioned 10,173 individuals, 4,089 entities, 177 vessels, and 100 aircraft.⁷ In total, Russia has been subjected to more than 14,000 sanctions.⁸ Alexandra Prokopenko from the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace notes, “That’s more than Iran, Cuba, and North Korea combined.”⁹ Yet, after 10 years of conflict and the most extensive sanctions regime in history, little has changed.

Have sanctions been effective in deterring Russian aggression or compelling Russian cooperation in Ukraine? From a military perspective, based on operations in Ukraine, sanctions have been irrelevant. From a political-economic perspective, the state of affairs is more ambiguous. Most supporting arguments
from sanctioning countries cite the reduction of Russian growth rates and slowdowns in supply, resupply, and production. This argument is about future opportunity costs and is highly speculative, given 10 years of imposed sanctions. After a decade, one would expect reductions in growth, not in the rate of growth. Advocates for sanctions who cite the need for longer durations or accumulation of effects should review Cuba’s experience. The United States has embargoed trade with Cuba since 1962 without forcing a regime change or a change in regime behavior.

Financially, the imposition of sanctions has had a significant effect on the Russian capital economy—specifically, the Russian ruble, the external value of which dropped by approximately 30 percent when the EU imposed its 10th package of sanctions on February 25, 2022. By June 2022, the ruble had more than recovered. From 2013 to 2023, the ruble experienced a 63 percent drop in value. After the February 2022 sanctions, the Central Bank of the Russian Federation hiked its key interest rate to 20 percent. The interest rate had dropped to 7.5 percent by May 2022, and the rate currently sits at 16 percent. By comparison, the US Federal Reserve interest rate is 5.3 percent. Sanctions against the Russian capital economy generated an intense but short-duration effect, after which the market found a new equilibrium.

Overall, the effect of sanctions against the Russian economy appears muted at best. Prokopenko reports the Russian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell just 2.1 percent in 2022 and grew by 2.2 percent in 2023; the International Monetary Fund forecasts Russian GDP will grow by 2.2 percent in 2024. Russia’s economic resilience relies heavily on the country’s resource economy—mainly, oil and gas production, which has remained consistent for more than 10 years, despite sanctions. According to CEIC Data, Russia is currently producing 9.877 million barrels of crude per day, off its 2022 production of 10.974 million barrels per day. The International Energy Agency cites Russia as having a sustainable capacity of 9.98 million barrels of crude per day. Russia’s new budget, which President Vladimir Putin signed in November 2023, projects revenue will grow by more than a third in 2024, reaching 36.6 trillion rubles ($400 billion at current exchange rates). Of this amount, the Russian budget forecasts the oil and gas sector will contribute 11.5 trillion rubles. In a time of increasing US budget deficits, Russian deficits, even under sanctions, remain stable, from a planned 2 percent of GDP in 2023 to 0.8 percent of GDP in 2024. As of 2021,
Russia’s economy was the 11th largest in the world, accounting for 1.8 percent of the world’s total output.\textsuperscript{25}

Sanctions imposed by the United States have not yielded decisive results in constraining Russian aggression in Ukraine. Understanding why this outcome was inevitable requires an understanding of sanctions and their purpose. All sanctions are marketed upon the petit fiction they target foreign actors, such as Russia, Iran, and North Korea. This claim is false. In the case of US sanctions, they operationally target and penalize US actors and actors within US jurisdictions. In other words, US sanctions are US embargoes on US actors and in US jurisdictions, precluding transactions with thousands of named, foreign entities. Although the target appears to be Russia, Iran, or another foreign entity, the actual target is the US economy.

For US sanctions to have a significant effect on Russia, the United States would have to have been a significant trade partner of Russia. In 2012, before Russian aggression, combined US-Russian trade totaled $40 billion, with 73 percent of this total representing exports from Russia to the United States.\textsuperscript{26} In 2022, combined US-Russian trade totaled $16.1 billion, with 90 percent of this total representing exports from Russia to the United States.\textsuperscript{27} The United States was never a significant trade partner with Russia. Consequently, US sanctions could never have generated significant impact. The net effect of embargoes, sanctions, and designations is to truncate the US economy’s reach and global connectivity. The use of sanctions and designations has substituted internally directed regulation for external power projection. Given the United States was not a significant trade partner of Russia, sanctioning US trade with Russia could not generate significant results.

An obvious question is “Why have EU sanctions failed to constrain Russian aggression?” The EU is a significant trade partner of Russia. The EU’s sanctions should have a significant effect. In part, the mix of Russian exports addresses this question. In 2021, Russian global goods exports totaled $492 billion, with 45 percent of this total coming from oil, gas, and minerals.\textsuperscript{28} Fungible commodities with global, liquid markets are insanely difficult to track, sanction, or embargo. The consistency of sanction enforcement across EU member states is an open question. In 2022, EU member states Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Luxembourg, and Slovenia increased imports from Russia, with Hungary having the largest increase at €1 billion.\textsuperscript{29} The EU’s dependence on Russian energy products—fossil fuels, in particular—is significant, constituting €110 billion or 74 percent of the EU’s total energy imports in 2021.\textsuperscript{30} Pipeline gas imports alone represent one-third of all EU energy imports.
from Russia, accounting for “more than 30 percent of all EU gas inflows” in February 2022. Seeking to address its Russian energy dependency, the EU has attempted to substitute liquefied natural gas for Russian pipeline gas and sought alternative sources of energy (Australian coal as opposed to Russian coal). These are expensive, slow, and fragmented solutions to an immediate problem.

The Department of the Treasury’s Consolidated Sanctions List contains 445 primary names, and its Specially Designated Nationals List 13,901 entries across 2,370 pages in PDF format. The cumulative compliance costs of these sanctions on the US economy, both actual costs and opportunity costs, are uncalculated and may be incalculable. As a result, the net positive benefit and the efficiency of sanctions remain open questions. Every US sanction is based on the presumption of continued US financial-network centrality—that the US banking system will dominate the center of a global financial commons. This presumption is static and backwards looking. Great-power competition incents innovation. Innovation embodied in the increasing reach of Alipay and other digital financial systems demonstrates the futility of truncating the US economy and positioning the United States against the sweeping and inevitable trends of increasing connectivity, technological innovation, decreasing cost, and increasing penetration due to the global scaling capabilities of digital products and services.

Because sanctions and designations are the preeminent—if not the sole—meaningful US policy response, these tools have become a process fetish in which the process becomes its justification, regardless of strategically irrelevant results. This diversion of attention and resources into a possibly ineffectual and inefficient approach appears to have stymied innovation elsewhere. Depending on sanctions is lazy thinking that sidesteps the development of actual means and methods of projecting power. By themselves, sanctions deliver ersatz, indirect network constraints, with increasing expense delivering decreasing results.

Sanctions could be valuable if the United States were to use them as part of a larger campaign against Russia’s political economy, rather than as a one-off solution. As we have seen, sanctions can initiate chaotic change in markets, such as the changes seen in the European natural-gas market and the Russian export market. The effects of sanctions can be intense but are of limited duration because the market will seek new prices that clear demand and establish a new equilibrium. This point argues for the use of sanctions as initiators for campaigns of sequential and possibly parallel operations. Sanctions strategy should include initiating systemic failures, such as contagions or cascades. Cascading failures occur when one
fault within a system, a supply chain, or a financial clearinghouse causes subsequent multiple failures downstream. System contagions occur when failures exploit a system’s connective characteristics to propagate effects that are antithetical to the system’s purpose. The Great Depression (1929–39) offers a contagion example. When a local bank failed, it did not repay all its debt, including borrowings from other banks. As a result, the holders of the debt—mostly, regional banks—failed, and lenders had to write off the regional banks’ debts as well. When regional banks failed, their creditors, which were money-center banks, either failed or sold their debt. Lending ceased, and illiquidity seized the economy. The resulting credit contraction spurred more local and regional bank failures. Contagions spread an infection through horizontal, peer-to-peer relationships, and cascade failures occur in vertically integrated systems, like supply chains.

Whether sanctions can be used to constrain Russian or Chinese aggression remains an open question. Currently, states employ sanctions as singular strategic actions. Much like World War I strategy, which maneuvered opposing armies into meeting engagements, sanctions maneuver opposing political economies into meeting engagements. Much like World War I, sanctions devolve into grinding wars of economic attrition rather than catastrophic battles that settle accounts. Currently, sanctions neither provide a solution nor allow for disengagement. As a previously cited example, the United States has embargoed trade with Cuba since February 1962 without strategic effect. Reminiscent of World War I tactics, repeated sanctioning linearly extends the financial engagement, hoping to flank the adversary’s political economy and overcome its economic resistance. Multiple iterations of EU sanctions—12 sanction packages, in the case of Russia—demonstrate this linear approach. This repetition has not worked. Sanctions, by themselves, are not able to provide a decisive solution.

We have reached an inflection point. If history is a guide, solving sanctions’ indecisive results will require something new. Napoleon’s military campaigns, the American Civil War, and World War I demonstrated the paucity of contemporary strategy and strategic art. Each spurred strategic innovation. Likewise, repeated sanctioning of Russia to little effect illustrates a dependency on tactics reminiscent of World War I. In reaction to World War I’s bloody and grinding linear war of attrition, Alexander A. Svechin, Georgii S. Isserson, Vladimir K. Triandafillov, and Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky created the concept of operations—the bridge between strategy and tactics—and the art of the deep operation. This concept transformed Soviet military doctrine in World War II and, through Operations, Field Manual 100-5, US military doctrine
in AirLand Battle. Similarly, we must create new strategic and operational art that frames and guides campaigns to maneuver political economies in and out of engagements, in depth, in a nuclear age.

**Strategic Art**

The obvious question is “Is new art needed?” In part, we can answer this question by reviewing US geostrategic successes and failures from 2001 to the present. The United States is currently emerging from the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) into peer competition. Before the war on terrorism, the last clear strategic victory for the US military was Operation Desert Storm, which began on January 17, 1991, and concluded on February 28, 1991, with the American-led liberation of Kuwait. The core of the war on terrorism, Operation Enduring Freedom, had initial tactical success but was a strategically irrelevant diversion of effort and resources, costing between $2 trillion and $8 trillion and ending ignominiously by unilateral US withdrawal 20 years later, on August 30, 2021, from the continuant operation, Operation Freedom's Sentinel. Over its lifespan, Operation Enduring Freedom spawned a variety of subordinate, equally strategically irrelevant military operations around the globe, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, Operation Odyssey Dawn, Operation Unified Protector, Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation Freedom's Sentinel, and Operation Resolute Support, collectively and colloquially referred to as the war on terrorism. Although Operation Iraqi Freedom succeeded in removing Saddam Hussein from power, the operation’s strategic success is ambiguous at best due to a poorly planned and incompetently led US transition from combat operations. Ironically, Operation Iraqi Freedom resolved the long-standing regional conflict between Iraq and Iran in favor of Iran. Operation Odyssey Dawn resulted in the death of Muammar al-Qaddafi and the collapse of the Libyan state, unleashing chaos in northeastern Africa. This cascading series of incoherent, strategically irrelevant military campaigns demonstrates the paucity of strategic competence guiding the projection of US power. In other words, the United States loses strategically because it invests time and money into operations that do not matter, like irrelevant military campaigns. Even if the United States had won these military campaigns, their diversion of resources and attention almost guarantees strategic failure on the policies and initiatives that do matter.

During the time frame of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the war on terrorism, the persistent strategic frustration and operational inability of the United States to respond
to Russian aggression in Europe, as well as Chinese aggression in Asia, revealed the mismatch of strategy and strategic art. Russia expanded south with the 2008 conflict in South Ossetia and west with the Russian seizure of Crimea and four Ukrainian oblasts—Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhya—in 2014. Russian information warfare targeted Russophone populations in the Baltic states. Sergiy Gerasyshchuk lists Russian active measures, reflexive control, and deep operations in Moldova. Russian hybrid-warfare tactics in Georgia included the issuance of Russian passports to Abkhaz and Ossetians, “allowing Russia to justify its intervention in 2008 with the need to protect Russian ‘citizens.’” Russia’s military actions were accompanied by cyberattacks against the Georgian government’s information outlets and Georgian media, an influx of mercenaries and so-called volunteers into Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and an international disinformation campaign.

Before 2014, Ukraine represented a classic case of Russian subversion tactics used initially to forestall a military response, deter external intervention, and, by extension, make hybrid warfare viable. Alexander Lanoszka cites four Russian hybrid-warfare focuses: ethnic heterogeneity, latent historical grievance, the weakness of local civil society, and the resulting regional complexity, all of which Russia is better positioned to grasp than external powers. Russia’s seizure of Crimea and eastern Ukrainian oblasts in 2014 was a model of successful hybrid warfare. This success may have convinced Russia to attempt a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2021, which has been a catastrophe. In the aftermath of the invasion, Putin has arguably consolidated control over Belarus.


Operationally, the People’s Republic of China honed its art and design through the employment of China’s People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia as one means of achieving the country’s Guangkong or Jingule objective. The Chinese military deployed the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia in 2009 (harassing US Naval ship Impeccable), in the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, and in the 2014 HD-981 clash. Beyond the South China Sea, the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia played a role in a large intrusion in 2016 and, more recently, in waters near the Senkaku Islands. Additionally, China has enhanced its force-projection capabilities by building islands in the South China Sea. The People’s Republic of China has built 20 outposts in the Paracel Islands and seven outposts in the Spratly Islands. In addition, China seized Scarborough Shoal in 2012. In total, the People’s Republic of China has created 3,200 acres of new islands in the South China Sea. Before 2022, Russia’s strategic approach worked. Since Xi Jinping’s accession in 2012, the United States has not effectively contested China’s aggression.

Given Chinese and Russian strategic successes prior to 2022, the United States needs new strategic art to respond effectively. Any discussion of strategic art should start with the definition provided in Joint Planning, Joint Publication 5-0: “Strategic art is the formulation, coordination, and application of ends, ways, and means to implement policy and promote national interests.” Joint Planning further states, “The essence of strategic art is distillation—organizing and articulating the complex interrelationship between national interests, policy, strategic ends, and practice, in clear terms.” Strategic art frames how strategy can imbue policy with force. Contextualizing sanctions as tactics in a campaign against an adversary’s political economy requires strategic art that can formulate, coordinate, and distill engagements between or among political economies. Scale is a problem. Political economics
are enormous systems of systems that are constantly interacting and continually rebalancing, aggregating, and accumulating actions, interactions, and transactions with other political economies, domestic constituencies, and the global commons. Art seeking to frame and guide policy through the cooperation, competition, and conflict of political economies must operate at a high level of abstraction as well as provide strategic subdivisions that support operational design.

Figure 1. Political-economy model
(Source: Created by author)

The idea of a political economy has been a subject of debate for philosophers since the time of Aristotle. According to George E. P. Box and Norman R. Draper, “Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful.”75 No single model can encapsulate all aspects of a political economy. As strategic art, I propose a simple, utilitarian model of a political economy for use in planning and conducting strategic, operational, and tactical engagements between political economies. This model is sufficiently abstract to provide a convenient utility as well as describe the organization and interrelation among a society, polity, and economy. In this model, political economies are codependent categorical activities. The model consists of two categories: political and economic. The economy funds the political; the political facilitates the economic. Each category is internally integrated, and both categories are cross-integrated. The subdivisions within the economy are the factors of production: capital, labor, and resources.76 The capital economy consists of money and credit, equity and debt, and assets and liabilities. The resource economy consists of land, commodities,
and anything else required by production or distribution, other than labor or capital. Lastly, the labor economy consists of human activity and the expenditure of physical or mental effort used in the production and distribution of goods or services.\textsuperscript{77}

Political organization in this model describes the distribution and transference of power and the interrelationships among a society, a polity, and their accepted sets of laws. Customary governance of a society provides the fundamental, foundational, or commonly held assumptions and rationale that position the individual and explain the individual’s relationship to his or her society, from the smallest unit of social organization to the largest.\textsuperscript{78} Civil governance distributes power through a polity and provides its rationale, enforcement, and limits.\textsuperscript{79} Political governance manages the transference of power among competing constituencies within a polity.\textsuperscript{80} The legal organization of a polity provides the operating rule set that manages and intermediates between civil and political governance.\textsuperscript{81}

Cooperation is an act or instance of two or more entities working together for a common purpose or benefit. Cooperation is voluntary, mutual, and beneficial. Competition in the political economy is two or more parties acting independently to secure something of value from a third party.\textsuperscript{82} More specifically, competition is two or more actors independently delivering a value proposition to a third party in exchange for goods or services from the third party, political affiliation, or status as a customer. From the perspective of the third party, competition is voluntary, mutual, and beneficial. Aggression and conflict are neither voluntary, mutual, nor beneficial. Aggression is a forceful, unprovoked act that is hostile and injurious.\textsuperscript{83} Sanctions are a tactical form of instrumental aggression, albeit a form that is nonkinetic, because sanctions are hostile, planned with injurious intent, and neither voluntary, mutual, nor beneficial across participants. Conflict is active opposition to aggression backed by power. As Rudolph J. Rummel remarked, “Power, simply, is the capability to produce effects; conflict is the process of powers meeting and balancing.”\textsuperscript{84} Campaigning in the political economy requires we consider cooperation and competition as much as, if not more than, aggression and conflict.

As mentioned above, US sanctions are embargoes on US actors and actors in US jurisdictions. Sanctions preclude transacting with the sanctioned entity. By their nature, US sanctions are asymmetric and impose asymmetric costs on the US capital economy. On one side of a sanction, only the named
foreign entity is constrained; on the other side, all US actors and all actors in US jurisdictions are embargoed from transacting with the named entity. The first-order effect of a US sanction is to end transactions with the named entity, which changes the market clearing price for similar goods or services purchased by US actors or actors within US jurisdictions. Products and services sold by the sanctioned entity—raw materials, oil, and so forth used as inputs in US economic activities—are no longer available. This reduction of inputs changes the market clearing price for similar goods or services. Sanctions also change the market clearing price for economic inputs the named foreign entity previously purchased from US actors or actors within US jurisdictions. These price changes, or temporary disequilibriums, resonate as second-order effects through every linked economic activity in the resource and labor subcategories of both economies. In addition, third-order effects transmit the shocks within both economies to the political organization of both political economies.

The more a state imposes sanctions and aggresses, the more others will see the state as an aggressor. Aggression by sanction compels organic adaptation by named entities; potential counterparties; and, ultimately, all counterparties to the US capital economy. This adaptation occurs because the risk of transacting with the US capital economy increases every time the United States uses sanctions as a means to aggress. Policymakers who use sanctions to deter malign behavior in effect compel adaptations and alternative structures, which renders sanctions less effective over time. If we must aggress, we must aggress competently. This competence means using sanctions as part of a campaign that holistically anticipates and uses first-, second-, and third-order tactical effects across the political economy to obtain policy objectives strategically.

**Tactical Art**

This point introduces the question of how to conduct tactical actions within or across an adversary's political economy. Economic activity, whether it is production or distribution, requires capital, resources, and labor as inputs. Economic activities add value through transformative processes that use these inputs to produce an output, which is sold or used in subsequent processes. The sale price or internal value of the output must be greater than the cost of inputs and transformation; otherwise, the activity will not be self-sustaining. Tactical economic engagement targets inputs, outputs and transformative processes, and the boundaries that protect them from external despoilation.
Where do sanctions fit? Again, US sanctions are embargoes on the US capital economy. Sanctions block transactions (distribution) of capital through internal administrative and regulatory means. Sanctions are a planned and executed engagement to achieve an objective. In other words, sanctions are a tactic. Because sanctions affect all US actors and US jurisdictions, rather than a singular, specific transaction, sanctions are a boundary action or hardening of the boundary surrounding the US economy. Every US sanction hardens the boundary and increasingly truncates the US economy’s reach. The hoped-for effect, truncation of the named entity’s economic activity, is ancillary. The magnitude of the effect of sanctions depends, in part, upon the centrality of the US capital economy. In other words, the ability of a US sanction to constrain the distribution of the products and services of the named entity depends in degree upon the positional dominance the US capital economy exerts over the formal banking sector of the global financial commons. Although the US capital economy is significant, perhaps exercising dominion in sectors of the global financial commons, US control is neither singular nor absolute.

As opposed to hardening access to and from the US economy, other tactical means include directly engaging the inputs and input transactions as well as the outputs and output transactions of the named entity. If successful, this tactic may deny the adversary’s transactions entirely—or at least increase the adversary’s expense. Penetrating the named entity’s political-economic boundary allows for seizing or misdirecting inputs and outputs inside the entity’s economy as well as disrupting an adversary’s transformative (economic) processes. These tactical actions are more specific and direct than sanctioning one’s own economy. Consequently, the operating costs are lower. Depending on the means of execution, the risks of a tactical action may or may not be lower. Interrupting market clearing mechanisms and risk estimation by interrupting transactions inside an adversary’s political
economy may generate effects that are as short-lived as US sanctions. But even short-lived effects—disrupting the inputs, transformative processes, and outputs of a vertically integrated supply chain—can collapse the system before it can regain equilibrium.

Over time, the repeated use of sanctions as the sole tactic of engagement erodes the tactic’s impact and reduces the persistence of the tactic’s effects. Adversaries adapt. These adaptations accumulate. Eventually, sanctions begin to damage the US economy more than they hurt adversaries’ economies. Sanctions are only one of many tactics available to engage an adversary’s political economy. Other tactics must be employed, and the United States must orchestrate all tactical results within a campaign—a series of related engagements of an adversary’s political economy aimed at achieving strategic and operational objectives within a given time and space. This orchestration alleviates the risk of a sanction failing to achieve strategic objectives. Much like the concept of operations bridged World War I’s gap between strategy and tactics, campaigns in the political economy offer a solution to grinding, repetitive, and ineffectual sanction regimes.

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Endnotes


31. Di Comite and Pasimeni, “EU Decoupling from Russia.” Return to text.

32. Di Comite and Pasimeni, “EU Decoupling from Russia.” Return to text.


47. “Major Military Operations.” Return to text.


54. Lanoszka, “Russian Hybrid Warfare.” Return to text.


72. “China Island Tracker.” Return to text.

73. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Joint Planning, Joint Publication 5-0 (Washington, DC: JCS, 2020), xii. Return to text.

74. JCS, Joint Planning, I-3. Return to text.


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