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by Angela Poh, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2021, 372 pp.,
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BOOK REVIEW

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China's more assertive use of diverse instruments of economic statecraft – economic inducements and economic sanctions – surfaced almost a decade ago. Commentators slowly began to take note. In 2013, for example, James Reilly asserted that 'China today is using economic statecraft more frequently, more assertively, and in more diverse fashion than ever before'.¹ China's use of economic incentives to secure its influence over geopolitically significant countries and regions has subsequently been investigated by a variety of other scholars.² Some have even described China as 'the world's leading practitioner of geoeconomics'.³ However, the existing literature has mainly overlooked the coercive aspects of such economic statecraft and thus there is a dearth of in-depth studies on China's use of economic sanctions. In part, this paucity of scholarly research can be explained by the inherent features of Chinese sanctions, a point to which I return below.

Given China's growing economic heft and the apparent scarcity of profound academic research on China's use of economic sanctions, Angela Poh's recent book is a timely contribution. In *Sanctions with Chinese Characteristics: Rhetoric and Restraint in China's Diplomacy*, she seeks to counter expectations that China will more aggressively engage in the sanctions game, seeing that view as misguided. Her main argument is that China's longstanding sanctions rhetoric has had a constraining effect on its behaviour. More specifically, the working hypothesis offered to readers is based on two building blocks: China's persistent efforts to depict Western sanctions as imperialist and interventionist (sanctions rhetoric) and the so-called international audience cost mechanism.

As Western governments led by the United States tightened their economic grip on China after the Communist Revolution in 1949, it was important for the country to devise a strategy to counteract those actions. At the time, Chinese leadership perceived Western sanctions as concerted attempts to stigmatise it as a 'deviant state'. In an attempt to depict Western sanctions as imperialist and interventionist, China pursued a counter-stigmatisation strategy, which rested on establishing a relationship with nations that could be portrayed as 'fellow sufferers' (that is, former colonies) and advancing an alternative set of principles to guide interstate relations. Hence, these early accounts of economic sanctions sowed the seeds of China's longstanding vehement opposition to economic sanctions, which is reflected both in China's voting patterns at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and in its fierce opposition to unilateral economic sanctions.

This narrative dovetails with China's historical record. It has long condemned the unilateral efforts of other states, particularly the United States and the European Union for flexing their economic muscle in response to the actions of rogue states and non-state actors. Consistent with this stance, China has backed numerous UN declarations condemning unilateral economic sanctions as illegal under international law,⁴ and has cast votes against UN sanctions sought to be imposed on human rights grounds.⁵

Poh's theory of international audience cost assumes that public statements of the governments are not purposeless and may play a role in defining government actions if certain pre-conditions are met. For Poh, the international audience cost mechanism may be triggered if a

state is concerned about international opinion and if there is at least one rhetorical actor present who is willing to use the rhetorical tools of shaming or flattery. Poh believes that China places significant value on gaining credibility and international status, and, as a result, that it frequently modifies its sanctions behaviour once questioned by sanctions targets or other parties. As such, China's anti-sanctions rhetoric has been a natural response given that the historical context in which it evolved constrains its sanctions behaviour, thus rendering contemporary Chinese leaders reluctant to explicitly employ unilateral sanctions for fear of jeopardising their credibility.

In testing her working hypothesis, Poh analyses China's voting patterns at the UNSC, as well as instances when China has engaged in unilateral sanctions. Poh's research also entailed numerous interviews with government officials, which adds significantly to the credibility of her book.

Describing the inherent features of Chinese unilateral economic sanctions, Poh reaches a conclusion that resonates with the views of other scholars. The instances in which coercive measures have been employed share discernible similarities: first, no official threats or public admissions of intended sanctions were made; and second, sanctions were frequently targeted at very specific sectors, thus avoiding affecting overall patterns of trade and investment between China and the target state in a given instance.

In a similar vein, Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris have observed that 'the arbitrariness of China's regulatory system is part of what makes Beijing so effective in its use of geoeconomic instruments'.⁶ This arbitrariness becomes blatantly obvious when one compares the process of imposing sanctions in the United States or European Union with current Chinese practice. Indeed, the imposition of economic sanctions is a highly regulated process in both the US and the EU, which are considered to be global sanctions standard-setters. Additionally, Poh's contribution buttresses the assertion that China has been employing economic sanctions primarily for signalling purposes, the potential of which has already been discussed in the literature.⁷

Poh's analysis reveals that the pattern of China's behaviour might shift and that it may in future demonstrate an increasing propensity to use economic sanctions to compel its targets to alter their policies. This prophecy has been expressed before by the likes of Bonnie Glaser,⁸ as well as Mingjiang Li, who posits that 'China is gradually becoming more prepared to use its economic power for coercive purposes'.⁹ The recent Chinese sanctions levied against Australia attest to the veracity of this assumption.¹⁰

Among the glaring omissions of the book is a missing discussion on the link between the success of the Chinese economic sanctions, including threats of economic sanctions, and the fact that they are relatively infrequently employed or, put differently, whether and to what extent the fact that Chinese economic coercion is used so rarely accounts for its apparent efficacy. A pertinent example in this context would be the half-hearted Chinese sanctions imposed on Norway, which saw a shift in Norwegian policy in that its foreign minister refused to meet with the Dalai Lama in 2014 because of the threat of further deteriorating economic relations with China.

Against the backdrop of the growing tensions between the United States and China, so vividly reflected in the ongoing trade and tech wars, and a looming technological de-coupling, it is anticipated that both states would employ instruments of economic statecraft with increasing frequency. Given that China has made huge strides through enacting new legislation which enables it to impose unilateral economic sanctions, as well as its apparent willingness to use these statutory powers, we may observe a rapid change in China's attitude towards unilateral economic sanctions and their legality. These new realities will offer ample opportunities for further testing the validity of the rhetoric-based argument advanced by Poh.

The book offers a timely and much-needed explanation of when and how China wields its economic power in pursuit of its strategic objectives by applying a rhetoric-based lens, which for Poh is the best way to approach questions of this nature. It is written in simple language, and theoretical discussions are illustrated with examples that make the work appealing to anyone who is interested in the subject of economic sanctions, even to readers with little base knowledge. It should also appeal to a broad subset of the academic community, including in the fields of international relations, political science and international law.

Notes

1. James Reilly, 'China's Economic Statecraft: Turning Wealth into Power,' Lowy Institute, November 27, 2013, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinas-economic-statecraft-turning-wealth-power>.
2. See, for example, Mingjiang Li, ed., *China's Economic Statecraft: Co-optation, Cooperation, and Coercion* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2017); Robert D Blackwill and Jennifer M Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016).
3. Blackwill and Harris, *War by Other Means*, 93.
4. Alexandra Hofer, 'The Developed/Developing Divide on Unilateral Coercive Measures: Legitimate Enforcement or Illegitimate Intervention?' *Chinese Journal of International Law* 16 (2017): 175–214.
5. UN, 'Russia, China Block Security Council Action on Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria,' UN News, February 28, 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/02/552362-russia-china-block-security-council-acti-on-use-chemical-weapons-syria>.
6. Blackwill and Harris, *War by Other Means*, 108.
7. See, for example, Blackwill and Harris, *War by Other Means*, 120, where it is asserted that '[i]n other cases, China has merely [signalled] to its [neighbours] the costs of risking geopolitical daylight between it and them, making those governments less inclined to act in ways that would run counter to China's strategic objectives'.
8. Bonnie S Glaser, 'China's Coercive Economic Diplomacy: A New and Worrying Trend', Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 6, 2012, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-coercive-economic-diplomacy-new-and-worrying-trend>.
9. Li, *China's Economic Statecraft*, xxv.
10. Kath Sullivan, 'China's list of sanctions and tariffs on Australian trade is growing. Here's what has been hit so far,' ABC Rural, December 16, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-17/australian-trade-tension-sanctions-china-growing-commodities/12984218>.

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