**Manufacturing a policy**

Touqir Hussain

Saturday, Jun 25, 2022

The eagerness of the US to start, provoke or engage in wars is well known but what is not commonly known or understood are the reasons. The Russian aggression in Ukraine of course had to be responded to as it raised legitimate security issues for the Atlantic Alliance and posed geopolitical challenges, but the response has far exceeded the stimulus. And tensions over Taiwan are being ratcheted for no apparent reason. So, what exactly lies behind all this?

The popular view that the military industrial complex is responsible for wars and hawkish policies of America is but half-truth. Nor should the neocons share all the blame for this. The reality is far more complex.

We have to look for answers in the American foreign policymaking process which over the decades has lost its seriousness and somewhat its integrity as well. A major reason is the so-called American sense of exceptionalism, first exaggerated by the hubris of the unipolar moment, then scarred by 9/11, and now inflamed by the fear and anxiety of losing the leading great power status to China. All this has aggravated America’s traditional aggressiveness.

Being a mechanistic society, the US feels every problem has a solution. And Americans’ own historical experience tells them the use of force works. So going to war comes naturally to them. They do not look at the wisdom or morality of wars. They look at only one thing: is the war winnable? And what does the US get out of it? Most importantly, is it important to maintain American values (a euphemism for US dominance)?

Americans are always thinking in terms of winning – not realizing that complex issues like wars do not always have clear winners and losers specially in lands whose problems they do not understand. They do not have a concept of history and culture except their own. So, they do not understand that many of the issues they have gone to war for are not susceptible to resolution by force of arms.

That is why when they start losing, the debate is rarely about the war having been a bad idea. It is always about not having had the right winning strategy, and about cutting the losses and getting out. So in the end, Americans never quite know why they really went to war and why they really got out. This is a perfect recipe for continuing to get into and get out of future wars. Harman Ulman in his remarkable book ‘Anatomy of Failure’ says that after the Second World War America has lost every war that was started by it. And he blames the policymaking process.

Another major reason for the erosion in the quality of policymaking is the decline in the quality of democracy. The reasons for that are many but the increasing influence of money into politics and media are the most important. Policy in the US is now all about politics which is all about power. So in the interest of power, politicians are pandering to the public misinformed by commercially motivated media. And it is the opinion of the majority of the electorate which counts, not that of intelligentsia.

The worst is when the politics of the day is in alignment with the elite interests and hobby horses – great power rivalry, for instance. The elite want to preserve the US-led so-called rules-based world which is an adjunct to American hegemony and influence. And as this influence declines there is a desperation to preserve it. Arguably it is also an identity issue for the elite. The net result is that at this moment the anti-China feeling is the highest it has ever been in the US Congress since 1949.

That is not the end but the beginning of the story. The fact is that the US cannot pursue a major foreign policy initiative without hype. Once an issue is hyped up, it gets opened up to many influences who give political support to the policy and then receive dividends from the policy. It thus creates many stakeholders. That is where the military industrial complex and neocons often enter the picture but just as ones among many stakeholders. Both have benefited from the increasing militarization of US foreign policy after 9/11. The military industrial complex has helped itself and neocons have helped Israel.

And then the various diasporas also start frying their own fish. The Indians, many of whom have made a name for themselves in America for their scholastic achievements, are in the forefront of pushing the hawkish view of China.

Many academics or researchers at think tanks are aiming for a government job especially in the White House where the National Security Council size has grown almost 20 times since its inception. They are vying with each other to stand out as the greatest experts on the emerging obsession of the US at any given time, which at the moment happens to be China. They thus become a major contributing factor in the hardening of any policy.

Think tanks also gain. They often get more funding by first inciting and then endorsing an emerging policy. With their writings they have reinforced the hard line on China. Before you know it, the policy has become like a runaway train. It is all about the Indo-Pacific these days in the academia and think tank community.

And then the lobbies also come into action. Taiwan has a very effective lobby. No wonder suddenly Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the House gets up and decides to go to Taiwan. It is almost as if a crisis has been manufactured to benefit from the politics of it. The Democrats who are struggling to maintain their tenuous majority in the Congress think Ukraine and Taiwan might help them in the midterm elections.

The politics of the Ukraine issue can be especially helpful for electoral politics. It is such a compelling media story. It has stirred public emotions in multiple ways. It is a humanitarian crisis ; it is loss of a country’s freedom for no fault of its own; and it is a tragic war story like all war stories. And it is a story of human courage. So, both parties are responding to public expectations that the US did something for Ukraine. There is a bidding war going on between the Democrats and the Republicans about the aid to Ukraine. The latest aid package approved by the Congress is in the amount of $40 billion, way beyond what a good foreign policy would support and way less than what good politics will demand. This is America.

Two remarkable books – ‘Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War’ by former US secretary of defense Robert Gates, and ‘The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat’ by Vali Nasr – identify some of the reasons for the problems with public policy. They both blame electoral politics by the Congress and the White House. The issue is democracy.

Of course, this is not to say there is only politics and no good policy in the US. There are some good policies or at least good ideas. But as the policymaking process gets going specially on an issue that one hand affects public opinion and thus electoral politics and on the other it often gets alloyed with many bad ideas because of politics and influence of many special or institutional interests, bureaucratic turf wars, think tank role and the careerism and ambition of the academics and analysts. This is what has happened to the China policy. Some genuine economic interests and geopolitical concerns have blown way out of proportion.

The only successful policies in the US are those issues in which public opinion is not concerned. Nor are special interests involved. Or– and that is very rare – where public opinion special interests are on the side of good ideas. And where good policies make good politics.

The writer, a former ambassador, is adjunct professor at Georgetown University and senior visiting research fellow at the National University of Singapore.