

Structural Dysfunction in Foreign Policy

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Diplomats, academics and other foreign policy experts who visit the U.S. are often struck by the quality and size of the foreign policy community. This community includes government officials from numerous departments and agencies, members of congress and their staff, NGO leaders and activists, scholars, bloggers, journalists, diplomats and others. There is a great deal of expertise and, notwithstanding, a significant amount of substantive breadth to this community with vibrant, well-informed debates occurring on most issues.

It is, therefore, even more puzzling and upsetting that such a smart, large and vibrant community of foreign policy experts consistently produces such uncreative frequently, unsuccessful and often dysfunctional policies, leading to an expensive network of military bases, poorly thought out wars, diminished leverage with both allies and adversaries and failure to take meaningful leadership on issues of global import such as climate change. U.S. foreign policy is trapped by the illogic of its bureaucracy, an unwillingness to disaggregate what is desirable from what is possible and a view of the U.S. role in the world that is not only inaccurate, but so deeply held that it is rarely seriously challenged even in an otherwise very deliberative foreign policy community.

The network of military bases and large and politically powerful defense community makes it almost impossible to consider a foreign policy that is more modest or to view a problem in any part of the world as not our own. More precisely, it makes it very easy to create a rationale for continued U.S. presence and involvement almost anywhere. Almost every country is either home to a base, next to a country with a base or part of some kind of strategic transportation network, at least according to the logic of this bureaucracy. Once this is accepted, the path to a global American presence is much less obstructed. In a less direct way, the presence of foreign policy communities working on most parts of the world creates a similar bureaucratic logic for continued American involvement in these regions and for overstating the strategic relevance of these regions or issues. Nobody can build a career by admitting that the issue or area they study, while fascinating, just isn't that important from Washington's perspective.

Similarly, too much of the debate about various foreign policy questions focus on what the U.S. should do, rather than what we can do. A truly wise foreign policy would, of course, focus on both. Disaggregating these questions is particularly difficult because it requires both recognizing the limits of American power, but also, at least in the short term, conceding that some people will continue to suffer, be oppressed or even be killed. For example, clearly it very desirable for the U.S. to do something to alleviate the conditions of starvation and oppression under which the people of North Korea live, but there is very little we can do about that. North Korea is one of the few cases where there

is agreement on the limits of American power. Similar questions should lay at the center of numerous current debates, not least the war in Afghanistan.

Conflating what the U.S. would like to do with what it can do is intertwined with the view that permeates American foreign policy that the U.S. has a unique role in the world that allows us, or even requires us, to seek to solve problems across the globe. This view is shared throughout the foreign policy elite, and is probably a defining characteristic of the foreign policy community. If your view is that the U.S. is just another country with its own interests and problems that should probably just take care of its own needs and otherwise mind its own business, you will spend your career on the outside of the foreign policy community looking in. This was not always the case as there have been strong isolationist elements for better and worse among the foreign policy leadership for much of American history, but not so much anymore. Today, the bipartisan consensus, at least at the elite level, around an internationalist foreign policy is strong and the belief in America's unique ability and obligation to be involved in problems and issues across the globe almost universal in this elite.

These factors contribute to a foreign policy community that while largely populated by diverse, smart and committed people, as well as of course, a handful of ideologues, people out only for themselves and their careers, or who may not be so bright, is largely dysfunctional. The foreign policy community in the U.S. is very good at analyzing problems, proposing solutions within a given policy bandwidth, even implementing these policies. However, it is not as good at looking at bigger picture questions and proposing, or even entertaining significant shifts in American foreign policy. This makes it difficult to consciously make major decisions so that U.S. foreign policy is, at least in the big picture, troublingly reactive. For example, the evolution of the U.S. into something of a 21st century empire was never discussed or debated, it just happened, more or less due to entropy. This is not the way empires should be built, or more significantly, how they can ever be walked back once they have been created. As the world moves back to becoming multi-polar, the U.S. will have to rethink much of its foreign policy, while the intellect and ability is there, the structural constraints will make this difficult.