

One Grand Disillusion

Andrei N. Lankov

Andrei N. Lankov

Kookmin University, Seoul, Republic of Korea
Professor

ORCID: 0000-0003-0876-880X

E-mail: andreilankov@gmail.com

Tel.: +82-2-910-5833

Address: Kookmin University, 77 Jeongneung-ro, Seongbuk-gu, Seoul 02707, Korea

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-1-210-216

Richard Hanania. *Public Choice Theory and the Illusion of Grand Strategy: How Generals, Weapon Manufacturers, and Foreign Governments Shape American Foreign Policy*. Routledge, 2022. 230 pp.

In the broadest terms, the situation in the international relations theory can be described as a clash between two main schools—realist and liberal. The realists' leading voices are John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz, while the liberals' mastermind is John Ikenberry. Richard Hanania's new book challenges both camps by offering a new vision of how U.S. foreign policy is shaped.

Hanania's main postulate is

that, contrary to a widespread popular belief, modern democracy in general and the United States in particular cannot be described in principle as a unitary actor, capable of developing and effecting long-term strategic plans.

The gist of Hanania's book is devoted first and foremost to polemics with what he calls the "illusion of grand strategy." Hanania argues that in most situations, both the United States and the majority of other democracies are fundamentally incapable of developing and implementing long-term foreign policies. However, Hanania makes a reservation that this observation does not apply to situations where

the country is faced with an existential crisis, for example, a major war, as well as authoritarian regimes (or, as he puts it mildly, with “strong states that are ruled by a single powerful individual or small group” (p. 37)).

Hanania points out specifically that the people who make up the U.S. political elite are rigorously selected, but the ability to plan for the long term is absent from the list of criteria they are expected to meet. Hanania notes: “American leaders are individuals selected for their skill at winning elections and staying in power, not their ability to implement effective strategy or be thought well of decades into the future” (p. 5).

He recalls that the political fate of the U.S. president is decisively influenced by what happens shortly before the election, and not by long-term trends (pp. 51-52). For this reason, both presidents and other high-ranking officials are reluctant to waste their political resources—intrinsically very limited—on issues that are obviously irrelevant for their future political careers regardless of whether the eventual solutions are successful or not.

Hanania’s ideas about how U.S. foreign policy actually takes shape

revolve around the public choice theory—in fact, an approach that is reflected in the title of the book. In accordance with this theory, the most coherent groups are capable of exercising disproportionate influence on policy-making, while at the same time considering the issues under discussion to be particularly important to themselves. Such groups may be small. Their influence stems from the ability to self-organize, the considerable resources available to them and, most importantly, their keen interest in the ultimate success of a particular policy.

Hanania postulates that certain structural features of foreign policy make it one of the areas where small but organized interest groups can enjoy an unduly strong leverage on strategic decision-making.

The reason is all stakeholders display a high level of coordination and a clear understanding of their interests in foreign policy matters, while ordinary voters tend to believe that these issues do not concern them directly.

For the average American voter, foreign policy issues tend to be of little interest or of any emotional value. Hanania recalls a 2015 poll as a curious but very telling example

in this regard. In that survey, one in three polled Republican Party supporters said they welcomed the bombing of Agrabah, and 44% of the Democrats said they were ready to welcome refugees from the country (p. 45). The tricky thing is such a country has never existed: Agrabah is the homeland of Aladdin, the main character of the same-name animated feature film. A study of the political elites produced a not very optimistic picture, either: people who make important foreign policy decisions in the United States also have a very vague idea of how the outside world really works and are easily influenced by those whom they regard as experts (not always deservedly).

Finally, the veil of secrecy that usually envelopes foreign and defense policies makes it very difficult for the general public to discuss foreign policy issues. All this—the indifference of the public at large, secrecy, and the cohesion of groups of influence—means that U.S. foreign policy, according to Hanania, is not made by some “wise men in Washington” but constitutes a resultant vector, the end sum of efforts exerted by several groups of influence.

As far as foreign policy is

concerned, the decisive groups, according to Hanania, are, firstly, the U.S. military-industrial complex, that is, the defense industry, secondly, the armed forces, and thirdly, foreign governments, which influence the U.S. position on major foreign policy issues.

When it comes to the influence of the military lobby and the military-industrial complex on U.S. foreign policy, Hanania’s book is somewhat reminiscent of critical pamphlets in old Soviet newspapers. The important difference is that Hanania is far more competent in such matters. He emphasizes that the top five lines on the list of the U.S. government’s largest contractors are occupied by arms manufacturers. As he dwells on the merger of the military industry and the armed forces, Hanania recalls that in 2004-2008 about 80 percent of the retired three- and four-star generals got jobs as military-industrial companies’ consultants or board members. In 1994-1998, only about 50 percent of all military retirees were employed in this way (p. 59).

Foreign governments, he says, are another group of stakeholders. They influence U.S. policy

through lobbying and support from the media and research centers. Military-industrial complex companies influence the decision-making process in the same way.

There is a certain contradiction here, which Hanania himself openly admits. It would be appropriate to ask: How can foreign governments and their proxies actively impose long-term strategies on Washington if, according to Hanania, they cannot be regarded as unitary actors, and also have problems developing a long-term strategy and implementing them? To an extent Hanania resolves this contradiction by pointing out that many foreign governments face a real threat or are authoritarian, that is, find themselves in situations where the government can act as a unitary actor with a long strategic planning horizon (pp. 54-55).

However, in this case, Hanania's explanations look not very convincing. He seems to be following in the footsteps of many patriotically-minded intellectuals (for all his skepticism, sober-minded attitudes and excellent knowledge of the underside of U.S. politics, he is certainly an American patriot). He tends to

present his country as somewhat naive, disorganized, and even corrupt to a degree, while its external opponents appear as determined, crafty, and capable of building long-term plans.

It is the influence of the above-described groups, according to Hanania, that explains why the United States tends to get involved in conflicts abroad—very often in situations that have nothing to do with either pragmatic U.S. interests or with the principles the U.S. professes.

Hanania dismisses as a myth any speculations to the effect that the main motive for American interventions abroad is the desire to maintain a “liberal international order,” although precisely such allegations were often employed to excuse U.S. actions: “...there is no country on earth that violates the most fundamental tenets of international law so flagrantly and often” (p. 73).

Hanania is no less skeptical about the U.S. foreign policy's criticism “from the left,” in other words, claims that the main motive behind U.S. interventions boils down to “neo-imperialism,” i.e., the struggle for preferential access to resources or for long-term U.S. hegemony in the world. Based on a

review of a dozen most significant U.S. military operations abroad since 1945, he demonstrates (quite convincingly) that, figuratively speaking, the struggle for a liberal order and human rights, as well as for oil fields and military bases held a very modest place on the list of underlying reasons (pp. 76-88). In his opinion, in most cases, decisions to send troops on overseas expeditions reflected the interests of the three main groups of influence, although temporary circumstances, induced by current policies—and not by global strategy considerations—also played an important role.

In this regard, Hanania points out that the deployment of U.S. military bases and foreign military contingents has remained virtually unchanged since the early 1950s. He believes that this persistence reflects the position of the stakeholders concerned—above all, the U.S. military and U.S. allies. The military and the military-industrial complex, on the one hand, are interested in maintaining their presence abroad, but on the other hand, they are not inclined to expand it to potentially problematic regions, preferring to maintain the “geographical status quo” (pp.

87-89). Allies are usually also interested in maintaining the U.S. military presence, which enables them to save a great deal on their own military spending.

One of the chapters in Hanania’s book addresses situations where U.S. businesses first invest in a country that may pose a threat to U.S. interests in the long run—and then, when that country does become a threat—relations with it deteriorate sharply. Hanania believes that the U.S. policies towards the Soviet Union and towards China after 1972 are classical examples.

Although the U.S. political establishment began to perceive the RSFSR-USSR as a potential threat immediately after the 1917 revolution, U.S. businesses eagerly jumped at the lucrative opportunity to participate in Soviet industrialization and promoted that industrialization in many ways. After 1945, the situation changed radically: the United States opted for a policy of containment.

The U.S. policy towards China is a similar example: American companies have been actively investing in China for decades since the early 1970s, thus systematically turning it into a great economic and

military power. Only when China transformed itself into the world's second largest power (not without the involvement of American businesses), Washington switched to a policy of containment. Not without a pinch of irony Hanania says this approach to politics is confined to a very brief formula: "Build, then balance" (p. 92).

Hanania believes that the model he has proposed explains why the United States' behavior is obviously inconsistent with the idea of a country as a unitary actor concerned with strategic planning. At an early stage, the decisive role in politics belonged to numerous entrepreneurs, fascinated by the prospects of new markets—Soviet or Chinese. At the next stage, when the emergence of a rival becomes apparent, the army and the military-industrial complex come to the fore in policy-making. Businesses may still be interested in maintaining ties with a country that is perceived as a rival, but businesses as a group are less organized and the issues at stake are far less significant, as most entrepreneurs had and still have many alternatives to the Soviet or Chinese markets. As the social choice theory predicts, small but well-organized pressure groups

are beginning to exert the decisive influence on politics.

One section in Hanania's book deals with international sanctions. He recalls that most studies on the effectiveness of economic sanctions have shown that sanctions either have little effect on the states against which they are directed, or, more often, do not work at all (pp. 126-130). However, despite their low effectiveness, sanctions remain an important tool in U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, their popularity has increased over time. Hanania stresses that the reason for this is the effectiveness of sanctions as a tool in home policies. By imposing sanctions on another country, the president and the lawmakers send a message to the voters and the elites that they do take steps to address a certain political issue.

According to Hanania, sanctions are not only ineffective, but also a morally doubtful way of conducting foreign policies, at least because they harm the civilian population, including those groups which oppose the policies that have brought the sanctions about (pp. 122-125). However, the sanctions' targets are foreigners who are usually unable to effectively influence U.S. domestic policies, and their

problems can therefore be easily ignored. From the establishment's point of view, sanctions are a very low-cost way of bolstering popularity ratings and chances of electoral success without clashing with influential interest groups. As Hanania reasonably writes, "if we see sanctions as a tool of domestic politics, American behavior makes more sense" (p. 11).

Perhaps the main conclusion of Richard Hanania's book is this: "American foreign policy is better explained by assuming that individuals within the system seek out their own personal gain rather than assuming actors work towards goals consistent with some conception of national interest" (p. 170).

At the same time, Hanania hints inconspicuously that such a thing as "national interest" does exist in reality, but, with the structure and institutions of the American state as they are, its actions seldom agree with these "national interests," and if they do, only by chance.

In other words, Hanania believes that U.S. foreign policy is

a product of neither virtuous nor insidious strategists, but of groups of people who are usually far more concerned about their material interests and career prospects than U.S. national interests or the prospects for advancing liberal democracy. This point of view is expressed by a person with considerable experience. Also, it is consonant with observations by other insiders, so it should not be ignored by any means.

At the end of the book, Richard Hanania shares advice as to how to handle (or mitigate) the problems he identified. Admittedly, this part of the book—fortunately a short one—is the least interesting. The solutions that Hanania proposes are at best half-measures—for example, his proposal for making clearer and more transparent the links between the lobbyists and the expert community. Clearly, these measures are unlikely to radically change the situation, which is a product of American bureaucracy and, more broadly, of American society as a whole, which Richard Hanania scrutinized in his new book in such a brilliant way.