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Strengthening U.S. Strategic Planning

The U.S. government has lost the capacity to conduct serious, sustained national strategic planning. Although offices and bureaus scattered throughout the executive branch perform parts of this task for their respective agencies, no one place brings all the pieces together and integrates them into anything resembling a coherent, comprehensive whole. Worse still, to judge by the lack of any real effort in recent years to correct this shortcoming, there appears to be very little concern about what it may mean for the nation's security.

These institutional and intellectual deficiencies have existed for some time and cannot be blamed entirely on the current administration or its immediate predecessors. Nevertheless, the consequences of an eroding capacity for strategic planning and an apparently dwindling recognition at the highest levels of government of its importance have become painfully evident in recent years. At a minimum, the absence of an institutionalized planning process seems certain to lead to a loss of efficiency: misallocated resources, suboptimal policies, duplication of effort, lost opportunities, and costly improvisations. At worst, it raises the risk of catastrophic failure.

Although the problem is deeply rooted and no perfect solution exists, significant improvements are possible. These will require changes not only in organization but also in the mind-sets of officials at all levels of the national security system. Even the most strategically inclined top officials cannot do serious planning on their own without a staff and a process to support them. On the other hand, adding planning bureaus is pointless if leaders refuse to use them or to take them seriously.

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Planning, Not Plans

National strategic challenges must be met by the application of most, if not all, the instruments of national power, including diplomacy, financial pressure and economic inducements, information operations, and covert action, as well as the threat or use of military force, and therefore require cooperation among a number of executive branch departments and agencies.

Such challenges may vary in scope and duration, but their defining feature is the demand they impose for coordination in planning and execution. The ongoing efforts to stabilize Iraq and to block or dismantle the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs are critically important national strategic challenges of comparatively limited geographic scope and likely duration. Each will play out, one way or another, over the next several years. By contrast, winning the "long war" against violent Islamist groups and preventing the further spread of weapons of mass destruction will require policies coordinated on a global scale and over a period of decades. The rise of China may be the greatest challenge confronting the United States in Asia and beyond over the course of the coming century. In an ideal world, the U.S. approaches to these interrelated issues should be coordinated and synchronized. At a minimum, they should be designed and executed so as not to conflict with one another.

The purpose of a national strategic planning process is not to produce a single, comprehensive document or an assortment of paper plans for subsidiary challenges, or to prepare for an endless array of specific contingencies. The proper aim of such a process is not really to generate plans at all, but rather to inform and support the deliberations of top executive branch officials as they make strategic decisions. The true aim of national strategic planning is heuristic; it is an aid to the collective thinking of the highest echelons of the government, rather than a mechanism for the production of operational plans. This point is nicely captured in President Dwight Eisenhower's pithy observation that whereas "plans are useless … planning is indispensable."[1]

Four Key Tasks

When General George Marshall established the Department of State's policy planning staff in 1947, he had in mind that it would perform two distinct tasks. The first was "to look ahead, not into the distant future, but beyond the vision of the operating officers caught in the smoke and crises of current battle; far enough ahead to see the emerging form of things to come and outline what should be done to meet or anticipate them." At the same time, "the staff should also do something else—constantly reappraise what [is] being done."[2] Marshall's broad categories of assessment and anticipation can be further divided into four specific functions:

weighing alternative strategies, assessing current strategy, examining high-impact contingencies, and identifying key trends and emerging issues.

The first and most fundamental task of any strategic planning operation is to develop alternative courses of action and to assist policymakers in conducting a systematic evaluation of their potential costs and benefits. Because the responses of the opponent and the unfolding of events can never be predicted with assurance, this kind of calculation is always imprecise and becomes even more so the farther into the future it attempts to project. Yet, for nations as well as individuals, some attempt to identify and evaluate different paths forward is the *sine qua non* of rational behavior.

> What is worse is that there appears to be very little concern about the lack of strategic planning.

Ideally, a rigorous assessment of alternatives should be undertaken before a strategy is chosen or, in the event an existing approach is deemed ineffective, before a change is initiated. Unfortunately, real-life decisionmaking usually bears little resemblance to theoretical models. If it happens at all, the process of examining alternative courses of action may be truncated, unsystematic, or biased by the fact that the "right" answer is already known. Although no bureaucratic mechanism can provide absolute protection against such failings, the absence of any process at all makes them far more likely.

Because strategic interaction involves a contest of adversary wills, it is rarely sufficient for one side or the other simply to choose a path and then to stick to it until it has reached its goal. Unless the opponent is completely outmatched or virtually inert, his reactions, countermoves, and initiatives will almost always call for adjustments and sometimes entirely new approaches. Without an ongoing effort to assess how a struggle is unfolding, it will be impossible to make the tactical shifts or wholesale changes in strategy necessary to increase the odds of success. Although it is always conceivable that a combatant may stumble into victory simply by "staying the course," there is also the danger of blundering into defeat. Like a sailor in heavy winds and high seas who fails to consult his sextant and compass, a nation that does not regularly assess the performance of its strategy and that of its opponent is likely to wander far from its intended destination.

As obvious as these points might seem, governments, having chosen a course of action, often do not engage in rigorous analysis of the sort that could help them to assess their performance and even at times avoid disaster. One important purpose of a strategic planning process is therefore to assist top decisionmakers in engaging in this kind of ongoing evaluation of existing policies and, if necessary, to help them force the rest of government to do the same.

Lurking just beyond the "smoke and crises of current battle" is an array of developments that could change its course. These typically involve actions taken by an adversary or sometimes by an ally or third party, but they may also be events that, despite being exogenous to it, could nevertheless reshape an ongoing strategic interaction. Planners cannot reasonably be expected to anticipate and analyze every conceivable contingency, but they should be able to select a finite number that, because of their plausibility, their likely effects, or some combination of the two, would demand a significant response.

Top decisionmakers are usually aware of at least some of these possibilities and may even have given preliminary consideration to a few of them. They are unlikely, however, to have had the time to work through the implications of specific contingencies in a structured way and still less likely to have made any initial judgments about how to proceed should a particular high-impact event occur. Another aim of a national-level strategic planning process should therefore be to assist decisionmakers in identifying key contingencies, assessing the dangers and opportunities they might present, selecting those that require further detailed planning and preparation, and making preliminary decisions about how to respond should one of them arise.

Even if planners cannot see far enough ahead to anticipate with great precision the "form of things to come," they can often identify key trends and emerging issues of potential significance for ongoing or possible future strategic interactions. The final aim of a national-level strategic planning mechanism should be to bring these developments to the attention of top decisionmakers and to assist them in thinking through their potential implications. As with more narrowly defined, nearer-term contingencies, top decisionmakers are likely aware of at least some important trends and potential emerging issues. Yet, given these trends' comparative lack of urgency and the uncertainties about their eventual emergence and potential significance, it is far less probable that these will have received systematic consideration anywhere in the government, to say nothing of its uppermost reaches.

Obstacles to Implementation

At least three sets of barriers stand in the way of strengthening the U.S. government's capacity to conduct strategic planning: bureaucratic, political, and intellectual.

Bureaucratic Interests

Within the existing organizational structure of the federal government, the National Security Council (NSC) is the logical home for a national strate-

Notional Examples of Strategic Planning: The North Korea Case

- *Weighing alternative strategies.* Prior to confronting Pyongyang with knowledge of its secret uranium-enrichment project in the autumn of 2002: undertake an analysis of broad alternative approaches to compelling the North to abandon its nuclear weapons programs.
- *Assessing current strategy.* Following the initiation of six-party talks in the summer of 2003: perform periodic assessments of whether the process of multilateral negotiations was working, based on analysis of assumptions using previously agreed-upon indicators of progress or its absence.
- *Examining key contingencies.* At any point in the process: conduct an analysis of the likely impact of a North Korean nuclear weapons test and possible alternative U.S. responses to it.
- *Identifying emerging issues.* At any point in the process: begin to analyze the long-term implications for the United States of a more highly proliferated world.

gic planning mechanism. As has already been noted, the executive branch organizations engaged in the formulation and implementation of national security policy, primarily the Departments of State, Defense, Commerce, and the Treasury, as well as the individual armed services, joint staff, and the intelligence agencies, all have some capacity for strategic planning, but these units naturally focus on the concerns of their home departments. It is only within the Executive Office of the President (EOP) that the different strands can be brought together and the activities of the various agencies orchestrated in accordance with some wider vision or plan.

The EOP has had little institutional capacity for strategic planning since the early 1960s, when the incoming Kennedy administration abolished the Eisenhower-era NSC Planning Board. The composition and functioning of this organization made it, in essence, a mechanism for performing the four functions of strategic planning. The Planning Board played a critical role during the 1950s, especially during the formative first term of Eisenhower's presidency. It ceased to function in the early 1960s, and from that point on, the NSC largely abandoned its formal role as the locus for national strategic planning.

Beginning with the Kennedy administration, the national security adviser and the NSC staff became preoccupied with the responsibility of supporting the president, managing crises, and overseeing and coordinating the day-to-

day operations of the rest of the government. In the process, the ability of the national security adviser "to drive an extended iterative process of long-term strategic planning has simply been erased from the panoply of duties the position performs on a daily basis."[3] These responsibilities have not been picked up by any other office or agency. As former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski remarked:

> The Planning Board was a very important instrument, the elimination of which has handicapped the U.S. government ever since then. Because the consequence is that we don't have overall national security planning.… There is a Policy Planning Council in the State Department, which has had its ups and downs.… The Defense Department can't plan national strategies. It's a military organization. And the White House doesn't do it anymore.… [T]he NSC staff coordinates, but it has very little time for planning.[4]

To the extent that there has been something resembling a national strategic planning process in recent years, it has been run out of the vest pocket of the national security adviser; in small, informal clusters of top officials; or, on some narrower issues, in ad hoc interagency working groups. Although NSC staff members have at times had titles that included the words "strategic planning," they have typically operated without significant staff support and have often been charged with other, more pressing duties, such as managing current policy issues or drafting speeches and other public documents, that tend to take precedence over planning.

Whatever their inadequacy, these arrangements have evidently suited the bureaucratic interests of the most powerful players. Rarely has anyone clamored for the creation of a more highly developed planning mechanism. The reasons are not difficult to discern. Strong national security advisers generally seek to retain tight control over policymaking and a short, uncluttered line of communication to the president. Opening the process up to include more agencies and departments would complicate deliberation and decisionmaking and reduce the independent power and importance of the national security adviser. On the other hand, when one or more of the departments is strong and the national security adviser is relatively weak, the department chiefs usually prefer to keep tight control of the parts of national policy that are within their respective domains. The absence of an authoritative strategic planning process makes it easier for them to do so.

Political Pressures

Broader domestic political considerations have tended to bolster these bureaucratic incentives. There is always a measure of tension and mistrust between

elected as well as politically appointed officials and those who are part of the permanent, professional bureaucracy. The former generally regard the latter as unimaginative, second-rate time-servers at best and as disgruntled and potentially disloyal supporters of the party out of power at worst. The bureaucrats return the favor by viewing their superiors as amateurs and political hacks, if not wild-eyed ideologues of one stripe or another.

Because they often have little use for the bureaucracy, top-level officials may see scant need to create a planning process in which the bureaucracy's collective views would be prominently featured. This inclination is reinforced by the fear of leaks or potentially embarrassing revelations by departing former government employees. The current assumption that some of these people will immediately publish memoirs detailing the deliberations of which they were a part cannot help but have a chilling effect on discussions of strategy. The certain knowledge that those who quit and publish first will be the ones who are least happy with the direction of policy only strengthens the impulse to restrict serious deliberations to the innermost circle of political appointees.

> The goal is not to generate plans, but to inform and support executive branch deliberations.

The pervasive culture of leaks is another factor discouraging open, candid debate over the performance of existing strategies, the costs and benefits of possible alternatives, and potential responses to key contingencies or to emerging, longer-term trends. Those who disapprove of an existing strategy may try to discredit it by publicizing harsh internal assessments of its efficacy to date. Alternative strategies can sometimes be discredited before they have even been subjected to rigorous internal scrutiny if their outlines are revealed, often in distorted form, in the media. Two examples of this phenomenon are the leaks at the beginning of the Carter administration regarding possible force drawdowns in Europe and those at the end of the George H.W. Bush administration regarding the possible desirability of a strategy aimed at preserving U.S. superiority by dissuading potential military competitors. The mere fact that an administration is discussing certain courses of action, especially those that may involve the use of force, or even the possible strategic implications of long-term trends such as global warming can be a cause of serious domestic and international embarrassment. For example, the revelation in 2004 that the Defense Department had sponsored research on the possible strategic implications of climate change caused a huge flap and no doubt discouraged future work on this potentially very important subject. Although there is always some danger of exaggerating the extent to which standards of

loyalty and discretion were higher in the past than they are today, there does appear to have been a marked decline in recent decades. In 1953 the Eisenhower administration's Project Solarium review of alternative grand strategies involved hundreds of people working over a period of months. Yet, word of the existence of this review, to say nothing of its contents, does not appear to have leaked. It is very difficult to imagine that an equivalent effort could be carried out today with anything approaching this level of secrecy.

A second approach would focus on strengthening the capabilities of the NSC itself.

The strategic planning vacuum at the top of the executive branch organization chart could presumably be filled if the president and his chief advisers wanted it to be. Political considerations help to explain why recent administrations have preferred to do a version of national strategic planning in smaller, less formal, more ad hoc groups of trusted top lieutenants. The advantage of this approach, in addition to those already suggested, is that its results will reflect the collective wisdom and presumably the consensus views of those on whom the president has chosen to place the most reliance.

The disadvantages are twofold. First, top political appointees are likely to share many of the same assumptions and opinions, thereby increasing the risk of groupthink. Second, because those people are extremely busy with other responsibilities, a planning process that depends on their participation is likely to be sporadic, partial, and unsystematic. It is very difficult to perform any of the functions listed above with a group of people small enough to fit in the White House Situation Room and virtually impossible to perform some of them when that group can meet together for 45-minute intervals one or two days a week at most.

Intellectual Predilections

If the relevant officials do not believe that an improved national strategic planning process is feasible or even desirable, the situation that exists today and has existed with some minor variations since the early 1960s is not going to change. The deepest obstacles to the creation of an effective planning mechanism lie in the minds of the people who would have to expend energy and political capital to bring it into existence.

Many of those who have had experience at high levels of government in recent years regard the notion of trying to create a national strategic planning process with a mix of bemusement and scorn. Some argue that such a mechanism already exists in the form of the process that produces annual national

strategy statements. Others claim more plausibly that it is and ought to be embodied in the informal deliberations of the president and his inner circle. Finally, there are those who insist that they "do strategy" on an ongoing basis as part of a fluid, seamless process of deliberation and decisionmaking. By contrast, broader, more formal planning exercises are cumbersome, slow, prone to leaks, and likely to produce results that are bland, if not entirely devoid of serious content.

Not surprisingly, the attitudes and preferences of most of those who have risen up through the contemporary national security system reflect the incentives embodied within it. In this world, the most important people are generally those who are perceived to be most directly involved in the making and implementation of policy on the most pressing issues of the day. Such people are intensely busy with meetings, phone calls, and travel; their focus is on operations rather than planning and on tactics rather than strategy. Although they may recognize the importance of having a sense of strategic direction to guide their actions, for the most part they take strategy as a given. In any day, month, or year, a very small fraction of their time will be devoted to contemplating strategic issues.

Creating a Strategic Planning Capability

There are at least three ways in which the U.S. government's strategic planning capabilities could be strengthened, discussed below in descending order of potential payoff but also of likely difficulty. Re-creating something such as the Eisenhower-era Planning Board could have a substantial positive impact on U.S. strategic performance. Yet, overcoming the predictable obstacles and objections in order to make it work would also demand a major investment of presidential time and energy. Restructuring the NSC to include a fully staffed planning directorate would pose fewer bureaucratic challenges, but the risk is greater that its work would become decoupled from actual policy. Finally, although it is a relatively simple matter for a national security adviser to appoint one or two full-time planners, experience suggests that their contributions will necessarily be quite limited.

A New Planning Board

Eisenhower's Planning Board was made up of the top officials responsible for strategic planning from each relevant agency. In an indication of how important he considered it to be, the president gave very specific instructions on how board members were to approach their work. Among other things, they were prohibited from accompanying their bosses on international trips so that

they could "stay on the job and supply a continuity of planning and thought" but were also expected to have "an unbreakable engagement" to brief their principals prior to each meeting of the full NSC.[5] Despite being deeply involved in the work of their home agencies, in their role as board members they were "to see themselves as part of a 'corporate body' whose responsibilities were to the president, not to their department or agencies." Eisenhower instructed members that they were to seek "statesmen-like solutions to the problems of national security, rather than to reach solutions which represent merely a compromise of departmental positions."[6]

Re-creating something like the Eisenhower Planning Board could substantially improve planning…

According to former Eisenhower administration official Robert Bowie and historian Richard Immerman, the board's function was to "analyze trends, anticipate as well as identify problems, consider proposed solutions' advantages and disadvantages, and [explicitly] confront … questions of means and ends." It was intended to be the mechanism through which "relevant expertise, intelligence data, and experience from the rest of the government" were drawn together and integrated. Members were expected to draw on the resources of their home agencies but were also empowered to request "memoranda, staff studies, and other pertinent data" from all parts of the government.[7]

The Planning Board often convened two or more times each week, sometimes for as long as three hours at a stretch. Bowie and Immerman describe these meetings as "extremely intimate and informal" with the special assistant for national security affairs (still considered, at that time, primarily as a manager of the NSC system, rather than an adviser in his own right) in the chair, and nine or 10 participants seated around a small table.[8] The end products of these deliberations were policy papers that laid out issues and alternatives and often identified critical disagreements that remained to be resolved by the NSC principals. These papers were briefed to principals prior to full NSC meetings and served to structure their deliberations.[9]

Because of the ways in which the national security system has evolved since the 1950s, this model would require a number of modifications to make it workable today. First, given the growth of the national security adviser's responsibilities for day-to-day policy, it is unrealistic to expect that he or she would be able to devote sufficient time to running an ongoing planning process. For this reason, it might be advisable to appoint two deputy national security advisers, one charged with assisting in the management of the policy process and the other with overseeing strategic planning.

Re-creating something like the Eisenhower cross-governmental planning process would also require identifying an appropriate participant from each relevant agency. In some cases, whom this might be is clearer than in others. The State Department's designee would presumably still be the director of the Policy Planning Staff, just as it was in the 1950s. Officials with equivalent responsibilities would also be designated by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs, and the intelligence community. To participate effectively and at an appropriate level in a government-wide process, some agencies might need to consolidate and strengthen their own departmental strategic planning capabilities and perhaps create new positions with responsibility for coordinating them and joining in interagency deliberations.

...Yet making it work would demand a major investment of presidential time and energy.

Compared to Eisenhower's day, there are now several additional layers of interagency committees and meetings below those of the full NSC chaired by the president. Among these are the Principals Committee, essentially the NSC minus the president, chaired by the national security adviser; the Deputies Committee, made up of the second-in-command to each of the principals, chaired by the deputy national security adviser; and an assortment of regional and functional Policy Coordinating Committees, generally made up of lower-ranking personnel from the relevant agencies and chaired by a member of the NSC staff.

Feeding the products of a new planning process directly to the top of this pyramid would no longer be appropriate. One alternative would be to have a new Planning Board, perhaps reconstituted as a special NSC interagency Strategy Coordinating Committee, brief its reviews and recommendations to the Deputies Committee, which could then either request further refinements or approve the results for consideration by principals.

The main advantage of this approach is that if made to work, it would create a powerful mechanism for pooling the perspectives and synchronizing the collective thought and action of the entire executive branch. Balanced against this is the risk that if not staffed with the right kinds of people and treated with sufficient seriousness at the highest levels, a formal interagency planning process would generate reams of bureaucratic pap rather than fresh strategic thought. Such a mechanism could also become bogged down in disputes that left it deadlocked or incapable of producing results that represented anything more than the lowest-common-denominator conventional wisdom as opposed to sharply defined alternatives. Barring some change in prevailing norms, a

broad-based planning mechanism would probably also be more prone to leaks than one whose members were drawn exclusively from the NSC staff.

An NSC Strategic Planning Directorate

A second, somewhat less ambitious approach would bypass the potential pitfalls and complications of trying to build a full-blown interagency planning process and focus instead on strengthening the capabilities of the NSC itself. One way of doing this would be to create an NSC strategic planning directorate equivalent in organizational status to those that already exist to cover key regions and functional issues. Such an office, like others in the NSC structure, would have a staff of personnel seconded from relevant departments, as well as experts hired from business and academia. It would also have the authority to request information and analysis from other parts of the government and a budget to pay for studies by nongovernmental agencies.

The main function of an NSC planning directorate would be to assist the national security adviser in his or her efforts to support the president and to guide the formulation and implementation of national policy. The national security adviser might request a planning directorate to conduct an assessment of current strategy on a particular issue, to prepare a set of alternative approaches to a given problem, or to examine the possible implications of a critical contingency. A dedicated staff of planners could also assist the other NSC directorates in their work, helping them to add a strategic dimension to their efforts to manage current issues. Finally, to the extent that it had the necessary time and resources, a planning directorate could also take the initiative in drawing attention to important trends or potential long-term issues.

As compared to an interagency board, an NSC directorate would have no direct access to or leverage over the thinking and planning of other parts of the government. Under this model, the flow of ideas would be primarily from the top down, from the NSC through the relevant agencies via principals, deputies, or the various policy-coordinating committees. Because of its size and composition, there is probably a better chance that an in-house NSC group would do work that is intellectually sharp and rigorous. Its analysis, however, would run the risk of having little impact, whether because of bureaucratic opposition, indifference, or the simple absence of effective follow-up mechanisms for ensuring that policy is actually driven by strategy.

An NSC Strategic Planning Cell

A third and final model would forgo the construction of a full-scale directorate and designate a small group of perhaps no more than two or three people to

serve as strategic planning consultants to the national security adviser and perhaps also to the heads of the various NSC directorates. Such a cell would have the manpower to conduct its own analyses of only a handful of problems. For the most part, it would either review the work of others, commission internal or external analyses of questions of interest to the national security adviser, or assist in establishing and overseeing NSC-only or interagency working groups to ensure that they addressed core strategic questions.

Provided that it did not get caught up in more immediate business and assuming that it had the ear of the national security adviser, such a cell could help to raise the overall quality of the government's strategic thinking. Its impact, however, would inevitably be limited by its size and its weak, indirect connections to the rest of the bureaucracy.

A third model would just designate 2–3 people in a strategic planning cell in the NSC.

Waiting for the Next Catalyst

In the U.S. system, major changes in the structure and functioning of the executive branch generally come in the wake of crises that sweep away the usual obstacles to innovation or in the immediate aftermath of elections that bring new presidents to power. In 1947, within a year of the clear collapse of relations with the Soviet Union, the Truman administration had called into being the NSC, the CIA, and most of the other mechanisms with which the United States would conduct the Cold War. Six years later, with an eye on the difficult, long-term competition that he believed lay ahead, Eisenhower made significant adjustments to the structures he had inherited.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration has rearranged large chunks of the federal bureaucracy, in the process creating several substantial, new organizations such as the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Whatever the merits of these changes, they have done little, if anything, to enhance the nation's capacity for strategic thought and action. Such improvements are badly needed, but they will have to await the election of a new president.

Notes

1. Richard Nixon, *Six Crises* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1962), p. 235.
2. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), p. 214.

3. Michele A. Flournoy and Shawn W. Brimley, "Strategic Planning for National Security: A New Project Solarium," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 41 (Spring 2006): 84.
4. "The NSC at 50: Past, Present, and Future," October 31, 1997, http://www.cfr.org/publication/64/nsc_at_50.html (transcript).
5. Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 91, 92.
6. Ibid., p. 91.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.