



Strategic Planning for National Security

A New Project Solarium

By MICHÈLE A. FLOURNOY and SHAWN W. BRIMLEY

For a country that continues to enjoy an unrivaled global position, it is both remarkable and disturbing that the United States has no truly effective strategic planning process for national security. Fifteen years after the Cold War, the United States still lacks a comprehensive interagency process that takes into account both the character of the international security environment and its own ability to deal with future challenges and opportunities. Today, the United States is engaged in conflicts that will, whether by success or failure, completely transform both

the broader Middle East and the U.S. role in the world; yet there is no integrated planning process from which to derive the strategic guidance necessary to protect national interests and achieve U.S. objectives.

While the George W. Bush administration's 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* did articulate a set of national goals and objectives, it was not the product of serious strategic planning. More than 4 years after September 11, 2001, there is no established interagency process for assessing the full spectrum of threats and opportunities endemic to the

new security environment and identifying priorities for policy development, execution, and resource allocation. The articulation of a national vision that describes America's purpose in the post-September 11 world is useful—indeed, it is vital—but describing a destination is no substitute for developing a comprehensive roadmap for how the country will achieve its stated goals. Various institutions in the national security apparatus have attempted strategic planning, but these efforts have been stovepiped within individual agencies and have varied in both approach and quality.

There is still no systematic effort at strategic planning for national security that is inclusive, deliberative, and integrative. David Abshire was correct in concluding that the demands of strategic transforma-

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President Bush and his national security team meet at Executive Support Center

Fleet Combat Camera Group, Pacific (Chad J. McNealey)

that would ensure that agency budgets reflect both the fiscal guidance and the national security priorities of the President.² This essay looks to the Project Solarium of the Eisenhower era for inspiration, design principles, and best practices, while also taking into account lessons to be learned from the experience of other administrations since then. Our aim is to offer a set of actionable recommendations to the President and National Security Adviser that would enhance their ability to integrate all the disparate elements of national power to enable the United States to meet today's challenges and be better prepared for those of tomorrow.

The Problem

Presidents, National Security Advisers, and Cabinet Secretaries face a vexing challenge from the moment they take office until the moment they leave: how to keep the urgent from crowding out the important.³ In the national security arena, "the tyranny of the inbox" often becomes "the tyranny of managing today's crises." For reasons both practical and political, the day's headlines, meetings with counterparts, actions on Capitol Hill, and crises at home and abroad often set the day-to-day agenda for senior leaders. This focus on today, however, often precludes strategic thinking about tomorrow.

The Government currently lacks both the incentives and the capacity to support strategic thinking and long-range plan-

address the types of capabilities the United States should develop to deal with future challenges.

Moreover, there is no established interagency process for regularly bringing together senior national security officials to identify long-range threats and opportunities and consider their implications for U.S. policy and capabilities. While the Intelligence Community provides valuable products to policymakers on a regular basis, it has not been tasked to support a more interactive process in which future trends, possible developments, and wild cards can be discussed and debated to inform national security decisions. Such an interactive process, in which policymakers would hear not only the Intelligence Community's consensus views but also the diversity of views on more controversial topics, would be invaluable to senior leaders faced with making tough choices for an uncertain future.

Finally, existing processes for ensuring that national security policy priorities are reflected in how agencies allocate resources are weak. Today's budgeting processes are largely unchanged from the Cold War era. Agencies generally prepare their own budgets in stovepipes. These budgets are keyed to top-line fiscal guidance from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and to individual agency priorities, but not always to common strategic priorities as articulated in the National Security Strategy or other Presi-

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tion necessitate "structural reforms aimed at constructing a 'rooftop' that integrates the several key strategic pillars (diplomatic, economic, military, etc.) of American power and influence."¹ The reality is that America's most fundamental deliberations are made in an environment that remains dominated by the needs of the present and the cacophony of current crises. There must be a better way. Given that the United States has embarked on what is surely another long twilight struggle, it is past time to make a serious and sustained effort at integrating all the elements of national power in a manner that creates the unity of effort necessary for victory.

This article argues for establishing a strategic planning process for national security that includes three key elements: a quadrennial national security review that would identify national security objectives and priorities and develop a security strategy and implementing guidance for achieving them; an interagency process for regularly assessing the threats, challenges, and opportunities posed by the international security environment and informing the decisions of senior leaders; and a resource allocation process

ning in the national security arena. While the National Security Council (NSC) staff may develop planning documents for their respective issues, they do not have the ability to conduct integrated, long-range planning for the President. While some capacity for strategic planning exists in the Department of Defense (DOD), no other department devotes substantial resources to planning for the long term. Although the Department of State's Policy Planning Office develops a big-picture approach in specific policy areas, such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization enlargement or relations with China, it focuses (with some exceptions) on issues already on the policy agenda rather than those looming over the horizon. Nor does it

dential statements. Furthermore, no consistent process exists for developing budgets across agencies against these policy priorities. Without articulated priorities against which agency budgets can be examined on an interagency basis, the Federal Government has little means of assuring that the hard choices on funding national security missions are being considered within the context of a particular mission and against the full range of the President's top goals and objectives.

OMB is viewed as a dependable, often unbiased White House player with expertise about how programs work and how to pay for them. But it is principally concerned with the fiscal dimension of the overall budget. This primary task of fiscal control means the

office lacks the tools to develop, evaluate, and endorse robust and resource-intensive policy options. While it is excellent at finding resources to support Presidential priorities, the OMB process alone does not necessarily result in a realignment of resources to reflect policy priorities, either within any budget function or across functions.

This is a critical problem in an era in which nearly all national security priorities—from combating terrorism, to preventing and countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, to homeland security—require integrated action on the part of multiple independent agencies.

In sum, the absence of an institutionalized process for long-range planning puts Washington at a strategic disadvantage. If the



President Dwight D. Eisenhower

United States wants to defeat global terrorism, keep weapons of mass destruction out of the wrong hands, and deal with other threats to its vital interests, it needs a proactive national security policy that is sustainable over the long term. Achieving this requires building more capacity for long-range planning at the highest levels of government and creating incentives for harried decisionmakers to participate.

Project Solarium

An example of a truly inclusive and integrated process of long-term strategic planning in the executive branch does exist, although one must look back more than 50 years to find it. President Dwight Eisenhower faced a situation in 1953 similar to what the

current administration faces: how to plan for an uncertain future when the stakes are high and there is little consensus on how to deal with a growing strategic threat.

On entering office, President Eisenhower grew concerned that national security strategy, as articulated in National Security Council Memorandum 68, committed the country to policies that were not sustainable in the long term.⁴ In the late afternoon of May 8, 1953, in the White House solarium, he engaged in an extraordinary debate with his foreign policy advisers on the Soviet threat and what an American national security strategy should look like. John Foster Dulles suggested that the President's focus on "talk about 'liberty' doesn't stop people from becoming communist." Eisenhower replied, "It's men's minds and hearts that must be won."⁵ The breadth and intensity of the debate convinced Eisenhower to propose

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an exercise that would analytically capture the range of options available to the United States while preserving the differences and disagreements between them. "Project Solarium," as it became known, is a rare example of useful strategic planning at the highest levels of the executive branch.

Eisenhower understood from his experience as a military officer that long-term planning, while necessary, is difficult to sustain when daily operations and crises eclipse a commander's efforts to keep his eyes on the horizon. Eisenhower clarified the importance of strategic planning early in his administration, telling the NSC principals that they had little time to think through "the best decisions regarding the national security. Someone must therefore do much of this thinking for you."⁶ Thus, when Project Solarium was proposed, Eisenhower immediately suggested that the administration assemble "teams of bright young fellows" who would "take an alternative and tackle it with a real belief in it just the way a good advocate tackles a law case." Eisenhower wanted each team to present its findings before the NSC principals, with "maps, charts, all the basic supporting figures and estimates, just what each alternative would mean in terms of goal, risk, cost in money and men and world relations."⁷

After working on their positions at the National War College throughout June, the groups convened at the White House on July 16 for a special meeting of the National Security Council. Beyond the principal members of the council, the meeting included the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Service Secretaries, and the NSC Planning Board. During the all-day gathering, each group presented its views and was questioned by opposing groups and the gathered officials. The conversation coalesced around each group's more controversial recommendations. While some participants argued that the conclusions of each group were fundamentally incompatible, Eisenhower dissented and ordered the three groups to meet to "agree on certain features of the three presentations as the best features and to bring about a combination of such features into a unified policy."⁸ While the formulation of what would become NSC 162/2

took several more months, critical elements of the presentations ended up constituting several core strategies.

Project Solarium owed its success to unique features. Unlike most attempts at high-level strategic planning in the executive branch, the project was the direct result of Presidential leadership. Eisenhower understood the value of being challenged by his advisers on even his most basic assumptions regarding the nature of the developing Cold War with the Soviet Union. He understood the benefits of disagreement and sought to institutionalize such a debate in an inclusive and integrative fashion. Throughout Project Solarium and the subsequent drafting of NSC 162/2, all the institutions with a stake in the outcome were an integral part of the process. Moreover, the differences in opinion between both the Solarium groups and the various secretaries and NSC principals were not watered down to build consensus. Eisenhower understood that his job was to choose between irreconcilable positions. "I have been forced to make decisions, many of them of a critical character, for a good many years, and I know of only one way in which you can be sure you have done your best to make a wise decision," Eisenhower recollected in a 1967 interview. "That is to get all of the



Coast Guard patrols
New York Harbor

U.S. Coast Guard

[responsible policymakers] with their different points of view in front of you, and listen to them debate.”⁹ The value Eisenhower placed on preserving alternative analysis and contrarian viewpoints was surely crucial in the formulation of national strategy during his administration. Ultimately, however, he provided the leadership that only a President can exercise.

The Eisenhower administration offers perhaps the best example of long-term strategic planning in the history of the American Presidency. David Rothkopf considers Project Solarium “not just the work of a good executive or a master bureaucrat or even a canny politician; it was a magisterial illustration of an effective President in action.”¹⁰ The success of Project Solarium is directly attributable to the ability of President Eisenhower to preserve and nurture long-term strategic planning as a basic prerequisite of an effective and responsible foreign policy.

Unlearning Lessons

The decline of strategic planning after Eisenhower was largely due to three trends that have transcended the unique features of every modern administration. First, the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs evolved into a powerful political player who, in turn, has helped push the NSC staff to a dominant position in the foreign policy process. Second, informal

methods of Presidential decisionmaking, while always important in the final calculus of choice, have tended to eclipse the more structured and formal mechanisms that were once equally valued and prominent in the process. Finally, as administrations focus on crisis management and daily operations, outside entities such as Congress, other government agencies, and think tanks have attempted to address the strategic planning deficit, with varying results. These trends run deep within the currents of national security

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policy and process and have greatly influenced foreign policy development over the last 50 years.

The changes the Kennedy administration made in the national security decision-making process radically altered the evolutionary course of the NSC system. Primary among them, and the most significant considering the subsequent history of the National Security Council, was the merging of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs and the NSC Staff Secretary in 1961. A single adviser became responsible for both long-term strategic planning and the daily management of the President’s

foreign policy mechanisms. In her influential *Flawed by Design*, Amy Zegart concludes that “Under [McGeorge] Bundy, the NSC staff became a truly Presidential foreign policy staff for the first time. . . . Rather than serve as the executive branch’s professional bureaucrats, they served as Kennedy’s personal advisers.”¹¹ The job of managing the President’s daily activities was surely complicated by the dismantling of the Operations Coordinating Board, a move, in Bundy’s words, “to eliminate an instrument

that does not match the style of operation and coordination of the current administration.”¹² In this more nebulous and informal structure of decisionmaking, Kennedy established a situation room in the White House after the Bay of Pigs failure, which was to serve as a “nerve center” that would give him access to a near-real-time flow of information. Thus, in contrast to the stated desires of Kennedy and Bundy to push coordination out to the various lead departments that would carry out Presidential policy, the elimination of much of the inherited NSC system, combined with the creation of the situation room, quickly led Bundy

and his staff to be overwhelmed by the daily operational needs of a very active President. In dismantling the extensive NSC structure, the administration actually became more reliant on the smaller organization that remained.

The process the Kennedy administration set in motion dramatically altered the relationship between and among the President's senior foreign policy advisers. The National Security Adviser became, if

formal meetings of the National Security Council to the periphery of decisionmaking has been created by the rise of informal mechanisms as the primary arena of Presidential consultation. From Lyndon Johnson's famous "Tuesday luncheons," to Richard Nixon's backroom dealings, to Jimmy Carter's "Friday breakfasts," and to Ronald Reagan's tiny "National Security Planning Group," all Presidents have regularly used informal mechanisms. These procedures

individual agencies to pick up the slack. The problem with strategic planning outside the White House, however, is that it tends to be either confined to the purview of individual agencies or vulnerable to the partisan environment in Washington. There are, nevertheless, lessons to be learned from these efforts. Effective planning requires an interagency process that is inclusive, integrative, and comprehensive and that facilitates the unity of effort necessary for success.

It is unrealistic to suppose that a perfect organizational structure can be created that would ensure both prescient and consistent strategic planning while catering to the unique preferences of different administrations. It is, however, reasonable to consider what basic structure would best ensure a healthy balance between long-term planning versus daily operations and crisis management. The evolution of the National Security Adviser and the NSC staff from the Eisenhower era to the current administration is characterized by increasing emphasis on daily requirements and crisis management. The inability of senior decisionmakers to think strategically, to recognize and adapt to new challenges, and to ensure that resource allocation and policy execution reflect their priorities has contributed mightily to the types of failures we have seen in the post-Cold War period. In the words of the 9/11 Commission, "It is therefore crucial to



Soldiers boarding CH-47 to search for Taliban fighters in Afghanistan

U.S. Army

not a player of equal standing, then very much a peer to the Secretaries of State and Defense through proximity to the President and an increasing role as manager, advocate, policy spokesperson, and diplomat. Long ago ceasing to be simply an executive secretary of the National Security Council, the National Security Adviser has arguably evolved into the central player in the national security decisionmaking process. For these reasons, the ability of that office 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. This evolutionary process has resulted in a significant leadership gap, as no one individual has primary responsibility for long-term strategic planning in the national security domain.

Paralleling the growing importance of the National Security Adviser and the NSC staff has been a decline of the actual National Security Council as a critical catalyst of Presidential decisionmaking. Zegart argues that the NSC staff system has steadily drawn power into the White House for over 50 years, concluding that "the palace guard has, indeed, eclipsed the king's ministers."¹³ Much of the momentum that has pushed

are central tenets of the modern Presidency and should not be dismissed simply because they are informal. While these mechanisms are important features of Presidential decisionmaking, they can never entirely replace

at the outset of a new term, the President should designate a senior national security official to lead an interagency process

what a formal NSC interagency process can provide—analytical debate, long-range thinking, and real policy alternatives derived from reasoned judgment.

The scarcity of long-term strategic thinking within the NSC system has not gone unnoticed. Many executive, congressional, and think tank reports have dealt with the growing inability of the Federal Government to institutionalize imagination. With the exception of Project Solarium and perhaps the Carter administration's attempt at a comprehensive strategic appraisal, the overall trend reveals a declining ability or willingness of the NSC to perform strategic threat assessments and planning. The result of this dearth of strategic thinking at the White House has been a growing number of attempts by

find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination."¹⁴ The prevention of strategic failure in the 21st century depends on the ability of senior national security decisionmakers to drive continuous and extensive efforts at long-term strategic planning.

Charting a Way Forward

In light of this history, and given today's complex and critical national security challenges, we recommend that the President and the National Security Adviser take a number of steps to establish a truly strategic planning process.¹⁵ Although no approach can guarantee a successful national security policy, we believe that the mechanisms below would substantially enhance any President's



Secretaries of State and Defense outside Pentagon after press conference

Fleet Combat Camera Group, Pacific (Chad J. McNealey)

ability to integrate all elements of national power to meet present and future challenges.

Conduct a Quadrennial National Security Review (QNSR). Every 4 years, at the outset of a new term, the President should designate a senior national security official (most likely the National Security Adviser) to lead an interagency process to develop a national security strategy and identify the capabilities required—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. Like Project Solarium, this review should be inclusive, engaging all of the agencies with responsibilities for implementing the strategy, and designed to foster debate and frame key decisions for the President on critical issues, rather than papering over differences to reach consensus.

The review should begin with an interagency assessment of the future security environment and the development of national security objectives and priorities. The heart of the exercise should be devising a national security strategy for achieving these priorities, identifying the capabilities needed to carry out the strategy, and delineating agency roles and responsibilities. Such a process would provide each administration with an opportunity to conduct a strategic review of U.S. security policies and capability requirements and to define a way forward for the future.

The QNSR should produce two primary products: the National Security Planning Guidance described below and the unclassified National Security Strategy already mandated by Congress. As such, it should logically precede, and provide the conceptual basis for, agency reviews, such as the DOD Quadrennial Defense Review.

the President's National Security Planning Guidance would provide the conceptual basis for the unclassified National Security Strategy

Establish an Interagency Threat Assessment Process to Support the QNSR. In the opening phase of the QNSR, the Director of National Intelligence should be tasked to support a series of roundtable discussions for national security principals on the threats, challenges, and opportunities posed by the future security environment. This process could build on existing products (for example, the National Intelligence Council's Global 20XX series) with the aim of identifying future trends, uncertainties, and wild cards as the basis for senior leader discussions going into the QNSR. Perhaps the most important design feature of this threat assessment process would be the focus on highlighting areas not only of strong community consensus but also of strong differ-

ences of opinion and debate. To enable such frank debate, the President and the National Security Adviser must create a Solarium-like environment in which alternative points of view are encouraged, senior officials are not allowed to “shoot the messenger,” and discussion is driven toward decisions and tradeoffs that must be made in the QNSR

rather than a lowest common denominator consensus.

Establish Semiannual “Over the Horizon” Reviews. In these meetings, the Director of National Intelligence would present the deputies (representing NSC, OMB, and all other agencies involved in national security) with an over-the-horizon look at possible developments in the international security environment in 1 year, 5 years, and 10 years or more. This material would be developed in concert with the broader Intelligence Community and would highlight not only points of consensus but also areas of uncertainty and debate that should inform national decisionmaking. This review would increase the visibility of longer-term trends, plausible developments, and wild cards to

stimulate more proactive consideration of ways the United States could shape the international environment and prevent or mitigate crises.

Establish an Annual Table-top Exercise Program for Senior National Security Officials. This exercise program would serve several functions. First, it would allow senior national security officials to manage a crisis or complex operation virtually, without real-world costs and risks. Second, each exercise would enable officials to identify courses of action that might prevent or deter a crisis as well as responses to explore and develop further. Identified courses of action could be more fully developed and explored in the wake of the exercise, possibly for presentation at the next session. Finally, these simulations would enable participants to identify critical gaps in U.S. capabilities and task development of action plans to address them. Progress in implementing these plans could be reviewed in subsequent exercises or as part of the biannual National Security Planning Guidance process.

*Create a Classified National Security Planning Guidance.*¹⁶ The President's National Security Planning Guidance would articulate the White House's national security objectives and the strategy and capabilities required to achieve them. It would provide authoritative planning guidance under the President's signature, directing the National Security Adviser and Cabinet Secretaries to develop particular courses of action and undertake specific activities in support of the strategy. This document would provide the conceptual basis for the unclassified National Security Strategy, the development of interagency concepts of operation for specific mission areas, and the conduct of interagency mission area reviews as described below. It would also be the starting point for all of the national security departments to develop their own implementing strategies, such as the DOD defense strategy. This guidance would be issued in the first year of a new administration and updated biannually.

Create an NSC Senior Director and Office for Strategic Planning. In support of the above recommendations, the National Security Adviser should establish a small but empowered staff devoted to strategic planning and insulated from day-to-day demands and crisis management. The proposed Senior Director for Strategic Plan-

ning would be responsible for coordinating the Quadrennial National Security Review, drafting and staffing the President's National Security Planning Guidance and the National Security Strategy, working with the Director of National Intelligence to prepare the semiannual over-the-horizon reviews, and overseeing the annual national security exercise program.

Conduct NSC/OMB Mission Area Reviews. For high-priority mission areas, such as combating terrorism or homeland security, mission area reviews should be conducted to systematically identify gaps, duplication, or misalignment of effort among agencies. Because of the challenges inherent in the budget process, this strengthened review procedure—with NSC focusing on the President's policy guidance and OMB on fiscal guidance—should be confined to specific mission areas drawn from the most critical Presidential priorities and requiring coordinated implementation across multiple Federal agencies.

For specific high-priority mission areas, budgets would be presented to Congress not only in the traditional form, but also as a crosscut. Such a presentation would help the executive branch to defend its submissions based on the rationale with which they were developed.

The United States is at a crucial point, facing new and challenging threats as well as unprecedented opportunities in the national security domain. Yet at this critical juncture, the Government lacks an interagency process to ensure that national security decision-making at the highest levels is informed by the long view—a considered assessment of the future security environment and how the Nation can best protect and advance its strategic interests, objectives, and priorities over the long term. Nor does it have adequate mechanisms in place to ensure that national security resources are actually allocated and spent according to the President's policy priorities. The concrete steps recommended herein draw on the best practices and lessons learned from previous administrations. Collectively, they offer a new way forward for national security policymaking—a truly strategic planning process that could make the United States more effective in bringing the full range of its instruments of power to bear in meeting the challenges of the 21st century. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ David Abshire, *Comprehensive Strategic Reform: A Panel Report for the President and Congress* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of the Presidency, 2001), 4.

² This article is drawn from a longer paper commissioned by the Princeton Project on National Security, available at <www.wws.princeton.edu/ppns/papers.html>.

³ This section is drawn from work originally done by Michèle A. Flournoy, Anne Witkowsky, and Christine Wormuth at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and first presented in Clark A. Murdock and Michèle A. Flournoy, *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era, Phase 2 Report* (Washington, DC: CSIS, July 2005).

⁴ Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 124.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁶ NSC memorandum of March 19, 1953, quoted from Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "Effective National Security Advising: Recovering the Eisenhower Legacy," in *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2000), 340.

⁷ Bowie and Immerman, 125.

⁸ Eisenhower, quoted in Bowie and Immerman, 138.

⁹ Eisenhower, quoted in Greenstein and Immerman, 344.

¹⁰ David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 71.

¹¹ Amy B. Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 84.

¹² McGeorge Bundy, "Letter to Jackson Subcommittee," September 4, 1961, reproduced in *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council*, ed. Loch K. Johnson and Karl F. Inderfurth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 82–85.

¹³ Zegart, 87.

¹⁴ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: Norton, 2004), 344.

¹⁵ Murdock and Flournoy, 26–42.

¹⁶ The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) recommends the creation of a National Security Planning Guidance (NSPG), aimed at directing the development of both military and nonmilitary plans and institutional capabilities. The QDR advocates an NSPG that would set priorities and clarify national security roles and responsibilities to reduce capability gaps and eliminate redundancies.