

# Strategic Planning for U.S. National Security:

A Project Solarium for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Michèle A. Flournoy and Shawn W. Brimley

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*“When I awakened...I attempted to rise, but was not able to stir: For as I happen'd to lye on my back, I found my arms and legs were strongly fastened on each side to the ground; and my hair...was tied down in the same manner. I likewise felt several slender ligatures across my body, from my armpits to my thighs. I could look only upwards; the sun began to grow hot, and the light offended my eyes.”*

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*

**F**or a country that continues to enjoy an unrivalled global position, it is both remarkable and disturbing that the United States has no truly effective strategic planning process for national security.<sup>1</sup> Fifteen years after the Cold War, the United States still lacks a comprehensive interagency process that takes into account the international security environment's character and America's ability to deal with future challenges and opportunities. Today, the United States is engaged in conflicts that, whether by success or failure, will completely transform both the broader Middle East and the United States' role in the world; yet there is no integrated planning process from which to derive the vital strategic guidance necessary to protect U.S. national interests and achieve U.S. objectives.

While the current administration has done an effective job of articulating U.S. national goals and objectives through its many public 'strategy' documents to the American public, these documents are not the result of serious efforts at strategic planning. Five years after 9/11, there is minimal effort at assessing the spectrum of threats and opportunities endemic to the new security environment and at identifying priorities for policy development, execution, and resource allocation. An articulated national vision that describes America's purpose in the post-9/11 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. To be sure, various institutions in America's national security apparatus have attempted strategic planning, but these efforts have been stove-piped within individual agencies and quite varied in approach and quality.<sup>2</sup>

Given the reports of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, the Presidential Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction Intelligence, and similar investigations by

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper entitled “Strategic Planning for National Security: A New Project Solarium,” was published by courtesy of the Princeton Project in *Joint Force Quarterly* (Issue 41, 2nd Quarter 2006): 80-86.

<sup>2</sup> The Department of Defense, for example, is required by Congress to undertake a Quadrennial Defense Review every four years to develop the nation's defense strategy and program (see the National Defense Authorization Act of 1996, Public Law 104-201). In addition, a number of agencies now develop “strategic plans” to comply with the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (Section 3), but these plans tend not to have significant impact on the policy-making and program implementation of their respective departments. Finally, some agencies, such as the State Department, have policy planning offices that aim to identify longer-term objectives and courses of action for the United States in particular policy areas.

various Congressional committees concerning both the failure to prevent the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and the inaccuracy of intelligence estimates concerning Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD), it is surprising that the national security apparatus at the White House has received so little attention. Yet it is at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue – where all the stovepipes ultimately end – that the most important and strategic national security decisions are made. One would hope that if a culture of long-term strategic planning were to exist in the executive branch, it would be found in the White House – but this is not the case and has not been for at least four decades.

There is still no systematic effort at strategic planning for American national security that is wholly inclusive, deliberative, and integrative. David Abshire was correct in concluding that the demands of strategic transformation necessitate “structural reforms aimed at constructing a ‘rooftop’ that integrates the several key strategic pillars (diplomatic, economic, military, etc.) of American power and influence.”<sup>3</sup> 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 long past time to make a serious and sustained effort at integrating all the elements of national power in a manner that creates the united effort necessary for victory.

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This paper argues for establishing a strategic planning process for U.S. national security that includes three key elements:

1. A quadrennial national security review that would identify U.S. national security objectives and priorities and develop a national security strategy and implementing guidance for achieving them;
2. An interagency process that would regularly assess the threats, challenges, and opportunities posed by the international security environment and inform the decisions of senior leaders; and
3. A resource allocation process that would ensure agency budgets reflect not only the president’s fiscal guidance, but also his or her national security priorities.

<sup>3</sup> David Abshire, *Comprehensive Strategic Reform: A Panel Report for the President and Congress* (Washington: Center for the Study of the Presidency, 2001), 4.

This paper looks to the Solarium Project of the Eisenhower era for inspiration, design principles, and best practices while also taking into account lessons to be learned from the subsequent administrations. Our aim is to offer a set of actionable recommendations to the president and national security advisor that would enhance their ability to integrate all the disparate elements of U.S. national power so that the United States may meet the challenges it faces today and better prepare for those it will surely face tomorrow.

## The Problem

*“War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty. A sensitive and discriminating judgment is called for; a skilled intelligence to scent out the truth.”*

- Carl von Clausewitz

Presidents, national security advisors, 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 in government. This understandable focus on today, however, often precludes strategic thinking about tomorrow.

In a highly complex and uncertain international security environment, this near-term focus brings some substantial risks. Perhaps most importantly, it can force the United States into a predominantly reactive posture in which its options are, by definition, more limited. When the United States fails to anticipate crises or problems before they occur, it forfeits potential opportunities to prevent them or to minimize their consequences and consequently incurs higher costs associated with responding to them after the fact. When U.S. leaders fail to look over the horizon, they also can miss opportunities to shape the international environment in ways favorable to U.S. interests and to hedge against developments detrimental to those interests. Finally, without a long-term perspective, policymakers lack the bigger picture they need to set the nation’s priorities and spend the nation’s limited resources wisely; they lack the perspective they need to make tough choices about where to place emphasis and where to accept or manage a degree of risk.

<sup>4</sup> This section is drawn from work originally done collaboratively by Michèle A. Flournoy, Anne Witkowsky, and Christine Wormuth at 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: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2005).

The U.S. government currently lacks both the incentives and the capacity to support strategic thinking and long-range planning in the national security arena. While individuals on the National Security Council (NSC) staff may develop planning documents for their respective issues, the NSC staff lacks adequate capacity 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 future. Although the State Department'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 tends (with some exceptions) to focus on issues already on the policy agenda rather than challenges that might loom over the horizon. Nor does it address the types of capabilities the United States should seek to develop to deal with future challenges.

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Moreover, no established interagency process regularly brings together senior national security officials to look "over the horizon" in order to identify threats and opportunities that the future security environment may present and to consider their implications for U.S. policy and capabilities. While the intelligence community regularly provides valuable products to policy makers – such as daily briefs on current issues, issue papers on topics of particular interest, and National Intelligence Estimates on countries or issues of highest concern – no one has tasked it to support a more interactive process in which future trends, possible developments, and "wild cards" can be discussed and debated to inform U.S. 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 difficult choices in the face of a highly uncertain future.

Congress, recognizing the absence of a viable strategic planning process for national security, sought to address it by requiring in law that the president submit a National Security Strategy along with the annual budget request.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, this requirement has not always produced the intended

<sup>5</sup> Congress amended the 1947 National Security Act in 1986 as part of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act to require the president to transmit to Congress each year, with the submission of the budget, a comprehensive report on the national security strategy of the United States. See United States Code, Chapter 15, 404a. When a new president takes office, he or she must submit a national security strategy report within 150 days of taking office. "Each national security strategy report shall set forth the

strategic thinking on national security. Instead, each administration from President Ronald Reagan on has treated this statute primarily as a requirement to explain and sell its policies to the public rather than an opportunity to undertake a rigorous internal strategic planning process. The result consistently has been a glossy document that serves a public affairs function but does little to guide U.S. national security policymaking and resource allocation. Consequently, there is no national security analogue to DOD's Quadrennial Defense Review – no established process for delineating the nation's security strategy and the capabilities and programs required to implement it.

Finally, existing processes to ensure that agencies actually allocate resources to reflect national security policy priorities are quite weak. Today's budgeting processes are largely unchanged from the Cold War era, and agencies generally prepare their own budgets in stovepipes. These budgets are keyed to top-line fiscal guidance issued by 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 presidential statements. Furthermore, no consistent process exists for developing budgets across agencies against these policy priorities.<sup>6</sup> Without articulated priorities against which agency budgets can be examined on an interagency basis, the government has little means to assure that the hard choices on funding national security missions are considered within the context of a particular mission and against the full range of the president's top goals and objectives.

At the White House level, neither the National Security Council nor National Economic Council (NEC) staffs have an institutionalized role in coordinating resources across national security agencies. Some individuals at senior levels within the NSC have taken a particular interest in budget matters and supported the OMB budget process, but that interest has ebbed and flowed with personalities. More frequently, NSC offices with specific regional or functional responsibilities have worked closely with OMB to track or support specific initiatives. While this is useful, the process lacks a senior NSC policy official designated to look across national security priorities and work with OMB on budget trade-off decisions across those priorities and across agencies.

national security strategy of the United States and shall include a comprehensive description and discussion of the following: (1) The worldwide interests, goals, and objectives of the United States that are vital to the national security of the United States; (2) the foreign policy, worldwide commitments, and national defense capabilities of the United States necessary to deter aggression and to implement the national security strategy of the United States; (3) the proposed short-term and long-term uses of the political, economic, military, and other elements of the national power of the United States to protect or promote the interests and achieve the goals and objectives referred to in paragraph (1); (4) the adequacy of the capabilities of the United States to carry out the national security strategy of the United States, including an evaluation of the balance among the capabilities of all elements of the national power of the United States to support the implementation of the national security strategy; and (5) such other information as may be necessary to help inform Congress on matters relating to the national security strategy of the United States."

<sup>6</sup> See also discussion in The U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, *Road Map for National Security: Imperative for Change*, 48-49. Available online: <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/nssg/PhaseIIIFR.pdf>.

OMB – the main driver of the budget process – is viewed as a dependable, often un-biased White House player with expertise about how programs work and how to pay for them. Nevertheless, it is principally concerned with the overall budget’s fiscal dimension. This primary task of fiscal control means OMB does not have the tools to develop, evaluate, and endorse robust and resource-intensive policy options. Despite its excellence at finding resources to support presidential priorities, the OMB process alone does not result necessarily in a resource realignment to reflect policy priorities, either within a budget function or across functions.

This is a critical problem during an era in which nearly all U.S. national security priorities – from combating terrorism, to preventing and countering the proliferation of WMD, to homeland security – require integrated action on the part of multiple independent agencies.

In sum, the absence of an institutionalized process for long-range national security planning puts the United States at a strategic disadvantage. If the United States wants to defeat global terrorism, keep WMD out of the wrong hands, and deal with other threats to its vital interests, it needs to have 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 the U.S. government and creating incentives for harried decision-makers to participate in the process.

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### The Past as Prologue: Eisenhower’s “Project Solarium”

*“It is easy to recommend throwing the mass of the forces upon the decisive points, but the difficulty lies in recognizing those points.”*

- Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini

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 over fifty years to find it. In some ways, President Dwight D. Eisenhower faced a situation in 1953 similar to what the current administration faces today: how to plan for an uncertain future when the stakes are high, and there is no obvious consensus on how to deal with a growing strategic threat. Upon entering office, President Eisenhower grew concerned that

America’s national security strategy, as articulated in National Security Council Paper 68, committed the country to policies not sustainable in the long term.<sup>7</sup> In the late afternoon of May 8, 1953, in the White House’s solarium, he engaged in an extraordinary debate with his foreign policy advisors on the threat posed by the Soviet Union and what an American national security strategy should look like. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Eisenhower found themselves in what must have been an intense exchange, with Dulles suggesting that the president’s “talk about ‘liberty’ doesn’t stop people from becoming communist.” Eisenhower replied, “It’s men’s minds and hearts that must be won.”<sup>8</sup> The debate’s breadth and intensity convinced Eisenhower to propose an exercise that would capture analytically 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 and valuable example of useful strategic planning at the highest levels of the executive branch.

Eisenhower understood from his long and distinguished experience as a military officer that long-term planning is necessary but difficult to sustain when daily operations and current crises often eclipse a commander’s efforts to keep his eyes on the horizon. Eisenhower emphasized the importance of strategic planning, telling his NSC principals that they themselves did not have the time to think through “the best decisions regarding the national security. Someone must therefore do much of this thinking for you.”<sup>9</sup> Thus when Project Solarium was proposed, Eisenhower immediately suggested that the administration assemble “teams of bright young fellows,” that 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.”<sup>10</sup>

After spending that June working on their positions at the National War College, the Solarium groups convened at the White House on July 16 for a special NSC meeting. Beyond the principal NSC

<sup>7</sup> See Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>9</sup> NSC memorandum of March 19, 1953 quoted from Frank Greenstein and Richard Immerman, “Effective National Security Advising: Recovering the Eisenhower Legacy” in *Political Science Quarterly* (Vol.115:No.3, 2000): 340.

<sup>10</sup> *Waging Peace*, 125. Eisenhower’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Robert Cutler, created three groups of experts and analysts that would capture the essence of the debate. Group A was led by eminent Soviet expert George Kennan, who would argue in favor of maintaining adequate U.S. armed forces, assisting allies in the build-up of their economic and military strength, and exploiting vulnerabilities of the Soviet and their satellites without “materially increasing the risk of general war.” Group B, headed by Air Force Major General James McCormack, was to argue for the establishment of a clear ‘line of no aggression’ to be communicated to the Soviet Union, beyond which any communist bloc expansion would constitute a *casus belli*. Finally, under the direction of Vice Admiral Richard Conolly, Group C was to argue for a vigorous and sustained attempt at rolling back the Soviet empire through the use of all the tools of statecraft, to include diplomacy, military, economic, covert operations and propaganda. See H.W. Brands, “The Age of Vulnerability: Eisenhower and the National Insecurity State,” in *The American Historical Review*. (Fall 1989): 963-989.

members, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Service Secretaries, and the NSC Planning Board also attended. During the daylong meeting each group presented its views and was questioned and challenged by opposing groups and the gathered officials. The conversation coalesced around each group's more controversial recommendations.<sup>11</sup> While some participants argued that each group's conclusions were fundamentally incompatible, Eisenhower disagreed and ordered the three groups to meet together in order 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."<sup>12</sup> While the formulation of what would eventually become NSC 162/2 took several months after the Solarium meetings, critical elements of those original presentations eventually constituted several core strategies.

Project Solarium owed its success to several unique features. Unlike most attempts at high-level strategic planning in the executive branch, Project Solarium was the direct result of presidential leadership. Eisenhower understood the value of being challenged by his advisors on even his most basic assumptions regarding the nature of the developing Cold War with the Soviet Union. He appreciated 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, every institution with a stake in the outcome was an integral part of the process.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the differences in opinion between the Solarium groups, the various secretaries, and NSC principals were not watered down in an effort to build consensus. Eisenhower recognized that his job was to choose between various irreconcilable differences. "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, and "that is to get all of the [responsible policymakers] with their different points of view in front of you, and listen to them debate."<sup>14</sup> The value Eisenhower placed on preserving alternative analysis and contrarian viewpoints was surely a crucial element in formulating national strategy during his administration. Ultimately, however, Eisenhower provided the leadership that only a president can exercise.

Beyond Project Solarium, the organization of Eisenhower's NSC into the Planning Board and the Operations Coordinating Board helped preserve his administration's institutional ability to focus on the long-term implications of U.S. foreign policy. The Planning Board included officials at the

<sup>11</sup> Group A recommended focusing on German unification and rearmament as a means to advancing containment, Group B emphasized atomic brinkmanship, and Group C argued for the rapid and aggressive U.S. policies to "fracture the communist empire." Ibid, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Eisenhower quoted in *Waging Peace*, 138.

<sup>13</sup> For example, the Department of the Treasury and the Bureau of the Budget were included in the process of debating the Solarium issues and the formulation of the Basic National Security Strategy even though they were normally outside the NSC process.

<sup>14</sup> Eisenhower quoted in Frank Greenstein and Richard Immerman, "Effective National Security Advising: Recovering the Eisenhower Legacy" in *Political Science Quarterly* (Vol.115:No.3, 2000): 344.

The Eisenhower administration was, in fact, the only one to create and maintain such a clear division between long-term planning and daily operations – and the failure to keep such a division was perhaps the most consequential organizational mistake committed by every subsequent administration.

assistant-secretary level who were tasked with overseeing the creation of policy papers that would be pushed up to the NSC for consideration by the Cabinet secretaries and the president. The Planning Board was the mechanism that executed Project Solarium and designed the Basic National Security Policy of 1953 – elements of which remained as basic national security strategy pillars throughout the Cold War. Once the hard choices were made, the Operations Coordinating Board pushed down the decisions and translated the policy into operational plans for action by the various institutions. The Eisenhower administration was, in fact, the only one to create and maintain such a clear division between long-term planning and daily operations. The failure to keep such a division was perhaps the most consequential organizational mistake committed by every subsequent administration.

The Eisenhower administration's approach to national security strategy is perhaps the best example of long-term strategic planning in the American presidency's history. David Rothkopf considers Project Solarium to be "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."<sup>15</sup> Project Solarium's success is directly attributable to President Eisenhower's ability to preserve and nurture long-term strategic planning as a basic prerequisite of an effective and responsible foreign policy.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

## Unlearning Lessons: The Decline of Strategic Planning in Subsequent Administrations

*“The essence of strategy consists in the organization of separate marches, but so as to provide for concentration at the right moment... An error in the original concentration of armies can hardly be corrected during the whole course of a campaign.”*

- Helmuth von Moltke

The decline of strategic planning in subsequent administrations was due largely to three trends that have transcended the unique features of every modern presidential 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 decision-making, 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 presidential administrations have focused 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 in the currents of national security policy and process and have greatly influenced American foreign policy development over the last fifty years.

The Kennedy administration profoundly changed the national security decision-making process, which radically altered the evolutionary course of the NSC system. Primary among these changes – and most significant considering the subsequent history of the NSC – was the merging of the special assistant for national security affairs and the NSC staff secretary in 1961. A single advisor was now responsible for both long-term strategic planning and the daily management of the president’s foreign policy mechanisms. In her seminal work, *Flawed By Design*, Amy Zegart concludes that “Under [National Security Advisor 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 advisors.”<sup>16</sup> Dismantling the Operations Coordinating Board surely complicated the job of managing the president’s daily operations. This was a move, in Bundy’s words, “to eliminate an instrument that does not match the style of operation and coordination of the current administration.”<sup>17</sup> In this more nebulous and informal decision-making structure, Kennedy established a White House situation room after the Bay of Pigs failure to serve as a “nerve center” that would give

<sup>16</sup> Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 84.

<sup>17</sup> McGeorge Bundy, “Letter to Jackson Subcommittee.” 4 September 1961, reproduced in *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council*, Inderfurth & Johnson (eds). (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 82-85.

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 NSC system, combined with creating the situation room quickly overwhelmed Bundy and his staff with a very active president’s daily operational needs. In dismantling the extensive NSC structure, the Kennedy administration actually became more reliant on the smaller organization that remained. Lost in the fog of perpetual crisis was the Planning Board – the only long-term planning cell ever to exist at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

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The process set in motion by the Kennedy administration dramatically altered the relationship between and among the president’s senior foreign policy advisors. The national security advisor became, if not a player of equal standing, then very much a peer to the secretaries of state and defense by virtue of proximity to the president and an increasingly prominent role as manager, advocate, policy spokesperson, and diplomat. The national security advisor long ago ceased to be simply an executive secretary of the National Security Council and has become a central – some would argue *the* central – bureaucratic player in the process of national security decision-making. For these reasons, the national security advisor is no longer able to drive an extended, iterative strategic planning process due to the panoply of duties required on a daily basis. This evolutionary process has produced a significant leadership gap, as no one individual has primary responsibility for long-term strategic planning in the national security domain.

Running parallel to the national security advisor’s and NSC staff’s growing importance has been a decline of the actual National Security Council as a critical catalyst of presidential decision-making. Zegart argues that the NSC staff system has steadily drawn power into the White House for over fifty years, concluding, “the palace guard has, indeed, eclipsed the king’s ministers.”<sup>18</sup> Much of the momentum that has pushed formal National Security Council meetings to the periphery of decision-making was created by the increase in 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 Ronald Reagan’s tiny “National Security Planning Group,” all presidents have used informal mechanisms on a regular basis. These procedures are central tenets of the modern

<sup>18</sup> Zegart, 87.

presidency and should not be dismissed as ineffective simply because they are informal. However, by their very nature, these mechanisms are limited in what they can offer presidents. They are constrained by the limited picture given by a select few individuals, the typically short-term focus on current issues, and the varied interests of the president, which do not typically cover the full spectrum of issues addressed in a more formal, iterative setting. The Reagan administration's reliance on informal mechanisms certainly played a role in the Iran-Contra affair. The President's Special Review Board concluded that "the whole matter was handled too informally, without adequate written records of what had been considered, discussed, and decided."<sup>19</sup> More fundamentally, the review board found, "the most powerful features of the NSC system – providing comprehensive analysis, alternatives and follow-up – were not utilized."<sup>20</sup> Although informal mechanisms are important presidential decision-making features, they can never entirely replace what a formal NSC interagency process can provide – namely analytical debate, long-range thinking, and real policy alternatives derived from reasoned judgment.

Although informal mechanisms are important features of presidential decision-making, they can never entirely replace what a formal NSC interagency process can provide – namely analytical debate, long-range thinking, and real policy alternatives derived from reasoned judgment.

The lack 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.<sup>21</sup> With the exception of Project Solarium and perhaps the Carter administration's attempt at a comprehensive strategic appraisal,<sup>22</sup> the overall trend reveals the NSC's declining ability or willingness to perform strategic threat assessments and planning. As a result, a growing number of individual government agencies have attempted to pick up the slack. DOD's Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) process has generally been regarded as a positive experience that has helped to drive both strategic thinking and broader attempts at defense transformation. The National Intelligence Council's *Mapping the Global Future* and *Global Trends* reports are also notable for

<sup>19</sup> Report of the president's Special Review Board, 1-2 (26 February 1987) quoted in Paul Stevens, "The Reagan NSC: Before and After," in *Perspectives on Political Science*. (Spring 1990): 118-122.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>21</sup> Some recent reports include the Center for the Study of the Presidency's 2001 report, *Comprehensive Strategic Reform: A Panel Report for the President and Congress*, the U.S. Commission of National Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's 2001 report, *Road Map for National Security: Imperative for Change*, and the 2005 study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era, Phase 2 Report*.

<sup>22</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski led an attempt at a comprehensive threat assessment in the lead-up to Carter's Presidential Review Memorandum (PRM) 10.

their attempts to look to – and beyond – the mid-term horizon. The problem with attempts at strategic planning outside the White House, however, is that they tend to be either confined to parochial agency concerns or vulnerable to the partisan political environment in Washington.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, there are lessons to be learned from these efforts: most importantly, inclusive, integrative, and comprehensive planning can only be achieved in an interagency environment that facilitates the unity of effort necessary for success.

It is unrealistic to suppose that a perfect organizational structure can be created to ensure both prescient and consistent strategic planning while catering to the unique preferences of different presidential administrations. It is, however, reasonable to consider what basic structure would best ensure a healthy balance between long-term planning and daily operations and crisis management. The evolution of the national security advisor and the NSC staff from the Eisenhower-era to the current administration is one

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characterized by ever-increasing emphasis on daily operational and crisis management. The inability of senior decision makers 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 find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination."<sup>24</sup> Preventing strategic failure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will depend on the ability of the senior national security decision-makers to drive continuous and extensive efforts at long-term strategic planning.

<sup>23</sup> For example, while the debate over the Team A/B exercise of 1976 still simmers today, it is reasonable to conclude that the ultimate value of the exercise was limited by the political firestorm generated by both the composition of the contrarian team, and the partisan congressional attention it received.

<sup>24</sup> *Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: Norton, 2004), 344.

## Charting A Way Forward: Establishing a Viable Strategic Planning Process for U.S. National Security

*“Organization cannot make a successful leader out of a dunce, any more than it should make a decision for its chief. But it is effective in minimizing the chances of failure and in insuring that the right hand does, indeed, know what the left hand is doing.”*<sup>25</sup>

- Dwight D. Eisenhower

In light of this history, and given the complex and critical national security challenges with which the United States must grapple now and in the future, the president and the national security advisor should take a number of steps to establish a truly strategic planning process for U.S. national security.<sup>26</sup> This process should include three principal elements: (1) a quadrennial national security review that would identify U.S. national security objectives and priorities and develop a national security strategy and implementing guidance for achieving them; (2) an interagency process that would assess regularly the threats, challenges, and opportunities posed by the international security environment and inform the decisions of senior leaders; and (3) a resource allocation process that would ensure that agency budgets reflect not only the president’s fiscal guidance but also his or her national security priorities. Although no process can guarantee a successful U.S. national security policy, these proposed mechanisms would substantially enhance any president’s ability to integrate all of the elements of U.S. national power to enable the United States to more effectively meet present and future challenges.

### *Conduct a Quadrennial National Security Review (QNSR)*

Every four years, at the outset of his or her term, the president should designate a senior national security official (most likely the national security advisor) to lead an interagency process to develop a U.S. national security strategy and identify the capabilities required – economic, diplomatic, military, informational, and so on – to implement the strategy. Like Project Solarium, this review should engage all of the agencies responsible for implementing the strategy; it should be designed to foster debate and frame key decisions for the president on critical issues, rather than paper over differences to reach consensus.

<sup>25</sup> Eisenhower quoted in *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council*, Inderfurth and Johnson eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 29.

<sup>26</sup> These recommendations are drawn from work originally 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: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2005), 26-42.

The review should begin with an interagency assessment, as described below, of the future security environment and the development of national security objectives and priorities. The heart of the exercise should be to devise a national security strategy for achieving these priorities, to identify the capabilities required to implement the strategy, and to delineate broad agency roles and responsibilities. Such a process would provide each administration with an opportunity to conduct a strategic review of U.S. national 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.<sup>27</sup> As such, it should logically precede and provide the conceptual basis for agency reviews, like the DOD Quadrennial Defense Review.<sup>28</sup>

### *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 (such as the National Intelligence Council’s Global 20XX series) to identify 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 its focus on highlighting areas not only of strong community consensus but also of strong differences of opinion and debate. This is a radical notion in today’s intelligence community and is often resisted as “airing one’s dirty laundry” in front of policy makers. As Project Solarium demonstrated, however painful airing these differences in front of senior decision makers might be for the intelligence community, it is also essential to informed decision making on the toughest national security issues. In order for this kind of open and frank debate to take place, the president and the national security advisor must foster a Solarium-like environment that welcomes a healthy competition of ideas. In practice, this means creating an environment in which

In order for this kind of open and frank debate to take place, the president and the national security advisor must foster a Solarium-like environment that welcomes a healthy competition of ideas.

<sup>27</sup> We believe the Congressional requirement for the president to submit a National Security Strategy each year should be amended to require a Quadrennial National Security Review instead.

<sup>28</sup> This would likely require delaying the start of the QDR and other agency reviews until the basic conclusions of the QNSR are known. Consequently, agency reviews would not likely be completed until the second year of a president’s term.

those with alternative points of views are encouraged to speak up, senior officials are not allowed to “shoot the messenger,” and discussion is driven toward framing the key decisions or tradeoffs that need to be made in the QNSR rather than reaching a lowest common denominator consensus.

*Establish semi-annual “over the horizon” reviews for agency deputies to anticipate potential future crises and challenges, and to stimulate proactive policy development.*

In these meetings, the director of national intelligence would present the deputies, representing NSC, OMB, and all of the agencies involved in national security, with an “over the horizon look” at possible developments in the international security environment one year, five years, and ten years or more in the future. This material would be developed in concert with the broader intelligence community and would aim to highlight not only points of consensus but also areas of uncertainty and debate that should inform national decision-making. This review would increase the visibility of longer-term trends, plausible developments, and “wild cards” in order to stimulate more proactive consideration of ways the United States could shape the international environment.<sup>29</sup> This review process could also stimulate interagency contingency planning efforts and provide scenarios for the exercise program described below.

*Establish an annual table-top exercise program for senior national security officials to practice managing future national security challenges and identify capability shortfalls that need to be addressed.*

This exercise program would serve several functions. First, it would allow senior national security officials an opportunity to “experience” managing a crisis or complex operation without the costs and risks involved in a real-world situation. Second, each exercise would enable these officials to identify courses of action that might prevent or deter a crisis. Identified courses of action could be more fully explored and developed after the exercise, possibly for presentation at the next such session. Finally, these simulations would enable the participants to identify critical gaps in U.S. capabilities and to task development of action plans to address them. Progress in implementing these action plans could be reviewed in subsequent exercises or as part of the biannual National Security Planning Guidance process.

<sup>29</sup> Such reviews would build on the existing interagency reviews of the NIC watch list, which aims to identify countries on the brink of instability or failure, but be broader in scope.

*Create a classified National Security Planning Guidance to be reviewed by the NSC, signed by the president in the first year of a new administration and updated on a biannual basis.*

The president’s National Security Planning Guidance would articulate his or her national security objectives and the strategy and capabilities required to achieve them. It would provide authoritative planning guidance under the president’s signature and direct the national security advisor and Cabinet secretaries to develop particular courses of action and undertake specific activities in support of the strategy. Developed in conjunction with OMB, it would also provide capabilities guidance to identify baseline capability requirements in priority areas. 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 the national security departments to develop their own implementing strategies, such as DOD’s defense strategy. To be effective, the development of this National Security Planning Guidance would have to be a top-down, rather than bottom-up, effort that would engage the president and the national security principals.

...the national security advisor should establish a small but empowered staff devoted to strategic planning and insulated from day-to-day demands and crisis management.

*Create an NSC senior director and office dedicated to strategic planning.*

In support of the above recommendations, the national security advisor 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 planning 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 semi-annual “over the horizon” reviews, and overseeing the annual national security exercise program.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> The recent reorganization of the NSC staff includes a new “Senior Advisor for Strategic Planning,” but the responsibilities of this position do not appear to be as expansive as what is proposed here.

*Conduct NSC/OMB mission area reviews for top national security priorities that require resource allocation and implementation across multiple agencies.*

For high-priority mission areas, such as combating terrorism or homeland security, reviews should be designed to systematically identify gaps, duplication, or misalignment of effort among agencies. Recognizing the challenges inherent in the budget process, this strengthened review process – with NSC focused on meeting the president’s policy guidance and OMB focused on meeting the president’s fiscal guidance – should be confined to very specific mission areas that are among the most critical presidential priorities and require coordinated implementation across multiple government agencies.

Specifically, these mission area reviews would include the following elements:

- First, the NSC senior director for strategic planning, in coordination with other NSC senior directors and key agencies, would develop capabilities guidance as part of the president’s National Security Planning Guidance described above. This guidance would articulate baseline capabilities and programs in key mission areas and would be issued in the spring, prior to development of the agencies’ respective budgets.
- Second, once the president’s National Security Planning Guidance is issued, OMB would track planned resource allocation against presidentially mandated priorities before agencies submit their budgets to OMB. It would also review the execution of the prior year’s guidance to ensure accountability and highlight areas in which plans and budgets may need to be changed accordingly.
- Third, OMB and the NSC would co-chair interagency mission area reviews before agency budgets are finalized. These would build on the “hearing” process in place today but would be broader in scope and participation and would be held on a regular basis. They could be conducted in two phases: in the early summer, before agency submissions to OMB; and in the fall, as part of the process of finalizing the president’s budget submission to Congress. Extra reviews would be held as needed for emerging issues not foreseen in the budget.
- Finally, significant unresolved issues would be raised to the president for decision.

For specific high priority mission areas, budgets would be presented to Congress not only in the traditional form, but also as a cross-cut. Such a presentation would enhance the executive branch’s ability to defend its submissions in these areas based on the rationale with which they were developed.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

*“Only if the mind works in this comprehensive fashion can it achieve the freedom it needs to dominate events and not be dominated by them.”*

- Carl von Clausewitz

The United States is at a critical point in its history; it faces a new and challenging array of threats, as well as an unprecedented set of opportunities in the national security domain. Yet at this critical juncture, the U.S. 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 United States 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 national security resources are allocated and spent according to the president’s policy priorities. The concrete steps recommended in this paper draw on the best practices and lessons learned from previous administrations – most notably, the Eisenhower era. Collectively, they offer a new way forward for U.S. national security policy-making – a truly strategic planning process with the potential to make the United States far more effective in bringing to bear the full range of its instruments of power to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>31</sup> There is some precedent for this approach. In the 1990s, OMB developed budget “cross-cuts” for several priority mission areas, such as combating terrorism, counter-narcotics, and counter-proliferation. More recently, it has developed cross-cuts for homeland security and combating terrorism. For another proposal to strengthen NSC and OMB planning and coordination to build capabilities to meet new threats, see John Deutch, Arnold Kantor, and Brent Scowcroft with Chris Hornbarger, “Strengthening the National Security Interagency Process,” in Ashton B. Carter and John P. White, eds., *Keeping the Edge: Managing Defense for the Future* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 265-284.

