
The Challenging Future of Strategic Planning

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“Avoid trivia.”

—Secretary of State George Marshall’s advice to
George Kennan, the first Director of Policy Planning

INTRODUCTION

Strategic planning for American foreign policy is either dead or dying. Or, at least, this is the assessment of mainstream commentators and policymakers in recent years.¹

Michèle Flournoy and Shawn Brimley observe, “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.”² At an academic conference, a recent former director of the U.S. State Department’s policy planning staff complained that, “six years after 9/11, we still don’t have a grand strategy.” Aaron Friedberg, who was director of policy planning for former Vice President Richard Cheney, writes that, “The U.S. government has lost the capacity to conduct serious, sustained national strategic planning.”³ Admiral William Fallon, the Central Command (CENTCOM) commander until the spring of 2008, told the *New York Times* that the next administration must focus more on policy planning: “We need to have a well-thought-out game plan for engagement in the world that we adjust regularly and that has some system of checks and balances built into it.”⁴

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These laments have become common in the past decade, in no small part because of the foreign policy planning of the last two administrations. Members of the Clinton administration's foreign policy team prided themselves on their ad hoc approach to foreign policy problems.⁵ The Bush administration had ambitious policy goals, but it failed to develop the plans and policies necessary to achieve them.⁶ The challenges facing the Obama administration in 2009 are stark: two ongoing wars, a global financial crisis, a rising China, and the mounting effects of global warming. The malaise of strategic planning has fed nostalgia for the days of George Kennan and his founding of the U.S. State Department's policy planning staff.⁷

What, exactly, is strategic planning? In his memoirs, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson provided one useful definition: "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." In addition, Acheson thought that policy planners should "constantly reappraise" existing policies.⁸ Strategic planning in this form is not limited to grand strategy; it can also apply to regional or crisis situations. Of course, strategic or policy planning is not just about top-down implementation.⁹ It can also be about reinterpreting past and current actions through a new analytic lens, one that carries "heuristic punch."

Strategic planning affects three aspects of foreign policy: the plans, the planning, and the planners. If the policy plans are actually implemented, their effect on foreign affairs is self-evident. Even if they are not implemented, however, the process still matters. Planning is not limited to plans; it is also about the patterns of thinking that best match resources and capabilities to achieving desired policy ends. Similarly, if the planners are thought to be capable and strategically minded, then they will be more likely to influence responses to new and unanticipated events. Even when plans are overtaken by events, the process and the individuals are still important.

In foreign policy, the concept of strategic planning is synonymous with the U.S. State Department's policy planning staff, or "S/P" as it is called within the confines of Foggy Bottom. During its sixty-year history, the actual functions of the staff have varied widely, ranging from speech-writing duties to operational functions to acting as a liaison to the foreign policy community outside of the government. According to its own website, the goal of S/P is "to take a longer-term, strategic view of global trends and frame recommendations for the Secretary of State to advance U.S. interests

and American values.”¹⁰ This goes against the grain of the current 24/7, real-time, rapid-reaction era in which policymakers define the long term as anything longer than a week. Part of the challenge of twenty-first century foreign policy is to think about how this concept of long-range thinking should be applied to all foreign policy agencies.

Demand for cogent strategic planning has not been matched by scholarly interest in the subject, especially in recent years.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the glamour of grand strategy will always trump debates about the processes that enable or retard policy planning. In academia, grand theory is accorded greater respect than foreign policy analysis: everyone likes debating the content of the plans themselves more than the bureaucratic “plumbing” behind the plans.

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In another respect, however, previous decades saw at least *some* scholarly interest in this topic.¹² But in recent years, there has been very little research.¹³ With the change in presidential administration comes a hope that strategic planning—inside and outside the State Department—will play an elevated role. At a time when the United States faces a rising number of foreign policy challenges, the need for planning appears to be greater than ever. Are strategic planners housed in the Pentagon, the State Department, Treasury Department, National Security Council, and National Intelligence Council capable of rising to the challenge? Indeed, is strategic planning a viable concept in the twenty-first century? These are the questions that animate this essay.

The need for planning appears to be greater than ever.

Future policymakers need to comprehend the utility and the limits of policy planning. Policy principals in the Obama administration will face external, internal, and historical challenges in adapting the strategic planning process to the challenges of the here and now. Externally, the United States faces a plethora of complex and overlapping challenges that would seem to require an even greater emphasis on strategic planning. Internally, the wars of this century have contributed to an unbalanced mix of foreign policy resources—a material fact that hampers coordination of the policy planning process. Historically, the imposing—and inflated—legacy of George Kennan has cast a formidable shadow over his successors. These factors complicate an already challenging task: balancing the

inherent tension between strategic planning and operational authority in the crafting of foreign policy.

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

With the conclusion of the George W. Bush presidency, there is a demand for new concepts and plans to organize American foreign policy. Containment is dead and gone. The Bush Doctrine was unpopular at home and abroad.¹⁴ Isolationism is simply not a viable option. Both policymakers and scholars need a better grasp of how to craft viable, long-term strategies for the international environment of the twenty-first century.

To describe the current international environment as complex would be an understatement. To appreciate the depth of these external challenges, consider the Princeton Project on National Security. This was a multi-year, multi-pronged effort to develop a twenty-first-century doctrine that could achieve what containment accomplished during the Cold War. The effort to create a “Kennan by committee” involved hundreds of foreign policy analysts. After dozens of meetings, however, the final report concluded, “it became clear that such an organizing principle—such as containment, enlargement, balancing or democracy promotion—would not be forthcoming. Indeed, no overarching concept fit because no one danger facing the United States is the overarching threat.”¹⁵ If today’s leading foreign policy analysts cannot agree on a single heuristic to anchor U.S. foreign policy, policy planning becomes that much more difficult.¹⁶

It is easy to list the external challenges facing the United States. From a conventional, state-centric perspective, the greatest conundrum is coping with the rise of developing country great powers. Two years ago the *National Journal* ran a cover story resuscitating Paul Kennedy’s thesis of America’s “imperial overstretch,” articulated most prominently in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. Kennedy’s assessment of the current situation was stark: “There are now more players on the globe who can screw us rather more effectively than we can screw them.”¹⁷ Two years later, the trend lines only reinforce that assessment, even among America’s allies. Last year, the French foreign minister declared that “the magic is over” for America’s image, and the German finance minister declared that the United States would soon lose its status as a financial superpower.¹⁸

Power is a relative measure, and the United States is in relative decline because of the astonishing growth rates and capital surpluses of the developing world, particularly those of China and India. China possesses two trillion dollars in hard currency reserves and is starting to use its financial

muscle to achieve foreign policy objectives.¹⁹ India's technology sector is growing by leaps and bounds. Both countries are nuclear powers that aspire for blue-water navies. By 2020, the National Intelligence Council projects that China and India will have the world's second and fourth largest economies. While simple extrapolations from the recent past can be misleading, these trends suggest that the growth of India and China will push world politics into a new multipolar era.²⁰

The growth of these states is a challenge unto itself, but it also highlights a related problem. This tectonic shift in world politics further weakens the international institutions that were previously thought to "matter." The United States helped establish a bevy of global governance structures between 1945 and 1955, including the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund. As long as the United States and its allies were the most important actors in the world, these institutions served the twin purposes of coordinating and legitimizing the global rules of the game. As the distribution of power in the world shifts, however, the United States needs to think about how to revamp these institutions in order to maintain their relevance. To its credit, the Bush administration recognized this problem, but its efforts at addressing the problem were fitful.²¹ A decade of global governance reform efforts has yielded little in the way of concrete results.²² Key institutions—like the G-8 or the WTO—threaten to be overwhelmed by new forums, compacts, and institutions.²³ In fact, a recent *Foreign Affairs* essay recommended that the United States and its Western allies simply get out of the way and let the developing world have its turn at global governance.²⁴

Handling a power transition is tricky, but handling it while simultaneously coping with a rise in systemic threats is even trickier. Concerns about terrorism and weapons of mass destruction will, for obvious reasons, remain near the top of the list for the new administration. Just as the balance of power is shifting away from the United States, power is also shifting from states to non-state actors. These non-state actors, like Hamas and Hezbollah, appear to be more powerful than the territorial governments in which they are based. Richard Haass warns about the rise in "nonpolarity"—the ebbing of power from governments to more amorphous, networked actors; Niall Ferguson makes a similar claim when he talks about "apolarity."²⁵ Others have observed the rise of super-empowered individuals who have amassed influence in world politics.²⁶ The U.S. government will need to figure out how best to interface with these new kinds of foreign policy actors.

The most novel threats, however, are even more nontraditional in nature. In the past calendar year, global markets in financial assets, food,

and energy have been buffeted by a series of shocks. None of them appears to be functioning terribly well in response. In all three sectors, national governments have responded with greater intervention. It is far from clear, however, whether these interventions will be welfare-enhancing on any level. Beyond the failures of global markets, there are additional concerns. Global warming will increasingly insert itself onto the international policy agenda, and the specter of a global pandemic remains ever present.

It would be dangerous to exaggerate the challenges posed to the United States. By many metrics, American power remains unparalleled.²⁷

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Recent surveys demonstrate that the United States possesses large reservoirs of soft power in the Pacific Rim, and the worldwide response to Barack Obama's election suggests that American standing may be on the rise.²⁸

However, the distribution of power and influence is shifting away from the United States. The Washington Consensus is now a dead letter, and American values seem less enticing than they did a decade ago. Simply put, at the end of 2008 the United States generated less respect, less influence, less goodwill, less standing, and less relative power in world politics than it did at any time during the post-cold war era.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES

There are several internal constraints that make improving strategic planning difficult. Part of the problem rests with the incomplete search for new strategic ideas. As Jeffrey Legro points out, a lot is required to revamp American grand strategy.²⁹ There needs to be a viable alternative around which others can rally—one that can generate immediately attractive solutions to current problems. In the past four years, a number of scholars and ex-policymakers have tried to come up with new and attractive grand strategies.³⁰ The result is pulling and hauling in different directions. These ideas have different labels—progressive realism, realistic Wilsonianism, ethical realism, liberal realism—and their creators hope to earn fame, fortune, or perhaps a spot on the new administration's foreign policy team. Until the foreign policy machinery of an administration develops a consensus choice for a new alternative, the status quo of policy inertia will remain.

There are other internal reasons for the malaise in policy planning, however. Persistent pathologies in American foreign policy make strategic planning difficult. Bureaucratic politics can make rational planning a

difficult process. Policymakers in this decade complain that rising levels of partisan rancor have made it increasingly difficult to engage in dispassionate strategic planning. Another significant factor is the growing imbalance of foreign policy resources among the relevant bureaucracies. The agencies that command significant resources will inevitably dictate the policy planning process.

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Consider the previous two administrations. During the Clinton years, both the State and Defense Department budgets were cut significantly in real dollar terms, as was foreign aid. Foreign economic policy became increasingly important as barriers to goods and capital fell and global economic interdependence increased. This led to the Treasury Department being widely viewed as the most important agency in American foreign policy by the end of the Clinton years.³¹

This lopsidedness increased in the Bush years, although in a radically different direction. The global war on terror and the war in Iraq led to a vastly increased Defense Department budget.³² In 2007, this led to Defense Secretary Robert Gates publicly pleading for more resources for the civilian foreign policy agencies: “There is a need for a dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security—diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, and economic reconstruction and development. . . . We must focus our energies beyond the guns and steel of the military, beyond just our brave soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen. We must also focus our energies on the other elements of national power that will be so crucial in the coming years.”³³ When one agency head lobbies hard for another agency’s budget, it signals that resource allocation in foreign policy is seriously askew.

In theory, operational control over resources should not matter. In practice, a cardinal rule of bureaucratic politics is that organizations that command greater staff and resources are more likely to get their way in policy implementation. Emergent strategies and plans emanate from actions already taken. The agencies that have the greatest resources will be able to act first, creating path dependencies and lock-ins from which planning units might never escape. No wonder Gates warned in 2008 about the “creeping militarization” of American foreign policy.³⁴

The agencies that command significant resources will inevitably dictate the policy planning process. During the Asian financial crisis, Treasury had the lead in formulating a policy response—despite the

obvious security externalities of the meltdown.³⁵ This was due, in part, to Treasury's growing expertise, while State faced increasing difficulty holding onto its top personnel.³⁶

Similarly, during the last years of the Bush administration, the military began flexing more muscle in the allocation of foreign aid and the coordination of regional policies. The U.S. Southern Command, for example, issued a "Command Strategy 2016" document, which conceived itself as the lead agency coordinating civilian and military resources in the region—despite the fact that the Command did not envision any armed combat scenarios in the region.³⁷ As one assessment of this report concluded, "The sheer number of U.S. military personnel engaged in Latin America, and the resources that the Southern Command has available, makes them the elephant in the room. *They dominate what they coordinate* (emphasis added)."³⁸

The challenge for policy planning is the ability of these units to balance planning and operational roles. George Kennan himself concluded that the fundamental constraint on policy planning was "the impossibility of having the planning function performed outside of the line of command. . . . [T]he operating units—the geographical and functional units—will not take interference from any unit outside the line of command."³⁹ Policy planning directors have handled this challenge in different ways. Some have insisted on maximizing "face time" with policy principals to ensure continued access—traveling with the secretary of state on overseas trips, for example. Others, such as Richard Haass, who was given ambassadorial rank and put in charge of the Northern Ireland peace process, have acquired operational as well as planning functions. Some analysts, however, question whether these tactics have an appreciable effect on policy.

Resource asymmetry and the persistent tension between planning and operations suggest a disturbing paradox about the future of policy planning. Ideally, the policy planning process should be able to determine the proper sequencing and allocation of foreign policy resources. The imbalance in existing resources, however, empowers some agencies at the expense of others, threatening to warp the existing process in a way that guarantees a suboptimal outcome.

One possible way to correct this problem is to create a smooth inter-agency process that handles policy planning. In its waning months, the Bush administration issued a National Security Presidential Directive to formalize the interagency strategic planning process into a National Security Policy Planning Committee. This committee includes the policy planning heads of National Security Council, National Intelligence Council, Joint

Chiefs of Staff, and the Departments of State, Defense, Treasury, Justice, and Homeland Security.

The problem is that the planning units beyond the State Department have had a more precarious existence. Offices of strategic planning have a more intermittent history in the Pentagon, the National Security Council, or the Treasury Department.⁴⁰ Without greater stability of the planning bureaucracy, improved interagency coordination will be difficult to achieve. Bruce Jentleson suggests a more integrated executive branch-wide effort to engage in better strategic planning.

A related question is which planning agency should have the “lead” in such a coordination process. Historically, S/P has had the greatest institutional memory and legacy in these matters, though the center of gravity in foreign policymaking has shifted over the past sixty years.⁴¹ Over the decades, the President has supplanted the secretary of state as the principal foreign policy official. By that logic, Aaron Friedberg posits that the central organizer for strategic planning should be housed within the White House. As Amy Zegart observes in her research, however, the iron laws of bureaucratic politics suggest that such reform efforts will come to naught.⁴²

HISTORICAL CHALLENGES

The mythology that surrounds strategic planning stretches back to Kennan and his formidable intellectual shadow. Under the first heads of S/P—George Kennan, Paul Nitze, and Robert Bowie—the policy planning staff played a pivotal role in the Marshall Plan, NATO, the Korean War, nuclear policy, the Suez crisis, and the European economic recovery.⁴³ The success of these policies has encouraged Kennan’s successors to aim just as high.

Yet it is far from clear whether policy planners can still possess influence equal to Kennan’s. The historical consensus is that the first few directors had the greatest influence over American foreign policy. As far back as twenty years ago, Lucian Pugliaresi and Diane Berliner noted that, “S/P no longer commands a dominant position in the development of U.S. foreign policy.”⁴⁴ Recent initiatives have yielded mixed results. Morton Halperin, for example, used the office to initiate efforts of democracy promotion, and his Community of Democracies project is essentially moribund. Time will tell whether Stephen Krasner’s Partnership for Democratic Governance faces a similar fate.

Does this mean that current staffers at policy planning agencies cannot match their predecessors? Hardly. The conditions necessary for policy planning to play a significant role go far beyond individual ability.

The success of policy planning units depends crucially on the interpersonal relationships of policy principals. The historical consensus is that George Kennan, Paul Nitze, Robert Bowie, Winston Lord, and Dennis Ross are the names that stand out as “making a difference” at S/P. While these individuals were, and are, able statesmen, it is far from clear that they outshine other former directors such as W.W. Rostow, Tony Lake, Paul Wolfowitz, Morton Halperin, or Richard Haass.

A key difference between these two groups was in the relationship between them and the secretary of state, and the relationship between the secretary and the president. The first four directors had the confidence of their bosses (George Marshall, Dean Acheson, John Foster Dulles, Henry Kissinger, and James Baker). Kennan, for example, was the only State Department official to have unfettered access to George Marshall’s office. These secretaries of state, in turn, earned the trust of presidents who were engaged in foreign policy (Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and George H.W. Bush). The same cannot be said of the latter group of policy planning directors, who had to negotiate more troublesome relationships with their policy principals (Dean Rusk/John F. Kennedy, Cyrus Vance/Jimmy Carter, Alexander Haig/Ronald Reagan, Madeleine Albright/Bill Clinton, and Colin Powell/George W. Bush). The best policy planning staff in the world will have little influence unless they assimilate into a favorable bureaucratic and political environment.⁴⁵

It is worth remembering that as much as current analysts look back on the late 1940s as the halcyon era of policy planning, Kennan himself took a much dimmer view. When he decided to resign in November 1949, he wrote in his diary that, “it is time I recognized that my Policy Planning

Staff, started nearly three years ago, has simply been a failure, like all previous attempts to bring order and foresight into the designing of foreign policy by special institutional arrangements.”⁴⁶ Indeed, the doctrine of containment as implemented by Nitze and his successors looked very different from

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Kennan’s original conception. Kennan opposed the creation of NATO, the most successful alliance in world history. For all of his analytical brilliance, Kennan erred in many of his predictions and evinced little understanding of the country he served. It would serve those involved in policy planning to respect Kennan’s intellect without lapsing into hagiography.

Even when the institutional and interpersonal conditions do not exist for policy planning to excel, they are possible in the future. As John Kingdon observes, crisis, change, and uncertainty can provide an agenda-setting moment when none previously existed.⁴⁷ Consider, for example, the “responsible stakeholder” language currently used toward China. In 2003, an S/P staff member conceived this idea and put it into a policy planning paper that was ignored by senior staff. With a change in personnel after January 2005, the same staff member resubmitted the same paper. The second time around, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick embraced the concept and adopted it as his own.

Future policymakers need to comprehend the utility and the limits of policy planning. Externally, the United States faces a plethora of complex and overlapping challenges that require an even greater emphasis on strategic planning. Internally, the wars of this century have contributed to an unbalanced mix of foreign policy resources—a material fact that hampers coordination of the policy planning process. Historically, the imposing—and inflated—legacy of George Kennan has cast a formidable shadow over his successors. These factors complicate an already challenging task: balancing the inherent tension between strategic planning and operational authority in the crafting of foreign policy.

Future policymakers need to comprehend the utility and the limits of policy planning.

If luck is the residue of design, then perhaps the best advice for policy planners is to be fully prepared for the moment when the right policy principals and the right circumstances fuse individual thought with American action. This goes back to the distinction between plans and planning. The plans themselves might not always matter, but the planning process is indispensable. ■

ENDNOTES

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