

On the Scope of National Security

Reconstructing National Security

Our understanding of National Security is not broad enough to take into account new forces that are shaping the destiny of the United States, and the machinery of state is not well designed to meet these new challenges. This is unacceptable at a time when the United States' margin for error has shrunk in every dimension of national power.

Many analysts would accept this characterization. In practice, however, they divide into two camps. Some would expand the concept of national security to make it more comprehensive. Others do not necessarily deny the case for change, but say that expanding the scope of national security will deprive it of real meaning, and lead to incoherence.

National Security (“Standard” Model)

There is a kind of standard model of the term national security: a composite of many variations. In my opinion, the customary meaning of “national security,” is a reference to the United States’ ability to survive threats to its vital interests. The term “vital interest” is, in turn, generally understood to cover whatever is required for the physical survival of the nation and its “way of life.” For these purposes, “the American way of life” means our existence as a republic of free citizens, conducting their affairs according to laws they have made, through multiple systems of government (federal, state, local) that operate within boundaries set by the Constitution.

Challenges to the Standard Model

The concept of national security has been periodically adjusted in response to new threats, including most recently, terrorism. It remains, however, mainly focused on the elimination of physical danger in the immediate present. It pushes away longer range concerns having to do with other vital elements of national power. These “discounted” challenges are pressing for acceptance as officially recognized major components of national security.

Loss of Technological leadership

Assuring our technological primacy is not a given, but if we proceed as if it is an attribute of the national character, we put our nation in peril. We have lost or are in the process of losing that primacy in a succession of fields, many of them directly relevant to defense, and others to the underlying economy. There is also a growing, perhaps already acute, risk that we are losing the capacity to regulate the societal consequences of technological change, and that the results will be substantively dangerous and politically corrosive.

Loss of Economic Leadership

The United States' ability to pay for the costs of its position in the world can no longer be taken for granted. The United States is no longer in control of its financial destiny. As the one-time owner of the world's sole reserve currency, the United States was far more able to handle the costs of national security, than it will be now that it owes its solvency to foreign creditors – particularly when the largest of these is a peer competitor.

Climate Change

Global climate change belongs to a special meta-class of threat. Even at the lower end of the range of possibilities, the potential level of disruption from climate change will challenge every political system, and every institution we depend upon for the regulation of international relations. We are a long way, however, from even partially integrating climate into the working definition of national security, much less fully integrating it into the decision making process.

National Security: Proposed Revision

Under these circumstances, a serious review of what we mean by “national security,” is needed, and in fact overdue. The term has expanded, but slowly, given the strongly held legacy view that national security is an equation about violence, rather than an equation about national vitality and overall power. National defense is a vital element of national security, but needs to be seen as the living composite of the nation’s economic, diplomatic, scientific, physical, energy, agriculture, and financial and moral resources. A revised definition of national security would include but not be limited to:

- Security from violent assault against the nation, whether from within or without, by means of a national capacity to anticipate threat; deter threat; respond to attack by destroying enemies; recover from the effects of attack, and sustain the costs of defense.
- Security against massive societal disruption as a result of natural forces (specifically including the national and international effects of environmental collapse at the systems level, including climate change).
- Security against the failure of major man-made systems, by means of the capacity to plan for contingencies; to organize systems capable of containing the damage; and to organize systems capable of expeditiously repairing the damage.
- Security against societal collapse and demoralization as a consequence of massive economic failure.
- Maintenance of the foundations of national power, by means of sound fiscal policy over time; combined with long-term investment in the elements of competitive strength, including physical infrastructure, public health, public education, and especially the nurturing over time of broad areas of deep excellence in the sciences and in engineering.
- Maintaining the capacity to perform such guarantees as extend to formal allies and associates.
- Preserving the ability to do all of the above within the framework of the Constitution, in a free society, governed by law, faithfully and transparently administered.

Complex Challenges and Networked Solutions.

Modern policy issues are complex phenomena, not linear. Linear problems can be broken down into components, and then sequentially resolved and administered. Complex problems are the result of concurrent interactions among multiple systems of events. They do not lend themselves to permanent solutions, but instead morph into new problems, even as the result of our interventions to deal with them. They do not automatically tend towards stable outcomes, but may exhibit highly disproportionate consequences in response to relatively small changes of condition.

The “legacy” mode of organization of the executive branch is vertical, which reflects an understanding of events as linear. This form of organization significantly impedes the ability of government to deal with complex problems. Authority to act requires detailed supervision from the top, mediated by large bureaucracies. Information about real-world conditions does not travel easily between field-level components of institutions and the policy-making levels. It

flows even less readily between executive institutions. These shortcomings expose the government to “system failure,” which takes the form of sudden failures in the presence of unanticipated threats.

Network theory offers an alternative way to organize management. Networking expands the mandate of lower echelons to act, eliminates middle layers of management, radically improves the flow of information throughout the new system, and inculcates a new organizational “culture” through education, training and career incentives. The national security of the United States is a complex mega- system of systems, and needs to be managed as such. The end-state should not be a single, vast concentric process, but many systems harmonized by common strategic direction, conveyed through a networked administrative system.

Networked forms of organization have been used extensively in the private sector, and are the basis for the ongoing restructuring of the US military. They have not been employed to any significant degree in the executive branch as a whole. Congress is even further behind. The typical Congressional response to complexity involves the notion of central direction from a “tsar,” as opposed to collective response within a network.

As a result of the weaknesses that are pointed to on the civilian side, there is now an imbalance in the government as a whole that favors the military perspective, by virtue of the latter’s long term interest in systems-analysis and programs such as network-centric warfare. The result, as we have seen during the last administration, is a tendency for national security analysis originating within the Defense Department to brush aside the perspectives of other portions of the government, invariably to the detriment of national security. This is not merely a question of the temperament of a particular secretary of defense; it reflects an imbalance in the capacity and organization of the executive branch as a whole. This needs to be addressed by systemic changes involving a redefinition of national security and a rebalancing of the national security system.

What some say “can’t” be done.

Many people respond very favorably to the idea that the scope of national security should be broadened, and that our administrative systems need to be reconfigured so that they can better deal with the resulting complexity. Others, however, oppose these ideas on grounds that they are not actionable. Here is a representative summary:

- Widening the scope of national security will destroy its meaning.
- National security is inherently limited to core missions of protecting the US against violent attack and subversion
- Upgrading the scope of the term “national security” would create something impossible to administer and impossible for the Congress to deal with.
- It is impossible to predict the longer-range future, or even to make good long range forecasts, so no effort should be made to couple policy to systematically researched foresight.
- The political system in any event discounts the future, in favor of current priorities.
- Even if you could reform the executive branch, such changes would be pointless unless the Congress reforms itself, which it will not.
- The bureaucracy will resist any serious redesign of the executive branch.

How to do it, anyway

As National Security Adviser to Vice President Gore, I had eight years to deal with national security under transformed circumstances. Since then, I have had an equal amount of time to explore my ideas, as a research professor at the George Washington University. I have challenged my students with these problems, and have given the opportunity to design practical responses. The results are so worthwhile, that I will conclude by summarizing them.

- Complex Priorities. White House operations should be organized to identify and deal more effectively with “Complex Priorities,” meaning the sets of complex policy issues that are moving fast enough to require action. Due to the connected nature of our 21st century world, our future will be characterized by increasing complexity. White House operations should be augmented by a long-range strategy function that positions the U.S. to become proactive, rather than reactive in its national security outlook. The issues addressed by this strategy group, as they consider the environment holistically and across time, would be longer-range and multi-faceted, and considered to be capable of generating unexpected, consequential side-developments. In addition to strategy, the Executive Branch needs to redefine the potential players in national security, as potentially encompassing all Agencies. This will enable us to, in effect, “pre-position” capabilities and expectations – and be better able to “bring the Government to bear” on issues of national security.
- Principals and Deputies to deal with National Strategy. At the level of the Principals and Deputies, two new bodies should be formed to deal specifically

with the issue of a holistic national strategy. These two bodies would routinely engage cabinet level officers and the key presidential assistants, including the Director of Management and Budget (to more closely couple long-range policy decisions and financial implications).

- Metrics and Feedback Systems. Policy determinations at the White House levels should include specified metrics to gauge effectiveness, and should incorporate feed-back systems to make sure that the potential exists to adjust policy based on results in the course of implementation. These metrics should not be limited to outcome metrics, but should also assess the ability of the system to adapt, be proactive, and exhibit other desirable process metrics. Metrics tied to current circumstances alone will not result in system improvement over time.
- Networked operations in the Executive Branch. Networked procedures at the White House should lead the way to networked operations within the executive branch generally. Networking within the executive branch would be assisted by means of advanced information technology, to assist in the flow of information across organizational boundaries, and to help in the establishment of ad hoc networks and coalitions to solve problems. While improved technology is essential, these operations must be enabled through comprehensive changes to resource mechanisms, personnel incentives, programs that optimize to local agency needs, and the establishment of a “whole of government” culture and approach to leadership.
- Promoting “cultural” change in the Executive Branch.. Establishing new definitions and new systems of organization for national security must be accompanied by “cultural” changes within the executive branch. Over the longer-term, education, training and incentives would be used to promote a cross-disciplinary culture among civil servants.
- Congressional buy-in. The Congress would be encouraged to create procedures of its own for dealing with Complex Priorities through strategic planning and visioning, including the possibility of standing committees with broad charters to engage in hearings and to form legislative proposals for this class of issue. Congressional presence would be a feature of the White House system for identifying and developing policy for Complex Priorities and national strategies. All adaptations in Congressional procedure can, and should be made by using inherent flexibility in the rules.

Summation.

Those who hold to the conservative view of national security rely heavily on precedents to be found in the analytic literature and in practice. But what was adequate even in the recent past is not automatically a valid response for what is coming. Precedent-based analysis works only if lessons from the past continue to be adequate guides for what is coming. In the environments characterized by complexity, we must look for emergent patterns – not linear paths that “connect the dots.”

“Lessons learned” are important, but also of limited utility in a complex world that defies prediction. Under conditions of complexity our narrower definitions of national security must yield to broader; and legacy approaches to governance must adjust. Rather than position a fixed set of specific military and diplomatic resources against a fixed set of perceived threats, we need to marshal any combination of government functions to deal with any combination of emergent threats *and* opportunities in our path. In essence, the National Security infrastructure must be designed to adapt the “scope” of national security to meet the demands presented by circumstances, including both short-term events and long-term trends.

National security absolutely begins with the ability to deal with the nation’s physical enemies, foreign and domestic. But more is needed. We are in the presence of new forces, rapidly accelerating in speed and growing in power. To deal with these forces we need to overhaul the concept of national security, and the apparatus used to sustain it. There is broad consensus that change is needed, but disagreement as to its feasibility. If we accept a conclusion that major change is necessary, but impossible, we accept failure. Failure is not an option. The only question is how to succeed.

Foot notes: reference to specific documents and to website for student papers.
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