

The Scenario

Forward Engagement Spring 2009

It is early spring 2009, still within the first “Hundred Days” of the new administration. Three months earlier, just after inauguration, the President set a new process into motion within the White House designed to launch an effort to improve the capacity of the government to deal with so-called “complex priorities” – defined as:

“An important policy dynamic that arises from the interaction of a number of Future Contingencies of Interest (FCIs) interacting in a systemic, simultaneous manner. As complex, interacting systems, it is impossible to manage Complex Priorities by engaging their FCIs individually. Complex Priorities are characterized by non-linear changes and often give off faint signals that may alert policymakers to the onset of significant change.”

The first phase of this effort began when a small staff briefed members of the then newly-established DCOM (Deputies Committee on Complex Priorities) on the results of their work, which had been ongoing since the middle of the Transition. That report is appended to this instruction.

Members of the DCOM responded well to the fundamental substantive conclusions of the report: i.e. the urgent necessity of confronting the three Complex Priorities identified by the previous DCOM staff: (1) Managing accelerating technological innovation; (2) Fragility of the state-based international system; and (3) Socio-economic fragility. They also responded well to process innovations that were a major focus of the report’s discussion of the implications of complexity for policy making. Among these recommendations, the principle finding had to do with the need to employ the concept of “trajectories” along in conjunction with scenarios as a means for visualizing alternative futures. Finally, the DCOM responded very strongly to the staff’s observation that cultural changes would need to be encouraged not only in White House operations, but generally in the executive branch, if the reform were to be broad-based and durable.

Based on this discussion, the DCOM staff is instructed to:

- Produce a supplementary report comprising three chapters and an annex. The chapters are to be devoted, one each, to the three meta-scenarios, applying the concept of trajectories, in order to illuminate possible major future states for the nation.
- These chapters are to include recommendations for actions designed to generally steer the United States along the most favorable trajectories, and to react should circumstances require reconsideration.
- This supplementary report is to be submitted as a potential new section of the President’s National Security Strategy document, to be submitted to the Congress, as required by law.
- The annex is to present the staff’s recommendation for methods to bring about a cultural shift in the bureaucracy that would sustain the new approach – much in the same way that the military has been attempting to do, since the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986.