

Strategic Planning for the New Administration

COLIN DUECK

On January 20, 2017, President-Elect Trump will inherit a powerful array of international challenges, capabilities, and opportunities. Insofar as there is any plausible focus within the modern federal government for the imposition of an overarching coherence on US foreign policy, it centers on the president himself. If we define strategy—wrongly—as a prefabricated plan, carried out to the letter against all resistance, then clearly no president and probably no world leader has ever had such a strategy or ever will. But if we adopt a more realistic and less stringent definition, then we see that all presidents necessarily make strategic choices and decisions based at least partially on their preexisting assumptions. The inescapable nature of limited resources, hard choices, and policy trade-offs means that strategic decisions are both implicit and inevitable. Here, defeatism is of no practical help.

Some of the new administration's leading positions have yet to be specified. Subject to congressional confirmation, it looks as though key members of the president's national security and foreign policy team may include James Mattis as secretary of defense, Rex Tillerson as secretary of state, Michael Flynn as national security adviser, Mike Pompeo as CIA director, Nikki Haley as ambassador to the United Nations, Steve Mnuchin as secretary of the Treasury, Wilbur Ross as secretary of commerce, John Kelly as secretary of homeland security, and of course Mike Pence as vice president. Viewed as a whole, this is a conservative, qualified, and relatively hard-line group, with some useful diversity of views and backgrounds. These are strong-minded people who will tell Trump what they think. Most speculation right now centers on personnel and policy, and naturally they must be got right. But it's worth taking a moment to consider how the next president will make important foreign policy decisions because this too is practical and essential to success.

No formal arrangement for national security will work if it does not fit the personality of the president or does not have his confidence. On the other hand, any one of several techniques could be of considerable help if the next president wanted to develop and impose a successful strategy on US foreign policy. Because these are literally matters of life and death, such an imposition would be appropriate.

A generous interpretation of the president-elect's decision-making style would note the following. According to many business associates, he has an appetite for information



but not in the usual Beltway style. He lays out broad goals and pursues them with intensity combined with flexibility on tactics. When a given tactic fails, he adapts quickly and moves on. He believes in escalation dominance. He's open to negotiation but does not believe in signaling his reservation point ahead of time. Instead, he starts with bold positions and reserves the right to walk away.

Trump believes that current US foreign policy processes do not work particularly well. He is a gut player with an instinctive, spontaneous streak. He's comfortable with a certain amount of conflict, viewing it as inevitable. He believes in the uses of theatricality and enjoys it. Yet in private he is very often calm, polite, and curious. He delegates authority and then holds people accountable. Trump works long hours but resists rigid schedules. He has limited appetite for lengthy memos. Many of the key decisions will probably be made in consultation with a circle of close advisers, including key cabinet officials, verbally and informally. Taken separately, none of these qualities are that unusual in the history of presidential foreign policy leadership. The question then becomes—at the level of principals, deputies, and inter agency coordination—which National Security Council process will be most likely to produce practical foreign policy success?

Here are six specific recommendations:

First: Learn from private-sector experience.

Strategy is both deliberate and emergent.

The United State has the richest, most dynamic civil society and business community in the world. It's clear the federal government could do a better job tapping into that vast experience. Trump plans to make multiple appointments from the business world. Yet this is not the limit of what can be learned from private-sector experience.

Over the years, many leading companies have used internal strategic planning processes in an attempt to foster innovation and productivity. What they have learned is extremely relevant to foreign policy, including that strategy cannot realistically be detached from operations. To some extent, it emerges as a pattern from action, decisions, learning, and adaptation, whether or not entirely preplanned. The formulation of strategy thus walks on two legs: one deliberate and the other emergent. Indeed those private-sector lessons are in keeping with some of the most convincing research on how US national security strategy is made. The implications for strategic planning are profound. The chief executive must own the strategy; it cannot be outsourced. It requires a serious attention to process. The purpose of strategic planning therefore is not as much to fabricate plans as to help prepare policy makers to make better decisions and then execute them when the opportunity arises. In the end strategic planning cells do not literally make strategy; they help those who do.

Second: Develop and execute a meaningful national security strategy early on.

Any declared strategy released by the White House has the advantage that by definition it is an authoritative description of the president's views. The Reagan administration provides a useful lesson. During the opening months, Reagan's national security adviser and NSC staff led a serious, classified, interagency planning effort that helped guide the administration's successful foreign policy during the course of two terms. Despite hostile caricatures of Reagan at the time, he was personally invested in this process: generally businesslike, diligent, and in charge of the key decisions. Further presidential directives flowed from this, laying out policies for specific regional and functional areas with appropriate flexibility. Those directives were then sent to the relevant departments and agencies to be implemented, an expectation enforced by the White House.

The current interagency paper churn is excessive. Those types of strategy documents are valuable mainly and only insofar as they constitute a relatively brief, crisp, timely encapsulation and description of the president's aims. A reformed national security process can be used to drive interagency planning and set the agenda so that the United States takes the initiative internationally, rather than constantly allowing its competitors to do so.

Third: Restore a proper balance of responsibilities between the NSC and line departments and agencies.

Even many Democratic Party foreign policy experts agree that the Obama White House has too often been micromanaging and indecisive simultaneously. The execution of policy should be the province of agencies and departments that have their hands on the tools of implementation. The proper role of the national security adviser and his or her staff is to manage the interagency process, generate ideas, monitor what is going on inside government, and arm the president for policy engagement. The overarching size of the NSC staff can and should be reduced from its current excessive level. It should be a relatively flat, streamlined group, with the appropriate mix of political and career appointees. Senior positions should have some prior stature in the policy world and awareness of the specific tools available to help develop and implement the president's policies.

NSC staff can play an entrepreneurial role that respects the prerogatives of line departments and agencies while ensuring the president's options are not limited to those favored by the interagency. It is reasonable for the president to appoint and empower people inside various departments and agencies who understand his priorities and are able to represent them effectively. This is doubly true for NSC staff, all of whom are a centripetal force in US national security policy. Ideally, they



can provide coordination and proximity to political authority in a way that regular bureaucratic settings can not. But this is no reason to disdain career civil servants. On the contrary, those with decades of practical experience in the career military, intelligence, and diplomatic services bring situational awareness indispensable to any successful foreign policy. The same might be said for political appointees working at the head of line departments and agencies; NSC staff need not duplicate their work. There are already thousands of people in government whose job it is to carry out and implement US foreign policy. When it comes to actual policy execution, NSC staff should work to ensure implementation on a few key issues of high priority to the president and then get out of the way.

Fourth: The president's national security adviser should play the role of honest broker, policy entrepreneur, and presidential agent.

Lieutenant-General Michael Flynn is known to be a staunch loyalist of the president-elect and a relentless fighter against jihadist terrorists. Among the principal players in the foreign policy process, only the national security adviser can represent the president's overarching perspective, separate from specific departmental responsibilities. To be fully effective, however, any national security adviser must play several roles simultaneously. First, the president needs him to be an honest broker, precisely to improve the odds of policy success. This means ensuring that all relevant actors receive a fair hearing and weighing the costs and benefits of each possible course. No other cabinet official is adequately placed to perform this role. Second, a national security adviser must be an effective agent of the president. His authority derives from the fact that he acts on behalf of the president and is understood to do so. Any conception of the office detached from that foundation will not allow it to have much practical influence over the decision-making process. Third, a national security adviser can and should act as policy entrepreneur from time to time. Policy entrepreneurs connect viable solutions to pressing problems and real-world conditions. The role of honest broker does not require national security advisers to be indifferent to the merit of policy alternatives or to be silent when asked for their personal views by the commander in chief. Only by joining the role of honest broker to that of policy entrepreneur, when necessary, can the national security advisor be an effective agent of the president. Academic analysts tend to appreciate the honest broker role while underestimating the significance of the other two.

Fifth: Appoint and empower a strategic planning directorate on the NSC staff.

Although the overall size of NSC staff should be reduced, little would be gained by further decimating any presidential capacity for overall foreign policy planning. Only presidents have the authority to cut across interagency tensions and interests. Yet strategic planning cells for US foreign policy have a precarious and uncertain

history in the White House. The result has been a persistent gap in the president's ability to oversee coherent foreign policy and security strategies. This gap can be addressed in part by establishing a properly staffed and empowered strategic planning directorate on the staff of the NSC.

An effective strategic planning directorate inside the White House can help explicitly weigh the costs and benefits of alternative US foreign policy strategies in specific regional cases. It can play a useful role in helping coordinate strategic and policy planning cells at the various departments and agencies, including state and defense. This in turn could encourage more successful presidential initiatives. Such a directorate, however, will only work if the principal decision makers are using it to better policy outcomes. If the principals are not interested in acting or thinking strategically, then that will not happen.

Sixth: Consider creating an effective strategic planning board.

This was a technique used by President Eisenhower, who created a strategic planning board with top representatives from throughout the interagency to anticipate problems, consider alternative solutions, and generate policy recommendations for consideration by the NSC. In their policy presentations members of the board were instructed by Eisenhower not to split the difference between departmental positions but, if necessary, “bring out conflicts” and see themselves as part of a corporate body whose responsibilities were to the president. Execution was delegated to the relevant agencies, but Ike created and used an operations coordinating board to help implement approved policies. He used a strong staff system to inform lively, thorough debate in regular meetings with top advisers, explicitly weighing the costs and benefits of various policy options while maintaining firm control of the entire process. The next administration would do well to create and rely on something like this from the beginning, rather than noting its absence later on.

Presidents further need to be well advised as to how economic and commercial considerations affect national security and vice versa. Trump is obviously interested in this topic. Any interagency planning board should therefore integrate economic considerations into US national security strategy through formal input and representation from the departments of Treasury, commerce, and agriculture. This would all require some political lift on the president's part but would help to reverse America's current strategic dysfunction.

The presentation of meaningful choices to the chief executive is central to his authority. Prior bureaucratic consensus is overrated. A president ought to be made aware of his options. Then it is up to him to decide. Strategic planning can help.



Conclusion

A great deal depends on the personal qualities of the president and his leading advisers, including whether they have confidence in one another. No organizational structure, or lack thereof, can substitute for presidential engagement. No foreign policy strategy is credible if not backed up by him. Presidential authority provides democratic legitimacy and accountability to the entire process. It also provides executive direction.

It is not impossible to develop a reasonably effective foreign policy strategy. More than one past US president has done so; in those cases where they have, it has made a difference. If the next president is determined to craft and implement such a strategy, this in itself would alter the current situation dramatically. It can be done.



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About the Author



COLIN DUECK

Colin Dueck is a professor in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University and a nonresident fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. This essay is adapted from a summer 2016 article in the journal *Orbis*, with permission from its editor. Dueck has published three books on American foreign and national security policies, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (Oxford 2015), *Hard Line: The Republican Party and US Foreign Policy since World War II* (Princeton 2010), and *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton 2006). He has worked as a foreign policy adviser on several Republican presidential campaigns.

The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order

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