Atlantic Council Strategy Consortium
Strategic Surprise Task Force
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*Responding to Strategic Surprise*
*DISCUSSION DRAFT*
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Question: What should the White House do when a strategic surprise has occurred?

Definition: For the purpose of this paper, a strategic surprise is *an unanticipated development that erodes if not ends our prevailing strategic assumptions, undermines one or more existing policy lines, and demands a policy response.*

## Three Tasks

In the event of a strategic surprise, the President and his administration face three tasks. They should pursue these tasks concurrently, not sequentially:

1. Expand the Circle to Gain Perspective. In the event of a true strategic shift in the international environment, the president and his advisors will benefit from a greater diversity of advisors, in and out of government. Expanding the circle of advisors to gain fresh thinking can help identify when a strategic shift has truly occurred and put the strategic shift in perspective. This could take the form of outreach to scholars, think tanks, and the opposition party; commissioning "red team" studies by the intelligence community; consulting with allies and Congress; and involving lower levels of the policymaking bureaucracy in deliberations.

2. Abide By a Structured Decision-Making Process. Because a strategic surprise is likely to require a time-sensitive response, decision-makers are often compelled to forgo normal interagency processes and use ad hoc or improvised structures. Such improvisation can be more responsive to crises, but it has significant disadvantages: it can exclude important stakeholders, narrow the range of discussion, neglect important staff work, and generate insufficient options. When a strategic shift has made normal decision-making processes infeasible, the assistant to the president for national security affairs (APNSA) should still insist on and guide a modified version of the interagency process that a) involves some of the extended circle of advisors (as discussed above), b) adheres to some form of predictable structure, but also c) moves quickly to meet the needs of the moment.

3. Look Backwards. All levels of the U.S. Government (and future historians) will benefit from a hindsight analysis that examines how a strategic shift came about and why it was a surprise. This is not time-sensitive—but it is no less important in responding to strategic surprise. Without an effort to learn

from past events and adapt the intelligence and policymaking process, strategic surprises are likely to recur, especially unnecessary ones. Analysts and policymakers are likely to be surprised by situations that could have been anticipated, or mishandle events for which they might have prepared.

## Expand the Circle to Gain Perspective

*Use Outsiders' Time*

By its nature, a strategic surprise challenges existing beliefs and presuppositions about the international environment. Meeting these challenges requires substantial intellectual work to identify beliefs about the world that are no longer valid; get out of the mindset shaped by those beliefs; and sketch the shape of the emerging environment.

Crucially, this kind of intellectual work is unique to situations of strategic surprise; during normal business, policymakers can usually rely on their accumulated experience and on the expertise and knowledge of the professional staff in the agencies and departments. Unfortunately, policymakers are often least well positioned for the unique intellectual work required of them during strategic shifts because of constraints on their time and demands on their attention. Policymakers can benefit from those who have more time and fewer distractions, including scholars and former policymakers.

- Some formal channels exist to link policymakers with outside experts, such as the intelligence community's (former) "IC Associate" program, the President's Intelligence Advisory Board, the Defense Policy Board, and federally-funded research and development centers (such as the Center for Naval Analysis and several units within the RAND Corporation and the Institute for Defense Analysis).

- But past administrations have also invested in informal channels, such as the George W. Bush administration's regular meetings with "responsible critics" of the Iraq War. And most presidents have consulted their predecessors and other former senior officials, such as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

*Use Critics' Opposition*

Policymakers are not limited only by time: they can face cognitive barriers to effective decision-making. If policymakers continue to deliberate without reexamining their beliefs in light of a strategic shift, they are prone to groupthink, straight-line projections, or confirmation bias—leading to faulty decision-making regardless of how much time they devote to it. This was almost certainly one of the challenges in the Johnson Administration, for example, in its deliberations over the war in Vietnam.

- During strategic surprise, policymakers can benefit from those who start from different presuppositions, including members of the opposition party in Congress, allied governments, and intelligence analysts commissioned to play devil's advocate or a "red team."

- Including a selection of these outsiders can provoke a healthy debate over bedrock presuppositions. Such a debate need not occupy much time—the president and his advisors are unlikely to have much time to give—but forgoing it entirely leaves the administration vulnerable to cognitive traps that will not serve them well during strategic shifts in the international environment.

**Abide By a Structured Decision-Making Process**

The President and his advisors face two opposing challenges when deliberating their response to a strategic surprise: too much deliberation, and too little.

- The pressure of time can cut discussion short before options have been fully explored; and it can pressure policymakers to adopt an unstructured decision-making process that leaves key stakeholders excluded, as may have been the case with Kennedy's decision-making before the Bay of Pigs operation.

- On the other hand, some policymakers can become paralyzed by the strategic implications of their decisions, leading to counterproductively prolonged and over-structured deliberations—as, for example, seems to have characterized the Obama administration's three-month-long Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy review from September to early December, 2009.

The APNSA must walk a fine line to manage a structured and thorough process that involves relevant stakeholders and, as appropriate, trusted outsiders—but must also retain enough flexibility and speed to deliver a timely decision.

- For routine business, something akin to Eisenhower's NSC system, with its bifurcation into a Planning Board and an Oversight and Implementation Committee, would provide a structured and thorough process that could be a model for future administrations.

- In times of strategic surprise or international crisis, some adaptation is likely necessary. Despite the lack of structure in Kennedy's initial decision-making process, his NSC seems to have found a successful mix of thoroughness, structure, and speed during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The NSC formally met three times, and its Executive Committee (consisting of the NSC and a selection of advisors and deputies) met at least ten times between October 20 and 28, 1962—not counting informal meetings and ongoing sidebar deliberations—

helping Kennedy make a series of decisions and respond to unfolding events over a very short time frame.

- Similarly, the ideas behind the Iraq surge and counterinsurgency strategy in President George W. Bush's administration came partly from sources other than the conventional interagency process, such as external advisors, scholars, and midlevel staff in early 2006. They were then folded into a more formal interagency review, and more fully developed, later in the year—a prime example of a White House using formal and informal processes, meshing innovation with conventional structure.

Regardless of the specific structure or process, policymakers will still need to do much the same work responding to strategic surprise as they do for any foreign policy situation. In their deliberations, they will need to identify the United States' national security interests at stake; define a clear goal and measurable objectives; take stock of the U.S.'s relevant resources and capabilities; identify other actors, rivals, and stakeholders and anticipate their courses of actions; and develop policy options for the president.

**Look Backwards**

Finally, the President and his advisors should ensure that some retrospective analysis is conducted. Such analysis serves several purposes.

- A retrospective analysis will help unearth the roots of a strategic surprise, helping policymakers understand the depth and implications of the event more fully. Such understanding will, in turn, ensure subsequent policy responses are appropriately calibrated.

- A retrospective analysis will help illuminate how and if policymakers should have been better prepared: in particular, it will help clarify if the strategic surprise could have been anticipated. This will help policymakers adapt going forward and cultivate the habits of mind necessary for thinking about the future.

- Senior policymakers will not have the time to conduct such a retrospective analysis themselves. It could be delegated to a body such as a Council of Historical Advisors, as recently proposed by a pair of prominent historians, perhaps with support from intelligence community detailees. A group of trained historians with clearance and access to senior policymakers' deliberation would be well-positioned to trace the history of how a strategic surprise happened, how it was perceived by policymakers, and how they responded to it.

**Prerequisites**

There are two prerequisites for these tasks that the administration—the APNSA in particular—should focus on before a strategic surprise occurs.

1. Existing relationships. The President and his advisors will be well served if they have already established trusted relationships with a wide circle of advisors in and out of government. They are unlikely to initiate such relationships during a fast-moving crisis. Identifying and investing in trusted scholars, former policymakers, members of the opposition, specific members of allied governments, and junior staffers before a crisis happens will payoff when the administration is able to call on them for fresh perspective without having to start from scratch.

2. Message discipline and confidentiality. It is especially important during a strategic surprise that the President and his advisors be able to deliberate in confidence and speak with one voice in their public messaging. But the habits an administration develops before a strategic surprise will be the habits they rely on during a strategic surprise. The APNSA should work to cultivate strong norms of confidentiality and message discipline as a matter of course to ensure they are especially respected during moments of strategic surprise.