

The Challenge of Ascertaining a Strategic Surprise

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Introduction: Strategic surprises are as inevitable as they are unexpected. Virtually every presidency will confront a strategic shock, often in its first year. A military contingency, a political upheaval in a strategic ally, a natural disaster or disease pandemic, a nuclear test or other WMD event, a popular revolution, or even a cyberattack on critical infrastructure can all develop into strategic surprises that profoundly shape or reshape the Administration's foreign policy. The challenge posed by strategic surprises is not just their unexpected nature, but also that they are often not evident when they first occur. This memo discusses criteria and indicators for determining when a strategic surprise is occurring.

Definition: What is a "strategic surprise"? A working definition is an unanticipated development that erodes, if not ends, our prevailing strategic assumptions, undermines one or more existing policy lines, and demands a meaningful response. Often our government's first response is inadequate and fails to comprehend how profound the surprise is. It is only as events unfold that the scale and seismic nature of the change begins to set in, and it becomes a "strategic surprise."

Historical Illustrations: While the protests in Tunisia sparked by Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010 caught the American government by surprise, if the effects had only been confined by ending the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, it would not have had strategic consequences. Rather, it did not enter the "strategic" dimension until a month later in late January 2011 when the popular uprisings spread to Egypt and other Arab countries, soon leading to the fall of Mubarak and the upheaval of the regional order that continues to this day.

In other instances the magnitude of the surprise may be known immediately, but its precise contours and consequences cannot yet be seen. The two most notable surprise attacks in American history fall under this category. Within hours of Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt and virtually every American knew that it meant going to war with Japan. But it was not clear until four days later with Nazi Germany's surprise declaration of war on the United States that the US would also be going to war in Europe, nor was it known until almost four years later that the United States would become the dominant power in shaping the global post-war order.

So also with the September 11th attacks. Almost instantaneously, it was evident that "everything had changed" for the United States and that a major conflict loomed. But where, when, and to what scale remained unknown. Eventually it would of course lead to a war in Afghanistan now past its fifteenth year, a war in Iraq, and continuing military and intelligence operations across the broader Middle East and South Asia.

Indicators of Strategic Surprise: Other times, surprises may take place that do not rise to the "strategic" level. Adama Barrow's recent defeat of Yahya Jammeh in Gambia's presidential election caught outside observers off-guard and marked a welcome democratic transition, but does not constitute a "strategic" surprise. *How can policymakers ascertain when a strategic*

surprise is occurring or has occurred? The following indicators should be heeded. Any one of these by itself may indicate that a strategic surprise is occurring, and if multiple indicators are present it is almost certain that a surprise of strategic magnitude has taken place:

- **Strategic Actor.** *Does it involve an important world leader of strategic significance?* Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's 1961 tightening of control on Berlin, including the surprise erection of the Berlin Wall, was important not just because it centered in Berlin but because it emanated from Khrushchev. Taking the measure of President Kennedy's relatively anemic response to the Berlin crisis emboldened Khrushchev to deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba the next year.
- **Policy Disruption.** *Does it disrupt an existing US policy line and strategic assumption?* The outbreak of protests against Mubarak in Tahrir Square in January 2011 turned the Arab Spring into a strategic shock because they eroded and soon ended Mubarak's rule. For three decades, American policy in the Middle East had depended in part on Mubarak as an American ally committed to the peace treaty with Israel, the security of the Suez Canal, and close cooperation on counterterrorism and regional stability.
- **Divided Response.** *Does determining the appropriate US response provoke significant divisions within the US government?* Following the 1983 terrorist bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, the Reagan Administration suffered acute internal divisions over how to respond. These disputes eventually led to their own strategic effects (for good and for ill), including contributing to the creation of the Weinberger Doctrine, the Iran-Contra scandal, and even Osama bin Laden's perception of America's lack of resolve.
- **US action.** *Were US actions a proximate cause of the surprise?* The US decision to withdraw financing for the Aswan Dam in 1956, justified though it may have been, led directly to Egyptian President Nasser's partnership with the USSR and a growing rift between the United States and United Kingdom that became most pronounced in the surprise Suez Crisis a few months later.
- **US inaction.** *Was American inaction a proximate cause of the surprise?* Secretary of State Dean Acheson's exclusion of South Korea from America's defensive perimeter in Northeast Asia in 1950 led directly to North Korea's surprise invasion a few months later. In a different context, the Obama Administration's failure to enforce the "red line" and general inaction in Syria led eventually to Russia's intervention in support of the Assad regime and reassertion of Moscow's strategic influence in the Middle East.
- **Public Opinion.** *Does the event noticeably influence domestic opinion in the United States?* As tragic as the deaths of 18 American servicemen in Somalia in October 1993 were, the "Black Hawk Dawn" episode's *strategic* effects were largely in the realm of public opinion. It further eroded public trust in the Clinton Administration's competence on national security policy, and also undermined public support for American

engagement in humanitarian missions abroad. Similarly the 1968 Tet Offensive may have resulted in a tactical battlefield victory for the US, but its strategic effects were felt in damage to the domestic credibility of the Johnson presidency and eroded public support for the war effort.

- **Perceptions.** *Is the US response watched by other global actors, and does it potentially signal an important message about American credibility or other policy equities?* North Korea's seizure of the USS Pueblo in 1968, and the Khmer Rouge's capture of the USS Mayaguez in 1975, both assumed strategic importance because of their effects on global perceptions of American credibility and resolve.
- **Technological Revelations.** *Does it make a major revelation about the United States' technological capabilities?* The USSR's 1957 debut of the Sputnik satellite stands as the classic example, significant not just because it showed what the Soviets could do, but also because it revealed what the United States could not (yet) do. In a very different context, Edward Snowden's 2013 defection and disclosure of US intelligence programs became a strategic shock when its revelations about American capabilities ended those collection advantages over our adversaries and damaged trust with our allies.
- **Location.** *Does it take place in a region or capital of strategic importance?* As barbaric as the Tiananmen Square massacre was, it assumed strategic importance because it took place in Beijing, and signaled that China would not be following the unfolding Eastern European model of peaceful political reform away from communism.
- **Timing.** *Does it take place in the midst of other momentous events of similar nature?* Again Tiananmen Square is significant because it took place in 1989, amidst the crumbling Iron Curtain and just after Gorbachev's visit to Beijing, and thus indicated the Chinese Communist Party's determination not to follow Gorbachev's reform path.
- **Scale.** *Do its effects extend beyond just one country?* This helps in assessments of natural disasters and disease pandemics. The 2003 SARS epidemic and the 2004 tsunami both took on strategic importance because of the scale of their reach.