

Strategic Surprises in the First Year: Principles for Preparation and Response

Strategic surprises that occur within the first year of an administration are a subset of the broader “strategic surprise” problem set. Nearly every administration of the postwar era has confronted a major strategic surprise during its first year: Stalin's death in 1953, the erection of the Berlin Wall (as well as the Bay of Pigs invasion and subsequent unveiling of the Soviet-Cuban military alliance) in 1961, the *Mayaguez* incident in 1975, the Tiananmen square massacre and the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the “Blackhawk down” incident in Somalia in 1993, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and so on. The scale and significance of these episodes varied considerably, but all undermined existing strategic assumptions, disrupted existing policy initiatives, and required significant internal deliberation leading to a major policy response.

Preparing for and responding to strategic surprises is always difficult; that difficulty is often magnified in an administration's first year. An administration may be more likely to be surprised early on, as it focuses on taking the reins of government and establishing effective procedures, as it adjusts to rapid pace of events and decision-making, and as it learns how to consume intelligence and interpret global events. Adversaries may be more likely to test a new administration as a way of gathering information or seeking to catch Washington flat-footed. Formulating an effective response may also prove challenging during the first year, when crisis response procedures are unclear or untested, when major lines of policy have yet to be established, when the president's attention is often diverted by a focus on major domestic and congressional initiatives, and when many mid-level appointees may not yet be in place.

Ideas and prerequisites for responding to strategic surprise are laid out in Paul Miller's longer memorandum. With respect to first-year surprises in particular, the following basic principles and initiatives may be useful in enabling better preparation and response:

- *Staff up quickly.* All the problems inherent in preparing for and responding to strategic surprises are compounded when the mid-level appointees (e.g., assistant secretaries) responsible for running the various policy shops on a day to day basis are not in place. These officials are the crucial link between top-level political leadership and the career officials who generate policy options, provide textured analyses of events, and—as specialists rather than generalists—may be better placed than harried cabinet officials to recognize indicators of incoming surprises. The sooner these mid-level appointees are in place, the better.
- *Test assumptions and prepare intellectually for contingencies.* An incoming administration should test—either internally or by enlisting trusted outsiders—the assumptions that have guided U.S. policy to date, as tenuous assumptions are often leading indicators of an approaching strategic surprise. An incoming administration should also proactively task the IC to prepare assessments of major strategic events that could plausibly occur in the first year, giving due attention to both “most likely” and “most dangerous” scenarios. The common theme here is the necessity of using

groups that have either spare intellectual bandwidth or the ability to do “big think” analysis, and that may be able to help an administration avoid group-think by bringing varied perspectives to the task.

- *Establish and test crisis management and decision-making procedures early on.* Effective information flows and decision-making are critical to averting strategic surprises when possible and responding when they do occur. The Clinton administration’s early struggles with decision-making processes and civil-military relations contributed to the making of the Blackhawk Down incident; Kennedy’s unstructured approach to decision-making helped cause the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Every administration has a different rhythm and approach to these issues. But it is essential, early in the first year, to establish clear bureaucratic lines of authority and responsibility, to create a decision-making process that can move quickly while still ensuring adequate deliberation, to foster constructive relationships among top officials, and to set procedures for ensuring unity and discipline with respect to communications and strategic messaging. It may also be useful to test crisis management procedures through structured exercises that can reveal shortcomings during practice as opposed to having them exposed during the big game.
- *Get to strategic planning promptly.* The nature of strategic surprises is that they are unexpected, and so there is rarely a preplanned response at hand. But doing the higher-level strategic work associated with the drafting of the National Security Strategy, or with some equivalent of Eisenhower’s Solarium exercise, can help orient policymakers in the wake of a strategic surprise by giving them a broader sense of where the administration seeks to go. If policymakers can readily answer the question, “What are we trying to accomplish in the Middle East?” for instance, they are more likely to be able to answer the question of how to respond to the unexpected crisis in Saudi Arabia.
- *Stay flexible.* Planning can help in addressing strategic surprise, but some degree of adaptation and innovation will be essential. New administrative arrangements such as Kennedy’s ExCom may be needed; old policies will likely need to be rethought; “blue sky” thinking may be useful. While paying due attention to preparation and planning, a new administration should therefore also foster an intellectual climate conducive to creativity, red-teaming, and the sort of intellectual flexibility that responding effectively to strategic surprises often demands.
- *Don’t forget the lessons learned.* Strategic surprises in the first year may be particularly jarring, but they are unlikely to be the last such surprises an administration confronts. Taking a hard look—either internally or by enlisting trusted outsiders—at what happened, why it took administration officials by surprise, and how effective the reaction was can yield insights that will make for better preparation and response in future episodes.