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Developing a Coherent National Security Architecture

Gabriel C. Lajeunesse
William Wunderle

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Gabriel Lajeunesse and Bill Wunderle are associates at Georgetown’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Walsh School of Foreign Service, where they co-teach a class on radical Islam and the war of ideas.

We face a number of significant challenges to US security interests. One of the next administration’s first acts should be to introduce rigor into our national security processes.

Transition provides opportunity; opportunity to rethink, renew, reorganize, opportunity to reinterpret and be reinterpreted. Perhaps never before has any President had so much at stake in getting it right as this—with the US engaged in two wars, both of which will be arguably won or lost during this administration, an economic crisis of global proportions, growing competition from China, the threat of a nuclear Iran, and a resurgent Russia to name just a few pressing issues. In his early days in office, President Obama should take the opportunity to organize an effective National Security Architecture. Interagency failures in the handling of Iraq and Afghanistan provide a window into needed reforms.

The National Security Council Staff

President Obama must continue to make conscientious choices as he fills out his National Security Council staff. It is the NSC staff that manage the interagency process for the President—the day to day working groups (currently Policy Coordination Committees, PCCs or sub-PCCs) that bring together the various departments of the US government to formulate policy options for the President and his National Security Council. The National Security Advisor is the captain of this elite team. General Jim Jones is an excellent choice. While some have advocated for massive national security overhaul, i.e. a Goldwater-Nichols Act for the interagency, much can be accomplished simply through good leadership; in that regard we are off to a good start.

The NSC staffers must also be experienced leaders and not just policy wonks. This is particularly crucial when dealing with our nation’s top priorities. It wasn’t until May 2007 that President Bush placed a senior leader in charge of policy development for Iraq and Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Doug Lute. Prior to that, a rising young star, Meghan O’Sullivan, held that seat, but was unable to overcome an environment of interagency backbiting over Iraq that became notorious. The youthfulness of the Bush NSC team was well known; and the decision to bring in more senior leadership has helped the interagency process immensely. Yet even after the appointment of LTG Lute, one has to wonder if it would not be more effective to have a single senior Presidential advisor for Iraq and another for Afghanistan. Our national security leaders need to have sufficient depth of knowledge, continuity, and focus. It may have been effective to have a single senior National Security Advisor and a couple of other senior assistants when looking at the world through “Cold
War tinted lenses”; but this cannot be the case now. We should have senior policy advisors/drivers for all our top priorities—i.e. Iran, the Middle East Peace, China etc. These senior Assistant National Security Advisors could keep the interagency on-track with regularly scheduled work-product flowing through working groups to the Deputies Committee, and Principal’s Committee and NSCs as appropriate, to drive whole of government efforts in achieving US national security objectives.

Agencies also need to be agile in how they assign their senior staff to priority problems. The most senior military officers working Iraq or Afghanistan full time at the Pentagon are Colonels. These are the very best officers the services could find, for sure, but possibly not as senior as needed in wartime. The situation is similar across the interagency. If these really are our most pressing problems, they deserve the attention of our very best, very most experienced people.

The National Security Planning Process

In addition to improvements in personnel, the NSC must make some serious changes to its planning methodology (or lack thereof). The NSC should develop overarching regional plans that articulate the government’s desired end-state and strategic objectives and drive interagency action and link ends, ways and means to operationalize our foreign policy. Such an effort would allow for something that has yet to be done to date—a budget process grounded and linked to clearly articulated foreign policy objectives.

Interagency Structure

The interagency must also dedicate proper resources to supporting counterinsurgency and state-building enterprises. US Agency for International Development, State, US Department of Agriculture and Treasury are key actors and must prepare themselves to fully partner with the DoD in its deployments to contingency environments. Additionally, the international affairs budget must be appropriately funded to allow these agencies to fully lead or partner in hostile environments. Planning will go a long way to help justify these expenditures and help demilitarize what has been termed a militarized foreign policy.

By ensuring good leadership of the NSC process, implementing planning processes in the NSC, and properly resourcing the interagency we will optimize our ability to deal with complex challenges ahead.

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