National Security Challenges Will Require Undaunted Leadership

William Wunderle, Georgetown University
Gabriel Lajeunesse, Georgetown University
National Security Challenges Will Require Undaunted Leadership

Bill Wunderle
Gabriel Lajeunesse
01/11/09

In 2009, we face a number of significant challenges to the United States’ security interests. One of the next administration’s first acts should be to introduce rigor into our national security processes.

Transition provides opportunity: to rethink, renew, reorganize and reinterpret. Perhaps never before has any president had so much at stake in getting it right as now — with the country engaged in two wars, both of which will arguably be 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, among other 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.

President-elect Obama must continue to make smart, considerate choices as he fills out his National Security Council staff. It is the NSC staff that manages the interagency process for the president — the day-to-day working groups (policy coordination committees or PCCs) that bring together the various departments of the U.S. government to formulate policy options for the president and his NSC. The national security advisor is the head of this elite team.

Obama’s selection of Gen. Jim Jones for this post is an excellent choice. While some have advocated a massive national security overhaul (something like a Goldwater-Nichols Act for the interagency system), much can be accomplished simply through good leadership; in that regard, we are off to a good start.

NSC staffers must also be experienced leaders, not just policy wonks. This is particularly crucial when addressing 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 Douglas Lute. Prior to that, a rising young star, Meghan O’Sullivan, held that seat but was unable to overcome a notoriously vicious interagency environment.

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. Despite this improvement, however, it would be more effective to have separate senior presidential advisors for Iraq and Afghanistan. Our
national security leaders need to have depth of knowledge, continuity and focus.

It may have been effective to have a single senior national security advisor when looking at the world through “Cold War-tinted lenses,” but this can no longer be the case. We should have senior policy advisors for all our top priorities — Iran, the Middle East, China and so forth.

Agencies also need to be agile in how they assign their senior staff to priority problems. If these really are our most pressing problems, they deserve the attention of our very best, most experienced people.

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 while driving interagency action and operationalizing our foreign policy. Such an effort would allow for something that has yet to be done to date — a ground, rational budget policy.

The interagency system must also dedicate proper resources to supporting counterinsurgency and state-building enterprises. The U.S. Agency for International Development and the State, Agriculture and Treasury Departments are key actors and must prepare to partner fully with the Pentagon in its deployments to contingency environments. Additionally, the international affairs budget must be appropriately funded to allow these agencies to 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 supporting the interagency structure, we will optimize our ability to deal with the complex challenges that lie ahead.

Gabriel Lajeunesse and Bill Wunderle are associates at Georgetown’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy.

To send a letter to the editor on a recent campus issue or Hoya story or a viewpoint on any topic, contact opinion@thehoya.com. Letters should not exceed 300 words, and viewpoints should be between 600 to 800 words.

Copyright 2008. The Hoya, Georgetown University. All rights reserved.

Source URL: http://www.thehoya.com/node/17396