

America's Role in the World Working Group  
Institute for the Study of Diplomacy  
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service  
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

# Domestic Challenges to America's Capacity to Conduct Foreign Policy

Sara Thannhauser

April 30, 2007

## America's Role in the World Working Group

The Institute for the Study of Diplomacy of Georgetown University launched the America's Role in the World Working Group Series on November 28, 2006. It will focus on the geopolitical challenges that a new administration—Democrat or Republican—could face beginning in 2009, and seek to define the central foreign policy choices and responses that are likely to be available. While we do not intend to offer specific policy prescriptions, we hope to provide the candidates a comprehensive agenda of issues that could require attention and on which they should be forming views and taking positions. The aim of this working group is to look forward. The working group relies on a permanent "core membership" of generalists from the policymaking and research communities and academia, who are sometimes joined by respected authorities on specific regional or functional topics under consideration. The meetings are chaired by Schlesinger Professor of Strategic Studies Chester Crocker and ISD Board

Chairman Thomas Pickering.

The Institute for the Study of Diplomacy extends a special thanks to those core members and guest participants who laid the groundwork for discussion with their opening remarks. Listed below are the core members of the America's Role in the World Working Group. Not all members participated in the November 28, 2006 session. Core members of the working group were not asked to approve this *Report*. The *Report*, however, relies heavily on the discussions of the group. As such, this document reflects the general ideas of working group members, but is not a consensus document and cannot be ascribed to any individual member.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The capacity to craft effective policies and to implement them in a manner that maintains popular support is the greatest challenge facing every newly elected American president. In terms of foreign policy, this capacity is critical to many facets of U.S. power and influence abroad. It affects the credibility of American military instruments, both as a deterrent to attacks and as a potential tool for use against enemies. It also determines the openness of U.S. markets and borders to foreign investment, and the availability of American investment to assist economic growth in other nations. Likewise, such capacity is crucial to the effectiveness of our diplomatic representation, our leadership role in international institutions and alliances, and our standing abroad in terms of both popular and elite judgments on the wisdom and legitimacy of American foreign policy decisions.

Though each new administration faces this task, President Bush's successor will have the unique challenge of doing so at a time when America's standing abroad has deteriorated to historic lows, and when U.S. military power has been eroded by open-ended wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Adding to this challenge, despite the fact that the U.S. economy remains the most open in the world, there is evidence of a protectionist backlash in domestic political circles. Resistance to the current administration's free trade policies has risen with Democratic control of Congress. Furthermore, President Bush has lost fast-track negotiating authority and is unlikely to regain it during the remainder of his presidency. At the same time, American public diplomacy continues to falter, as too many countries neither admire nor fear the United States. Foreigners view the staggering ineptness

of America's handling of Iraq as the ultimate symbol of the U.S. government's inability to select and implement sound foreign policy. Foreigners also fear that the Bush Administration's Global War on Terror has transformed the United States into an ideological nation bent on imposing its values on others and applying litmus tests to friends and foes.

The next administration's capacity challenge is even more critical than before because the organizational structures initially constructed to contain a Cold War superpower are failing to effectively deal with today's panoply of transnational security issues, which range from global terrorism and nuclear proliferation, to weak or failing states and global warming.<sup>1</sup> Solutions to these challenges require collective approaches and a strong interrelationship between government agencies that have expertise dealing with security, political, economic, or social issues. Given the international environment that the next American President will inherit, it will be a necessary task to improve the ability of U.S. foreign policy institutions to merge their diplomatic, military, economic, and security policies into coherent, integrated strategies.

On April 30, 2007, the America's Role in the World Working Group met for the third time and focused on this unique capacity challenge. During the meeting members analyzed the U.S. foreign policy apparatus that the next administration will inherit. Specifically, group members examined shortcomings in the domestic inter-

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1. For more on potential challenges facing the next president see Sara Thannhauser's, *A Dangerous Inheritance: Converging Challenges that Will Face the Next American President*, Report No. 2, America's Role in the World Working Group, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, February 26, 2007.

agency process, capacity gaps in a number of foreign policy institutions, and, finally the challenge of grappling with a divided American elite and polarized public. Inevitably, participants also addressed Iraq and its impact on the next administration's policy choices.

## II. FAILURES OF THE INTERAGENCY PROCESS

There was an overall consensus among working group members that America's foreign policy process is damaged. Presently, the system is designed so that policy is made at the interagency level, without linking it to financial requirements or the complexities of implementation. Group members argued that the challenge of organizing not only the government decision-making process, but also the effective implementation of those decisions by the responsible agencies, is greater today than ever before because our role as the sole superpower has required increased global engagement and expanded operational capacity in areas such as economic and security assistance, humanitarian relief, public diplomacy, international capacity building in weak or fragile states, and an ability to conduct and implement successfully complex overseas operations. Increasingly, traditionally domestic government agencies that once lacked any clear connection to strategy and budget planning for foreign affairs have significantly expanded their direct engagement overseas. Each of these agencies plans its programs and budgets independently of each other, and there is no mechanism in the federal government to bring these activities together and examine their synergies.<sup>2</sup> Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Peter Pace has observed that the current system "does a great job of teeing up the issues of the day for the President...but once the President decides to do something, then our government goes back into the stovepipes for execution."<sup>3</sup>

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2. See Gordon Adams, "The Politics of National Security Budgets," Policy Analysis Brief, The Stanley Foundation, February 2007.

A number of transformations have been initiated by the Bush Administration in an effort to address this challenge—establishment of the Department of Homeland Security to bring together agencies dealing with domestic security, establishment of the Director of National Intelligence to coordinate U.S. intelligence activities, and the establishment of fusion centers such as the National Counter-terrorism Center to focus on particular issues which cut across national and functional boundaries. However, participants agreed these transformations remain "works in progress" at best.

Participants listed several factors that contribute to the poor interagency operational performance of the U.S. government. First, group members argued that, unlike the military, which has doctrine and a standard approach to planning operations, government agencies as a whole lack the established procedures for developing integrated strategies and plans. Each new administration tends to reinvent this wheel, issuing new guidance on how strategy development and planning is to be done. This *ad hoc* approach has thwarted institutional learning and often hindered performance.<sup>4</sup> Participants also argued there is little capacity on the National Security Council staff dedicated to integrating agency strategies and plans or monitoring their execution, even though both functions are critical to achieving unity of effort across the U.S. government.

The second factor lies in the policymaking and planning process itself. Participants argued that during this process, issues are too narrowly defined as either a military, diplomatic, or assistance challenge. The result of such a focused definition is that the tasking ends up going to one agency. Inevitably, the agency develops and invests in a particular implementation strategy, but when the administration tries to integrate that strategy into some sort of an interagency process, the result is an uphill turf battle.

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3. Quoted in Michael Donley, "Rethinking the Interagency System," Hicks and Associates, Inc. March 2005.

4. See Clark A. Murdock et al., "Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era," Center for Strategic and International Studies. March 2004.

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Members also discussed the lack of a “planning culture” outside the Department of Defense. Whereas military officers are taught to see planning as critical to success in operations and trained in its finer points, this notion is largely foreign to other agencies like the Department of State. With the exception of the Agency for International Development, which plans long-term development projects, civilian agencies tend not to have dedicated planning staffs or expertise. Making matters more difficult, when joint planning does occur, agency employees have difficulty working together because they lack a common process on how to address issues, and they often have different perspectives regarding time horizons.

Participants pointed to the current federal budget system as the third gap in the inter-agency process in most civilian agencies. At present, the budgeting process is separate from the planning process. This allows for agency planners to spend their budgets without taking into consideration the overall strategic objectives that need to be addressed. Several members also discussed the inability to shift money from one budget account to another due to legislative barriers and constraints, even when a national security need arises.

In terms of the budget and U.S. foreign policy, members also argued that another critical problem is the drastic under-resourcing of the civilian foreign affairs component. The 050 account in the federal budget, which includes the Department of Defense's budget, is roughly \$700 billion (plus supplements), while the 150 account, which includes our foreign assistance programs and State Department budget, is a mere \$35 billion. Many members argued that this current imbalance between military and civilian instruments may not serve U.S. national security interests. Today's foreign policy agenda requires programmatic capacity to efficiently operate and act on a wide range of issues such as global economic inequality and poverty, energy resource challenges, immigration, refugee affairs, and failed or brittle governments in key regions of the world. Though the military is a critical aspect of America's national security toolkit, members argued that it is most effective when used in the context of other economic,

diplomatic, political, and cultural capacities.

While the group agreed that the next administration will have to prioritize inter-agency capacity building, several members cautioned that it is necessary to distinguish the need for greater civilian capacities from the need to run interventions in failed states. As Philip Zelikow observed, “The United States is central in world politics today, not omnipotent. Nor is the Federal government organized in such a fashion that would allow it to wield durable imperial power around the world – it has trouble enough fashioning coherent policies within the fifty United States.”<sup>5</sup> A reorganization of America's interagency process is necessary, but such reorganization should not be solely based on a unilateral U.S. strategy to prevent/rebuild weak states. Experience has shown that failed states demand multilateral responses and carefully devised burden sharing by leading powers.

### III. WEAKENED INSTITUTIONS

The demands of the post-9/11 environment have severely strained key American foreign policy institutions. During the discussion, participants focused specifically on the challenges facing the U.S. Army, the Marine Corps and ground force reserves. They also examined issues with the Department of State, the Congress, and the Media.

#### U.S. Ground Forces

With a comparatively generous budget, the Department of Defense has tended increasingly to displace the Department State as the dominant agency in national security policy. As such, the department has continued to push for its own programs to train and equip foreign militaries, a role in stabilization and reconstruction projects, and a leadership role in the pursuit of terrorist organizations. However, group members agreed that the demands of waging two simultaneous inconclusive wars have stretched the U.S. military too thinly. In 2003, the then

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5. See Philip Zelikow, “The Transformation of National Security,” *The National Interest*. Spring 2003.

Army Chief of Staff, General Eric Shinseki prophetically warned, "Beware the 12-division strategy for a 10-division Army."<sup>6</sup> Since then, Army and Marine units have been deployed repeatedly to Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, the smallest active Army force since World War II has units being deployed up to five times, and in April of 2007, the Department of Defense announced that active duty Army units now, and in the future, would serve 15-month tours, three months longer than the standard one-year tour. Pressure is also building on the National Guard. Despite the fact that almost 90 percent of Army National Guard units are rated as "not ready" due to equipment shortages, the Pentagon has announced that large units may be going back to Iraq for a second time.

Group members agreed that the current overstretch of American ground forces has severely constrained our leverage abroad. As a result, countries like Iran, Sudan, and North Korea are able to defy American policy preferences and challenge our influence in their respective regions. Domestically, depletion of National Guard troops and equipment has left local communities at greater risk should a natural disaster occur.

### Department of State

Underutilized during the first term of the Bush Administration, the Department of State is now being called on to take on a larger role in rebuilding both Iraq and Afghanistan. In January 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced the new strategy of "transformational diplomacy." This strategy calls on Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) to jointly work on the frontlines with military officers to help stabilize and rebuild countries in disarray. While few members questioned the logic behind the strategy, many pointed to the fact that the State Department only employs roughly 6,500 FSOs for service worldwide. Likewise, USAID direct employment is quite small at just over 2,000. Consequently, even though FSOs may be charged with performing critical tasks in a par-

ticular operation, they generally lack sufficient numbers of personnel who are trained and ready for these missions, as well as the authorities and resources to rapidly deploy them to quickly establish programs in the field. In practice, this means that the U.S. military has few FSO partners on the ground. There is simply no margin of available and mission-prepared FSOs to take over and administrate a failed or conquered state. This can be a recipe for mission creep, as military personnel are pressed to step into the vacuum and conduct tasks for which they, too, are ill-suited or ill-prepared.

Participants also addressed weaknesses in the State Department's organizational culture and focus. Since the foreign affairs culture, especially on the diplomatic side, emphasizes skills in negotiation, political analysis, report writing and an understanding of foreign cultures, FSOs rarely have hands-on experience in long-term strategic or budgetary planning. Management, particularly of programs, is not a core element of their training, and career paths are not generally enhanced by such experience. Group members argued that this results in a weak capacity for strategic and budgetary planning, inter-agency operations (especially overseas), program management, and congressional relations. The travails of the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Stability Operations, which was set up in 2004 to help organize and coordinate U.S. post-conflict activities following the dismal performance in Iraq, exemplifies this weakness. Three years after its founding, the office has a skeleton staff and little dedicated, flexible funding at a time when experts maintain successful counterinsurgency must be 80 percent "political" and 20 percent "military."

While some participants were quick to assign the blame for the State Department's poor performance on the current Administration's penchant for hard power strategies, others directed the blame towards Congress. Foreign aid programs along with the Department of State have never been popular in Congress, mostly because these agencies and programs have virtually no domestic support base. Combine this with the State Department's inability resistance to strategic planning linking resources to goals, and develop some form of measurement as to

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6. See Thomas Shanker, "Retiring Army Chief of Staff Warns Against Arrogance," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2003

whether or not those goals are being met, and the result is, as experienced in Iraq, a U.S. strategy that relies excessively on its military to carry out diplomatic, foreign assistance, stabilization, reconstruction, and governance activities. Moreover, this syndrome is by no means confined to Iraq. It is visible in various regions where combatant commanders and Department of Defense presence and programs may at times overshadow the voice and policy management role of ambassadors and the State Department.

### Congress

Ideally, the making of sound U.S. foreign policy depends on a vigorous, deliberative, and often combative process that involves both the executive and the legislative branches. However, as Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann wrote, "In the past six years . . . congressional oversight of the executive branch across a range of policies, but especially on foreign and national security policy, has virtually collapsed."<sup>7</sup> There was a consensus among group members that Congress' supine inactivity in recent years was due to a rigid allegiance to party rule. This resulted in policies that lacked serious debate and an executive that was given largely a *carte blanche* when both chambers and both branches are in the hand of one party.

With the Democrats taking power in both houses, executive branch oversight has returned with a vengeance. What has not changed is the cumbersome and at times dysfunctional nature of Congressional deliberation and action. Group members argued that Congress's overlapping committees and arcane procedures are made worse by virtue of the huge fundraising demands placed on its members. Not only does this eat into their time to debate sound policies, but, as David Brooks notes, democracy in the U.S. takes politicians "who are reasonable in private and churns them through a public process that is almost tailor-made to undermine their virtues."<sup>8</sup> In terms of foreign policy, this

results in a weakness for oversimplified big ideas and media-enhanced political conformity, especially in times of an immediate or perceived crisis.

Another factor discussed by group members was the negative effect of extreme partisan division in Congress. Participants debated whether the next administration will inherit this powerful partisan legacy. Some argued that it will persist because the country and the people are equally polarized. Others pointed to the role of money and fund-raising imperatives as incentives for oversimplified stereotyped partisanship. Either way, the next administration will have to work with Congress to rebuild public support for bipartisan leadership and engage both houses in managing key issues such as improving interagency processes and enhancing the civilian foreign affairs capacity.

### Media

James Madison warned that, "A people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."<sup>9</sup> Given the state of today's media, several participants argued that there are an extraordinary number of unarmed Americans, less and less knowledgeable about foreign affairs or other news. These members argued that, in the place of meticulous information-gathering and editorial quality-controls essential for serious, high quality news, media institutions have opted to hollow out this process and rely instead on instant live coverage and oversimplified sound bites that go along with a 24 hour news cycle. Furthermore, international reporting and investigative reporting, always time-consuming and expensive, have come to be regarded by media industry management as: high risk, high maintenance, and high-priced impracticalities.<sup>10</sup> Though group members agreed that media reform is essential, there is little the next president can do to mandate such change. Neverthe-

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7. See Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann. "When Congress Checks Out," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2006.

8. David Brooks, "Private Virtue and Public Vice," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2007.

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9. See Alisdair Roberts, *Blacked Out: Government Secrecy in the Information Age* (St. Martin's Press: New York: 2006), p. 160.

10. See Charles Lewis, "The Growing Importance of Nonprofit Journalism," The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, Harvard University, April 2007.

less, participants agreed that President Bush's successor should recognize the institution's vital role in educating the American people about their government's foreign policy choices and actively engage diplomatic correspondents on a regular basis. Experience in Iraq has shown that while the executive branch has the power to initiate a specific policy, unless other players (Congress and the Media) are included and informed in the process, the President will not be able to sustain support for such a strategy over the long-term.

#### IV. AMERICAN POLITICS

In addition to inheriting a flawed foreign policy apparatus that stumbles when implementing interagency strategies, the next American president will have to deal with an increasingly polarized political environment. During the Cold War there existed a broad national consensus regarding the nature of the geopolitical threat confronting the United States. Debates, for the most part, were over the best means to confront Soviet power and the political center provided the swing votes in Congress. Conservative southern Democrats moderated the liberal tendencies in their party, and moderate northern Republicans limited conservative excess in their party. Cross aisle coalitions on foreign policy issues were the norm.

In contrast, participants argued that much has changed in the today's Congress, if not necessarily in the country. Gerrymandering has increased the number of "safe" districts in the House, encouraging members on both sides to appeal to their support base, which are typically more ideologically driven. There are fewer southern Democrats and northern Republicans in Congress, thus, there is a diminished need for either party to broaden its appeal. After examining survey research, experts found that, "when we combined voters' answers to (the) fourteen issue questions to form a liberal-conservative scale . . . 86 percent of Democratic voters were on the liberal side of the scale, while 80 percent of Republican voters were on the conservative side."<sup>11</sup> Only 10 percent of all voters were in the center. These survey results show that the visual

representation of the nation's voters today is far from the Cold War period, where one could observe a nicely shaped bell curve with most voters in the moderate middle. Though some members supported this notion of a divided populace, other participants argued that the real problem is the gap between the electorate, which is more comfortable in the political center, and elected officials who feel compelled for financial and organizational reasons to respond to their active political bases.

Central to the deep divisions now apparent in both the nation's elite and populace, are the foreign policy choices of the Bush Administration. According to survey results, fully 85 percent of those who voted for Democratic House candidates felt that it had been a mistake to invade Iraq, compared with only 18 percent of voters who cast ballots for Republicans.<sup>12</sup> Group members argued that not only has the war divided the country, but it has also led to domestic fatigue of U.S. global participation. Results of a PEW survey found that, "Even as Americans express greater commitment to solving domestic problems, they voice more hesitancy about global engagement. They are also less disposed than five years ago to favor a strong military as the best way to ensure peace."<sup>13</sup> At the very least, this shows that the American people have a diminishing interest in and support for the type of global engagement that recent presidents have supported. One member pointed out that when it comes to military intervention and forward engagements, the U.S. public will draw one of two lessons from the Iraq experience: "never again" or "do it different and better." Without a doubt, the next American president will have to take this into account when formulating his or her foreign policy agenda.

11. See Alan Abramowitz and Bill Bishop, "The Myth of the Middle," *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2007.

12. *Ibid.*

13. PEW—"Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes 1987–2007," March 22, 2007.

## V. LESSONS FROM IRAQ WAR

Threaded throughout the entirety of the discussion, the issue of Iraq linked the three domestic capacity challenges that were examined. One reason that the Iraq strategy failed in its stated goals (apart from toppling Saddam Hussein) was that the U.S. did not have the interagency mechanisms in place to effectively handle the strains of a massive post-conflict occupation and stabilization responsibility. Devoid of interagency infrastructure, civilian agencies that were assigned to the reconstruction efforts proved incapable of successfully accomplishing these tasks due to inadequate numbers of trained personnel and a lack of funding. Failure to implement President Bush's Iraq policy resulted in a shift in American politics played out in Congress as Democrats seized control of both houses. Now, the architects of America's failed policies in Iraq are being hauled before an engaged Congress and media. Group members agreed the obvious lesson for the next American president is that if you fail to implement policy effectively, you will lose politically.

Given the state of America's interagency process, under-resourced civilian agencies, and divided electorate, the next president will have to make a series of critical choices especially in regards to foreign policy in "zones of conflict." In regards to U.S. domestic capacity challenges, participants argued that the President Bush's successor must choose from several options which they broke down using four slogans: 1. "Never again," 2. "Do it better," 3. "Get others to do more," and 4. "Focus on other foreign policy objectives."

The first option would require a reduction of U.S. foreign policy commitments, which would reduce strain on the interagency system and institutions by bringing resources (human and financial) back into alignment. The second option would be far more challenging because it would entail a fundamental revision of how the U.S. organizes and prepares for a global role. Reforms would have to occur in the way the government makes national security decisions and implements those choices through the interagency process. Beyond this, agencies in the government will have to define or redefine

their roles. For the Army, it means making a doctrinal choice: "Is it to be the lean, high-tech force that toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein in little more than three weeks . . . or will it be the manpower-intense, counterinsurgency force that is slugging it out with guerrillas and trying to secure Baghdad today?"<sup>14</sup> Most members doubted that the Army could be both effectively.

The State Department would also have to determine whether within its confines there should be housed a "colonial service" capable of playing the critical political leadership role in post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction. If the next president chooses to continue U.S. commitments in the Middle East and elsewhere, many participants suggested that the State Department should develop a civilian reserve corps that could be called on for rapid deployment in a crisis. Others suggested that the Foreign Service have a "core" of officers jointly trained with the military and prepared to deploy to danger zones when called upon. While both options would help immensely, neither is a reality without Congressional support in the form of adequate budget resources to build the level of civilian capacity. Presidential leadership will be required to enhance America's capacity for global leadership, but it is insufficient without Congressional approval and commitment. This, in turn, would require effective rebuilding of public support for assertive U.S. leadership in crisis areas of turbulence.

The third option involves moving away from unilateral policies and shifting to more multilateral approaches. If this path is chosen, the next President must make it a priority to rebuild relations with critical allies in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. It will also require a reinvestment in international institutions like the UN and NATO. The fourth option requires focusing on foreign policy objectives other than occupying and rebuilding weak or failed states. By redirecting attention away from the Middle East, the next President could focus on other issues such as relations with developing powers in Asia or rebuilding trans-Atlantic ties. None of

14. James Kitfield, "For the Army: Code Yellow," *The National Journal*, April 7, 2007.

these options are mutually exclusive, and many group members favored a hybrid approach especially given the mood of the electorate.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In the end, President Bush's successor must decide what type of engagement the U.S. needs to develop capacity for. Given the challenges discussed during the second meeting of the Working Group, there is little doubt that over

the next ten years the United States will face future conflicts of choice (similar to Iraq) and conflicts of necessity (similar to Afghanistan). It will also face a range of foreign policy challenges that do not respond primarily to the use or threat of force. When selecting a course of action, the next president must remind himself/herself that no policy determining America's role in the world is immune to flaws in the foreign policy apparatus and the realities of domestic politics.