

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

Center for Preventive Action

POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. 5

Date: June 21, 2011
From: Paul B. Stares
Re: Enhancing U.S. Crisis Preparedness

The Obama administration was caught flatfooted by the recent “Arab Spring” uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. Not only did the intelligence community fail to warn senior officials of the combustible situations in Tunisia and Egypt, but evidently little or no forethought was given to how the United States might respond to popular uprisings or other forms of political instability in those countries of clear importance to U.S. interests and regional goals. As a result, the administration struggled to manage the unfolding crisis, largely improvising its responses without a clear sense of their implications or the overarching strategic objectives. The Obama administration can reduce its chances of being blindsided and unprepared in future crises by instituting a regular national security risk assessment of potential threats and challenges while also elevating the role of strategic planning to provide high level policy guidance as to how they may be managed and better still averted. The capacity of the National Security Council and the State Department to handle complex contingencies should also be upgraded.

THE CHALLENGES

Crisis preparedness can be considered a function of three factors—early warning, pre-planning, and the availability of ready and adaptable resources. Each has its own set of challenges.

Early Warning

As numerous cases of strategic surprise have demonstrated, early warning can be impeded by a failure to identify critical signals amid background noise, counter various analytical biases that can distort the interpretation of incoming information, and minimize the bureaucratic barriers to the timely alerting of senior decision-makers. The United States has invested heavily in intelligence gathering and analytical capabilities to address these challenges, but the sheer complexity and randomness of the many factors and interactions that can precipitate a major crisis makes accurate and

timely warning immensely difficult. It is hard to imagine how any early-warning system could have predicted the chain of events triggered by the self-immolation of a lowly fruit vendor in Tunisia in January 2011.

The difficulty of looking far into the future reinforces the tendency for senior policymakers to demand short-term “current intelligence” to help them manage events that could occur next week rather than next year. The need to warn of potentially catastrophic terrorist attacks and support current military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has further accentuated this short-term focus. Thus, other than the annual unclassified global threat briefing by the director of national intelligence (DNI) to Congress, there is no regular and systematic process of “scanning the horizon” for either potentially threatening developments and contingencies or political opportunities that could arise.

Pre-Planning

Busy policymakers are understandably reluctant to expend precious time on planning for potential crises that may never materialize, especially those that seem particularly remote or seemingly inconsequential. With every crisis, there is also a natural resistance to make plans that may be irrelevant to the specific circumstances or quickly rendered meaningless. Policymakers also like to retain maximum freedom of maneuver in a crisis, which pre-planning threatens to restrict. As a result, while the Defense Department and Combatant Commands conduct extensive operational planning for specific military contingencies, very little strategic planning takes place within the U.S. government. The small policy planning bureau at the State Department is primarily used to support special initiatives or the day-to-day needs of the secretary, while the even smaller strategic planning directorate at the National Security Council (NSC) does more or less the same for the national security adviser.

Recent efforts to improve the level of strategic planning in the U.S. government have not fared well. A 2005 presidential directive authorizing the State Department “to coordinate interagency processes to identify states at risk of instability, lead interagency planning to prevent or mitigate conflict and develop detailed contingency plans for integrated United States Government reconstruction and stabilization efforts” largely failed because the new coordinator for reconstruction and stabilization (S/CRS) tasked with this responsibility was never given the necessary resources or bureaucratic backing. Similarly, an NSC-led interagency group formed in the late stages of the George W. Bush administration to consider potential strategic challenges—the National Security Policy Planning Committee (NSPPC)—never gained traction within the mainstream policy process, and its work was largely ignored. The Obama administration chose not to reconstitute it or replace it with a similar interagency planning mechanism.

Ready and Adaptable Resources

Because crises are considered rare events, maintaining dedicated personnel and resources on standby to help manage them is generally deemed excessive. Preparing senior policymakers for specific contingencies through simulations and exercises is also exceedingly hard given the press of daily events. And Congress has traditionally resisted appropriating funds for unspecified emergencies. As a consequence, crises are typically managed in a makeshift manner: personnel are pulled from their regular assignments, responses are hastily prepared, and funds are hurriedly reprogrammed if they can be. Once the crisis is over, whatever the lessons or valuable experience gained in the process usually dissipates as life returns to “normal.”

Some parts of the U.S. government are better prepared for crises than others. The Defense Department has considerable military and civilian resources at the ready as well as flexible contingency funding to draw on at short notice. Even the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has a modest capability to respond to humanitarian and other emergencies. The State Department, however, continues to be hobbled by a limited crisis “surge capacity” and insufficient emergency funds. At the White House, the newly modernized Situation Room, with its state-of-the-art video conference

facilities, has significantly enhanced high-level crisis management and coordination, but the NSC remains chronically understaffed. Valuable experience and operationally relevant guidance for future crises is not retained due to the regular turnover of personnel, especially between administrations.

IMPROVING U.S. CRISIS ANTICIPATION, PLANNING, AND MANAGEMENT

U.S. crisis preparedness can be enhanced by implementing these three recommendations:

1. *Conduct a comprehensive U.S. national security risk assessment every two years at the behest of the national security adviser.* This would evaluate potential threats and other plausible strategic challenges over a twelve-to-eighteen-month time frame using agreed-upon criteria for assessing their relative likelihood and impact. A useful model is the UK government's National Security Risk Assessment (see <http://download.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/nss/nss-factsheet2.pdf>). This effort would be overseen by a newly created and properly staffed deputy national security adviser for strategic planning and carried out in partnership with the Office of the DNI. The Strategic Futures Group at the National Intelligence Council, which has recently been formed from the disbanded National Warning Office, should be tasked to support this effort. Using the techniques of strategic foresight analysis, plausible scenarios of consequence to U.S. interests would be assessed on the basis of identifiable risk factors (e.g., autocratic regimes, demographic imbalances, prior history of conflict) as well as known crisis triggers (e.g., coups, a rigged election, food price spikes) and drivers (e.g., opportunities for public mobilization, regime fracturing, external intervention). The goal would be to not only anticipate potential risks but also envisage possible strategic opportunities.
2. *Revive and elevate the status of the currently moribund NSPPC for the purpose of directing and coordinating interagency policy planning.* The new deputy national security adviser for strategic planning would chair the committee, which would meet at the assistant secretary level. A list of planning priorities based on the findings of the national security risk assessment would be generated and approved by the principals committee of the NSC. The principal planning departments of the relevant bureaus would conduct the bulk of the planning under the direction of the deputy national security adviser. The intent would not be to develop detailed operational plans but rather identify broad policy options to lessen the likelihood of a specific threat or undesired crisis from materializing and mitigate the potential negative consequences if it did. These planning documents would be reviewed twice a year by the deputies committee of the NSC, which would recommend revisions and direct follow-on action.
3. *Establish a separate Directorate for Complex Contingency Operations within the NSC to oversee and coordinate humanitarian relief and crisis stabilization missions across the U.S. government.* Its directing staff should preferably not be short-term political appointees. Reforms identified in the 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review to enhance in-house capacity for crisis prevention and response at the State Department and USAID need to be implemented and fully funded by Congress. These include the development of an interagency International Operational Response Framework to facilitate government coordination, a roster of on-call experts with proven functional and regional expertise that can be assembled and even deployed at short notice, and a Complex Crises Fund for unforeseen contingencies.

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