

## Our Own Worst Enemy? Self-Inflicted Vulnerabilities in U.S. National Security

On the night of January 1, 2013, nearly every light in the U.S. Capitol building was lit as Congress furiously worked towards a solution for the country's pre-eminent crisis – the fiscal cliff. The last-minute agreement would have been remarkable, except that Congress had known about the problem (and deadline) for a year and a half. In the end, all Congress had done was postpone dealing with the more significant issue of the debt ceiling (and sequestration). Not reaching a deal would have certainly damaged the American economy. However, these dramatic events demonstrated once again that the worst problems are often self-made. The U.S. national security arena is not exempt, as self-inflicted vulnerabilities may become the biggest threat of all.

### Ambiguity

Strategically, ambiguity is a double-edged sword. On one hand, the lack of specificity provides maneuverability, flexibility, and anonymity. Vital interests can be escalated as appropriate or disguised as necessary. On the other hand, the lack of clarity obstructs purpose, accountability and assessment. Despite numerous strategy papers, policy memos and official speeches, the guise of ambiguity has made it difficult to simply identify (and communicate) U.S. national security priorities. Cases in point are the top two national security policy documents. In the May 2010 *White House National Security Strategy*, priorities are buried in complex, matrixed long-term strategies. The Department of Defense's *Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense* from January 2012 lists ten "primary missions" that are either vague ("Deter and Defeat Aggression") or obvious ("Defend the Homeland and Provide Support to Civil Authorities"). The lack of clearly articulated priorities creates an inherent futility. Resources, from financial to intellectual, are inefficiently allocated, while efficiencies from potential interagency cooperation are forfeited. National security agendas can be hijacked by opportunists or by hot-button issues, such as the fiscal cliff overshadowing the debt crisis. In the end, ambiguity over priorities simply leads to everyone working against each other, instead of with each other.

Another key problem that arises from unclear priorities is the setting of vague, or worse, unattainable goals. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are prime examples where two primarily counter-terrorism operations (WMDs and Taliban, respectively) turned into long-term nation-building enterprises. Without knowing what's to be achieved, the focus drifts to the symptoms instead of the causes of national security threats. "These days, our goals are less about stopping bad things from happening and more about limiting the effects when they do happen – whether it's creating computer networks that can resume operation after a cyber attack, developing homeland security programs to accelerate recovery after a terrorist strike, or helping new democracies withstand violent insurgencies."<sup>1</sup> The question, then, is it better to have a loose purpose or to lose purpose? Even if mission creep elevated the final objective in Iraq or Afghanistan, ambiguity still triumphed over key milestones. "In Iraq [and Afghanistan], reconstruction was begun before stabilization was achieved."<sup>2</sup> Without some sort of criteria, resources are pushed until some threshold – rather than results – is reached. In national

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Zegart, "Taking Resilience Too Far; Resilience isn't always a good thing, especially when it comes to national security," *Slate*, March 19, 2012, [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future\\_tense/2012/03/resilience\\_in\\_national\\_security\\_is\\_overrated\\_.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2012/03/resilience_in_national_security_is_overrated_.html).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph R. Cerami, Robert H. Dorff, Matthew H. Harber, Eds., "National Security Reform 2010: A Mid-Term Assessment," August 2011, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/download.cfm?q=1080>.

security, ambiguity unfortunately has everyone reading different books when they need to be on the same page.

### Perception

Whether a result of intelligence gaps, cultural unawareness or hubris, another key vulnerability is perception, or more often, misperception. Able to boast a relatively successful track record due to its size, stature and resourcefulness, the U.S. generally believes that it will not only overcome national security challenges, but that things will also work out in its favor. This “optimism bias,” however, also creates opportunities for adversaries to catch the U.S. off guard. The tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup> forced the U.S. to realize for the first time since Pearl Harbor how motivated and resourceful its adversaries could be. In fact, it could be argued that Al Qaeda’s signature attack transformed U.S. national security operations into a counter-terrorism-driven program. The U.S. cannot afford to underestimate other countries. Although Iran’s nuclear aspirations predated its 1979 revolution, the U.S. didn’t take Iran’s nuclear capabilities seriously until the mid-1990s after its missile capacity was judged to be on par with North Korea’s. Jump ahead some twenty-five years to the U.S. being surprised by North Korea’s missile capacity: “North Korea likely engaged in a deliberate campaign of deception before a December 12 long-range missile launch, catching the United States and its Asian allies ‘off guard’ ...”<sup>3</sup> Whether it’s due to skill or trick plays, the U.S. cannot afford to lose the national security game because it underestimated an opponent.

Miscalculation, particularly when common sense, experience, and facts are discounted or ignored, also undermines U.S. national security. For example, American innovators (both civilian and military) have pioneered information technology and computer science since the 1960s. Information security and information warfare, as concepts and practice, were well-established by the 1970s. Even after the advent of the Internet era in the 1990s, however, American national security leaders were still surprised at how quickly and effectively the rest of the world embraced their new-found cyber powers. To accept the threat took even longer. “Public confirmation that concerns over critical infrastructure and national security systems had merit came in the spring of 2001.”<sup>4</sup> It took another decade before cyber was promoted to a warfare domain equivalent to air, sea, land, and space.

The U.S. was also surprised by the Arab Spring revolutions. Despite first-hand knowledge of nation-building and insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. somehow hoped for smooth transitions to functional democracies in a region with no experience with self-rule and strong fundamentalist momentum. Conversely, the quick toppling of dictatorial regimes from Egypt to Tunisia somehow made Bashar Assad’s defiance, the duration and intensity of Syria’s conflict, and potential regional spillover even more disturbing. Meanwhile, the U.S. clearly misjudged stability in Libya. The deaths of U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other American personnel sent shockwaves around Washington. However, an independent review of the Benghazi attacks “found that Washington tended ‘to overemphasize the positive impact of

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Starr, “U.S. official: North Korea likely deceived U.S., allies before launching rocket,” *CNN*, December 27, 2012, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/12/27/u-s-official-north-korea-likely-deceived-u-s-allies-before-launching-rocket/>.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Warner, “Cybersecurity: A Pre-history,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.27, No.5, October 2012, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02684527.2012.708530>.

physical security upgrades ... while generally failing to meet Benghazi's repeated requests' to beef up personnel."<sup>5</sup> It seemed lessons of protecting diplomatic and military facilities from previous attacks, such as the 1998 attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that killed 223 people, may have gone unheeded.

While the collateral damage of perception failures is generally immediate, the long-term damage in terms of reputation is also steep. From the inability to solve financial problems to protecting its citizens, U.S. influence is waning. "National security is not just about the number of tanks or rockets you have...Why should developing countries trust American leadership, when it seems incapable of solving anything at home? And while the West's foremost democracy stays paralysed, China is making decisions and forging ahead."<sup>6</sup> For now, American superiority remains strong in all areas of national security. However, it has become quite clear that in many areas, it's better to take things too seriously than to take them too lightly.

### Apathy

The idea that apathy could plague something as vital as national security may seem absurd. Yet the "not interested, not possible, or not my problem" attitudes across the government unconsciously undermine the effectiveness of national security organizations and operations. This trend of disengagement has been building for some time. During the Cold War, the overarching threat of a Soviet attack and subsequent mutually-assured destruction provided a clear focus. Today's asymmetric national security environment, however, is overwhelmed by an abundance of threats that the American national security system was not built to handle. Within national security agencies and across government, skill sets and know-how are often compartmentalized, usually overlapping, and inadequately coordinated. More demoralizing, however, is the widely-held belief that "[t]he tensions generated by cultural differences, turf, and competition for limited resources will always be part of the interagency process."<sup>7</sup>

Harder to envision than cross-functional cooperation these days are the dangers themselves. A key vulnerability is the "out of sight, out of mind" nature of asymmetric threats. What were once tangible (kinetic weapons and damage) are now increasingly virtual. With certain exceptions, many of the largest threats to U.S. – the debt crisis, cybersecurity, and trans-national terrorism – aren't taken seriously until it's too late. Threats to critical infrastructure now come more from servers than from bombs, as American power grids and industrial control systems are increasingly targets of cyber attacks. For example, Iranian hackers are believed to be behind a recent series of damaging cyber attacks on Persian Gulf oil and gas companies, as well as U.S. banks last summer. Consequently, the severity of these threats is unfortunately not always matched by the urgency to prevent them.

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<sup>5</sup> Elise Labott, "Report on Benghazi attack cites 'systemic failures'," *CNN*, December 18, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/18/us/state-benghazi-report/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "America's European moment; The troubling similarities between the fiscal mismanagement in Washington and the mess in the euro zone," *Economist*, January 5, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21569024-troubling-similarities-between-fiscal-mismanagement-washington-and-mess>.

<sup>7</sup> Gabirel Marcelle, Ed., "Affairs of State: The Interagency and National Security," December 2008, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubid=896>.

Perhaps a real sense of urgency is missing from national security overall? Consider the decade-plus War on Terror, the 24/7 news cycle of domestic and international crises, or an increasingly adversarial internal U.S. political system. Americans may simply be growing tired of endless fighting for uncertain results. “The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have drained public faith that the United States can and should do good in the world, leading to a surly mood toward foreign policy on the left as well as the right and stirring up the nativism that is never far from the surface of American life.”<sup>8</sup> Whether it is the fractured nature of the U.S. national security system or fatigue from intangible threats, the vulnerability created by apathy – more than not caring – is not worrying about it at all.

In the weeks since the fiscal cliff deal was reached, there has been much rhetoric, but little action, on the ominous debt ceiling crisis. In the meantime, the threat from inaction to national security is mounting. “The nation’s combat readiness and homeland security threat level preparations would be reminiscent of – but worse than – the hollow forces of the 1970s and ’90s.”<sup>9</sup> As national security agencies work diligently against an unprecedented number and variety of threats, the worst thing for them would be to undermine or handicap their capabilities in any way. Yet, the systemic presence of *ambiguity*, *perception*, and *apathy* create that very danger. And the consequences have been very clear. In the end, the U.S. cannot continue to perpetuate vulnerabilities of its own making. Otherwise, when the damage is done, there will be no one to blame but ourselves.

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<sup>8</sup> James Traub, “Welcome, Know-Nothings,” *Foreign Policy*, January 4, 2013, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/01/04/welcome\\_know\\_nothings](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/01/04/welcome_know_nothings).

<sup>9</sup> Dale Lumme, “Abdicating our National and Economic Security,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 17, 2013, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2013/jan/17/tp-abdicating-our-national-and-economic-security/>.