Toward A New National Security Paradigm: Breaking Out to Break Through

"The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible." At least so thought Albert Einstein. Many would argue that even his insights into the universe wouldn't have been able to predict the current state of the world. After all, this past generation has seen culture-altering events that jolted national and global security. The end of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. The tragedy of September 11th and the rise of global terrorism. The fall of dictatorships in the second Arab Spring. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The surge of asymmetric warfare and rise of technology, both as a precursor and as an amplifier of kinetic attacks.

In reality, these events really haven't been all that incomprehensible. Numerous empires have risen and fallen. Before 9/11, it was December 7th that would live in infamy. There was a first Arab Spring. And Iraq and Afghanistan each had previous wars with Iran and the Soviet Union, respectively. Even asymmetric warfare has a long history. From stories of David and Goliath, and the 300 at Thermopylae, to guerilla warfare in Vietnam or throughout Latin America, small, agile, and capable forces have been known to frustrate established powers. While technology has erased boundaries and time delays, it still is only a tool. The roots of problems are typically the same: greed, envy, revenge, paranoia, hate, or fanatical delusion. The impetus of the threats hasn't changed; they've just become easier to carry out. Perhaps the flaw in global and national security strategic thinking is the conviction that everything is different, when, in fact, it isn't.

The anxiety from November terror attacks around Paris was a greatly magnified replay of the January attacks on the French satirical news magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*. The marginalization (and self-isolation) of ethnic communities, particularly Arab Muslim, in France and throughout Europe that created opportunities for extremist ideologies to take hold and recruitment has been going on for years. However, the quick recurrence of domestic terrorism on high-profile, soft-targets in Paris reveals the lack of progress on thwarting these threats.

If "peace in the Middle East" were a Jeopardy answer, the question would be "What is 'something not likely to happen anytime soon?'" The rise of the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" and the war in Syria have only escalated regional instability brought on by the Arab Spring, on top of ongoing concerns over Iran and the long enduring Israel-Palestine conflict. Of course, Iran is at the heart of all this.

The Syrian refugee crisis has exposed further challenges within Europe and the faltering European Union (EU), in particular, whose response to the influx has been anything but unified. While many of the refugees in question aren't Syrian, but from Africa and other areas of instability, it's a reminder that people will always want to flee warzones, poverty and oppression. And that even the most politically and economic developed countries will struggle with how to deal with the problem.

A resurgent Russia has also pushed itself back onto the global security stage. The flood of images and videos of Vladimir Putin horseback-riding, deep-sea diving in submarines and more, has been a gratuitous demonstration of exaggerated personal strength that conveys his grand vision for Russia to regain super power status. The unchallenged annexation of Crimea only empowered Putin, as shown by Russian military action in Syria. What followed was an old-

fashioned show down between despots after Turkey shot down a Russian jet alleged to have violated Turkish airspace. This Cold War-esque fracas added further questions over NATO's purpose and value.

Meanwhile, China continues its decades-long plans for domination in South East Asia and the world, in a much more subtle and calculated manner than their Russian neighbors. They've advanced their military capabilities (including a bolstered navy), increased cyber capabilities, invested heavily into Africa for rare earth minerals and into Latin America for commodities, all the while holding democracy at bay.

The U.S. (and European, for that matter) response to all of these threats and trends has vacillated between passive and aggressive. The passive "wait and see" posture seems likely continue for some time. The more aggressive approach seems limited to retaliation, such as the Russian and French bombings of Syria after a Russian commercial flight was shot down over Egypt and the Paris attacks. Both were immediate, strong responses, but of little or no strategic value. The prevalent argument for these positions has been the unpredictable nature of current security threats, which is true to the extent of specific incidences. However, the threat actors and modus operandi are generally well-known. Yet there is a jarring uncertainty on how to proceed, and worse, an unwillingness to take the offensive.

Just as history (and current trends) continues to repeat itself, the same mistakes have persisted to be made in national security. Perception biases, stagnant paradigms, and uncertainty have hampered analysis, decision-making and strategic planning in national security. What should be done to regain the initiative and the advantage are far from incomprehensible: promote a more holistic understanding of the strategic environment; nurture, retain and promote adaptable leaders, able to succeed within complexity; strengthen enterprise agility; develop robust international partnerships; and leverage the opportunities afforded by new technologies, while striving to mitigate constraints imposed by both obsolescent policies and processes. Although this sounds like the considerable undertaking it actually is, there are important steps that can be taken to break old habits and break through to framing the future of national security.

First, learn to challenge and discard assumptions. All strategic planning is based on a set of assumptions, typically formed through experience, perceptions and values. However, planners get into trouble when they are wedded to comfortable assumptions and time-tested constructs even though the strategic environment in which they function has been operationally transformed. The reasons behind this failure include cognitive dissonance, hubris, inexperience, or simply the inability to accept change. Even examples of false assumptions are repeating themselves, such as the U.S. not being vulnerable to physical attack from a foreign adversary (the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 1941 and the terror attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, 2011).

Among the basic assumptions that should be discarded immediately, the first is don't expect others to act the way you do or how you want them to act. "For the past three presidents, policy has chiefly involved the export of American values – although, to the countries on the receiving end, that sometimes felt like an imposition. The idea was that countries would inevitably

gravitate towards democracy, [free] markets and human rights."[1] For example, there seemed to be an optimistic expectation that after the second Arab Spring, those Middle Eastern countries would gravitate towards democratic institutions and processes despite having little experience with representative government. Another example is the value placed on the glory of death and rewards in the afterlife by radical Islamic terror organizations. Such motivation is the antithesis of the American mindset of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, which underscores most assumptions. The simple (but sometimes forgotten) lesson here is that no strategy will work if the assumptions don't evolve with or adapt to the operational environment.

Second, learn how to deal with uncertainty. Being comfortable with uncertainty may be a tall order for a country that spends nearly $1.1 billion a year on the National Weather Service to fundamentally predict the weather.[2] In 2015, Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Ray Odierno admitted that he found uncertainty to be "problematic because the nation doesn't know what it's going to respond to as it did during the Cold War when the Army had operational concepts and strategy."[3]

The national security conversation, particularly in light of ongoing financial constraints, has been on operational concepts and strategies squarely based on flexibility and agility. Odierno and the other service chiefs during his tenure (rightly) focused their attention on developing budgets and capabilities to prepare the military to do a variety of things simultaneously, and provide the right tools to do any job asked in the future. Their calls for continuing investments to sustain military readiness addressed the challenge of preparedness. Yet it also brings national security planners back to the question of 'prepared for what?'

A promising (and cost-effective) answer may be wargaming. Recently endorsed by both Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Paul Selva, wargaming yields "a cycle of creative ideas and innovation that generated requirements for new systems, suggested new operation concepts, and influenced force design."[4] Wargaming has its advantages, from testing out strategies and tactics to making critical mistakes without incurring losses or costs. However, the problems Work and Selva found were that both service and joint wargaming was uncoordinated. Even worse, "Wargame results are neither shared laterally across the defense enterprise nor up the chain to influence senior level decision-making. In other words, even if wargames are generating innovative insights and suggesting needed operational and organizational changes, the people in position to act upon them are generally unaware of the insights or their import."[5] While wargaming may not provide a complete picture of the national security environment, it could help provide the strategic clarity necessary to disaggregate compounded threats and address them systemically and innovatively.

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[1] "American dominance is being challenged," *The Economist*, October 17, 2015, http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21674699-american-dominance-being-challenged-new-game.
[2] "FY 2016 Budget Request: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration" American Institute for Physics, February 6, 2015, https://www.aip.org/fyi/2015/fy-2016-budget-request-national-oceanic-and-atmospheric-administration.
[3] J.D. Leipold, "Uncertainty means Army must be prepared for multiple threats," *Army News Service*, January 23, 2015, http://www.army.mil/article/141620/Uncertainty_means_Army_must_be_prepared_for_multiple_threats/.
[4] Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work and Gen. Paul Selva, "Revitalizing Wargaming is Necessary to Be Prepared for Future Wars," *War on the Rocks*, December 8, 2015, http://warontherocks.com/2015/12/revitalizing-wargaming-is-necessary-to-be-prepared-for-future-wars/.
[5] Work and Selva, op.cit.

Finally, learn to mind the gap. National budget constraints have brought the significant 'end-means' gap in defense to the forefront, challenging mainly the military to scale down objectives to what is affordable, rather than what's necessary. Yet this isn't the only gap plaguing the national security community. One is the 'say-do' gap (between what is said and what is actually done). From "mission accomplished" to "red lines in the sand", the U.S. has failed to back up its words with impactful action, such as stabilizing Iraq, impeding Russia in the Ukraine, and most recently, in Syria. The effect has been to undermine American credibility and influence, to the point that "our enemies do not fear us and our friends do not trust us."[6]

Then there's the 'action-progress' gap (between talking about goals/taking small steps and actually making progress on them). In the nearly 15 years since the U.S. declared a global war on terror, there have been notable achievements, but no truly decisive victories. In fact, the 2015 Global Terror Index reported that the number of people who have died from terrorist activity has increased nine-fold since the year 2000 and terrorist activity increased by 80% in 2014 to its highest recorded level.[7] To counter setbacks in Afghanistan, for example, the reoccurring response has been to send more special operations forces to assist struggling Afghan security forces or to provide training support to local police and the army. Each time, ironically, a handful of newly deployed trainers and advisors are expected to achieve in a short amount of time what thousands could not do over the past decade. It seems there is a greater fear of failing to act than failing to make actual progress.

Albert Einstein also once defined crazy as doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results. Despite being stuck in these perceptual and operational cycles, the U.S. remains the only country able to project power across the globe.[8] Whether familiar or new, the complexity and scale of challenges that lay ahead for the next several decades – perhaps century – are unavoidable. Recent attacks in Istanbul and Jakarta show the increased boldness of emerging, radicalized threats actors, while the Iranian capture of American sailors (albeit brief) in the Persian Gulf is a reminder of the dangers posed by long-standing adversaries. National security strategic thinking and policy will first require breaking some old habits before constructing a new vocabulary and intellectual framework. With national and global security at stake, not making the necessary changes to break though would be the most incomprehensible act of all.

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[6] Bing West, "How We Fight in the Twenty-First Century: Winning Battles While Losing Wars," *Hoover Institution*, December 10, 2015, http://www.hoover.org/research/how-we-fight-twenty-first-century-winning-battles-while-losing-wars.

[7] Institute of Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism," November 2015, http://static.visionofhumanity.org/sites/default/files/2015%20Global%20Terrorism%20Index%20Report_0_0.pdf.

[8] *The Economist*, op.cit.