



Project on National Security Reform: Vision Working Group Update¹

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Sheila R. Ronis provided an overview of the work being done by the Vision Working Group of the Project on National Security Reform in the United States. Set up in 2005, the Vision Working Group explores improved national security systems and processes that the U.S. government should develop and use in its decision-making processes in the Executive Office of the President. The Vision Working Group's trials of some of the processes were discussed, along with the outcomes of the development of scenarios representing a fifty-year period. These scenarios were used to stress-test the overall findings of the Project on National Security Reform which were presented to the Congress and the President of the United States.

Ronis began by discussing the scope of national security. First, the factors for the assessment and prioritization of threats and opportunities were identified. Those for threats included urgency, impact, magnitude, mitigation options and intention, while those pertaining to opportunities included knowledge, expertise, probability of success, resources, long-term sustainability, proportionality and intention. Based on this approach, national security refers to any situation, condition, or entity which has the potential to enhance or degrade the viability and vitality of the nation. Following from this, the National Security System would be responsible for, and its effectiveness measured by, the viability and vitality of the nation, peaceful and positive development throughout the countries of every region, and cooperation and collaboration around the globe.

Ronis shared three observations regarding the complex national security landscape facing many nations today. First, given that global interdependence is now a reality, national security issues must always assume a global focus. Second, the distinction between foreign

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affairs and homeland concerns has become blurred and thus, managing national security issues requires tackling the internal, external and interdependent issues. Third, the reality of globalization demands a holistic world-view alongside of specific national interests. Consequently, for the future security system to succeed as a complex adaptive system, it should possess the following five inherent qualities: i) it must share information and collaborate horizontally; ii) accommodate unanticipated needs and partnership; iii) ensure agility in the face of uncertainty; iv) incorporate ad-hoc structures and processes; and v) maintain a long-term view.

Ronis also stressed that an important characteristic of complex systems is that they can rarely be controlled and at best, can only be influenced if well-understood. Even then, in complex systems, one can only predict with probabilities, but not with certainty.

Following from this, the Vision Working Group suggested synthesizing whole-of-government solutions to complex system issues and problems in order to develop scenarios for planning and ultimately to develop grand strategies. To stress-test some of the processes and recommendations of the Project, nine scenarios were developed. The objective was not to predict the future but to generate plausible alternative future scenarios to provoke debate that will lead to the refinement of the recommendations.

The Vision Working Group also recommended that the Center for Strategic Analysis and Assessment in the Executive Office of the President be established to support strategic decision-making in a whole-of-government manner for important national issues which is currently lacking.