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## **Obama's Geopolitical Initiation; Preventive Strategy**

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### **Abstract**

Since taking office, the Obama administration has repeatedly affirmed its intent to prevent potential future international crises from becoming the source of costly new U.S. military commitments. In one of the earliest foreign policy pronouncements of the new administration, vice President Joseph R. Biden declared: “We’ll strive to act preventively, not preemptively, to avoid whenever possible or wherever possible the choice of last resort between the risks of war and the dangers of inaction.”

This would not be the first time senior U.S. officials have extolled the virtues of better crisis management and conflict prevention as a way to avoid costly military entanglements.

Yet for all the avowed interest in preventive action, the United States has repeatedly found itself responding to foreign crises belatedly and hastily with damaging consequences for U.S. regional interests and policy goals.

In many other cases, moreover, regional instability and conflict have eventually necessitated major U.S. military interventions to stabilize and reconstruct the stricken country. The Obama administration’s declarations will intent to make preventive action a policy priority for the United States.

The hypothesis of this article indicates a direct relation between Obama’s foreign policy and preventive action in U.S. strategy. The Obama’s foreign policy is the independent variable and preventive strategy is the dependent variable and the theoretical framework is based on Agent-Structure approach.

**Keywords:** Preemptive action, Intervention, Prevention war, Policy goals, Stability, Regional crisis.

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## Introduction

The implications, moreover, of emerging geostrategic trends provide additional reasons to favor preventive or “upstream” approaches to conflict management over more costly remedial or “downstream” responses. Rhetorical commitments, however, will not suffice to bring about the needed improvements. The essential organizational arrangements that guide policy, planning, and budgeting must also be improved. In much the same way that entrenched service parochialism in the U.S. armed services was systemically addressed through organizational reforms to promote a culture of “jointness”, so the same has to happen to enhance U.S. preventive action.

Preventive action to minimize dangerous political instability and forestall violent conflict is not a singular endeavor or even a discrete set of activities. Indeed, it can mean quite different things to different people (Atlantic Council, 2009:8).

This article uses the term preventive action to refer to three overlapping types of activity: conflict risk reduction, crisis prevention, and crisis mitigation.

— Conflict Risk Reduction: These are measures taken to minimize potential sources of instability and conflict before they arise. They encompass, on the one hand, efforts to reduce the impact of specific threats, such as controlling the development of destabilizing weapon systems or arms transfers that may cause regional power imbalances, restricting the potential influence of dangerous nonstate actors, and diminishing the possible negative impact of anticipated demographic, economic, and environmental change.

On the other hand, they cover measures that promote conditions conducive to peace and stability. Within states these include encouraging equitable economic development, good governance, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Stability can be enhanced through rules on the use of force, military and economic cooperation, security guarantees, confidence-building measures, functional integration, and effective arbitration mechanisms, among other things. Risk reduction measures, moreover, can be global in application so as to have broad systemic benefits, or may be more narrowly focused on a specific region or state.

— Crisis Prevention: In regions or states that are assessed to be particularly volatile or susceptible to violence, another, albeit similar, set of measures can be applied to prevent the situation from deteriorating further.

Much like risk reduction efforts, crisis prevention measures can be aimed at redressing the specific source(s) or “drivers” of instability and potential conflict and/or assisting the state(s) or group(s) that are threatened.

A host of diplomatic, military, economic, and legal measures are in principle available to alter either the contributing conditions or the decision calculus of the parties to the potential conflict. These include various cooperative measures (such as diplomatic persuasion and mediation, economic assistance and incentives, legal arbitration, and military support) as well as coercive instruments (diplomatic condemnation and isolation, various kinds of economic sanctions, legal action, preventive military deployments, and threats of punitive action). The two are not mutually exclusive and are frequently seen as most effective when applied together “carrots and sticks” in the vernacular.

— Crisis Mitigation: If earlier preventive efforts fail to have the desired effect or violence erupts with little or no warning, then many of the same basic techniques can be employed to manage and mitigate the crisis.

These measures include efforts targeted at the parties to facilitate cooperative dispute resolution and change their incentive structures to promote peaceful outcomes. Thus, steps can be taken to identify and empower “moderates,” isolate or deter potential “spoilers,” and sway the uncommitted. More interventionist measures to protect endangered groups or secure sensitive areas through the use of such tactics as observer missions, arms embargoes (or arms supplies), and preventive military or police deployments are also conceivable of potentially equal importance in some circumstances, moreover, are the preventive initiatives to help contain a relatively localized crisis or flash point to help ensure it does not either spread or draw in others. In some cases, containment may realistically be the only crisis mitigation option(Agiesta and Cohen).

Obviously, there is no “one size fits all” formula for each of these types of preventive action. The various measures have to be mixed and matched according to the specific circumstances and guided by a similarly tailored political strategy.

With so many different kinds of preventive action, there is understandably no single, integrated management system to help guide, plan, and execute the full range of U.S. efforts. However, the relevant organizational arrangements affecting the three principal categories of preventive action can still be reasonably assessed(Rosecrance and Brown,1999:39).

## **1- Conflict Risk Reduction**

Ideally, a systematic and comprehensive approach to conflict risk reduction would entail medium-to-long-term assessments of potential destabilizing developments or sources of conflict, an appraisal of their relative threat to U.S. interests, and a coordinated strategic planning process designed to match policy responses and resources to prioritized concerns. Currently, the United States does only some of these tasks and certainly not in an integrated fashion.

The National Intelligence Council (NIC) conducts long-range strategic assessments, including the unclassified Global Outlook series that regularly reviews international trends and plausible scenarios over a twenty-year time span. A Long-Range Analysis Unit has also been established within the NIC to augment this effort with in-depth studies.

In addition, more focused National Intelligence Estimates and National Intelligence Assessments are also regularly commissioned on specific sources of concern, whether it be an individual country such as North Korea or broader transnational threats such as global climate change, HIV/AIDS, international migration, proliferation, terrorism, and potential humanitarian challenges. But there is no regular intelligence product specifically dedicated to surveying areas of instability and conflict aside from the shorter-term Internal Instability Watchlist (IIW).

The director of National Intelligence (DNI) does give an annual unclassified briefing to Congress, but that is more of a general tour d'horizon assessment of national security threats(Lund,1996:5).

Although these assessments will inform the production of various national strategy documents such as the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy, they do not represent detailed policy guidance documents. No established interagency strategic planning process exists to produce such guidance for addressing longer-range concerns or priorities. To its credit, the Bush administration did try to lay the basis for more rigorous strategic planning with the creation of the National Security Policy Planning Committee (NSPPC) in late 2008. Made up of representatives from the NSC and the departments of State, Defense, Treasury, Justice, and Homeland Security, as well as the Joint Staff and the NIC, the NSPPC considered U.S. policy responses to more than a dozen potential contingencies or possible "strategic shocks" that were eventually briefed to the incoming Obama administration. Though a useful first step, the work of

the NSPPC was still a work in progress by the time the Bush administration ended(Woucher,2001:203).

Selection of the issue areas was apparently more the result of informal deliberation among its regular participants than a formalized process linked to specific intelligence assessments, while a systematic planning methodology had yet to be developed to undergird the process. The fate of the NSPPC is also uncertain; although General Jones indicated his intent to create a small “planning cell” at the NSC, the work of the NSPPC has yet to be revived(Sweet and Ondiak,2008:93).

The lack of coherent strategic planning relevant to conflict risk reduction is most acutely evident in U.S. foreign assistance programming. As indicated earlier, aid programs are one of the most important tools for lowering the risk of instability and conflict. There is widespread agreement, however, that management of the multibillion-dollar U.S. aid program is hugely incoherent and flawed. Currently, more than twenty U.S. agencies administer more than fifty types of aid programs to more than 150 countries around the world.

The programs of most relevance for this report fall under the purview of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department. USAID’s Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (which includes the Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation and the Office of Transition Initiatives) administers a variety of conflict prevention efforts around the world, though their scale is relatively modest.

The State Department, meanwhile, manages several security cooperation and security sector reform efforts, notably the International Military and Education Training (IMET) program to train foreign military and police officers, as well as the Global Peace Operations Initiative, which trains peacekeepers and stability police. Both programs are overseen by the Bureau of Political Military Affairs. The International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Bureau similarly helps build the capacity of law enforcement and judicial bodies in countries threatened by drug traffickers and organized crime(Davidson,2009:428).

Efforts by the Bush administration to rationalize the process— though laudable—have not had the desired effect. USAID and the State Department now submit a joint five-year strategic plan under the direction of the newly created director of U.S. Foreign Assistance (who concurrently serves as USAID administrator), but major new initiatives relevant to conflict risk

reduction still fall outside their purview.

These include the Millennium Challenge Account and the Global Health and Child Survival program—formerly the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief—but also, more directly, the growing involvement of the Pentagon and the U.S. military in what they term Phase Zero or “shaping” operations explicitly conceived to lower the risk of regional conflict(Feaver and Emboden,2009:109).

Since September 11, 2001, Congress has granted the Defense Department authority to initiate a number of security assistance and development programs outside of Iraq and Afghanistan. The growth of these programs has skewed the long-standing arrangement whereby State provided oversight for most security assistance programs (such as IMET), while the Pentagon implemented them. For example, in FY2002, 94 percent of all security assistance programs between the agencies fell within the State Department budget. By FY2008, just over one-half were budgeted and managed by the Pentagon. Most of these military assistance programs are implemented by the five non-North American regional Combatant Commands (COCOMs) through their Theater Security Cooperation (TSC) plans to promote stability and build partnership capacity with foreign military forces in their area of operations(Adams,2009:31).

COCOM planning staffs have great leeway in designing a TSC, but they generally include nonmilitary tasks, such as deploying mobile medical care teams to underdeveloped areas, refurbishing hospitals, and digging wells and irrigation canals, as well as military tasks, such as providing training in the basic tactics, techniques, and procedures of military operations, equipping soldiers with nonlethal supplies, and providing logistics and communication support for deployed foreign military forces(Dod,2009:31).

The TSC plans are primarily funded out of the COCOM’s operations and maintenance budgets, with the average FY2010 request for each being \$200 million. Interagency coordination for regional COCOMs is supposed to be handled through a Joint Interagency Coordination Group, but in practice this has proven to be difficult due to basic differences in the planning cultures and available resources of the Defense Department and non-Defense Department agencies. Furthermore, COCOMs are also supposed to integrate their TSC programs into the three-year mission strategic plans developed by the ambassadors of the countries within their areas of operation. However, since the latter focus on just their own country while the COCOMs plan for their entire area of operations, this plan too has been difficult to accomplish

in practice(Marshal,2008:35).

No overarching strategy or framework exists to guide the conflict risk reduction activities of the various agencies. USAID developed a general “Fragile States Strategy” for this purpose, but it was never adopted across the government. As part of its reform effort, the Bush administration introduced a Foreign Assistance (F) Framework that organized states into distinct categories and set specific “end goals” for each, but it represents less of a clear strategy and more of an organized checklist of objectives. Many have also complained that the F Framework is arbitrary and cumbersome, making it less responsive to local needs.

## **2- The Utility of CRISIS PREVENTION**

Since the promulgation of National Security Presidential Directive-44 (NSPD-44) in 2005, U.S. efforts to respond to emerging threats of instability and conflict—particularly those associated with weak or failing states—have been organized under the aegis of “stabilization and reconstruction” operations. A new Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) was established at the State Department and charged with implementing NSPD 44.

However, the lack of vocal and sustained support from the White House, persistent underfunding from a skeptical Congress, and bureaucratic resistance from within and outside the State Department have all hobbled S/CRS’s efforts to fulfill its mandate. The perceived need to demonstrate its value also led S/CRS increasingly to devote most of its attention and resources to building up U.S. civil capabilities for stabilization and reconstruction missions rather than the crisis prevention part of its mission. Although some useful initiatives have been undertaken by S/CRS, U.S. crisis prevention and preparedness efforts remain deficient, particularly with respect to early warning and planning(Smith,2009:35).

In 2005, S/CRS in collaboration with the National Warning Staff of the Office of the Director for National Intelligence established an Internal Instability Watchlist to monitor states at risk of instability and conflict. Initially revised every six months, this interagency coordinated and classified watchlist is now produced once a year. States are included in the IIW on the basis of a combination of quantitative risk assessment techniques as well as more qualitative inputs from the intelligence community(Bendsahel and Others,2009:38).

The likelihood of five possible outcomes—internal conflict, humanitarian crisis, violent political transition, state collapse, and the emergence of “ungoverned spaces”—are assessed for each country considered at risk.

Also included in the assessment are potential crisis triggering events, the likelihood of such events occurring in the short to medium term, the potential consequences and severity of a crisis, and the resulting impact on U.S. interests. Since 2006, the Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation within USAID has also produced two similar alert lists: the Fragility Alert List and the Instability Alert List.

The former ranks more than 160 countries according to established criteria of state strength or weakness, while the latter assesses the likelihood that any given state will experience political instability or the outbreak of violent conflict in the near future. Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation also produces an amalgam of the two lists to determine those that not only face elevated risk of instability but also have the fewest political, economic, social, and security resources to deal with their vulnerability. These watchlists augment other, more established warning products(Smith,2009:15).

Since 1999, the National Warning Staff has produced a quarterly

Atrocities Watchlist of “countries where there is evidence of, or the potential for, significant political repression or systematic human rights abuses that could lead to a deliberate pattern of widespread atrocities or a major humanitarian emergency over the next twelve months.” More importantly, the National Warning Staff periodically issues “Special Warning Notices” when the threat is considered particularly acute or imminent. Some have a relatively short (six months) time horizon, while others can be as long as two years<sup>6</sup> Dod,2009:12).

Considerable effort goes into creating and distributing these various early-warning products. In addition to the well-established intelligence channels to senior officials, S/CRS has also created a dedicated network to distribute more specialized assessments to relevant agencies throughout the U.S. government. Its senior officer for warning chairs an interagency Intelligence and Analysis Working Group and also produces a regular compilation of other relevant material called the “Global Daily.” Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation likewise distributes the USAID watchlists to its respective country and regional missions in the field and to regional bureaus in Washington, DC.

Yet, for all this effort, the various warning products play a limited role in

either triggering or guiding preventive policy responses. This is partly a consequence of their design and format. With about fifty countries listed in the IIW and nearly thirty on the USAID combined alert list, policymakers do not consider them particularly helpful in drawing attention to the most pressing or important cases. Country and regional experts also complain that the watchlists add little to what they already know(GAO Report,2004:15).

Even more problematic, no established interagency policy review or contingency planning process exists to make use of the various conflict assessment and early-warning products for preventive action and crisis preparedness. As one senior intelligence official lamented, there are too many “drop and go” warning products that are distributed and then left to the vagaries of the regular NSC-led interagency process for subsequent follow-up. As a result, the intelligence community is often sidelined from playing a constructive role in helping to inform and shape policy options. More importantly, this increases the likelihood of ad hoc and improvised responses to emerging threats since each tends to be treated *de novo*, without the benefit of specialized knowledge of preventive action strategies(U.S. Department of State,2009:503).

In addition, although S/CRS is tasked “to lead interagency planning to prevent or mitigate conflict,” it has been unable to do this in a robust and sustained fashion due to its weak institutional standing within the State Department. For example, the S/CRS-led Intelligence and Analysis Working Group is authorized to make twice-yearly recommendations to the Stabilization and Reconstruction Policy Interagency Planning Committee for countries to be subjected to “scenario based planning” exercises, but resistance by the State Department’s regional bureaus to S/CRS involvement in their areas of responsibility has stymied efforts to do such planning on a regular basis. Any actual planning has largely been the result of informal arrangements with a few bureaus and missions abroad that have been amenable to receiving help from S/CRS. Though useful in helping to build up a cadre of civilian planners within S/CRS, a recent RAND study concluded these efforts nonetheless “had consumed the attention of S/CRS’s planning staff, leaving the office with little time to develop contingency plans or think strategically about prioritizing countries for planning”(Adams,2008:16).

S/CRS, however, created a useful interagency conflict assessment tool for planning and programming purposes that was approved in 2008 for all government agencies to use in developing a shared understanding of the

conflict dynamics of a particular country. Interagency groups have since applied the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) methodology to eight countries, including Tajikistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Cambodia. The intent is for the ICAF to be used by U.S. missions abroad in determining specific assistance needs, by the Defense Department and COCOM planners for designing theater Phase Zero programs, and for full-scale government strategic and operational planning. Similar generic planning aids have been drafted to help coordinate the implementation of stabilization and reconstruction missions. No agencies are required to use the ICAF when developing and implementing programs(GAO, 2009:39).

After years of being unable to fund field initiatives, S/CRS has also carried out some modest preventive efforts using Section 1207 Defense Department security and stabilization assistance funds. These funds were transferred to the State Department and USAID to “address urgent or emergent threats” in regions and countries “where a failure to act could lead to the deployment of U.S. forces.” Through FY2009, \$350 million in 1207 funding has been used in eleven countries and two regions, including \$30 million to support internally displaced people in Georgia, \$9 million to support youth services in Yemen, and \$15 million to support teacher and job skills training in the Trans Sahara.

Having a relatively flexible source of funds to support initiatives that fall outside the normal appropriations process has proven useful. Yet the future of this short-term transfer arrangement remains uncertain due to congressional criticism of the program(Dod,2009:12).

### **3- The Process of CRISIS MITIGATION**

Well-established arrangements exist to apprise senior officials of imminent or breaking crises as well as facilitate rapid decision-making in such circumstances. Following the 9/11 attacks, U.S. early-warning and crisis management procedures were also significantly upgraded (Davis,2003:118).

Only recently, however, have dedicated arrangements been established to manage the full range of stabilization and reconstruction operations as defined by NSPD-44. In 2007, an Interagency Management System (IMS) was formally approved to coordinate U.S. planning for such contingencies, including actual or imminent state failure, potential regional instability, humanitarian disasters, and grave human rights violations. Use of the IMS

can be triggered by the national security adviser or by direct request of the secretary of state or secretary of defense. It calls initially for the creation of an interagency Country Reconstruction and Stabilization Group (CRSG), co-chaired by the S/CRS coordinator, the relevant assistant secretary from the State Department, and the NSC senior director. This group would generate a strategic plan to respond to the crisis, which would be presented for approval to the Deputies Committee and above if necessary(Hass, 2002:36).

Coordination and implementation of the plan would be overseen by the CRSG and at lower operational levels by an Integrated Planning Cell that would be set up at the headquarters of the relevant regional combatant commander as well as by an interagency Advance Civilian Team dispatched to the country in crisis.

S/CRS has also been developing the Civilian Response Corps (CRC) as a major additional expeditionary capability for crisis situations. The CRC consists of three elements—an Active Component (CRC-A) to comprise 250 government employees on call to be deployed within forty-eight hours principally to augment embassy staff; a Standby Component (CRC-S) of additional governmental experts that can be deployed over a period of one to two months; and a larger Reserve Component (CRC-R) made up of state and local government experts as well as private sector specialists that would be called up and potentially deployed for up to one year. Only the Active and Standby components, however, have received congressional funding(Albright and Cohen,2008:66).

Promising though these initiatives appear, several concerns have been raised about the overall level of U.S. preparedness for preventive action in crisis situations. First, reorienting U.S. intelligence collection efforts on short notice in response to rapidly emerging needs can be difficult.

Since 2003, broad tasking guidance has been managed through the National Intelligence Priorities Framework (NIPF) coordinated by the director of National Intelligence. Consisting essentially of a tasking matrix, it ranks on its horizontal axis some thirty issues of concern according to their relative priority. On the vertical axis approximately 180 state and nonstate groups are listed. The DNI then translates the matrix into specific guidance to senior intelligence community managers for allocating collection and analytical resources for their country, region, or issue area. The NIPF is updated every six months and signed by the president. While the NIPF is a comprehensive and systematic process, it is viewed by many

intelligence officials and policymakers as too cumbersome and inflexible for responding to unforeseen contingencies (Department of State, 2009:150).

Second, the Interagency Management System has never been fully activated, and it is unclear when it would be. Criticisms have also been voiced that it duplicates standing NSC processes and, much like the NIPF, it is overly bureaucratic—all of which may ultimately deter activation. Similarly, the Civilian Reserve Corps has yet to be fully mobilized, and while small numbers of the Active Component have been dispatched to assist U.S. embassy staff in several unstable areas—Lebanon, Kosovo, Haiti, Afghanistan, Liberia, Chad, Sudan, and Iraq—the results have been mixed. Whether they truly add value to existing U.S. government civilian “expeditionary” capabilities—in particular, USAID’s Disaster Assistance Response Teams and the rapid response assets of its Office of Transitional Initiatives—is also a matter of some dispute. In any case, the CRC is primarily oriented to helping states deal with the late stages of a crisis or aftermath of a conflict rather than to helping the State Department prevent such situations arising in the first place( Adams,2008:39).

Third, U.S. agencies have repeatedly been hamstrung in crisis situations by the difficulty in accessing funds for operations not already preprogrammed or explicitly prescribed for certain contingencies. While several emergency funds are available for use, they come with various stipulations and constraints. Two new programs—a Rapid Response Fund and a Stabilization Bridge Fund—have been proposed in the president’s budget for FY2010 to help address this problem, but it is still uncertain whether they will be supported.

## **Conclusion**

The United States has considerable influence and resources at its disposal to carry out various forms of preventive action. What it lacks are effective organizational arrangements to make the most of this latent capacity and help overcome some of the more common hindrances to preventive action. Rectifying current deficiencies does not require a radical overhaul of the U.S. government or costly new programs. Rather, much can be accomplished with some relatively modest initiatives and adjustments in the following areas.

1- Preventive priorities would be defined as events that pose immediate or direct spillover threats to the U.S. homeland; have serious systemic

implications for international security, the global economy, and environment; or involve large-scale genocide and mass atrocities.

2- Priorities would be defined as threats to countries where the

United States has made alliance commitments, or where instability and conflict may have serious regional implications or cause a major humanitarian disaster.

3- Priorities would encapsulate concerns where the likely human, political, or geographical effects are of a lesser magnitude. Besides setting priorities for preventive action, such a ranking would help focus conflict risk assessments and intelligence collection. It would also sensitize policymakers to the significance of warning information in specific instances.

4- Given the diversity of concerns and potential contingencies, no single integrated strategy can hope to provide detailed policy guidance. More focused strategic planning frameworks can be developed, however, to direct preventive action toward generic sources of concern—such as fragile states or countries undergoing potential unstable political transitions—as well as toward specific regions or states.

5- These frameworks would share common features with the attention given to determining the focus, timing, and synchronization of U.S. efforts as well as the use made of prospective partners. They would obviously also draw on the latest utility assessments of different preventive measures.

6- Generating a clear set of preventive priorities would help guide the tasking of intelligence collection and analysis without compromising the integrity of the relationship. Thus, intelligence officials would not have to divine the leading concerns of the policymakers, nor make judgments about their relative import.

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