

The President's National Security In-Box

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David Kennedy asked me to frame the discussion tonight by imagining what should be in the next president's in-box the day after inauguration. I was immediately reminded of my friend, Al Carnesale, a nuclear engineer and Chancellor Emeritus at UCLA. Al has worked with many presidential administrations and for years he has had not one but three in-boxes on his desk: one is labeled "in," one is labeled "out," and the third is labeled "too hard."

The next president's "too hard box" will be overflowing. So let me talk about that box before I suggest the top five priorities I think should be in the in-box.

Every generation of foreign policy leaders thinks it faces unprecedented challenges. This time, it's really true. The threat environment today is marked by *uncertainty, complexity, velocity, and anxiety*.

During the Cold War, the United States confronted a single principal adversary, the Soviet Union. We were a bureaucracy dealing with another slow-moving bureaucracy. Today, US foreign policy leaders face rising states like China, declining states like Russia, weak states like Pakistan, failed states like Syria, rogue states like North Korea, non-state actors ranging from ISIS to Anonymous, and transnational threats like global climate change. The terrain is crowded. This is the most complex threat landscape in American history.

The velocity of change in the threat environment is also unprecedented. Threats are evolving at the speed of cyber but our responses are coming at the speed of government - and this poses tremendous challenges for our next president. I'm not just talking about cyber threats. To give just one

example, in 2004 ISIS did not exist. Within a decade, ISIS controlled territory equivalent to the distance between New York and Ohio. That's a vast expanse, even for us sitting here in California. Since 2014, ISIS-controlled territory has shrunk by about 25%. So in a relatively short period of time, we've seen this terrorist group go from birth to dramatic expansion of territorial control to contraction again.

The threat environment is crowded, and it's shifting quickly. But it's also marked by two historically unique challenges. The first is China's rise. If China's economic rise continues – and that's a big if, given the country's domestic stresses – it will soon surpass the United States as the world's most powerful economy, a position we have held for a century. But China is still a developing nation. Its GDP per capita is half that of Greece. Think about that for a minute. Half the GDP of Greece. China has millions of people in poverty, an aging population, and substantial domestic challenges that have profound implications for its foreign policy, its desire and its ability to behave responsibly on the international stage.

The second unique challenge is that for the first time in history, the ability to wage massive destruction or disruption no longer rests only in the hands of powerful states. It used to be that great powers worried most about the capabilities of other great powers. That's not true anymore. Thanks to the spread of technology, non-state actors, small groups, even lone individuals have the power to destroy and disrupt on a large scale, reaching inside even the most powerful societies like ours.

Then there's anxiety. The US is in many ways exceptionally secure--no country threatens us as the Soviet Union did in the 20th century or the UK did in the 19th century – when, lest we forget, British troops burned the White House. Yet there is tremendous anxiety both here and abroad. There's the Brexit vote to leave the UK – causing many to worry whether the European project is coming unstuck. The recession of democracy in Turkey, Russia, Poland, and elsewhere. Contests for influence with Putin in Europe, Iran in the Middle East, China in the South and East China Seas. And here at home, there is profound distrust of institutions, especially our government during this most dispiriting presidential election.

So the “too hard” box is full.

Given these circumstances, what should the priorities of the next president be? What's in the in-box?

First, the next president will need to spend the first 6 months in office helping us all recover from the last 12. We need a healer-in-chief. Domestically, we have become exceptionally polarized and our civil discourse has become ugly. Governing after this election, bringing the country together – which is vital for projecting American power abroad and advancing our national interests – is the first order of business and it will be hard. Internationally, there is also a great deal of repair work to do, reassuring our allies about what America stands for, that we stand with them, and putting our adversaries on notice.

Rounding out my top-5 priorities is a group of countries. I call them the “big four:” *Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea*. Many prognosticators, pundits, and professors like to give laundry lists of hot spots and threats. So let me explain why I chose these four. I don't think of them as hot spots. I think of them as places where four very serious threat vectors converge.

Threat vector #1: nuclear risks.

All four countries pose significant and growing nuclear risks, and if we're thinking about existential threats, nuclear risks should top the list. Russia and China are modernizing their nuclear arsenals. Russia has dropped its “no first use” nuclear policy. No matter how you feel about the Iran deal, at best, it has been put on hold. At best, Iran's nuclear capability has not been rolled back as South Africa's was. North Korea just conducted its 5th nuclear test and is working hard to develop the missile capability to be able to deliver a nuclear warhead that could reach the continental United States. I worry a lot about the nuclear dangers posed by these four countries – through crisis escalation, accident, war, and the proliferation of fissile material.

Threat vector #2: cyber.

China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea all also have sophisticated cyber capabilities and bad intentions. Russia's hacking of election related web sites is the first time in our history where a foreign power has directly tried to interfere in the cornerstone of our democracy, the election of a president.

And while Russia's cyber intrusions are unlikely to affect this election, they are a warning of cyber dark arts to come. China's theft of intellectual property from US corporations has occurred on massive scale. Make no mistake: IP theft degrades the economic competitiveness of our country. And if you believe that power is increasingly driven by economic clout, IP theft should concern you. Iran, too, has serious cyber capabilities. Iran was responsible for one of the most destructive cyber attacks in history, turning thousands of Saudi Aramco computers into bricks, and Iran has also waged cyber intrusions into US banks and casinos. And then there's North Korea, which was named for the attack against Sony - a disruptive and destructive and coercive attack that included threats of 9/11-style violence in movie theaters.

Threat vector #3: territorial aggression against US allies

All four of these countries also physically threaten allies of the United States. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and potential threats to the Baltics and NATO are serious. China's aggressive actions in the South and East China Seas potentially threaten Japan, South Korea, the Philippines - all countries the US has defense treaties with, not to mention Taiwan. Iran's growing influence in the Middle East is of deep concern not only for Israel but for our Sunni Arab allies in the region. And North Korea threatens South Korea, where thousands of American troops have been stationed for a very long time.

Threat vector #4: disrupting the international order

China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are also behaving in ways that challenge the rules, regimes, norms, and institutions that have formed the cornerstone of the international order since World War II - an order that has been pivotal to maintaining global peace and advancing global prosperity.

There are of course many other priorities the president will face. The list is long and the distractions and crises will be numerous. Perhaps the toughest challenge of all for the next president will be focusing on the strategic threats that matter most to our national security over the longer term.