

Organizational Innovations in Counterterrorism: Lessons for Cyber-security, Human Trafficking, and Other Complex National Missions

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All too often our national security and foreign policy institutions are slow to learn lessons from their own successes and failures. Lessons are identified and applied to an even lesser extent across different institutions and missions. But when problems and solutions are systemic – due to systems designed for a much different era – the experiences of one discrete organization or community can offer valuable insights to an entirely different set of actors.

One issue that demands particular attention in the contemporary security environment is how best to apply whole-of-government approaches to complex national missions, ranging from combating terrorism and trafficking in persons to securing cyberspace. These and many other twenty-first-century security challenges require an agile and integrated response; however, our national security system is organized along functional lines (diplomatic, military, intelligence, law enforcement, etc...) with weak coordinating mechanisms across these functions. Today, there is no definitive model for integrating capabilities and funding for inherently interagency missions.

Recent reforms in the U.S. government counterterrorism community provide a valuable case study on this subject for several reasons. First, the terrorist threat is representative of twenty-first-century national security challenges that are complex, trans-border, and fraught with multiple sets of networked, non-state adversaries. Second, like all multifaceted problems, counterterrorism requires a holistic approach to address; in this case, the law enforcement, financial, diplomatic, military, legal, and other dimensions of the terrorist threat. Third, the tragic events of September 11, 2001 led to the most systemic review and subsequent set of national security reforms thus far in the 21st century.

The creation of the Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning (DSOP) within the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) to conduct counterterrorism planning and assessments provides one model for integrating high-priority, high-complexity, multi-agency missions. Interagency teams for other national missions, such as cyber-security, should be seriously considered to support the National Security Staff in strategic management of end-to-end processes (policy, strategy, aligning resources with strategy, planning, execution, and assessment) and to fulfill functions such as:

- Clarifying interagency roles and responsibilities;
- Conducting integrated policy analysis and teeing up policy options;
- Developing national strategies;
- Conducting deliberate, dynamic and/or contingency planning;
- Conducting assessments of the nation's progress in meeting its goals and objectives; and

- Conducting long-term assessments on the changing nature of the threat/opportunity.

Certain key enablers must be in place for any interagency team or organization to be fully effective. These include:

- A reporting chain to the president;
- An institutionalized linkage to the National Security Staff;
- Requisite authorities;¹
- Congressional support and clear jurisdictional ownership;
- An untangling of overlapping mandates and authorities; and
- Interagency national security professionals with critical experience and skill sets (e.g., planning and assessments, negotiation, appreciation of diverse agency cultures, etc.) and interagency and intergovernmental organizations with planning, execution, and reach-back capabilities.

The 9/11 Commission found that the counterterrorism mission is in need of “joint planning” and “joint action” to ensure that unity of purpose and unity of effort are achieved. The Commission further recognized that the National Security Council staff, consumed with managing day-to-day crises, was unable to fulfill the functions of strategic planning and oversight and was therefore incapable of effectively managing a whole-of-government approach to counterterrorism on its own. Attempting to rectify these deficiencies, the Commission envisioned the National Counterterrorism Center as fulfilling these roles and “breaking the older mold of national government organization.”²

In 2004, the Intelligence Reform and Terrorist Prevention Act (IRTPA) established NCTC to serve as the U.S. government’s locus for counterterrorism intelligence and strategic operational planning. Part of the NCTC mandate was “to conduct strategic operational planning for counterterrorism activities, integrating all instruments of national power, including diplomatic, financial, military, intelligence, homeland security, and law enforcement activities within and among agencies.” To accomplish this, the IRTPA established the Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning within NCTC and gave it responsibility for developing interagency strategic operational plans, assigning roles and responsibilities for plans, coordinating interagency operational activities, monitoring implementation of plans, and conducting assessments.³

In February 2010, the Project on National Security Reform (PNSR) released a report – *Towards Integrating Complex Missions: Lessons from the National Counterterrorism Center’s Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning* – that studied DSOP in depth and found it to be a promising example of a national-level integrating mechanism for a complex mission such as counterterrorism.⁴ The Directorate conducts a broad range of integrating functions including interagency planning, assessment, and resource oversight to help ensure a holistic approach to the mission. Although this fledgling institution continues to face the inherent challenges of operating in an outdated system, the concept it embodies – an interagency mechanism

to support the National Security Staff in strategic management of a discrete mission – is worthy of consideration in other contexts.

Imagine, for example, an interagency cyber-security team chartered by the president and reporting to him through the National Security Staff. The team would report to the president, but could be housed in the Department of Homeland Security in the near-term for administrative and other support.⁵ It would consist of a permanent cadre of subject matter experts and individuals trained in strategic planning and assessments working alongside detailees from across the government. A cyber-security team could assist senior policy-makers by analyzing policy options, teeing up decisions, and developing planning, resource, and assessment products related to cyber-security. More specifically, an interagency cyber-security team could:

- Develop a comprehensive national cyber-security strategy that identifies goals and objectives and assigns roles and responsibilities;
- Conduct interagency contingency planning to consider how the nation would respond to a variety of cyber attacks;
- Conduct dynamic planning to disrupt or respond to an actual attack;
- Conduct assessments to determine if the nation is making progress in achieving its goals and propose actions to increase effectiveness;
- Conduct long-term assessments to consider what the cyber threat might look like in the future;
- Perform various resource oversight functions in support the Office of Management and Budget (OMB); and
- Integrate perspectives of other mission partners such as intergovernmental, private sector, and non-government stakeholders.

Today, no entity has responsibility for deliberately fulfilling these functions on a whole-of-government basis for the cyber-security mission. Other interagency mission areas have integrating mechanisms in place, but most are not fulfilling these roles. For instance, the National Counter Proliferation Center (NCPC) – also established by the IRTPA – does not have an equivalent to DSOP that looks beyond the intelligence community to conduct planning and assessments with all counter-proliferation stakeholders.

Or consider human trafficking, a twenty-first-century national security concern that has been linked to organized crime, drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, and terrorist financing. Similar to counterterrorism, counter-proliferation, and cyber-security, trafficking is a complex, multifaceted challenge that does not fall under the jurisdiction of any single executive branch organization. The anti-trafficking challenge unites nearly thirty offices in at least seven major U.S. government departments and agencies, as well as numerous intergovernmental and other mission partners. Out of recognition for the need to integrate these diverse capabilities, the President's Interagency Task Force (PITF) and supporting Senior Policy Operating Group (SPOG) were established as

policy-coordinating bodies and a Human Smuggling and Trafficking Center (HSTC) was created to serve as an information clearing house.⁶

Despite these developments, the anti-trafficking mission is still without a national strategy that establishes goals and objectives and delineates roles and responsibilities. There is no national planning and assessments capability that can integrate the perspectives of all mission partners. What would an interagency planning cell within the HSTC look like? Reporting to the president through the SPOG, this interagency team could lead all stakeholders (interagency and intergovernmental)⁷ in strategic planning and assessments for the anti-trafficking mission.

The PNSR study identifies several important lessons from the DSOP experience that are applicable to other mission areas. First, this case study demonstrates the importance of a reporting chain to the president. The director of NCTC reports to the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) for the intelligence aspects of the NCTC mission but reports to the president for DSOP work on whole-of-government planning and assessments. This chain of command and proximity to the president convey an informal authority that is beneficial, if not necessary to lead an effective interagency team.

In addition to a direct link to the president, just as critical is a seamless and institutionalized linkage to the team's customers in the interagency space – including relevant National Security Staff Directorates, NSC Committees, and OMB staff. These relationships are necessary to stay relevant and add value as organizational arrangements and policy priorities shift within and across administrations.

Moreover, the linkage to Congress is just as critical. The lack of congressional oversight and funding mechanisms that can look holistically at a complex national mission such as counterterrorism or cyber-security will also inhibit the effectiveness of any interagency team. A congressional champion is critical to resource the team and to provide streamlined oversight of the national mission. Furthermore, Congress must resource the participating departments and agencies that are being asked to contribute to a mission that may not be a core part of their mandate.

The State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS)⁸ is an example of the "lead agency" approach to integration. S/CRS was established in 2004 to support the secretary of state in leading and coordinating U.S. government reconstruction and stabilization efforts. The office has made progress integrating U.S. government capabilities to prepare, plan for, and conduct stabilization and reconstruction activities, but these efforts have been hindered as a result of S/CRS being buried within the State Department and without strong and consistent congressional support.⁹

In addition to the informal authority brought about by proximity to the president, the relevancy derived from an institutionalized relationship with the National Security Staff, and the formal authority derived from a champion on the Hill, other systemic impediments will plague any future interagency team just as they have plagued DSOP. For any complex, multi-agency mission such as counterterrorism or cyber-security, untangling overlapping mandates and authorities to ensure that all actors understand the need for the existence of, and leadership from, an interagency team is necessary for the team to achieve its full potential.

Any planning cell – including DSOP and S/CRS – will suffer from a lack of civilian planning and assessment capacity resident throughout the U.S. government. Until a government-wide human capital system is established to provide personnel with the necessary experience, expertise, and incentive, an interagency team will struggle to find sufficient numbers of individuals with the right skill sets. Beyond trained individuals, entire departments must be prepared to provide planning and reach-back support to personnel deployed to the field or to an interagency team in Washington.¹⁰

Complex national missions such as cyber-security, reconstruction and stabilization, and anti-trafficking in persons demand an integrated approach. Formal integrating mechanisms are needed to support an overburdened and understaffed National Security Staff. The experience of the Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning within the National Counterterrorism Center offers many valuable lessons for future interagency teams and provides insights into the challenges associated with operating in an outdated system. Before true integration can be achieved, the overall national security system must be modernized and recalibrated to put national missions ahead of parochial interests. Absent holistic reform, however, much can be done to improve on existing approaches and bolster mechanisms that enable the United States to bring all its capabilities to bear in the twenty-first-century security environment.

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¹ For a discussion on a range of possible integrating functions and authorities, see: Project on National Security Reform, *Towards Integrating Complex National Missions: Lessons from the National Counterterrorism Center’s Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning* (Arlington: Project on National Security Reform, 2010), http://www.pnsr.org/data/files/pnsr_nctc_dsop_report.pdf.

² National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 399-403.

³ Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-458, 119 Stat. 3673 (2004).

⁴ Project on National Security Reform, *Towards Integrating Complex National Missions: Lessons from the National Counterterrorism Center’s Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning* (Arlington: Project on National Security Reform, 2010), http://www.pnsr.org/data/files/pnsr_nctc_dsop_report.pdf.

⁵ The current national security system cannot accommodate an entity like DSOP standing on its own in the “interagency space”—the space below the president and above the departments. Just as DSOP is housed within NCTC inside the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, any new team will require an organizational home for administrative and other support. One option for a long-term solution is to build a capacity in the National Security Council staff to either a) house and manage priority teams or b) manage priority missions along with the overall system from a central hub. For a thoughtful discussion on

the latter approach see: Bob Polk, *The Thinking and Doing of National Security* (Washington, DC: Trafford, 2010).

⁶ Daniel R. Langberg, "U.S. Government Response to Human Trafficking in the 21st Century," in *Case Studies Volume I*, ed. Richard Weitz (Arlington, VA: Project on National Security Reform, 2008), 131-171, <http://www.pnsr.org/data/files/pnsr%20case%20studies%20vol.%201.pdf>.

⁷ *Interagency* is defined as United States government federal departments and agencies; *Intergovernmental* refers to federal, state, local, and tribal governments.

⁸ State Department, "Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization," www.crs.state.gov.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion on the limitations of the "lead agency" approach and the S/CRS model see: Project on National Security Reform, *Forging a New Shield* (Arlington, VA: Project on National Security Reform, 2008), 138-140; 573, <http://pnsr.org/data/files/pnsr%20forging%20a%20new%20shield.pdf>.

¹⁰ For more on the need to train entire departments for interagency missions see: Robert Polk and Merriam Mashatt, "From Deploying Individuals to Deploying Departments," *Prism* 1, No. 3 (2010): 13-20, <http://www.ndu.edu/press/from-deploying-individuals.html>.