

Governing Complexity in World Politics

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Complexity is the new global ontology for world politics. This article summarizes the characteristics of complexity and its implications for informed US state policy making. We conclude with some suggestions about administrative reforms to improve US policy making to address global complexity.

Keywords: hegemony, US leadership, institutional reform, institutional design, systemic complexity

Introduction

The lack of coherent, organized, and effective international responses to climate change and more recently to the Covid-19 pandemic reflect the growing challenge for addressing highly complex global problems. It is increasingly clear that we are living in a highly globalized world in which complex and inter-related dynamic problems quickly transcend national boundaries, overwhelm local, national, regional, and global institutional and political capacities. While history has long shown that international problems have always been complex, the analytic implication for world politics today, with the decline of US hegemony and the absence of concerted leadership with coherent problem-solving institutions and strategies, is that today's problems have demonstrated to be increasingly illusive.

It is long understood that globalization has been a generative force for complexity. International relations are today, differently *complicated* not just because of more actors, institutions and issues, but also because power is increasingly diffused throughout the system and the decision-makers tasked to address the problems and the institutions designed to manage them are outmoded and increasingly confounded by the impacts of decisions in one area that produce multiple and intersecting first, second, and third-order impacts on other areas they are trying to govern producing a whole range of technical, political, economic, and social challenges. (Slaughter, 2020) Problems defy simple, linear or issue-based solutions.

Systemic complexity generates a profound challenge: under conditions of complexity it is perhaps more necessary than ever to coordinate across issues, but the complexity, itself, coupled with the decline of American power and leadership, at a time when no other has taken the mantle, creates more challenges to organization and coordination in decision-making and effective problem-solving. The result is increasing failures to address global challenges in a coordinated, coherent, and effective manner.

This article considers the ontological character of global complexity, its governance, and the policy and analytic implications of this shift amid the decline of American hegemony. We begin with a review of the nature and meaning of complexity followed by a discussion of the relationship to global governance and power and the historic significance of American global leadership. We conclude with some illustrative examples of this complexity and present a brief set of U.S. administrative and institutional strategies which can help enhance prospective national planning and global governance for a globalized world.



Complexity

Complexity became widely recognized in the 1960s. (Orsini et al., 2019) Cybernetics and open systems theory helped focus attention on intertwined problems, and the complex arrays of social forces by which they are recognized and addressed. (Deutsch, 1963) The 1972 Apollo 17 photograph of the earth as “the blue marble” helped visualize a single system made up of intertwined natural and social systems. Global UN conferences and global environmental governance had the effect of alerting decision makers to the urgency of addressing new environmental threats and how they are causally intertwined with other global issues, requiring more comprehensive governance. (P. Haas, 2002; P. M. Haas, 2016) The growing popularity of the concept of The Anthropocene further consolidated attention on complex global open systems. (Crutzen, 2003)

This broad awareness and investigation has extensively been applied to the study of international relations which was conceived and understood as the systemic property of world politics. (E. B. Haas, 1975; LaPorte, 1975; Perrow, 1999) Herbert Simon pioneered much of the literature on complexity and social action and noted: “Everything is connected. Some things more than others.” (Simon, 1981, p. ch 7) Robert Jervis’s landmark study on systems effects demonstrated the wide range of unanticipated and unintended consequences, and often perverse, localized effects of action filtered through systemic level variables. (Jervis, 1997)

We now understand that the challenge with many of today’s problems is that they are complex across multiple domains: time horizons vary both within and across issue areas; many variables interact in non-linear and often unsuspecting ways. (Homer-Dixon, 2015) The world is full of issues interacting with other problems creating a system of problems – or, similar to what Russel Ackoff simply called “messes” (Ackoff, 1974) and the urban planners Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber called “wicked problems.” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) More recently these approaches have been absorbed under general attention to complexity and uncertainty in world politics. (Urry, 2003; Urry 2005)

Our current complex system of world politics rests on several elements that are continually evolving. First, and perhaps most significantly, the 20th century saw a geometric increase in the number of new actors in world politics, and in the volume of flows between countries. While post war settlements established uniform codes and institutions for governing international behavior, these institutional arrangements have not adequately responded to new actors, voices, and issues on the agenda, while underlying power shifts in specific issues have led to a dizzying quilt of rules, powerful parties, and practices across functional areas of world politics as influence within existing regimes has decayed. (Raustiala and Victor, 2004; Alter and Muenier, 2009; and, Alter and Raustiala, 2018)

The growth of the number of states in the international system over the past six decades has been coupled with a dramatic rise in a whole new range of non-state and domestic actors co-acting with greater input into state-level policy, international interactions, and transnational events. Democratic developments have fueled this growth. In the early 1970s, there were just over 30 democratic states in the international system. Today, more than 120 have various forms of democratic institutional frameworks. (Freedom House, 2020) And, within this states, we have seen a dramatic rise in domestic and transnational actors, including NGOs that have grown geometrically since the beginning of the 20th century. (Jonsson & Tallberg, 2010) Transnational scientific networks, including epistemic communities, have also flourished. (Drori, Meyer, Ramirez, & Schofer, 2003; P. Haas, 1992)

This dramatic proliferation of democratic institutions has opened the political space for the proliferation of a whole new generation of multinational business and financial enterprises, transnational monitoring and advocacy networks, civil society actors and networks, as well as transnational criminal actors – terrorist organizations, human traffickers, narcotics traders, and others. These actors have a broad



range of information and communication tools to collect, analyze, and disseminate information horizontally across organizations and sectors. And they can communicate, transmit information, and often act with a speed and volume on par with state actors.

The proliferation of legitimate actors engaged in diplomacy has led to the emergence of new voices, new issues and problems, and new methods and considerations to address the broad range of global problems. But this proliferation has also presented new challenges: which actors should be invited to participate in discussions on particular topics? Who sets the agendas? What are the relative weights and dimensions of issue, interests, and information areas under discussion? What forums and forms of power and influence are legitimate and appropriate? With more actors intersecting with each other, issues also become more difficult to govern with the simultaneity of decisions and synchronicity of more forms of interdependence that correspond with the greater political, economic, and social involvement of non-state actors.

Second, the international agenda has also expanded dramatically since World War II. More voices reflect more and varied concerns, many often long-ignored or long-dismissed. In addition to the traditional agenda items of trade, finance and security, a whole new set of issues with their own technical challenges, policy networks, and social, cultural, political, and economic contexts have emerged. Issues today include public health; intellectual property rights; the environment; migration; human rights and human security; transnational crime; nuclear proliferation and weapons of mass destruction; telecommunications; management of the internet, cybercrime and cyber security, and energy security.

A comparison of UN General Assembly agendas from 1970 to 2020 clearly demonstrates this burgeoning agenda, covering climate change, demographic stress, environmental degradation, resource scarcity, pervasive inequality, the host of challenges with international trade and financial regulatory systems, as well as expanding security concerns associated with failed states, proliferation, terrorism, migration, energy security, global public health, and a variety of forms of trafficking can all produce rapid and significant transnational effects and externalities across other issue areas requiring significant levels of coordinated and integrated international responses.

Third, related to the rise in actors and the number of issues is that many of the issues and problems are causally coupled, due to the long causal-chains and complex political, social, economic, and cultural tentacles connecting within and between issues. (Beck and Willms, 2003, and Urry, 2003) As a result, there are frequently unanticipated consequences and surprises from policy choices and practices in general, policy choices involve trade-offs and choosing equilibria, and there are unavoidable normative choices involved in choosing policies. Moreover, complex systems express emergent properties that cannot be understood or anticipated from a reductionist focus on the component parts, but rather requires a systemic and interconnected level (or scale) or analysis.

For nearly a decade, government and private studies of contemporary global trends have increasingly reflected these new complexities on the international agenda. The 2019 Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community describes a broad range to traditional challenges – competition from and between Russia and China – intersecting with new forms of threat ranging from on-line election interference, to hacktivist activities, to human and traditional security impacts of migration, rising nationalisms and xenophobia, and threats associated with potential pandemics and crises in global public health. (Coats, 2019; see also, International Risk Governance Council, 2013; UK Ministry of Defense, 2014; US National Intelligence Council, 2012; World Economic Forum, 2016)

Along with the recognition of the increased number of actors, new issues, and causal coupling, we have also observed the profound challenge with addressing them. The proliferation of actors means that there are multiple and interacting parties with *conflicting interpretations* of data and differing goals, analyses, and prescriptions. These actors have widely varying capabilities across and within issues, with

which they undertake action. As a result, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to identify the key actors or the range of influential actors on a given issue.

Furthermore, there is extensive *uncertainty* on multiple paths because they are causally interconnected. Uncertainty has long been a defining feature of global complexity: actors cannot assign confident probabilities to the likely outcomes of policy interventions, or the likelihood of any occurring at all. (Hayek, 1945; Iida, 1993; Knight, 1921) Moreover, efforts to govern specific issues in either domain end up with unanticipated consequences for other interconnected issues.

Today, the uncertainty is simply more prevalent across so many actors and intersecting issue areas. Uncertainty may stem from lack of data, biased data, or ambiguous data – or some combination of all three simultaneously. In a related manner, without a clear framework to impart meaning, too much data also swamps decision making capacity. It also may be, as James March wrote in 1976, that many problems face “intrinsic uncertainty” where “[t]he hard reality that the world in which we must act is often beyond our understanding. In part because, each action that we take is partly an instrumental step and partly a learning experience.” (Axelrod & Cohen, 1999) Typically, new issues have cumulative effects, are beset with uncertainty, and have interlocking moving parts. Consequently, it is difficult to anticipate policy consequences. The components to each issue requires multidisciplinary understanding and the different issues may each require its own disciplinary lenses. Because discrete problems have long causal chains and are causally interconnected with other issues, governance is challenging.

In addition, today’s challenges often require much more extensive and specialized technical and scientific knowledge to understand, diagnose, and analyze them. For example, climate change and proliferation – to name just two – require highly specialized communities of experts to collect, analyze, and interpret that nature and meaning of the challenges. These challenges do not fit easily into the all-too-frequent superficial public debate that privileges entertainment over public enlightenment.

Finally, today’s challenges must be addressed in a much more dynamic and fluid political environment. Domestic and international politics around the globe increasingly have become more contested – and dysfunctional – especially in an environment of 24-hour news cycles that have changed the speed, content, and depth of information and analysis presented through the media and challenged basic conceptions of scientific understanding and reasoning in profound ways. This has been particularly true in the United States over the past decade, and more specifically, in the past four years under President Trump where there has been a proliferation of splintered voices in American politics, hyper-partisanship, open challenge, disdain and mockery of scientific evidence and reasoning and of administrative and bureaucratic procedures to analyze and respond to complex issues. Add to that the known and unknown influences of external actors infiltrating American political discourse and amplifying discord through social media, hacking, and other forms of cyberattacks.

The result is that many of today’s problems are *connected in diverse and convoluted ways*. Some issues have easily identifiable first and second order effects – protracted ethno-national conflicts produce migration, disrupt economies, and produce downstream temporal and spatial effects for the country and the region. But, add acute stress in global public health, climate change, chronic inequality, resource competition and the range of externalities found in the initial conditions of each and the connections grow exponentially. We can imagine a variety of difficult effects to understand on causally connected issues from taking action or avoiding action (inaction). In short, while we may be sensitive to the concept of system effects and emergent properties, under our current institutional and organizational designs, we simply often do not have the diagnostic or analytical capabilities to detect or understand them. As the ordered effects grow more complicated the unanticipated/anticipated distinction frays.

Limits of Rational Problem-Solving Approaches

The cumulative effect of this complexity is that today's problems transgress the parameters of traditional public planning that focused primarily on efficiency and resolution. For more than five decades, public planners have sought to identify the core logics of problems -- to find "where in the complex causal network the trouble really lies." (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 159) The standard task has been to understand the interplay between cause and effect and to identify and isolate the variables to manipulate in order to produce optimal policy responses to problem. And while, we have long realized that most problems defy easy diagnosis analyses and we frequently witness cumbersome and convoluted responses, the effort has nonetheless been to search for optimal policy responses within a set of given constraints.

The emergence of many new issues on the international agenda offers more technical, organizational, and political challenges for policy makers. The increasing degree of causal interdependencies between issues generates a newfound need for more comprehensive and integrated policy making. These problems -- and the relationships between them -- are increasingly more difficult to identify, to diagnose and to mobilize the political, institutional, and economic capabilities to manage them

The traditional state-based power alignments and governance structures -- both internally inside of states and transnationally across states -- are no longer reliable guides to managing these global. (Slaughter, 2020) First, there is significant variation in governance both within and across issue areas. Different states and actors contribute in new and different ways to each of these problems. Some issues and challenges are more salient to specific actors within countries and across countries than others. Because solutions cannot be obtained with the support and coordination of multiple states and actors, it is not simply a matter of gaining better diagnostic capabilities, but also the ability to understand the goals and incentives of the multiple-interacting parts of the problems.

Whereas the still high levels of international interdependence command some form of multilateralism to ensure mutual gains from international commerce and to mitigate their externalities, the foundations for such order necessitate more scrutiny than commonly made. Global governance, however desirable, cannot simply be attained through traditional forms of state-based governance focusing on de-coupled issue areas.

The proliferation of political actors and political issue spaces makes international cooperation logically more difficult but also offers the promise of more diverse involvement in collective decision making by more stake holders and perspectives, (Ashby, 1960) including such networked approaches as polycentric governance, private governance, expert led governance, and orchestration.

American Hegemony and Global Governance

Global governance since World War II has rested principally on an American-led liberal world order. (Ikenberry, 2001; Mazower, 2012) This combined widespread ideational commitment to liberal norms of human rights, the rule of law, free trade, and multilateralism. It was steered by the United States, which generally espoused these beliefs and deployed its power resources -- material capabilities and soft power- on promoting and enforcing those norms, albeit selectively in many instances. While the US was often viewed, justifiably, with suspicion, the global governance institutions it helped set in place and supported contributed to the development of institutions, policies, and broader governance that improved life expectancy, reductions in infant mortality, access to potable water, nuclear non-proliferation, selective environmental improvements, economic growth outside the West, macroeconomic stability, inflows of foreign investment, and the absence of open, great power interstate wars.

Despite benefits in many areas, global governance however, was, and remains disjointed. Regimes were originally designed and developed to deal with isolated problems. Each regime was distinct,



reflecting different arrays of actors, beliefs, capabilities, and procedures. The World Health Organization, for example, focused on international disease classification and focused its early efforts on mitigating or eradicating specific diseases – yaws, small pox, polio. Today, the WHO’s work now focuses, not on single diseases and direct health delivery services, but on broader issues such as chronic disease, emergency preparedness, poverty, environmental stress, and access to public health. The WHO regime, like many others had, and has, different emergent political forces and now fall under a category that Alter and Raustiala call “regime complexes,” in which issue areas are deeply connected across multiple dimensions and institutions.

Whereas issues have traditionally been addressed discretely through the creation of distinct international regimes, these issues now refuse to stay in their boxes. The associated bureaucracies and even regime complexes lack the frames to capture the spill over between issues and inhibit their ability to coordinate and govern across the issue areas. (Alter and Raustiala, 2018) Careful leadership focused around new multilateral approaches are necessary to capture the interconnections between issues.

Yet, the decline of US hegemony has demonstrated that there is no clear state leader able to direct world affairs. Furthermore, emerging global and regional powers have less interest and/or investment in the existing order. Hence, the diminished consensus around the core elements of the liberal world order means that it is more difficult to guide collective around clear and shared goals.

Today we are experiencing twin challenges associated with confronting these global complexities – not only the decline of hegemony and the loss of its political capacity and legitimacy to lead, but also the loss of the US’s own internal ability to diagnose and address the complexities of problems internal to the United States and those that are transnational. The models for problem solving will require change both within the United States and within the global governance structures.

It is well established that while the United States boasted (and continues to do so) a position of military primacy, it has lost its hegemonic position in a material sense. (Keohane, 1984; Strange, Mahbubani.) The US remains a “normal” great power, with its vast military capabilities, but, especially under the past four years of the Trump administration, it is no longer capable or willing to lead the international community as it had through most of the Cold War and early post-Cold War era.

Power in the contemporary system is a multiplex concept. (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Hollis & Lukes, 1982; Lukes, 1974) It entails coercive power via the use of material capabilities to induce others’ behavior, (Baldwin, 1985) framing power via shaping others beliefs via a persuasive presentation of options, (Adler & Haas, 1992/1997) leadership on behalf of collective beliefs and shared goals; (J. Nye, 1990) and productive power to regenerate material and ideational capabilities. US power is diminished in all these aspects – and all of these declines have an impact on the existing global governance structures to effectively address and manage the complexity in the system today.

As significant to its relative material decline, the United States has lost its legitimacy as the stalwart promoter of shared liberal values, such as free trade and democracy. Even before the cataclysm of the Trump administration, faith in democracy and free trade as universal norms have been increasingly contested by the emerging powers. (Acharya, 2014; Mahbubani, 2008) Although seventy-four percent of countries are full or partial democracies (according to minimalist criterion for democracy), only 40% of the world’s population lives in a democracy and we have witnessed 14 years of democratic decline since 2005. (Freedom House, 2014, pp. 3-5; Freedom House, 2020)

Few substantive norms currently exist around which the US can seek to lead or command voluntary support. Individual norms such as free trade, democracy, human rights, the prohibition of mercenaries, and even the protection of whales are contested. The only major procedural norm that seems to be holding is the broad commitment to multilateralism, (Pew, 2020 <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/21/international-cooperation-welcomed-across-14->



advanced-economies/; Better World Campaign, 2020 <https://betterworldcampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Executive-Summary-September-U.S.-UN-Poll.pdf>Newman, 2006; Ruggie, 1993) as states continue to realize the need for collective action to provide international public goods and to cope with transboundary and global risks.

On the other hand, no other world order aspirants appear to have collective revolutionary values which would undermine global multilateralism as well as the attendant technical efforts to address complexities of global problems. The rise of China, India, the EU, Brazil, South Africa and Russia collectively provide counterweights to US primacy and leadership, yet, none of these countries have yet developed coherent *global* visions of how to deploy their newfound influence.

A central challenge is that the United States has lost many of its domestic material and political capabilities for exercising global leadership and its ability to acknowledge, diagnose, and respond to the levels of complexity. (Goldgeier and Jentleson, 2020, Haass, 2013; Mandelbaum & Friedman, 2011; Nasr, 2013; Parent & MacDonald, 2011) The United States which held 51% of global GDP in 1951 is now at 15% with chronic budget and trade deficits. Nearly two decades ago, at the outset of the US unilateral decision to invade Iraq, the central question appeared to be how American power and primacy could be tamed and contained. (Brooks & Wolforth, 2007; Hoffmann, 2004; Walt, 2004) Yet, a decade later the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan coupled with the lingering effects of the 2008 global financial crisis exacerbated a breakdown of the US domestic social contract over American international leadership. The cost of the wars alone are estimated to be in excess of \$6 trillion with little enhanced security to show for it. The overall return on international leadership investment was generally seen to be the provision of secure borders and relatively stable international security environment in which American interests were generally safe – including a stable and functioning global economic system that provided opportunities for foreign investment and markets (employment) and imports for American consumers (and a hedge against inflation). Despite spending nearly \$3 trillion over the past decade to restore some sense of global order, ongoing challenges demonstrate the limits of American power from climate change to Covid-19 to unchallenged Russian interference in democracies in the United States and across Europe, China's, rising nationalisms and nativism, and the chronic global economic malaise have all undermined American confidence in its leadership role. While a majority of Americans still believe that the United States should take an active role in global affairs, the largest percentage ever – including a majority of rank and file self-identified Republicans – believe that the United States is doing too much and should “stay out” of international meddling (Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, 2020).

This domestic fragmentation has also reduced the public's commitment and interest in international commitments and leadership of global institutions. While a majority of Americans continue to express interest in the United States being engaged in world events, under the Trump administration over the past four years, we have witnessed a rise in nativism and white supremacy that includes various forms of neo-isolationism and calls for international retrenchment that has found a home in both the right. The partisan differences over immigration are stark with 81% of Republicans expressing support for the use of US troops to block immigration into the US from Mexico as opposed to just 19% of Democrats (CCFR: REPORT 2019) while 78% of Democrats see climate change as a critical threat as opposed to only 23% of Republicans. And, finally, the threat to basic conceptions of scientific evidence and reasoning and overall to a shared understanding of America's role and responsibilities in both give further rise to the failure to acknowledge and address complexity.

Improving Global Governance Begins with Changes Inside the United States.

Without common set of accepted norms and principles or conceptual guidance about which issues are intertwined and how to address them, policy making continues to rest on outmoded reductionist



approaches to both at home and abroad. Within the United States, the bureaucratic planning and strategy structures are functionally differentiated, and thus lack the capability for horizontal planning across issues. The Congress as well as the public remains disinterested in complexity and traditional habits of thought in the government continue to stress a small number of key issues, defined narrowly, relating to national economic growth and the defense of US national security from terrorism and nuclear attack.

For instance, while a host of recent policy briefs have attempted to chart an American foreign policy for a new world in which the US lacks overarching capabilities and faces contested norms these approaches do not take account of the fundamental change in the context in which US understands its interests and pursues its foreign policies. (US Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, 2015, Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States, 2018) Historically, US strategic planning has been flawed, often because it projects a unifying framework onto a world that is much more nuanced. (Goldgeier & Suri, 2016) This traditional planning does not work for today's challenges: in short, the issues are connected but governance structures, internally in the United States and externally in global governance institutions, are not. This means that in addition to changes within the US foreign policymaking structures, the foreign policy establishment needs to establish stronger links and work more closely with relevant policy communities across and outside of government. The United States has long endured problems of group think and bureaucratic politics – all of which will exacerbate the dimensions of the current challenges. Given the type of complexities, the planning and policy system needs greater participation of state and non-state actors drawn from diverse policy networks and institutions and interdisciplinary teams that are capable of identifying externalities.

Within this context, we need to design new strategies and institutions capable of developing outcomes that are normatively and technically warranted. Institutions must be adaptable to complex circumstances. Administratively organizations are too often siloed – unable to see the forest for the trees - at the international and within the US decision-making apparatus. Currently most US and international institutions (including IOs and regimes) remain blinkered by their traditional narrow functional focus, combined with policy networks that are primarily experienced with individual issues and often narrowly disciplinarily trained. Organizational theory and experiences make it clear that complex issues are understood in light of the existing issue frames of the existing bodies. To this end, we need better monitoring of the policy environment in a variety of areas that are more reflective to new information and can explore the interactive effects.

Effective institutions capable of tracking and mapping a complex policy environment must enjoy autonomy, access to high levels of decision making, a high quality staff with relevant skill sets, a steady budget, and with porous organizational boundaries so that it can reach outside the formal bureaucracy for new ideas and relevant advice. (E. B. Haas, 1990; P. Haas & Haas, 1995)

While the US government has taken strides in recognizing the urgency and magnitude of climate change threats to national security, the organizational foundations of the assessments have seriously biased the nature of the assessments. Even though the Pentagon has been active in integrating climate change into its planning, the issue is framed in light of traditional DOD responsibilities. Thus, the multiple climate change documents from DOD emphasize tactical gains from reducing supply chains and costs through the adoption of solar power in the field, cleaning up military bases, preparing for operational challenges associated with climate change, and focusing on climate change effects with impacts on US geopolitical assets. It does not address the sustainability, human security, or environmental implications of climate change for economic sustainability or human quality of life. (The CNA Corporation, 2007; "USA National Security Strategy," 2015)

There have been a number of efforts to improve comprehensive planning and to infuse the process with specialized expertise. Senator Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson called for organizational redesign of the



foreign policy establishment to better anticipate and respond to complex challenges. (Jackson, 1960) The Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy released a seven-volume study in 1975, although it ultimately failed to yield any administrative reforms. The National Security Council and Homeland Security are efforts to provide multiple perspectives on security threats. The NSC may be too small and rely too extensively on military secondments to achieve as broad and independent a view as would be liked. The White House National Economic Council is an effort to provide a broad perspective on economic policy issues. Anticipatory Governance, now an eight-year-old effort, was designed to provide the procedural and institutional parameters for dealing with complex foreign policy issues. (L. Fuerth; L. S. Fuerth & Faber, 2012)

An early example of integrated governance was the formation of the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) (1972-1995) which was designed to craft policy analyses for Congress of emerging technologies. It was widely respected for producing high quality studies produced by a strong professional interdisciplinary staff that was independent from Congress. Ultimately it was eliminated due to cost cutting and because Congress felt that many of its reports were submitted too late to be used effectively in drafting legislation. (Bimber, 1996; Brown)

A number of more contemporary examples come from efforts to deal effectively with environmental issues. To a large extent the United States, as with other major countries relies on two institutions to develop insightful environmental policy. One body – the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) coordinates interagency work on environmental issues. Another body – the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) devises and enforces environmental regulations. Other countries have experimented with various administrative combinations in order to achieve broad policy coordination amongst functional agencies combined with efforts to devise and enforce environmental policies. (P. M. Haas, 1990, p. ch 5)

President Clinton created environmental hubs in state department embassies intended to impart environmental analyses into all issues which the Embassy would encounter. Due to lack of funding the hubs were unable to recruit sufficient staff in order to perform their tasks.

Similarly, other efforts on integrated and networked policy development were inspired by the foreign policy failures or mistakes since the end of the Cold War. The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) was created in 2004 to integrate and analyze all US intelligence on terrorism. Its mission was to ensure adequate sharing of information across all US departments and agencies and ensure the “integration of all instruments of national power.” Despite its ambitious structure, however, throughout much of its first decade the NCTC was hamstrung by serious staffing flaws, persistent cultural conflicts among participating departments and agencies, and limited authority structures. (Schmitt & Shanker, 2010; "Toward Integrating Complex National Missions," 2010) Today, it continues to struggle with the same problems. (Author interview with senior NCTC official, West Point, April 24, 2016)

President Obama’s Atrocities Prevention Board (APB) established in 2012 was another example of an effort to develop integrated policy coordination. (Alleblas, Aloyo, et al, 2017) The APB was born out of the recognition of the need to integrate functional and regional considerations into the formulation of coherent policy. The APB used a “whole of government approach” that was designed to tap existing institutional and bureaucratic capacities to prioritize surveying the whole environment, develop structures, gather intelligence, and coordinate analysis to identify and understand inter-linkages. The challenge, however, is that the bureaucracy has been slow to embrace this institution and the new practices.

The approach illustrated by the APB recognized and emphasized the importance of interagency involvement to assure that stakeholders from the operational agencies contribute to a comprehensive approach to studying complex issues and implementing policies on the ground. Yet, as evidenced by the experiences of the APB and other similar institutional reform efforts, training and socializing bureaucratic

actors is difficult. Furthermore, the Trump administration's national security approach has been to reduce and weaken interagency exchange and coordination in favor of more centralized, top-down executive directives. (Bolton, 2020)

The Road Ahead

We need better instruments to improve bureaucratic and organizational buy-in into the practices of breaking down problems to their appropriate scale – to identify the first and second order effects -- and, to promoting outcomes that reflect fluid conceptions of national interests in a complex environment.

Underlying all these efforts lies a catch-22, however: how to mobilize a network of diverse expert competencies and perspectives within the entrenched bureaucratic politics and organizational cultures of Washington decision-making structures – particularly in an era of acute partisanship.

Optimally, it would be preferential to rely on existing organizational structures to mobilize these diverse expert competencies. The National Security Council staff originally was envisioned to serve as the conduit of planning and coordination. Yet, although its staff has grown nearly eight-fold in the past thirty years, it too remains highly siloed and increasingly politicized (Bolton, 2020). Most US government agencies have developed more sophisticated forecasting, planning, and coordinating mandates. Yet they remain hamstrung by their narrow organizational charges and strong bureaucratic cultures. Without some formal structure and dedicated authorities and budgets, integrated whole-of-government approaches too often remain stifled by existing bureaucratic rivalries, contested staffing and missions, and limited or non-existent budgetary authority.

As a result, US decision making could be improved by the creation of two new bodies: an interagency council responsible for complex global issues supported by a small stand-alone executive unit responsible for collecting and aggregating data, conducting policy analysis, and formulating alternative policy proposals. Such a body would have a standing professional staff drawn from multiple disciplinary backgrounds with a regular budget appropriation with flexible authorities to directly program or re-program a set pool of funds as needed.

A narrative is necessary to justify the creation of such a new body. Strobe Talbott lamented the difficulty of selling “interdependence” and issue-linkages to a skeptical Congress as a framing concept behind administrative reform or policy. The standard tropes of American foreign policy: liberal multilateralism, conservative unilateralism, and a conservative policy agenda lack the ability to meaningfully engage with the challenges of complexity. (Kissinger, 2001; Mead, 2001; Nau, 2013; Ruggie, 1996)

The American people need not be afraid of uncertainty and the unknown. American technological prowess has been able to recognize and persevere over complex challenges: from the Apollo Space Program to the Shuttle to the internet and successfully networked energy systems. Complexity need not be feared; it can be something that is recognized as a challenge and overcome through reasoned analysis. By preparing for the next crisis and then presenting it as an instance of complexity to be governed, the warrants will be laid for appropriate institutional reforms.

There is a growing sense in Washington and the country that US actions generate surprises and unanticipated outcomes. They may even cause backlash and instill the very conditions we are seeking to avoid. Institutional reforms could be justified by recognizing that we are now in a new complex environment which requires smarter planning. The Trump administration's response and management of the Covid-19 pandemic has, perhaps more than other issues caused people to realize that they are affected by long causal chains with origins elsewhere in the world and in issues which may be disconnected from their immediate experiences. (Pew Research Center, 2020) Presenting a more sophisticated map of the policy world would support institutional reforms able to capture the intricacies



of that map. As Captain Barbosa said in *Pirates of the Caribbean*: “You’re off the edge of the map, mate. Here there be monsters.” We may be encountering monsters because we have been looking at the world wrong and crafting inaccurate maps.

Such institutional reform will contribute to more effective and accurate American foreign policy. In addition, policy emerging from such procedures will enhance US soft power by virtue of being based on a carefully reasoned understanding of global challenges.

The UN System also can benefit from institutional reforms to improve coordinated management of global complex issues. There are no centralized bodies able to coordinate between the multitude of specialized agencies.

To take one example, the WTO environmental dispute settlement procedures are insufficient to balance trade and environmental concerns. Trade and development are not adequately balanced within the WTO – especially in the face of the failed Doha round and lack of communication between UNDP, WB, and WTO. Correspondingly, those institutions responsible for the environment– UNEP and various regimes, for example – lack the resources, mandate, and power to inform policymaking in trade, finance, and other areas. Similarly, human rights and security remain narrowly defined within the purviews of narrow policy networks.

The Sustainable Development Goals which serve at the core of the international development agenda through 2030 highlight the need for an administrative body to help capture the interconnections between the 17 diffuse goals, and to promote international compliance. The UN secretariat needs a strengthened unit which has more disciplinary skills and competency than the current UNDESA in order to collect and appraise progress in achieving the SDGs. The UN also needs a new expert sustainability panel capable of understanding the interconnections between the SDGs, to identify gaps in knowledge, to mobilize the networks of expertise about and between the SDGs, and to collect best practices for their attainment.

Conclusion

New circumstances require new approaches. In this article we have suggested that the signature characteristic of the contemporary world order is its complexity. We do not make the claim that the world is more complex, or even more dangerous, than previous eras, only that the complexities are profoundly different from previous eras. The multitude of actors, issues, and the complex interactions between such issues have created a patchwork international order, rife with uncertainties about the relevant policy networks, the specific US interest, and the available assets to promote US interests. Such changes require a better and broader recognition of this new world order, as well as new domestic and international institutions that are capable of parsing the uncertainties in order to generate policies that are more likely to resonate with the US national interest and others’ interests, as well as being technically feasible.

Institutional reforms can help the US formulate and project more effective policies that can better respond to these changed conditions. It will enable more effective US leadership and engagement through more accurate understandings of the international policy environment, and by making US decision making more transparent and legitimate in the eyes of others.

Complexity is surely likely to persist as a systemic property. While global governance may face a rocky spell in the foreseeable future, governments still need new lenses and approaches to collectively deal with complexity. More comprehensive decision-making processes at the national and international levels can contribute to more effective governance, and the avoidance of rude surprises.



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