Less Art, More Science

Transforming U.S. Foreign Policy through
Evidence, Integrity, and Innovation

September 8, 2020

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Who We Are

FP21 is an independent, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to transforming the process and institutions of U.S. foreign policy. We seek to restore U.S. leadership and improve the lives of Americans and people around the world by designing pragmatic, actionable recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy. FP21 is building a community of experienced policymakers, social scientists, veterans, technologists, and NGO practitioners. We aim to support a new generation of government officials eager to inject data and rigor into the policy process.

Our Vision

Imagine a National Security Council (NSC) meeting where participants arrive prepared to defend their policy proposals with robust evidence from history, data, intelligence, and social science. At the meeting, the integrity of ideas and rigorous analysis wins out over ideology, watered-down recommendations, and bureaucratic turf battles. Armed with this information, meeting participants—a racially and socioeconomically diverse group from a range of disciplines—carefully weigh the likely costs, risks, and rewards associated with each policy option. Guided by a professional facilitator trained to lead effective strategy sessions, the group hones its objectives and chooses a recommendation that clearly lays out the steps necessary to achieve the president's desired results.

As the bureaucracy executes the policy, officials carefully monitor its effectiveness against clear metrics of progress, allowing leadership to honestly assess its success or, if necessary, change course. The policymakers find that they can more easily explain a transparent, evidence-based process to the president, Congress, and the American people.

Imagine that lessons from the successes and failures of the policy feed back into the bureaucracy's collective knowledge, helping agencies adjust their personnel practices, internal processes, and technology to more effectively contribute to U.S. foreign policy. A more objective understanding of merit takes shape as the system promotes officers who measurably perform.

FP21 aims to realize this vision. "Diplomacy is an art," it is said, yet from Silicon Valley to financial services, political campaigns to baseball, today's most successful enterprises have built their culture around evidence.[1] These organizations use a range of modern methods and tools to collect information, acquire insights, and make more sound decisions than their competitors.[2] The culture of U.S. foreign policy must follow suit to advance our national security. Our elected officials—and the American public—deserve nothing less.

A Strategy for Evidence-Based Foreign Policy

The United States faces an increasingly complex set of international challenges, but the methods and practices of U.S. foreign policy are stuck in the past. Instead of investing in modern technologies to make sense of today's superabundance of information, the system relies on subjective judgment. Instead of systematically researching and assessing information objectively, our organizations cherry-pick facts to defend their preexisting views. Instead of fostering a culture of evidence and empiricism, we ground our policy ideas in instinct and ideology.

The United States must remain a leader in today's complex, globalized world. In order to compete with our adversaries, we must harness new, more powerful analytic approaches to decision-making.[3] Just as today's most successful companies have cast off intuition and tradition, a U.S. foreign policy based on evidence, integrity, and innovation offers political leaders more effective and reliable tools of statecraft.

> Adapting common, user-friendly evidence-based practices will give foreign policy practitioners powerful tools to manage information collection, decision making, and implementation.

In order to evolve, our institutions must overcome their tendency to handle evidence like a courtroom lawyer. A lawyer presents facts that comply with her or his arguments, ignoring or disparaging inconvenient information.[4] Evidence cannot impact the policy process if it is only used when it supports our preexisting views.

Instead, the culture of foreign policy must be more systematic, designed to account for evidence on all sides of an argument. This will allow us to more effectively tackle the biases, misperceptions, and turfsmanship that impair our policy processes.[5]

Among the most pernicious forms of bias are the prejudices around gender, race, sexual orientation, and religion. Diversity and inclusion are integral to the achievement of evidence-based foreign policy. Research shows that diverse groups outperform homogenous ones.[6] If our country's policies are dominated by only one subsection of our society, we lose out on a vast spectrum of insight necessary to meet our international challenges. The faces of U.S. foreign policy must reflect America's rich diversity of experience, background, race, class, creed, and culture. Objectivity and inclusion go hand-in-hand. Indeed, they are inseparable.

Relationships, moral judgment, and the politics of our elected leaders will remain as vital to policymaking as languages, subject matter expertise, and history will to our diplomats. Computers cannot replace flesh-and-blood experts; human debate and judgment will remain indispensable. Instead, advancing our foreign policy calls for the *integration* of new insights into existing approaches—be they from data analysis, qualitative approaches, or better knowledge management— to make our policies smarter. Adopting these trusted and user-friendly practices will help foreign policy practitioners achieve better outcomes for the American people.[7]

Effective, evidence-based foreign policy requires a whole-of-government approach.[8] Most of our recommendations apply to the NSC process and the foreign affairs elements of U.S. departments and agencies. Many specifically concern the Department of State, the lead agency of foreign affairs. Rehabilitating State's ability to be a trusted advisor for the president is vital to improving U.S. foreign policy.[9] To reform the broader interagency process, we must empower diplomacy, realigning our national security resources to invest more in statecraft.[10]

Today's conversations around rebuilding diplomacy are heavy on substance but light on details regarding how a weakened institution will achieve such lofty objectives.[11] Simply investing more money and new staff into an old system will not adequately address the weaknesses of our foreign policy. Though previous reform efforts have identified the need to adopt modern technology and techniques, they have had limited impact due a lack of buy-in from leadership and their marginal role in the policy process.[12] The next administration should adopt the suite of reforms outlined below to realize a new vision for U.S. foreign policy.

A Five-Stage Model of the Policy Process

FP21's vision for a new culture of evidence-based policymaking is organized around a five-stage model of the policy process. Though the reality of policymaking is not typically linear, breaking the process down into component parts allows us to more thoughtfully inspect the challenges and opportunities at each stage.

Information Collection	Analysis	Policy Decisions	Learning & Accountability	Personnel & Organizational Change

I.   **Information Collection:** The bureaucracy collects considerable information and data, but our knowledge management structures are outdated, and the government does not invest in research that responds to the challenges of our foreign policy professionals, undermining our institutions' effectiveness. This must change.

II. **Analysis:** In contrast to the intelligence community,[13] the methods that policy analysts currently use to gather and evaluate evidence are ad hoc and subjective. Our leaders deserve a process that surfaces and rewards analysis with the strongest evidentiary basis and rationale; otherwise, arriving at good policy depends on the idiosyncrasies of those involved.

III. **Policy Decisions:** Policymaking today is often disconnected from analysis, allowing decision-makers to advocate for favored positions that have little likelihood of success.[14] A more effective policy process would transparently lay out the steps required to achieve a desired result so that the process can carefully assess the logic behind each step and, if found wanting, select another approach with greater expected benefits. We must also create space for long-term strategic thinking while remaining flexible to react to ongoing events.

IV. **Learning and Accountability:** Our foreign policy apparatus must learn from the successes and failures of our policies. To do so, our institutions must have processes to transform lessons into behavioral change.

V.   **Personnel and Organizational Change:** Our foreign policy agencies should promote the most effective staff, train personnel on today's most effective skills, and recruit a diverse pool of talent. An effective institution constantly upgrades itself, invests in new tools and approaches, and dispenses with stale and ineffective methods.

Summary of Recommendations

INFORMATION COLLECTION

Improve Knowledge Management
- Build an easily accessible database for all policy-relevant material
- Institutionalize knowledge management practices
- Assign "librarians" in each office to support knowledge management

Expand Foreign Policy Focused Research and Data
- Kickstart the collection of policy-relevant quantitative data
- Upgrade State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) with an Office of Social Science Research
- Direct Offices of the Historian to support policy

ANALYSIS

Upgrade Analytical Techniques
- Expand the basic analytical toolkit for all officials
- Propagate the use of advanced analytics
- Support existing analytical capacities

Better Integrate Analysis into the Policy Process
- Require the citation of evidence in analytical products
- Evaluate and reward strong analysis
- Create frameworks for different types of analysis
- Create cross-regional and cross-agency teams to conduct analyses

POLICY DECISIONS

Design Evidence-Based Foreign Policy
- Require evidence to support all policy recommendations
- Require measurable metrics of success in all policy memos
- Include alternative policy recommendations
- Implement an updated policy memo template

Implement Mechanisms for Quality Control
- Empower quality control checkpoints
- Convene policy review panels
- Institute "red team" processes
- Expand the OIG mandate to support policy
- Establish performance metrics and incentives tied to policy outcomes

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Institutionalize Processes for Long-Term Planning

- Adopt new incentives for long-term planning
- Introduce design thinking into the policy process
- Invigorate Policy Planning and prioritize strategy at State
- Revitalize the Foreign Affairs Policy Board with a bipartisan focus
- Embed planning positions in policy bureaus and on large policy desks

LEARNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Implement Monitoring and Evaluation Standards for Major Policy Initiatives

- Incentivize ongoing participation in monitoring and evaluation
- Require policy evaluations to capture lessons
- Require high-quality handover notes
- Implement exit interviews as officers rotate to capture expertise
- Establish a learning team to support the utilization of lessons

PERSONNEL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Recruit and Promote the Most Qualified Employees by Valuing Diversity

- Appoint a blue ribbon panel to study and redefine merit
- Update entrance exam and promotion precepts to emphasize new skills
- Implement comparable metrics in the evaluation process
- Objectively match skills with job requirements in the assignments process
- Appoint a Chief Inclusion Officer to improve diversity and inclusion
- Confront conscious and unconscious bias head-on
- Formalize management practices for LGBTQ employees

Train a 21st Century Workforce

- Upgrade the Foreign Service Institute (FSI)
- Mandate a training float of staff circulating through professional education programs
- Commit to data literacy for all officials
- Reward time in training in the promotion process
- Enable vertical and horizontal mobility for Civil Service officers
- Better use Civil Service hiring to recruit high-impact technical skills
- Restrict veterans' preference for certain Civil Service assignments

I. Information Collection

Evidence-based foreign policy begins with collecting and utilizing high-quality evidence. FP21 aims to expand foreign policy centered research and data by improving our foreign policy's capabilities and raising its resources to par with other elements of the national security establishment.

The following recommendations are organized into two goals: *improving knowledge management* and *expanding foreign policy centered research and data*.

Improve Knowledge Management

Policymakers need intuitive access to information at the speed of diplomacy. Our foreign policy institutions should transform from a culture of "drinking from the firehose" to more efficient onboarding and knowledge management practices that preserve and exploit institutional memory.[15] This goal must be balanced against the need to protect and compartmentalize sensitive information.

- *Build an easily accessible database for all policy-relevant material.* In today's high-paced environment, policymakers need quick, intuitive access to information. Yet, on day one, most foreign policy professionals find chaotic—or nonexistent—file management systems and multiple databases. The State Department and other agencies should develop classified and unclassified one-stop, easily searchable repositories for policy memos, research reports, data sets, academic articles, intel and historical analyses, diplomatic cables and record emails, diplomatic notes, after-action reports, and documents such as treaties, MOUs, and international agreements.[16]
- *Institutionalize knowledge management practices.* Each agency should institute enterprise-wide standard operating procedures for organizing and archiving office files—and enforce them. When an official departs from their assignment, their expertise should not leave with them.[17]
- *Assign "librarians" in each office to support knowledge management.* Each office or bureau should nominate a dedicated librarian to debrief outgoing employees, capture lessons from current initiatives, and feed them back into processes so that our foreign policy organizations continuously improve.

Expand Foreign Policy Centered Research and Data

In addition to the latest intelligence and diplomatic reporting, policymakers should have access to the latest research, historical analyses, and data. It is not enough that the information merely exists; the best evidence must be integrated into the policy process itself.

- *Kickstart the collection of policy-relevant quantitative data.* Data-driven, evidence-based foreign policy requires systematically collecting information relevant to today's foreign policy challenges and the capability to visualize and analyze it in ways that produce useful insights for policymakers. The NSC, State, and others should task and prioritize data collection efforts, especially in the field.
- *Upgrade State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) to host an Office of Social Science Research.* The State Department should expand INR's Office of Opinion Analysis and hire political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and data scientists armed with their own research budgets. In consultation with policymakers and embassies, the office would design and execute short-term and multi-year research projects based on the needs of senior policymakers and embassies.
- *Direct Offices of the Historian to support policy.* Our foreign policy agencies constantly reinvent the wheel and repeat mistakes because the well-meaning drafters of policy memos rarely understand the history of the issues they're working on or how their institutions have tackled the same problems before.[18] Historians at State, the NSC, and in other agencies should be intimately involved in policy analysis, recommendations, capturing historical memory, and lessons learned —much as they are at the Department of Defense (DoD)— and should keep that institutional memory fresh and accessible.[19]

Case Study:
Repeating the Same Mistakes in Yemen

The war in Yemen began in late 2014. Over 10,000 people would die by the end of 2016, setting off the world's most severe humanitarian crisis. An estimated four in five Yemenis, over 21 million people, required urgent humanitarian assistance.[A] Part of the problem was the United States' and international community's inability to incorporate lessons regarding what is most likely to end civil wars and build effective peace processes.

The U.S. response coalesced around supporting peace negotiations between the parties. Prospects for a comprehensive peace agreement were dim but the United States repeatedly pushed the parties to sign ceasefire agreements. Amid some of the deadliest fighting of the war, Secretary of State John Kerry announced in October 2016, "This is the time to implement a ceasefire unconditionally and then move to the negotiating table." The UN Special Envoy for Yemen similarly asserted that a new deal would "generate much needed confidence for the negotiation of a comprehensive and peaceful solution."[B] Five earlier ceasefires had failed to contain violence, but the parties quickly complied. The sixth ceasefire agreement was marked by repeated violations by both sides, and expired after only three days as violence took full force.[C] A seventh ceasefire agreement, agreed to a month later, collapsed within 48 hours.[D]

Evidence mounted that the approach was causing more harm than good. The temporary peace agreements repeatedly backfired, undermining confidence between the parties, deepening skepticism about a political resolution, and draining the support (and resources) of the international community.[E] Interviews in Yemen found, "Every time they announce a ceasefire fighting intensifies…"[F] Experts criticized the peace process for focusing on weak deals rather than working toward a comprehensive political agreement that could ensure the political reform necessary to stabilize Yemen.[G]

The U.S. government designs its approaches to each new peace process from the ground up, reflecting the idiosyncratic preferences of whoever is in charge. The government provides no training for U.S. officials who support such peace processes; nor do officials approach them armed with lessons learned from past successes and failures.

A better approach would be to draw from the rich academic and practitioner literature on best practices in peace processes, which indicates the types of agreements most likely to succeed.[H] The U.S. did not put these lessons to work in Yemen, because the policymaking process did not demand them. Further, the lack of monitoring and evaluation systems allowed officials to repeat the failed ceasefire strategy again and again. Until we transform the process of making U.S. foreign policy, our outcomes will remain hostage to unproven conventional wisdom and ideology, making failures like Yemen difficult to avoid.

A   "Yemen Conflict: How Bad is the Humanitarian Crisis?" BBC News. March, 28, 2017. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34011187.

B   "UN Envoy Says Restoring Ceasefire 'Critical' for Yemen." Yahoo News. August 31, 2016. https://www.yahoo.com/news/un-envoy-says-restoring-ceasefire-critical-yemen-155318789.html.

C   "Yemen Ceasefire Set To Start on Wednesday Night: U.N. Envoy." Reuters. October 17, 2016. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemen-ceasefire-set-to-start-on-wednesday-night-u-n-envoy-idUSKBN12H28O.

D   Milton-Edwards, Beverly. *Yemen: Ceasefires and Lost Opportunities.* Brookings Institution, November 29, 2019. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/11/29/yemen-ceasefires-and-lost-opportunities.

E   Al-Karimi, Khalid. "Why Do Yemen's Ceasefires Keep Failing?" The New Arab. October 26, 2016. https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/Comment/2016/10/26/Why-do-Yemens-ceasefires-keep-failing.

F   Center for Civilians in Conflict. *We Lived Days in Hell: Civilian Perspectives on the Conflict in Yemen.* PDF file. 2016. https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2017.We-Lived-In-Hell.Report.Yemen_.MENA-Program.pdf.

G   Project on Middle East Democracy. *Breaking the Cycle of Failed Negotiations in Yemen.* May 2017. https://pomed.org/pomed-policy-brief-breaking-the-cycle-of-failed-negotiations-in-yemen.

H   Fortna, Virginia Page. *Peace Time: Cease-Fire Agreements and the Durability of Peace.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. Hartzell, Caroline A, and Matthew Hoddie. *Crafting Peace: Power-Sharing Institutions and the Negotiated Settlement of Civil Wars.* University Park: Penn State Press, 2007. Mattes, Michaela, and Burcu Savun. "Fostering Peace After Civil War : Commitment Problems and Agreement Design." *International Studies Quarterly* 53(3) (2009): 737–59. Walter, Barbara F. Committing to Peace: *The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

II. Analysis

Officials rely heavily on their own judgment to draw conclusions from the flood of available information: intelligence analysis, reports from the field, the media, and their own personal experiences at the helm of powerful government bureaucracies.[20] The use of good analysis thus becomes idiosyncratic and biased.[21] Confirmation bias, for instance, causes findings which support one's preexisting judgment to be more eagerly accepted than evidence that cuts against one's views.[22]

Foreign policy analysis must be greater than the sum of its parts, not less. The process should seek to synthesize knowledge and expertise from across offices, rather than relying on the fallible judgment of the highest ranking official. We must systemize our analytical processes and adopt an evidence-based, data-driven approach to improve our ability to understand an increasingly complex world.

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A key challenge is that policymakers often discount recommendations from "outsiders" who cannot fully appreciate the political and bureaucratic intricacies of a policy environment. They are skeptical of any approach which risks pitting traditional expertise against new forms of analysis. For example, because State's new Center for Analytics sits outside the regional bureaus, it has had a hard time impacting the policy process.

We counsel a different approach. Policymakers must feel ownership over their own policy processes in order to make better informed decisions. Accordingly, our recommendations focus on *introducing cutting edge analytical techniques* and *integrating them into policymaking.*

Upgrade Analytical Techniques

Our most innovative industries use cutting edge analytic techniques to help make decisions. The Department of Defense (DoD) and the intelligence community have followed suit. The foreign policy establishment must adapt or risk getting left behind.[23]

A handful of exciting data-driven efforts have emerged within the field of foreign policy,[24] but new approaches are not well-integrated into decision-making processes. While data offers no silver bullet, it can help bring clarity to complex situations, foster a more scientific approach to policymaking, and push policymakers to ground their decisions in more objective and transparent evidence.

Predictive analytics, for example, can help policymakers engage in proactive and preventative policymaking. DoD's Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (I-CEWS) forecasts destabilizing events using a massive database of world news. Out-of-the-box technologies can quickly increase our analytical capabilities.

- *Expand the basic analytical toolkit for all officials.* Basic statistics and data visualization can provide a more comprehensive and accurate picture of global events. The State Department should require all officers and policymakers to have basic data literacy and an understanding of the scientific method. Officials should be trained to identify high-quality data and evidence and how to transform messy or unstructured data into usable information.

- *Propagate the use of advanced analytics.* Advanced data science capabilities uncover insights that traditional policy analysis misses. For example, natural language processing algorithms help identify new patterns of activity from social media feeds.[25] Artificial intelligence can process the vast amount of news articles and intelligence reports produced daily and detect key trends and developments significantly faster than humans.[26] Predictive analytics such as machine learning methodologies can predict when a crisis or violence will emerge.[27] Our bureaucracies should recruit data scientists proficient in these techniques.

- *Support existing analytical capacities.* Efforts should be made to increase funding and resources for existing analytical offices, including State's new Center for Analytics. Such investments should focus on institutionalizing existing capacities, hiring permanent staff rather than relying on contractors, and extending support to units that do not currently have advanced analytics capabilities. Every policy office should have access to data analysts.

Better Integrate Analysis into the Policy Process

In order to improve our foreign policy, demand for high-quality evidence must be baked into the incentive structures of the relevant bureaucracies. If leadership views analysis as merely another opinion to be evaluated, no gains will be achieved.[28] Implementing the recommendations outlined below will help institutionalize the use of evidence-based and data-driven analyses.

- *Require the citation of evidence in analytical products.* Front offices and executive secretariats must institute new requirements on the use of evidence in analytical products. Sources can be drawn from internal analysis, intelligence products, or external research, such as academic literature. Implementing this standard will signal to the institution that a change in culture is underway and will incentivize officers to pay extra attention to gathering and using evidence.
- *Evaluate and reward strong analysis.* The Department of State should create an award for policy analysis as measured against new tradecraft standards to incentivize high-quality memo writing. State should adopt the intelligence community's practice of assigning probabilities to predictions in its analytical products to increase the rigor and accuracy of its analysis.
- *Create frameworks for different types of analysis.* Little differentiation between types of analysis—description, explanation, or prediction—currently exists. Different questions require different types of analysis, and different types of analysis require different methodologies. The Department of State should create a training guide that supports various analytical approaches to solve different problems and identifies the best techniques and tools to use for each type.

> Implementing new standards for gathering and using evidence will signal to the institution that a change in culture is underway.

- *Create cross-regional and cross-agency teams to conduct analyses.* Geopolitical issues rarely conform to bureaucratic boundaries. Silos within and between departments stifle innovation and alternative perspectives. The interagency should form more task-force style cross-functional and cross-regional teams that sit together to analyze priority issues and respond to crises, like the FBI-led Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell.[29] Similarly, the Department of State should stand up inter-bureau teams to develop policy approaches in key areas.

Case Study:
Utilizing Data to Predict and Prevent Atrocities

Predicting the occurrence of genocide and mass atrocities is vital to their prevention. Once a genocide begins, it is usually too late. In previous instances of mass killings, U.S. policymakers only reacted after the killings reached extraordinary scales and often after the killings ceased.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's (USHMM) Early Warning Project (EWP)[A] applies a growing body of research on mass atrocity events, advanced statistical analysis, and scientific rigor to prevent future genocide and mass atrocities.

The EWP aims to identify risk factors associated with the occurrence of targeted mass killings, assess the prevalence of these factors in over 160 countries around the world, and assign a risk level of atrocities for each country. This annual risk list is derived from statistical analysis comprising roughly 30 variables and risk factors proven to correlate with atrocities. Examples of risk factors include a history of mass violence, high rates of infant mortality, repression of civil society, and ongoing armed conflict within the country.

The EWP employs a three-pronged approach to its mass atrocity risk assessments: 1) statistical risk assessment (described above); 2) crowd forecasting, which allows experts to provide real-time assessments; and, 3) country reports, which provide detailed qualitative assessments of the risk factors in select high-risk countries. To maintain transparency, the USHMM makes its datasets publicly available for download on its website, along with the detailed methodology that the EWP uses for the risk assessments.

USHMM staff participate in National Security Council meetings dedicated to atrocities prevention in order to share their insights and build momentum around preventing future genocide and mass atrocities. For instance, when Myanmar's security forces forcefully displaced Rohingya from their homes in Rakhine State in late 2017, the USHMM began collecting evidence of the abuses through firsthand accounts and fact-finding missions. Their analysis helped push the government to impose new sanctions against Myanmar's government.

The United States government could learn a great deal from the USHMM's efforts and better integrate advanced analytics across a range of issue areas.

[A] "Early Warning Project." USHMM. https://earlywarningproject.ushmm.org.

III. Policy Decisions

The American people should be proud of the public servants who staff our institutions of foreign policy. Yet, many would be surprised at how little time foreign policy professionals spend researching, creating, and debating new policy proposals. Instead, the policy process jumps from one crisis to the next, perpetually responding to external events. Officials use their best judgment about how to respond instead of proven methods and standards for how to create policy. In fact, the profession of foreign policy has never developed tradecraft principles, breeding inconsistency between administrations, agencies, and bureaus, and opening the door for inexperienced political appointees to obtain senior positions.

Policymakers often demand ideal outcomes, such as "the war in Syria must end!", instead of realistic strategies, leading the bureaucracy to busy itself with endless meetings and international trips in support of a policy few believe will succeed. As a consequence, the bureaucracy measures its performance by the effort it exerts rather than by the results it achieves.[30] This may contribute to a history of presidential distrust of the bureaucracy[31] and the increasingly centralized authority of the NSC.[32]

Finally, bureaucracies tend to fall in love with their own turf.[33] An office's influence, knowledge, and identity become tied to the tool it wields, whether or not it is the right one for the job.[34] A policy process designed around evidence would lead the interagency to choose options appropriate for the task at hand, instead of those that are simply readily available.

We must face the shortcomings in the policy process head on. An improved policy process should adopt standards for decision-making, much like the intelligence community[35] and the Department of Defense,[36] in order to provide objective analysis. A new approach would check ideological ideas with no obvious basis in reality and give presidents greater confidence that the bureaucracy will carry out their strategic guidance with integrity.[37]

FP21's recommendations are organized around the following goals: *methods for designing evidence-based policy, quality control,* and *tools for long-term planning.*

Design Evidence-Based Foreign Policy

The profession of foreign policy must develop and institute standards for evidence for all recommendations. This will help policymakers more systematically identify realistic objectives and design roadmaps for achieving them.

- *Require evidence to support all policy recommendations.* Authors of new policy must "show their work" by citing the evidence they used to support their policy proposals. Such evidence may come from historical or intelligence analyses, advanced analytic conclusions, social science research, or other sources.[38]
- *Require measurable metrics of success in all policy memos.* All policy initiatives should include clear metrics of success and plans to collect data against these metrics. Principals should not sign off on recommendations unless policy memos include a clear articulation of the minimum results needed to know a policy can work, plus a set of red flags to indicate when a policy is failing. Memos should include the likelihood that a policy option or proposal will succeed at achieving each objective just as the intelligence community assigns probabilities to assessments.
- *Include alternative policy recommendations.* Policy memos should allow space for bureaus and agencies that disagree with the majority's proposal to explain why and offer an alternative. This mechanism can be modeled after the intelligence community's practice of publishing "dissents" to mainline judgments. Preserving competing options throughout the process will strengthen policy.
- *Implement an updated policy memo template.* The humble memo is one of the most important tools of the policy process. An improved memo template would require the author to be explicit about the expected sequence of events that will lead to a successful policy outcome.[39] The new memo template will hold penholders accountable to the new foreign policy standards and invite more critical scrutiny of each proposal.

Action Memo for the Secretary of State

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January 21, 2021

ACTION MEMO FOR THE SECRETARY OF STATE

FROM: FP21

SUBJECT: (U) New Guidance for Policy Memorandum

(U) This proposal for a new decision memo format aims to hold officials accountable for thinking beyond the simple wordsmithing of talking points and focus more clearly on the assumptions and implications that undergird their analysis and policy proposals. The new memo template will be required for all new proposals or substantive shifts in existing policy.

(U) A new foreign policy decision memo asks officials to answer the following prompts:

1. Clearly state the problem and the opportunity.

2. Describe the end-state one hopes to achieve.

3. Detail the "theory of change" supporting this policy recommendation, including the chain reaction of events you expect to occur following this policy intervention. Estimate the likelihood of each link in the process occurring using percentages.

4. What information will we need to gather in order to understand whether the policy is working? What are the indicators of success that we should observe?

5. What evidence suggests that this policy will work?

6. What are the possible threats to success? How will the other party (or parties) respond to our new policy? What indicators will we observe if the policy is failing?

(U) Implement new memo procedure? Y_____   N_____

Implement Mechanisms for Quality Control

A healthy policy process focuses attention on the veracity of evidence. Our foreign policy departments and agencies should institute quality control measures to ensure the integrity of the policy process.

- *Empower quality control checkpoints.* NSC directors, the Secretary of State's Executive Secretariat, and staff assistants in State policy bureaus should act as quality control agents. If a policy memo does not adequately engage with the evidence and assumptions underlying its recommendations, they should return it to the author for improvements before it lands on the desk of a senior policymaker.

- *Convene policy review panels.* Policy review panels hosted by the Department of State's Policy Planning Office and staffed by interagency peers should regularly convene to make recommendations and suggest improvements. Such panels should be run like academic conference presentations, in which participants can ask questions and make constructive recommendations to authors.

- *Institute "red team" processes.* Red teams, formal processes that encourage actors to play devil's advocate and challenge a policy's assumptions, should be a required step in strategic policy planning to test the claims of policy proposals.[40]

- *Expand the OIG mandate to support policy.* Today, the Offices of the Inspector General focus primarily on management and financial practices,[41] but it should prioritize reviews of the policy process itself as well. The bureaucracy should be given more opportunity to replicate the practices of high-performing units and dispense with anachronistic practices.

- *Establish performance metrics and incentives tied to policy outcomes.* Promotion criteria heavily influence an organization's culture. Promotion precepts should include impartial measures of the quality of one's contribution to the policy process, focusing our foreign policy agencies on results.

Institutionalize Processes for Long-Term Planning

Strategic planning is vital to effective foreign policy, but officials must have the time, training, and resources to design forward-looking policies. Reactive foreign policy robs our process of the oxygen it needs to produce the best policies, especially when it comes to the production and use of strong evidence. Further, our professionals must be exposed to strategic planning early in their careers in order to prepare for high levels of service. We propose several structured efforts to channel such expertise.

- *Adopt new incentives for long-term planning.* Introduce a *Future Thinking Program* at the Department of State, modeled after Google's "20% time" program,[42] to encourage officers to dedicate a portion of their time to long-term planning and solutions. For two days each month, officers should step away from their day-to-day responsibilities to focus on the future. Policy entrepreneurs can form multidisciplinary and interagency working groups to generate new policy solutions.

- *Introduce design thinking into the policy process.* The NSC and State's Policy Planning office should facilitate design-thinking workshops[43] to help solve sticky policy challenges. Design thinking principles encourage out-of-the-box thinking through experiential research, careful problem definition, structured brainstorming, prototyping, and testing.

- *Invigorate Policy Planning and prioritize strategy at State.* The Secretary of State should select a Policy Planning director who is capable, qualified, and widely respected, and empower that person with the rank of Assistant Secretary. Policy Planning should employ professional facilitators who are experts in the latest strategic planning techniques and design methods to improve the efficiency and implementation of policy ideation and discussions.[44] Policy Planning should coordinate with research teams to ensure high-quality evidence is available for strategic priorities.

- *Revitalize the Foreign Affairs Policy Board with a bipartisan focus.* The next Secretary of State should select a full set of 25 members who are "distinguished, diverse, and bipartisan" from a wide range of backgrounds to provide independent advice and opinions concerning U.S. foreign policy.[45]

- *Embed planning positions in policy bureaus and on large policy desks.* Integrated planners tasked with thinking at least 6-18 months out and shielded from daily fire drills would ensure that longer-term goals inform everyday diplomacy. These planners would identify strategic priorities and future events in the countries or regions they cover and coordinate with desk officers, embassies, Policy Planning, and interagency partners to prepare for long-term challenges.

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Case Study:
Strategic Planning in the Sahel

A structured analytical approach improved the United States' fight against Boko Haram and the Islamic State in Chad, Niger, and Nigeria in 2017. The operation spanned across a range of U.S. government actors and locations, including State, DoD, USAID, and DoJ, operating out of Embassy Niamey, Embassy Abuja, Embassy N'Djamena, and various military bases across the three countries, challenging the interagency's ability to plan and execute a strategic plan.

Officials turned to the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) to help lay a foundation for a coordinated strategy.[A] The ICAF is a field-based study that guides officials to systematically collect and analyze information about a conflict based on a series of evidence-based indicators. The ICAF helped officials develop a clear understanding of the root causes of the conflict, how violence was used by the armed groups to assert control, and why young men were drawn to these terrorist organizations. Based on this assessment, the interagency team worked collaboratively to design a strategy to prevent violence, rehabilitate and re-introduce former fighters into civilian life, and introduce a measure of restorative justice for those affected by the violence.

The information-sharing environment and interagency functionality were enhanced by senior-level policymakers explicitly directing their subordinates to work collaboratively and problem-solve together. Weekly secure video teleconferences between decision-makers in D.C. and the various deployed locations ensured coordinated execution of the strategy. Cooperation through consistent, direct communication improved information sharing, deconfliction of efforts, and coordinated problem-solving in a highly complex environment.

Given the nature of the counter-terrorism operations and intercommunal violence happening in Chad, Niger, and Nigeria at the time, the various perspectives of the interagency were vital to generating a cohesive and comprehensive understanding of the situation and finding solutions best engineered to address the core challenges posed by Boko Haram and ISIS-WA.

[A] USAID. *Conflict Assessment Framework.* PDF file. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnady739.pdf.

IV. Learning and Accountability

Policymaking is difficult. Uncertainty is unavoidable, and one can never be sure exactly how a policy will affect events on the ground. But when we fail to examine a policy's effectiveness, bureaucratic inertia can sustain a misguided approach for far too long.[46] That is organizational failure.

In contrast, strong organizations learn from today's successes and failures in order to improve the likelihood of success tomorrow.[47] Fortunately, there are well-developed and tested tools to build a culture of learning. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems generate data to allow policymakers to understand the effectiveness of a policy or program from start to finish.

M&E systems introduce new measures of accountability into bureaucracy. Institutional ties between the White House, Department of State, Congress, and others have grown weak[48] and are often characterized by distrust.[49] These divides need repair. M&E tools rebuild trust by providing ongoing evidence that each organization is working to effectively advance the priorities of our political leadership. Further, M&E frameworks help improve communication of the administration's policies to Congress and the American people.

The U.S. military leans heavily on after-action reviews,[50] and most government foreign assistance programs already incorporate M&E tools.[51] Yet, policymakers infrequently use monitoring, evaluation, or learning.

In order to support learning and accountability in foreign policy, we must *implement system monitoring and evaluation standards* to support our most important foreign policy initiatives.

> When we fail to examine a policy's effectiveness, bureaucratic inertia can sustain a misguided approach for far too long.

Implement Monitoring and Evaluation Standards for Major Policy Initiatives.

The Department of State defines monitoring as "an ongoing system of gathering information and tracking performance to assess progress against established goals and objectives."[52] Policymakers should design plans with monitoring in mind from the start. They should monitor three kinds of information throughout policy implementation: 1) progress toward the intended results of a policy, and unintended effects; 2) evaluations of the assumptions that underpin the policy proposal; and, 3) feedback on whether the estimated resource requirements and implementation timeline are accurate.[53]

Evaluation is "the systematic collection and analysis of information about the characteristics and outcomes of programs, projects, or processes as a basis for making judgments, improving effectiveness and informing decisions about current and future programs, projects, and processes."[54] Evaluations can occur at a midpoint during policy implementation to make course corrections, or after a policy has been implemented.

Evaluations examine a policy's relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability. Was the recommended policy the best course of action at the time to achieve U.S. objectives? Did the policy contribute to the achievement of the desired results? Are the policy's results likely to last as long as the status quo prevails, and what conditions might nullify the achieved results?[55]

- *Incentivize ongoing participation in monitoring and evaluation*. Performance and promotion reviews should evaluate the extent to which each officer contributed to policy monitoring efforts, used the findings from evaluations and learning processes to inform policy recommendations, and participated in evaluations and learning processes.
- *Require policy evaluations to capture lessons*. Drawing on monitoring data and other sources of information about a policy, evaluations compare policy design, implementation, and results against a set of predetermined criteria. Model the rolling basis on which these evaluations are conducted on the Office of the Inspector General's model for conducting independent assessments of the operations of the Department and its posts abroad.[56] To ensure objectivity, a separate set of officials should conduct evaluations rather than those who design or implement the policy being evaluated.

- *Require high-quality handover notes.* Foreign policy professionals receive little job-specific training and often do not overlap with their predecessors. Comprehensive handover notes, including a list of contacts, should be required for all staff. The quality of handover notes should be evaluated within the existing performance review process. When a person leaves a position, their expertise should not leave with them.

- *Implement exit interviews as officers rotate to capture expertise.* Each office should conduct exit interviews as staff rotate out of assignments to capture lessons learned about policy issues in their portfolios. The lessons accumulated from interviews comprise a valuable source of learning.[57]

- *Establish a learning team to support the utilization of lessons.* The Secretary of State's Policy Planning staff should stand up a "learning team" to ensure Department leadership shapes monitoring, evaluation, and learning efforts to feed policy decision-making. Task this learning team to develop standards and tools for lower-level learning processes conducted by learning officers embedded in bureaus across the Department.

Sample Monitoring Plan

Policymakers should monitor for three kinds of evidence during policy implementation:

1. indicators of progress toward the goal;
2. evidence supporting or contradicting the assumptions that underpin the policy proposal; and,
3. feedback on whether the estimated resource requirements and implementation timeline are accurate.

Policy	"U.S. capacity-building support to Kenyan law enforcement institutions will increase their ability to address terrorist and transnational crime threats while encouraging an approach based on rule of law so that new threats do not emerge."
Context Monitoring	• Kenyan law enforcement remains willing to participate in capacity building provided by the U.S. government? • Kenyan law enforcement remains committed to using an approach based on rule of law? • Terrorist and transnational crime threats persist? Same types of threats from same groups/actors as when policy was designed?
Output-level Result Monitoring	• Kenyan law enforcement participate in capacity building • Ministry of Justice officials meet with U.S. officials on maintaining rule of law • Kenyan and U.S. officials conduct joint mapping of terrorist and transnational crime threats
Outcome-level Result Monitoring	• Kenyan law enforcement have improved knowledge and skills • Kenyan law enforcement effectively responds to terrorist threats before attacks occur • Kenyan law enforcement effectively disrupts transnational criminal activity • Ministry of Justice officials have improved knowledge of rule of law approaches • Ministry of Justice implements ministry-wide reforms to improve rule of law
Unintended Result Monitoring	• Increased # of wrongful arrests of members of vulnerable groups by Kenyan law enforcement (negative) • Kenyan military requests capacity-building because of the effectiveness of capacity building for Kenyan law enforcement (positive)

V. Personnel and Organizational Change

Any improvement of the foreign policy process must begin and end with our most valuable resource: the officials who staff the organizations every day. There is an old saying that "personnel is policy." Nowhere is this truer than in foreign policy.[58] The next administration must leverage existing expertise to build a new culture focused on constructive policy debate, the merit of one's evidence, and diversity.

But what skills are required to be a foreign policy expert? The Foreign Service relies on a list of "promotion precepts" that include categories such as substantive knowledge and intellectual ability.[59] These qualities are rhetorically admirable but hollow in practice. Virtually no training or feedback is offered to improve one's substantive knowledge or intellectual abilities, which sends the message that great diplomats are naturally gifted. The resulting evaluations are entirely subjective, and there is no ability to compare recommendations between officers.

Meanwhile, quantitative skills are not valued in the hiring or promotion rubrics, and little training is offered for the next generation of policymakers. This sends a strong signal to those eager to participate in serious foreign policy debate that quantitative training is not valued.

Outdated approaches to human resources are reflected in the lack of diversity of the foreign affairs workforce.[60] Hiring and promotion procedures that exclude talented women and minorities from positions of influence give lie to the idea of a meritocracy. If there is no transparent conception of merit, it is too easy for the pernicious effects of bias to undermine the quality of our workforce.[61]

> Hiring and promotion procedures that exclude talented women and minorities from positions of influence give lie to the idea of a meritocracy.

Indeed, promotion rates are consistently lower for racial and ethnic minorities than white officials at the Department of State, even when controlling for education, experience, and roles.[62] In the Senior Foreign Service, 90% are white and 69% are male.[63] Such statistics suggest the Department's promotion system has failed to progress far beyond the "good old boys club" of years past.[64]

There has been a flood of think-pieces suggesting the Department of State conduct a hiring surge to replace lost capacity.[65] This idea is welcome. But our foreign policy will fall flat if that hiring surge is not aligned with new thinking about diversity and updated skills.

The following recommendations are organized around two core aspects of human resource policy, primarily at the State Department but also touching on the NSC and other departments and agencies: *recruitment and promotions* and *training*.

Photo: State Dept. / CC-BY-SA 2.0

Recruit and Promote the Most Qualified Employees by Valuing Diversity

Foreign policy will always require judgment, creativity, and ethical considerations that require a human touch, but more attention to evidence will empower our leadership to recruit and promote the most qualified employees.[66] Staffing and personnel decisions must be supported by evidence gathered throughout the foreign policy process.

- *Appoint a blue ribbon panel to study and redefine merit.* New skills are required to meet the challenges of the 21st century.[67] The panel should produce recommendations to improve hiring and promotion priorities at the NSC and the Department of State. Research should be conducted to identify links between skills and policy success.

- *Update entrance exam and promotion precepts to emphasize new skills.* The Foreign Service Officer Test and the employee evaluation process used for promotions do not value the skills needed in the modern workforce. State must evaluate talent on quantitative and qualitative analysis, basic statistics, and the scientific method. Emphasis must be placed on rewarding diversity and inclusion, in addition to new standards requiring mentorship.

- *Implement comparable metrics in the evaluation process.* The current evaluation system at the Department of State is too subjective. State should move to a ranking system like that of the military and many Fortune 500 companies that assigns numeric values across a range of indicators.[68] Reviews should also include performance information gathered from colleagues and subordinates. The system should control for bosses that consistently give harsh or generous evaluations through weighted averages. Performance indicators must be tested over time against promotion records to better understand the skills of employees most likely to succeed at a high level.

> Personnel decisions must be supported by evidence gathered throughout the policy process.

- *Objectively match skills with job requirements in the assignments process.* The assignments process for the Foreign Service is delinked from measures of skills. Career enhancing assignments should not be doled to friends and proteges. They should be awarded based on objective evaluation of the qualifications of a diverse candidate pool.

- *Appoint a Chief Inclusion Officer to improve diversity and inclusion.* State must create the position of a Chief Inclusion Officer (CIO), responsible for improving diversity and inclusion. The CIO will report on each bureau's progress towards their diversity goals, hold the bureaus accountable, and collaborate with bureaus on establishing annual areas for improvement. The CIO should conduct exit interviews with departing employees to understand why employees are departing and implement retention programs accordingly.

- *Confront conscious and unconscious bias head-on.* Claims of objectivity must not be used as a smoke screen for prejudice. Hiring and promotion standards at State and the NSC must be attentive to the latest research on bias.[70] For instance, hiring procedures that showcase an applicant's name can reveal one's gender, race, ethnicity, and religious background and subject the process to discrimination. Blinding the process to social identities, as U.S. symphonic orchestras have done, has led to more merit and more diversity in that setting—an approach worth replicating in the U.S. government.

- *Formalize management practices for LGBTQ employees.* We cannot allow repressive foreign governments to dictate our ability to staff our organizations with the best and brightest by denying full diplomatic accreditation of same-sex spouses and family members. The State Department should standardize reciprocity practices against violators of our policy and provide full accreditation solutions for same-sex partners and Eligible Family Members (EFM) of LGBTQ employees for all departments and agencies serving worldwide.

Train a 21st Century Workforce

Few foreign policy officials have training in analytical methods, especially data science. As a result, there is a deep distrust and misunderstanding about such approaches. Foreign policy expertise does not emerge from the ether.[69] It is not endowed at birth. Instead, expertise must be carefully cultivated over time.[70]

- *Upgrade the Foreign Service Institute (FSI).* FSI is underutilized. Tradecraft and substantive issues such as analytical approaches, decision-making techniques, and knowledge-management practices should be emphasized. Highly qualified instructors should equip government officials with the tools they need to inject evidence and accountability into the United State's global engagement. Training should be offered to participants from across the U.S. government to build coherence across policy goals, strategy, and metrics. A small investment in training will pay large dividends for American national security and prosperity.[71]

- *Mandate a training float of staff circulating through professional education programs.* Staffing shortages have forced leadership to choose between leaving positions vacant and sending officers to necessary training. The Department of State should adopt the Department of Defense model of a training float that reserves 15% of staff positions for ongoing training and continuing education.[72]

- *Commit to data literacy for all officials.* Data literacy is a core skill for any foreign policy decision-maker in the 21st century. Training needs to be offered at the Foreign Service Institute and other appropriate training venues, and a concerted effort must be made to attract serious data scientists into government at all levels.

- *Reward time in training in the promotion process.* Time spent in training at the Department of State is not typically considered promotable service, nor is it typically rewarded in the assignments processes. Many employees avoid long-term training for fear it harms their promotion prospects. Just as the U.S. military has done, the department needs to incentivize training to flip this narrative. The Department should evaluate each official's performance during training through class ranks, and reward the highest achievers in the promotion process.

> Foreign policy expertise does not emerge from the ether.
> It must be carefully cultivated over time.

- *Enable vertical and horizontal mobility for Civil Service officers.* Limited opportunities for promotion, training, and mobility harms the State Department's ability to benefit from the deep experience and expertise Civil Service officers have to offer. New pathways for leadership, horizontal mobility, and training should be provided for the Civil Service.[73]

- *Better use Civil Service hiring to recruit high-impact technical skills.* Recruit, sponsor, and compensate professionals with high-impact technical skills identified as pressing needs, such as data scientists, experts in emerging technology, or language speakers.

- *Restrict veteran's preference for certain Civil Service assignments.* The Commission on Military, National, and Public Service studied the effects of veteran's preference on federal hiring practices and concluded that veteran's preferences should be eliminated.[74] Veteran's preferences outweigh virtually all other qualifications and exclude a broad swath of candidates. The veteran's preference requirements distort the hiring process and militarize the Department's culture.

Conclusion

A pragmatic framework for reform

This report aims to foster a new culture of U.S. foreign policy. It proposes a process to bring clarity to complex situations and a more scientific approach to policymaking. The framework presented here challenges American officials to ground their diplomatic decisions in objective and transparent evidence.

Foreign policy will always require a measure of artistry and creativity. We do not believe that existing foreign policy expertise should be dispensed, nor do we think diplomats can be replaced by computers. There is no such thing as perfect policy. Ethical questions, political pressures, and resource tradeoffs invariably complicate the pursuit of national goals. Policymakers work under tremendous time pressure with limited resources. Our government has finite time and money to explore available options and potential outcomes.
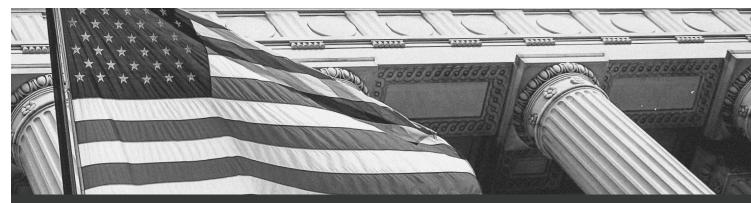
Pragmatic recommendations for reform must therefore meet a modest threshold: Will this empower policymakers to be more effective? Too many ideas seem good on paper but prove impossible to execute in the real world. Such ideas are unprofitable.

> Recommendations for reform must meet a modest threshold: Will this empower policymakers to be more effective?

Rather than advocating for sweeping, costly reform, we recommend focusing on proven, high-impact changes. We focus on shifting incentives, introducing process improvements to buy space for strategic thinking, and targeting chokepoints to improve the quality of policy proposals. We do not believe that rebuilding departments from the ground up is necessary to achieve the changes we propose.

Reformers seeking to transform the institutions of foreign policy do not operate in a historical vacuum. Two key lessons drawn from past reform efforts[75]—at State, in peer agencies, and in other nations' foreign ministries—can position the reforms we propose to succeed from the start. First, reform efforts should tie institutional change to an empowering, substantive vision for the mission of the agency itself. The vision should seek to build, not tear down. Such a vision, like USAID's successful "journey to self-reliance,"[76] is necessary for attaining sufficient stakeholder buy-in to overcome entrenched pockets of resistance, as staff come to see that reform itself is directly tied to the achievement of their own and their institution's goals.

Second, the president's cabinet and senior officials need to make reform a high priority and personally involve themselves in the process. Leaders need to demand change. When a memo arrives to a principal or deputy with flimsy evidence and unspecified assumptions, they should reject it. Successful foreign policy reform demands change from the ground up, at the level of the analyst, the desk officer, and the special assistant; but it also requires the senior officials who make foreign policy decisions to set the right incentive structure for their subordinates, by insisting on evidence and analytical rigor in the paper that reaches them.

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An opportunity for change

Foreign policy is a vital component of every president's sacred duty to serve the American people. There are no easy solutions to the challenges the United States faces, from nuclear proliferation to cybersecurity; the growing influence of China to a revanchist Russia; the destabilizing impact of bad actors like Iran and North Korea; and the need to mend relationships with old allies and newly empowered states around the globe.

Our ability to meet these challenges will depend on the strength and capabilities of our institutions, but those institutions are in urgent need of an upgrade. Simply rebuilding on an old foundation would be a mistake.[77] Across the U.S. government, decision-making relies on processes driven by opinion, "feel", gut instinct, and consensus. This subjective approach results in policy decisions that are watered down, unclear in intent, and often unsuccessful.

Transforming foreign policy means building a new culture that empowers every official to gather and analyze evidence in a more systematic, scientific fashion. It requires policy recommendations founded on the best possible evidence and conveyed with clear causal arguments. It prioritizes the monitoring and evaluation of policies as they are implemented, and, learning from the success and failures of our policies in order to continually improve our effectiveness. And finally, it requires building an inclusive, diverse, and skilled workforce relied on by presidents for the generations to come.

The American people deserve the best possible foreign policy. Meeting America's 21st century challenges demands a process driven by evidence, integrity, and innovation. That is the vision we propose.

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