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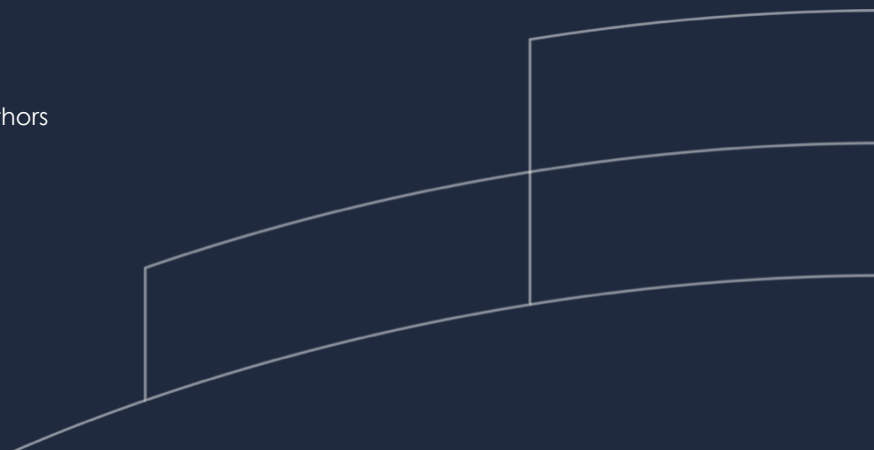
PROJECT SOLARIUM

A TOOL FOR NATIONAL STRATEGY-MAKING

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This year's Heywood Fellowship sets out to examine how governments come to a national view of what really matters over longer time horizons, the ways governments can best confront and tackle future problems, and how the configuration, mechanisms and capabilities of the state can best enable the pursuit and delivery of long-term outcomes for citizens.

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PROJECT SOLARIUM

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In a nutshell

- This paper explores how Project Solarium, a 1953 strategic exercise commissioned by President Eisenhower, **could be adapted as a useful tool** to help governments confront today's generational challenges by exposing conflicting perspectives, reaching deeper thinking and delivering coherence.
- We explore the methodical choices made about the process in 1953, **offering it as a potentially instructive method** for structuring and testing competing strategic approaches to major national questions.
- The method offers a potential antidote to **the current strategic shortcomings** of many countries facing the current outlook: insufficiently deep analysis, over-reliance on continuity, and lack of clear trade-off articulation in long-term decision-making over multiple domains.
- Key utility lies in how **Solarium forces clarity**: by designing and competing detailed, internally coherent strategies, it compels confrontation with trade-offs, risks, and implementation realities.
- By enforcing strategic coherence, Solarium helps surface and exploit **synergies** between domains that siloed approaches often miss. We identify six other key strengths of the method that suggest it is ideally suited to contesting different approaches to the key questions a national strategy would focus on.
- We also identify the **critical design questions** that need to be answered in adapting the approach to the context today — including whether secrecy is feasible and desirable, how to engage more diverse expertise, and whether multiple system leaders could share sponsorship.
- Ultimately, we see the Solarium method, or a modernised version, as a vital core component of a **more deliberate, disciplined and generative national strategy-making process**.

This year's Heywood Fellowship sets out to examine how governments come to a national view of what really matters over longer time horizons, the ways governments can best confront and tackle future problems, and how the configuration, mechanisms and capabilities of the state can best enable the pursuit and delivery of long-term outcomes for citizens. This project starts from the view that this is a generational moment for the UK, where assumptions held previously won't hold for the next phase. It will require a more outward-looking, future-focused, nationally-informed way of setting ambition and direction, and an enhanced strategic practice of agility and alignment to succeed at meeting national goals. The project's core concept is that long-term national strategy is a practice, and our aim is to elucidate, describe and capture that practice.

One of the eight core principles of that practice is that we need to enable proper choices, set within a longer-term frame. Short electoral cycles, adversarial debate, and intense media scrutiny disincentivise candour, and diminish the vital 'strategic capability' of a democratic state to conduct an honest debate about constraints and choices. This can lead to chronic over-promising and, over time, the gap between promise and delivery corrodes public trust.^{1 2 3} We need institutional mechanisms that enable the state to confront and make real trade-offs, and do so openly and accountably. Such a mechanism is also required in any cycle of national strategy: national strategy will have to weigh up alternative paths forward, make choices about them, and decide which to pursue and which to abandon.

President Eisenhower's 'Project Solarium' was a uniquely explicit attempt to do this — a rigorous methodology that forced hard choices and coherent options. Between May–October 1953, Eisenhower's administration reformed strategy-making. His team identified three competing approaches to the Cold War and tasked groups to develop each into a compelling plan. The work culminated in a presidentially-chaired debate in the White House and a major strategic pivot.

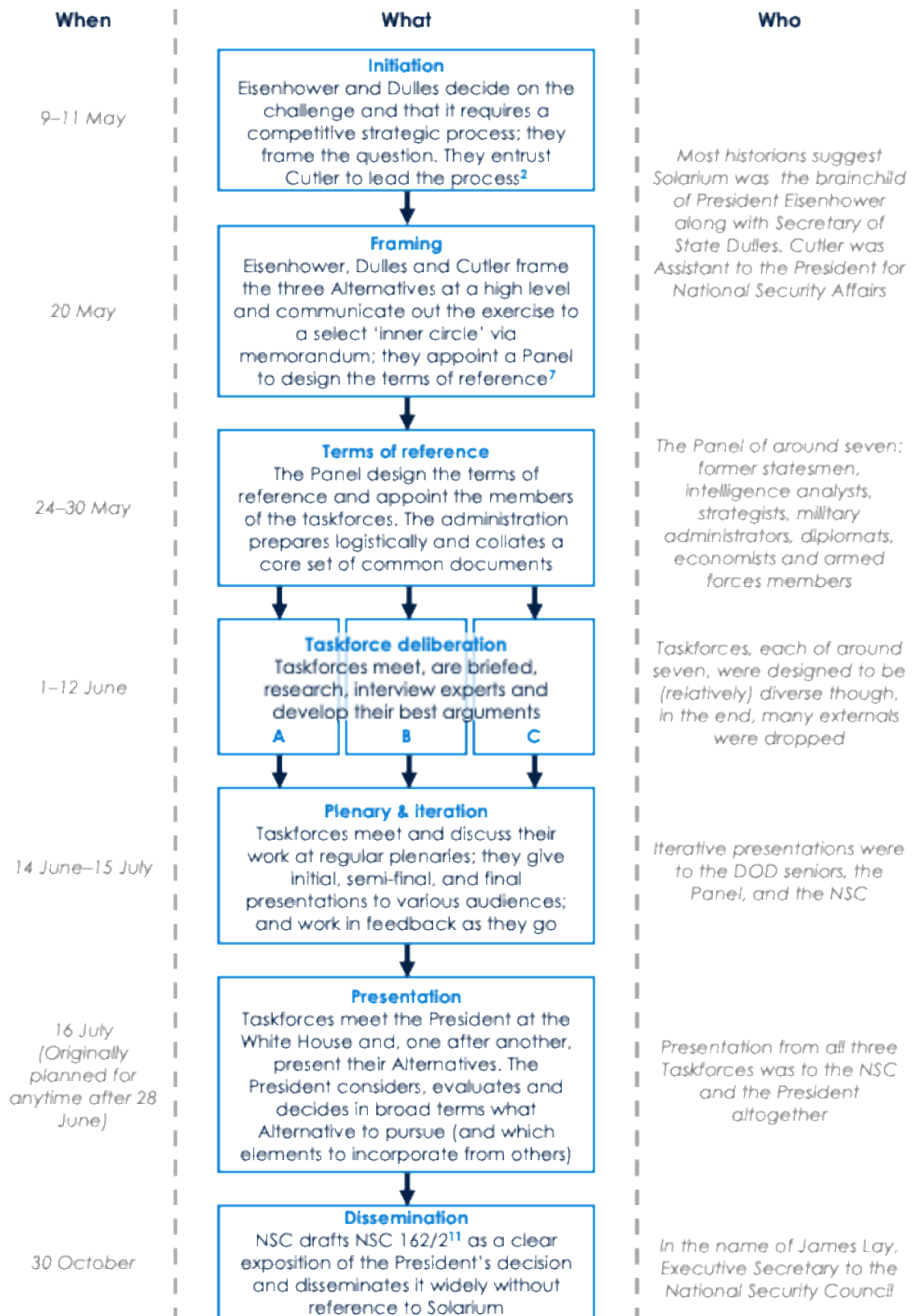
In purpose it: elicited conflicting positions; clarified trade-offs and options; forced the development of a coherent strategy across diplomatic, economic, military and social domains; and built consensus across internal factions. It has been called, "an outstanding example of strategic planning and foresight",⁴ both for shaping US strategic doctrine on the Soviet Union for decades, and for how it did so. Its "original genius" was in confronting deep divisions within the military and intelligence community through a structured process that made disagreement useful, surfaced real trade-offs, and forged a durable strategic direction.^{4 5} Its design transformed conflicting views into national strategy; and arguably helped prevent nuclear war.

In many ways, our modern situation is similar to Eisenhower's. We face similarly big questions, with vested interests arguing for alternative approaches leading to stasis. We must regain the capacity to make bold choices on challenges as profound as Eisenhower's — from a stretched social contract to climate-driven geopolitics and migration. These problems demand coherent strategies across politically-sensitive domains. For example, those countries with the sharpest decline in birth rates face the need to develop strategies encompassing labour market policies, social provision, intergenerational and gender inequalities and immigration; and there is a lack of common language between these domains and a lack of integration in the public narrative. Solarium offers not just inspiration but a proven, practice-led method to confront those questions and generate durable, long-term national strategy.

Several histories have been made of Project Solarium, focusing mainly on the personalities and relationships involved.^{4 6 7 8} Instead, we focus on the process Eisenhower and his administration chose — aiming to set out (a) its **key design strengths**; and (b) the critical **questions we must answer** to apply this much-heralded but little-emulated practice as a core part of national strategy-making in twenty-first century Britain.

The original Project Solarium

The 1953 process summarised



The why: Eisenhower's rationale for Solarium

In 1953, upon entering office, President Eisenhower and his advisers were frustrated by a status quo which assumed: defence spending would need to continue to increase in line with the existing trend; a geographically sprawling and aggressive posture towards the Soviet Union, its allies and proxies; and both nuclear plus conventional weapons development. They used Project Solarium to legitimise the consideration of new, competing approaches and then to consider those approaches deeply. Solarium was designed for three dedicated taskforces to make the most compelling cases for three competing approaches, just as legal teams might persuasively advocate for their case in front of a judge. This allowed Eisenhower to evaluate real, heavyweight options, strong enough to be durable over the time required to deliver the strategy.⁵

Methodological Strength 1: Clarity

A key benefit of Solarium is to derive clarity. The advocacy process is designed to allow teams to be internally coherent and present the clearest possible articulation as to why their alternative is strategically superior. And the point of competing these alternatives is to provide clarity of direction about which one is being selected (and crucially, which ones aren't).

Applicability Question 1: Topic

Could the Solarium methodology be applied to a question in the fields of social or economic policy rather than national security? What, if anything, would need to change methodologically, for example in a system where the executive controlled fewer of the levers?

As well as being based on the evidence, Eisenhower's administration clearly also needed detail. Robert Cutler, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, set out the plan for Solarium in an internal memorandum (May 1953), in which he writes that each taskforce should explore:

all the factors that would go into planning a major campaign: forces needed; costs in manpower, dollars, casualties, world relations; intelligence estimates; timetables; tactics in every other part of the world while actions were being taken in a specific area; relations with the UN and our Allies; disposition of an area after gaining a victory therein; influencing world opinion; Congressional action required; etc.⁹

Solarium was partly driven by the recognition that, although the Cold War was affecting almost every part of government and many parts of civil society (including \$45bn spent on defence in 1952 — 68% of all federal government expenditure),¹⁰ the strategy was principally a military, threat-based one with less regard for other lenses. That is, Eisenhower's advisers worried that a small number of military and Department of Defense seniors were continuing a strategy towards the Cold War which did not internalise or confront trade-offs (on top of concerns about that strategy's effectiveness). They wanted a coherent strategy that went beyond the world of defence to think about its impact on the whole of government and society.

The objectives of Solarium were not limited to helping Eisenhower make a decision though: the process also had considerable *intrinsic* value in fostering consensus or at

least a shared understanding of the decided-upon strategy and its rationale among Eisenhower's divided political and military elite. Andrew Goodpaster, Eisenhower's staff secretary and military liaison officer, reflected on the objectives of Solarium, not just as instrumental to produce a new strategy but to:

deepen the understanding of matters on the part of the principal advisors, some [of] whom had had very limited experience in these fields... so as to develop a kind of understanding, and so as to take a step beyond rather superficial and sometimes sweeping policy proposals.¹¹

As well as developing understanding, the process was aimed at developing a shared position: in the words of Robert Bowie, Director of the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department, Eisenhower, "wanted them to hear him say 'this is the way it's going to be.'"¹² Similarly, George Kennan, a senior diplomat who led Taskforce A, reflected that the most useful result of Solarium was to communicate,

the general outlook of a new political administration and to prod a lot of people in the Washington bureaucracy, military and civilian, into taking a new look at the things we had been trying to do, and to see whether they could not improve on our previous performance.¹²

Developing a common understanding was not just important in reaching a decision but was critical in executing the strategy too. Goodpaster noted how it enabled Eisenhower to remove his hand from the tiller: Solarium was his "means of forging a single controlling idea that would dominate his administration. Having done that, it was no longer necessary for him then to try to influence every decision that was taken."¹³

Methodological Strength 2: Contesting

Solarium gives leaders a way of navigating through strategic questions subject to a range of diverging and competing perspectives in an 'adaptive' way, i.e. requires new norms, systems and ways of thinking.¹⁴ In contesting different strategies together, and co-opting the key proponents of each argument to compete them, it:

- A. Allows decision-makers to weigh up and decide which route to take
- B. Educates the senior stakeholders involved, deepening understanding, building a shared strategic vocabulary and improving future policymaking capacity
- C. Creates settlement amongst the policymaking elite: co-opting key stakeholders into that decision, ensuring they understand it and why it has been taken.

The how: the setup

The Solarium came from the top: the President and his immediate circle initiated the project themselves, imbuing both the topic and the process with authority. Initiation was also decisive. Cutler's May 1953 memorandum impressed (emphasis added) "upon the President's direction and as a matter of **urgency**, the alternatives... **will** be explored and presented to the National Security Council."⁹ Having the formal authority and informal influence of the most powerful member of the executive enabled participants (many of whom, by design, entered the process

unconvinced) to work swiftly, thoughtfully and rigorously — and then deliver on its outputs. And while Eisenhower's visible backing was clearly required, it did not demand significant amounts of Eisenhower's time: he was involved for a day or so each at initiation and close, with occasional check-ins in the intervening period.

Applicability Question 2: Authority

Eisenhower's Solarium was requested by, for the express benefit of, and given full authority by the President helping overcome organisational siloes, entrenched opinions, bureaucratic systems that demand path dependency, and data sharing. A modern Solarium might need to run several efforts in parallel — on foreign policy, the social contract, migration, the pace of net zero transition and more. How can the institutional arrangements for national strategy-making draw institutional authority from the right places — for example Parliament, Cabinet or the Prime Minister — and with the right balance of democratic, executive and practical oversight?

Planning began with a sense of the question and the competing strategic approaches. Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, observed a fragmented set of perspectives across agencies, rival power bases and unresolved tensions and deliberately framed both the question and the approaches to address that.^{4*} They outlined three strategic "Alternatives" to the Soviet threat:

- A. 'Containment'** — continuing Truman's post-war strategy of limiting Soviet expansion via political, economic and diplomatic means without direct confrontation.
- B. 'A line in the sand'** — drawing clear boundaries where the US would forcefully (and militarily) respond to Soviet advances, particularly in Europe.
- C. 'Rollback'** — Actively and aggressively pushing back on Soviet influence (rather than just stopping its spread), for instance liberating Eastern European countries under Soviet control.⁴

Dulles and Cutler assembled a panel of experts — different from the taskforce members — to draft detailed terms of reference for each alternative. This was not treated as a bureaucratic task but one essential to the project's success. Cutler wrote to the President with a sense of both concreteness (who should do what and when) and urgency:

A Panel of about 5 qualified persons to draft precise and detailed terms of reference for each Alternative... The Panel should meet for a week or so before May 31st, utilizing the Council[†] offices and Staff. T.M. Koons, of the NSC Special Staff, is available to serve as Executive Secretary for this Panel and for the Teams set up.⁹

* In 'Solarium at 70', Hudson notes that Graham Allison's three models for strategy development — rational actors, organisational imperatives and backroom dealing (see [Annex D](#) for more details) — were all incorporated by Project Solarium.⁴

[†] The National Security Council (NSC) was the President's principal forum for coordinating national security and foreign policy across departments and agencies.

Methodological Strength 3: Precision

The process — setting up at least three distinct alternative strategic approaches reflecting viewpoints genuinely held within government or expert debate, framed precisely by terms of reference developed by subject matter experts to be internally coherent and meaningfully distinct from one — another inherently drives taskforces to:

- make the strongest possible case and plan for their approach
- bring evidence, produce analysis, apply insight
- identify options within approaches; evaluate options against appropriate criteria; identify and make judgements about inherent trade-offs across diplomatic, economic, military, social and environmental realms
- identify and evaluate risks and possibilities
- make recommendations
- be as granular as possible in describing the path to success: who needs to do what, when, how, why?

In so doing, it helps decision-makers make truly informed decisions based on detailed thinking with strong internal coherence.

Next came the task of appointing the taskforces, each assigned one (and only one) of the three strategic alternatives. Eisenhower and Cutler originally envisaged each being three to five “qualified persons”; in the end it was seven.^{15 16} Each had a (relatively) varied membership with different armed forces, intelligence agencies, and diplomatic experts represented (and the originally requested membership contained more external experts and academics — see [Annex C](#)). Membership was curated to the alternative (e.g. Taskforce A required members who could understand how the rest of the world might react, whereas Taskforce B required members who would understand how the strategy might be perceived internally in the Soviet Union).¹⁵

- A. Taskforce A** ('Containment') was led by George Kennan — a diplomat who had been arguing for such a strategy during the previous administration.⁴
- B. Taskforce B** ('A line in the sand') was led Major General James McCormack of the US Air Force and nuclear weapons expert.¹⁵
- C. Taskforce C** ('Rollback') was led by Vice Admiral Richard Connolly of the US Navy.⁴

The taskforces were each given an identical set of core documents and briefings to start from but each were instructed to work independently from each other, keeping the alternatives structurally isolated and preserving their analytic integrity until the first run-through of their arguments to the National Security Council.¹⁷ Given its subject matter and the documents and data each team were handling, the whole exercise was highly secret, obscured even from others in the military establishment under the ruse of a conference at the National War College. The project was only declassified in 1985.

Methodological Strength 4: Taskforces

The power of the Solarium model lies in how it empowers its taskforces. Each is charged with developing a distinct, substantive approach, grounded in a bold strategic 'big bet', not compromise or hedging. Each is led by serious, credible advocates of that approach, given both the authority and urgency to build the strongest possible case in opposition to the others. This structure pushes each team towards internal coherence and rigour and helps prevent the final strategy from becoming a diluted mix of incompatible ideas, increasing the likelihood of long-term success.

Applicability Question 3: Openness

The original Solarium was top secret. Neither the public nor Congress knew of its existence until decades later. The only outward sign of its impact was NSC 162/2: a top-secret national security directive that outlined the agreed strategy, but said nothing about how it had been developed. Secrecy served a purpose: it protected the process from political pressure, lobbying, and distraction, and ensured officials could speak freely on matters of national security. But secrecy was also a necessity and a *modus operandi* of operating in the security space.

Yet a modern Solarium — especially one addressing domestic, social or environmental questions — might need to be structured differently. Transparency brings many benefits, including accountability and legitimacy.

How might we design a modern Solarium that is open enough to benefit from the broadest insight, be rooted in diverse experiences and build legitimacy — but protected enough to think clearly and choose wisely?

Significant thought was given (and expressed directly in memos from Cutler and directly from the President) on the organisation of the effort: ensuring the resources, typists, budgetary specialists, information and staff they might need. Cutler wrote:

A separate Task Force of 3-5 qualified persons for each Alternative to be explored and presented. The preparation... might be done at the War College, utilizing also its top personnel and facilities. The National Security Council would furnish whatever authority was necessary for urgent access to any and all material... Each Task Force would work up its Alternative in the same spirit that an advocate works up a case for court presentation.⁹

Applicability Question 4: Resources

The original Solarium taskforces operated in a context that enabled rapid and authoritative access to information: they drew on a tightly controlled national security apparatus, were given full presidential backing, and could demand the data, expertise and resources they needed from across the federal government. Today's governments have far greater volumes of data, but drawing meaningful insight across multiple domains within tight timeframes remains difficult. The machinery of domestic government is also less hierarchical and more contested: power is dispersed, interests are plural, and many of the most important levers for change sit outside government altogether. To achieve comparable strategic coherence and pace, how might we need to reconfigure taskforce membership? What institutional design would give them both legitimacy and traction? And what new skills and capabilities would they need to succeed in navigating today's more complex, decentralised landscape?

Eisenhower set an ambitious timetable — just over six weeks from commissioning the taskforces in late May to receiving their conclusions in mid-July. This brisk pace

ensured the project had the required, disciplined urgency, and it helped avoid the loss of focus and diminishing returns that often accompany protracted processes.

Methodological Strength 5: Pace

One of Solarium's distinctive strengths was its speed: just over six weeks from inception to presidential decision. This concentrated timeframe created urgency, sustained focus, and protected against bureaucratic drift. In contrast to sprawling strategy reviews, the tight cycle helped ensure clarity, coherence and momentum — without sacrificing depth.

The so what: decision-making and its impact

Cutler had instructed teams to present one after the other (like judges might hear presentations of cases in a court), and for the information to be as accessible as possible, “In presenting an Alternative to the National Security Council, visual presentation (maps, charts, oral discourse) would be maximized. If possible, the Alternatives would be presented on the same or successive days in the White House.”⁹

The taskforces did present on a single day and, according to William DeMarco of the Hoover Institution,

The task forces presented their summations as the president listened intently. Then Eisenhower stood up, congratulated the participants on their work, and announced his impressions. He quickly ruled out any policy that could not win the support of America's allies, that cost too much, or that accepted an increased risk of general war. He paid close attention to Task Force A's advice on German unification and re-armament, to Task Force B's emphasis on atomic brinkmanship, and to Task Force C's argument that the international environment made it imperative that the United States move rapidly and aggressively to fracture the growing communist empire. But the basis of his strategy would remain containment.¹⁸

Methodological Strength 6: Presentation together

In presenting the multiple alternatives one after the other, all on the same day, the arguments, trade-offs and assumptions can be teased out between the alternatives.

Applicability Question 5: Parallel running

A strength of the original Solarium was its focus on a single all-consuming strategic question. The process of doing national strategy may turn up a handful of big challenges or question to which the Solarium methodology could be applied, but is it possible (both theoretically and practically) to run multiple versions in parallel?

Following the symposium, the taskforce reports were given to the NSC Planning Board (overseen by Robert Cutler), who interpreted Eisenhower's views on the Solarium outputs to produce directive NSC 162/2¹⁹ in October 1953. Just five months after the conception and initiation of Project Solarium, this document set out the administration's new strategy.

NSC 162/2 set out:

- the “Basic Problems of National Security Policy” (in modern parlance, the central trade-off): “To meet the Soviet threat to U.S. Security. In doing so, to avoid seriously weakening the U.S. economy or undermining our fundamental values and institutions”
- an assessment of “the Soviet Threat to the United States”
- the conditions, including economic, for effective defence
- an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the international coalition
- an economic principle that “the United States must maintain a sound economy based on free private enterprise as the basis both for high defense productivity and for the maintenance of its living standards and free institutions”
- a military-economic principle of containment, that “the United States must develop and maintain, at the lowest feasible cost, requisite military and non-military strength to deter and, if necessary, to counter Soviet military aggression against the United States.”

John Lewis Gaddis, the historian, argued that Solarium’s consequences were twofold: the key, instrumental document in the creation of the ‘New Look’ Cold War Strategy (aiming to balance the US’ military commitments with its economic capabilities);²⁰ and a process which led to systemic acceptance and adoption of containment. Gaddis writes with characteristic understatement:

[Eisenhower’s] strategy was coherent, bearing signs of his influence at almost every level, careful, for the most part, in its relation of ends to means, and on the whole, more consistent than detrimental to the national interest.²¹

Methodological Strength 7: Culmination

Solarium is not a talking shop; it culminates in a clear and distributed articulation of the challenges we are choosing to face, the objectives we set ourselves and crucially the big bets that we are taking to get there. It does so in a coherent way that has already distinguished between alternatives, synthesising the best parts of different approaches where possible, making clear and justified decisions on trade-offs. This communicates a shared direction and enthuses allies to act, recruits to become allies and adversaries to reduce their opposition.

Applicability Question 6: Integration with machinery of government

Solarium’s strength lay in its direct link to presidential authority and the machinery of decision-making — its conclusions were rapidly integrated into National Security Council directives and helped shape US strategy. That tight coupling was easier to achieve in the national security domain, where institutional hierarchies are clearer and policy levers more centralised. How might a modern Solarium be embedded within domestic policy systems — where power is more diffuse and delivery more devolved — in order to ensure its outputs are not merely advisory, but genuinely shape decisions and action?

The who: choosing the right individuals

The Solarium process hinged on selecting the right people — Eisenhower and Cutler’s early focus on personnel is testament to this. As noted already, the direction from the system leader is critical; but so was the appointing of a deputy to design and lead the process — Eisenhower and Dulles appointed Cutler and invested their

own political capital in shaping the strategic approaches at the outset. Eisenhower also asked the head of the National War College, Lieutenant General Craig, to organise and administer the Solarium. This involved everything from providing accommodation to access to typist and finance staff and connections into the various parts of the defence establishment.

The taskforces were chaired by people with the leadership and credibility required to cut through the Washington bureaucracy and, crucially, with the personal belief in their allotted alternative — for instance, George Kennan had been arguing for something like Alternative A ('Containment') throughout Truman's presidency. Diversity of skills, knowledge and background was clearly important within the taskforces — hence Eisenhower's desire to include many external stakeholders and many experts beyond the world of the Departments of State, Defence and the NSC. But involving key thinkers within this elite was important too. As noted earlier, a core aim of Solarium was to educate and co-opt sceptical members of this group. A particular strength of the process was that it brought the inevitable 'backroom dealing' — an inherent feature of strategic decision-making²² — into the open, allowing it to happen in front of the President and the strategy-making elite in a structured and informed way (see [Annex D](#) for more on this).

Methodological Strength 8: Candour through role assignment

Solarium achieves candour by assigning people to advocate for a particular strategy. The adversarial format meant their role was to advocate fully and freely. This structure allows dissenting views to be aired without professional reprisal or political cost; without being seen as disloyal or obstructionist.

Given a key objective of Solarium is 'clarity' (in the sense of depth, evidence and precision), taskforces needed to be both composed of experts and have access to other experts across the system. Eisenhower, Dulles and Cutler were therefore at pains to give them this explicit authority in memos to key gatekeepers (e.g. the Secretary of State):

This is to request that you cooperate with General Craig by providing to him on temporary duty such officers and other personnel as he may request and any services he may require. Travel, per diem and other expenses connected with his requests should be borne by your Department.

I wish to emphasize the urgency involved and to request that the needs be met as expeditiously as possible and by the provision of highest quality personnel and services.¹⁵

Applicability Question 7: Diversity v Agility

The 1953 taskforces were expert, small, senior and diverse (in expertise though not necessarily in demographics). Some of these qualities remain non-negotiable: members must have the requisite knowledge, skills, and networks to develop the strongest case for their alternative, and they must be senior enough to overcome bureaucratic resistance.

But the tension between small size and broader diversity is harder to resolve. For Eisenhower, diversity meant institutional breadth: ensuring representation from the Army, Navy, Air Force, CIA, and diplomatic corps. Attempts to include outside experts, such as economists, were unsuccessful.

We have written elsewhere about the importance of diverse engagement in the practice and process of national strategy-making. Yet the Solarium method depended upon taskforces being small and agile enough to act quickly and cohesively. What role should corporatism play? And could forms of public engagement help widen the range of perspectives without compromising taskforce coherence?

The Solarium as a modern tool of national strategy

The Solarium is much lauded as a particularly clear and well thought-through example of national strategising, but curiously, it has only been emulated a few times — applied to the contemporary challenge of cybersecurity in 2019 (see [Annex E](#) for a description) and used to very limited degrees by the foreign and defence ministries of the UK government.²³

We have many of the same challenges Eisenhower did in the 1950s. And yet we have not innovated the practice of strategy-making to the same degree. The need for integration and choice-making across domains is well understood, but new tools and methods for doing this are thin on the ground. Existing methods of developing strategy look at too few strategic approaches and fail to consider them deeply enough. This leaves the state stuck in the status quo: unprepared for significant changes in direction and unable to offer proper, long-term choices to the Prime Minister and their team. An emphasis on pace and a desire to depart from the route of predecessors means that incremental policy decisions are often taken but in contradictory and incoherent directions. This leaves the state without a clear, overarching direction that helps align action and response.

This is particularly acute given our current fiscal environment. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) note, “Fiscal constraints will make all manner of policy problems more difficult to tackle and will make all manner of trade-offs more acute. But these trade-offs cannot be simply wished away.”²⁴ This is exactly why we need Solarium: a structured way to confront those trade-offs, set out competing options, and build the confidence to make bigger, bolder choices that can transform outcomes without large new spending.

And we have challenges just as appropriate, just as salient and just as whole-state consuming that we could apply Solarium to: about how to reshape public health from cradle-to-grave so that citizens are healthier, fitter and live longer; or how to deal with climate change-driven mass migration in a future of global water scarcity.

Its applicability to modern times (and to the UK) is therefore key. We will use this paper to discuss the questions of applicability listed above (and collated in Annex A) with a range of experts. The conclusions from these discussions will help inform a model for a modern, British, cross-domain Solarium as a core part of a cycle of national strategy. We recommend that such a method be trialled first on a couple of key policy challenges so that we can confirm answers to the questions of applicability noted throughout this paper and hone a modern technique.

Applicability Question 8: Pilots

Before rolling out as a core method of national strategy, we plan to pilot a contemporary Solarium on one or two strategic policy challenges. What topics would help test our answers to these questions of applicability and would usefully benefit from the sort of thinking and strategising a Solarium approach could bring?

Applicability Question 9: Learning from you

Have you either directly experimented with a version of Solarium or read about other attempts? Please [contact us](#).

Annex A — Collated questions of applicability

1. Topic

Could the Solarium methodology be applied to a question in the fields of social or economic policy rather than national security? What, if anything, would need to change methodologically, for example in a system where the executive controlled fewer of the levers?

2. Authority

Eisenhower's Solarium was requested by, for the express benefit of, and given full authority by the President helping overcome organisational siloes, entrenched opinions, bureaucratic systems that demand path dependency, and data sharing. A modern Solarium might need to run several efforts in parallel — on foreign policy, the social contract, migration, the pace of net zero transition and more. How can the institutional arrangements for national strategy-making draw institutional authority from the right places — for example Parliament, Cabinet or the Prime Minister — and with the right balance of democratic, executive and practical oversight?

3. Openness

The original Solarium was top secret. Neither the public nor Congress knew of its existence until decades later. The only outward sign of its impact was NSC 162/2: a top-secret national security directive that outlined the agreed strategy, but said nothing about how it had been developed. Secrecy served a purpose: it protected the process from political pressure, lobbying, and distraction, and ensured officials could speak freely on matters of national security. But secrecy was also a necessity and a modus operandi of operating in the security space. Yet a modern Solarium — especially one addressing domestic, social or environmental questions — might need to be structured differently. Transparency brings many benefits, including accountability and legitimacy. How might we design a modern Solarium that is open enough to benefit from the broadest insight, be rooted in diverse experiences and build legitimacy — but protected enough to think clearly and choose wisely?

4. Resources

The original Solarium taskforces operated in a context that enabled rapid and authoritative access to information: they drew on a tightly controlled national security apparatus, were given full presidential backing, and could demand the data, expertise and resources they needed from across the federal government. Today's governments have far greater volumes of data, but drawing meaningful insight across multiple domains within tight timeframes remains difficult. The machinery of domestic government is also less hierarchical and more contested: power is dispersed, interests are plural, and many of the most important levers for change sit outside government altogether. To achieve comparable strategic coherence and pace, how might we need to reconfigure taskforce membership? What institutional design would give them both legitimacy and traction? And what new skills and capabilities would they need to succeed in navigating today's more complex, decentralised landscape?

5. Parallel running

A strength of the original Solarium was its focus on a single all-consuming strategic question. The process of doing national strategy may turn up a handful of big challenges or question to which the Solarium methodology could be

applied, but is it possible (both theoretically and practically) to run multiple versions in parallel?

6. Integration with machinery of government

Solarium's strength lay in its direct link to presidential authority and the machinery of decision-making — its conclusions were rapidly integrated into National Security Council directives and helped shape US strategy. That tight coupling was easier to achieve in the national security domain, where institutional hierarchies are clearer and policy levers more centralised. How might a modern Solarium be embedded within domestic policy systems — where power is more diffuse and delivery more devolved — in order to ensure its outputs are not merely advisory, but genuinely shape decisions and action?

7. Diversity v agility

The 1953 taskforces were expert, small, senior and diverse (in expertise though not necessarily in demographics). Some of these qualities remain non-negotiable: members must have the requisite knowledge, skills, and networks to develop the strongest case for their alternative, and they must be senior enough to overcome bureaucratic resistance.

But the tension between small size and broader diversity is harder to resolve. For Eisenhower, diversity meant institutional breadth: ensuring representation from the Army, Navy, Air Force, CIA, and diplomatic corps. Attempts to include outside experts, such as economists, were unsuccessful.

We have written elsewhere about the importance of diverse engagement in the practice and process of national strategy-making. Yet the Solarium method depended upon taskforces being small and agile enough to act quickly and cohesively. What role should corporatism play? And could forms of public engagement help widen the range of perspectives without compromising taskforce coherence?

8. Pilots

Before rolling out as a core method of national strategy, we plan to pilot a contemporary Solarium on one or two strategic policy challenges. What topics would help test our answers to these questions of applicability and would usefully benefit from the sort of thinking and strategising a Solarium approach could bring?

9. Learning from you

Have you either directly experimented with a version of Solarium or read about other attempts? Please [contact us](#).

Annex B — Memorandum for the Record by the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Robert Cutler⁹

Washington, 9 May 1953.

Subject: Solarium Project

1. Upon the President's direction and as a matter of urgency, the alternatives outlined in the attachment will be explored and presented to the National Security Council. The undertaking may be referred to as "Solarium".
2. A working committee of The National Security Council, consisting of W. B. Smith, A. W. Dulles, and R. Cutler, will arrange the detailed plans for:

- a. A Panel of about 5 qualified persons to draft precise and detailed terms of reference for each Alternative. Attached is a list of proposed names for such Panel. The Panel should meet for a week or so before May 31st, utilizing the Council offices and Staff. T. M. Koons, of the NSC Special Staff, is available to serve as Executive Secretary for this Panel and for the Teams set up under b.

The terms of reference should include directions to seek out all the factors that would go into planning a major campaign: forces needed; costs in manpower, dollars, casualties, world relations; intelligence estimates; time-tables; tactics in every other part of the world while actions were being taken in a specific area; relations with the UN and our Allies; disposition of an area after gaining a victory therein; influencing world opinion; Congressional action required; etc.

- b. A separate Task Force of 3–5 qualified persons for each Alternative to be explored and presented. The preparation should be as for a War College project, and might be done at the War College, utilizing also its top personnel and facilities. The National Security Council would furnish whatever authority was necessary for urgent access to any and all material.

Each Task Force would work up its Alternative in the same spirit that an advocate works up a case for court presentation. In presenting an Alternative to the National Security Council, visual presentation (maps, charts, oral discourse) would be maximized. If possible, the Alternatives would be presented on the same or successive days in the White House. Target date for presentation should be as near July 1 as possible.

3. At the NSC Meeting on May 13, 1953, the President should describe "Solarium" in general terms, and enjoin strict confidence. The Council should realize what is under way for their future guidance.

Robert Cutler

Annex C — Memorandum by the President to the Secretary of State, 20 May 1953¹⁵

Washington, May 20, 1953.

Subject: Project Solarium

I have asked the Commandant of The National War College, Lieutenant General H. A. Craig, USAF, to organize and administer the above-mentioned highly classified and urgent project for the National Security Council. The carrying out of this project will require the temporary services of some few specially selected officers, possibly from your Department or Agency, and the furnishing of some administrative or secretarial personnel and services. The project, which will formally commence about June 10, 1953, should be completed in about six weeks.

This is to request that you cooperate with General Craig by providing to him on temporary duty such officers and other personnel as he may request and any services he may require. Travel, per diem and other expenses connected with his requests should be borne by your Department.

I wish to emphasize the urgency involved and to request that the needs be met as expeditiously as possible and by the provision of highest quality personnel and services.

The Acting Secretary of State, General Smith; the Director for Central Intelligence, Mr. Dulles; and the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Mr. Cutler; constitute a working committee of the National Security Council in connection with Project Solarium. At my request they are coordinating arrangements with General Craig.

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Part I — Personnel Recommendations for Task Forces

Task Force “A”:

The exploration and presentation of Alternative “A” requires intimate understanding of the past policies and actions of the United States, the rest of the free world, and of the U.S.S.R., and broad gauge political, military, economic and psychological planning for the future.

The persons recommended to make up this Task Force are:

Chairman:

- George F. Kennan (Retired Foreign Service, Political Planner and Russian Expert)

Members:

- Colonel G. A. Lincoln (USA, Military Planner and Economist)
- Mr. Paul Nitze (State Department, Political Planner and Economist)

- Rear Admiral H. P. Smith (USN, Military Planner and Expert on Foreign Military Matters)
- Mr. C. Tyler Wood (MSA, Economist and Expert on Congressional Relations)

Alternates:

- Lieutenant General C. P. Cabell (USAF, Military Planner and Intelligence Expert)
- Mr. Dean Rusk (Rockefeller Foundation, Political and Military Planner and Economist)
- Mr. Edward T. Dickinson (NSRB, Economist)
- Mr. Joseph E. Johnson (Carnegie Endowment, Historian, Political Planner)

Task Force “B”:

The exploration of Alternative “B” requires an intimate knowledge of Communist reactions and methods; sound political and military judgement both regarding the Communist orbit and the free world; knowledge of United States military capabilities to wage general war, including the use of unconventional weapons; ability to evaluate the economic capability of the United States and the rest of the free world to support the alternative.

The personnel recommendations are:

Chairman:

- Philip E. Mosely (Director of Russian Institute, Columbia University)

Members:

- Major General John R. Deane (USA, Rtd., Military Planner and Russian Expert)
- Mr. Douglas MacArthur, Jr. [II] (State Dept., Counselor)
- Major General James McCormack (USAF, Military and Political Planner, Atomic and New Weapons Expert)
- Mr. John Lindeman (MSA, Student, NWC, Economist with experience in foreign economics)

Alternates:

- Mr. James K. Penfield (Foreign Service, Political Planner with experience in Far East, Soviet Orbit, U.K.)
- Major General John B. Montgomery (USAF, Strategic Air Operations)
- Dr. S. Douglas Cornell (Recently of R&DB, New Weapons Expert)

Task Force “C”:

The Task Force working on Alternative “C” should include imaginative military, political, psychological and subversive planning experience; profound experience on Soviet-Communist actions and reactions; knowledge of the military situation in Korea and Soviet Satellite areas; and ability to evaluate the economic resources required to follow such a course.

Recommended personnel are:

Chairman:

- Mr. J. J. McCloy

Members:

- Lieutenant General L. L. Lemnitzer (USA, Military Planner, Foreign Affairs Expert, recently returned from Korea)
- Mr. G. Frederick Reinhardt (Foreign Service, Russian Expert, Political Advisor, SHAPE)
- Mr. Frank G. Wisner (CIA)
- Lieutenant Colonel A. J. Goodpaster, Jr. (USA, Brilliant Military Planner, extensive background in international affairs)

Alternates:

- Admiral R. L. Conolly (USN)
- Mr. Edmund A. Gullion (Foreign Service, Policy Planning Staff, recently in Indo China)
- Mr. Burke Knapp (International Bank, Economist NATO and South American experience)
- Mr. Robert P. Joyce (Foreign Service, Policy Planning Staff, psychological and covert operations, Balkan experience)
- Mr. Edward T. Dickinson (NSRB, Economist)

Part II – Organization

4. The three separate Task Forces will be organized to work at The National War College. The Commandant of The National War College will provide the necessary administrative facilities and support. A small technical staff composed of Colonel C. H. Bonesteel as Executive, Colonel V. J. Esposito as Logistical Advisor and Colonel R. Hackett as Costing Advisor will assist the Commandant and the Task Forces. Mr. T. M. Koons, of the National Security Council Staff, aided by Chief Warrant Officer Leland W. Thompson, USA, will act as Executive Secretary. It may be found desirable to co-opt as a temporary member of the staff a senior officer of the Bureau of the Budget to provide budgetary advice to the Task Forces from time to time. Any of the faculty or students of The National War College will be available to assist if required.
5. Arrangements must be made to provide experts from the Executive Departments and Agencies for consultation with the Task Forces as required. These witnesses need not be informed of the project under way. They can be told they are being called upon in connection with a War College project.
6. Physical accommodations and most of the necessary equipment and supplies will be furnished by The National War College. Six expert, security cleared shorthand-typists will be required from other sources.
7. Visual aids for presentation purposes should be made up somewhere other than at the War College so as not to compromise the Cover Plan applying to the work of the Task Forces.

8. Authority will be needed to order required personnel to temporary duty at the War College and to obtain needed services. The source of funds required for travel expenses, per diem, etc., needs to be fixed.

Part III – Method of Work and Timetable

9. During the week ending 23 May, the Task Forces will be formed, initial briefing performed, intelligence and background data accumulated. A tentative briefing schedule might be as follows:
 - Thursday A.M., 21 May — N.S.C. Staff
 - Thursday P.M., 21 May — J.C.S.
 - Friday A.M., 22 May — Research and Development Board
 - Friday A.M., 22 May — Munitions Board
 - Friday P.M., 22 May — C.I.A.
 - Friday P.M., 22 May — State Department(These might need to be scheduled later if many members of the Task Forces are required to travel some distance to get to Washington)
10. The week 24–30 May will be devoted to general exploration of each Alternative in the form it is expressed in the original Memo for the Record, dated 9 May. Task Forces will be available for consultation with the Directing Panel while the Panel is finalizing the terms of reference.
11. The two weeks 31 May–13 June will be devoted to the formulation of initial plans and presentations for each Alternative. These initial presentations will be made before the Directing Officers and the Panel on the week-end 13–14 June. The Panel will then make such criticisms and suggestions to the Task Forces as are required to assure that the finished presentations will be of the type and substance desired.
12. The ten days 15–24 June will be used to complete the plans and presentations in accordance with the critique of 13–14 June. Semi-final presentations will be given to the Panel on 24–25 June.
13. The Task Forces will be prepared to give their finished presentations to the President and the NSC any time after 28 June.
14. During the working periods there will be frequent plenary sessions at which all Task Forces can exchange ideas and be informed of the others work.
15. The Commandant of The National War College and the Technical Staff for the project will assist the Task Forces as required.

Part IV – Security Arrangements

16. The highest security will be maintained concerning the existence and object of the project.
17. As a Cover Plan it is suggested that the group working at the War College be explained by calling them a Board of Review on National Security Education, with the purported task of examining the present system.
18. Special identity passes will be issued to all persons working on the project and the area in which they work will be under special security guard.

Part V – Actions Required

19. Early approval as to the composition of the Task Forces.
20. Authority for the Commandant of The National War College to request orders be issued to bring government employed personnel of the Task Forces to temporary but full time duty at the War College. One means of handling this is to have the President sign a memorandum to certain Chiefs of Executive Departments and Agencies requesting them to provide personnel and services as requested. A draft of such a letter is attached.
21. Provision of competent shorthand-typists. This would be effected by the Commandant of The National War College through use of the Presidential memorandum suggested in 2 above.
22. Arrangements for briefings of the Task Forces. Depending on when the Task Forces can be assembled, these can be arranged by the Commandant of the National War College under the authority of the Presidential memorandum.
23. Arrangements for obtaining intelligence and background material and, from time to time the services of expert advisors from Executive Departments. This can be handled as in 4 above.
24. Security clearance, administrative arrangements, compensation, etc., of persons not presently employed by the government who are asked to serve on the Task Forces. Recommend these be effected by the State Department.

Annex D — Allison's three models for long-term national strategy development

Historian and scholar of government Graham Allison argues that long-term national strategies are developed through the *combination* of three models: rational actors navigating large organisations and power dynamics.²²

Walter Hudson, professor at the National Defense University, argues that Solarium is a rare strategy-making process which internalises all three of Allison's models:⁴

- **Model one: 'rational actors'** take data and evidence as inputs to maximise desired outcomes relative to constraints. Different strategies can be quantitatively assessed and / or predicted.
- **Model two: 'organizational imperatives'**. "Large organizations functioning according to regular patterns of behaviour" ²² are often the key institutions in / with which long term national strategy is developed. These organisations have their own context, structure, norms and standard operating procedures, which may well be imperfect but (a) exist for a reason, (b) have to be reckoned with as part of strategy development and (c) may need to evolve as part of that strategy.
- **Model three: 'backroom dealmaking'**. The "perceptions, motivations, positions, power and makeovers of the players" ²² are key to how events unfold as a strategy is developed and delivered. It is naïve to suggest that strategies should 'not be political' or should be developed by those without equities; instead, successful strategy development should take this into account and the best strategists are those who are able to 'deal in the backroom' in such a way as to deliver a strategy that best meets the wider objectives.

Annex E — the Cyberspace Solarium Commission, a case study

The 2019 National Defense Authorization Act²⁵ launched a bipartisan 'Cyberspace Solarium Commission', a conscious attempt to replicate the methodology of Solarium and apply it to the contemporary challenges of cybersecurity.

The Commission identified three strategic alternatives:

- deterrence
- persistent engagement
- establishing international norms

The Cyberspace Solarium Commission is generally considered to have done some good work in illuminating alternative strategic approaches and reinvigorating some of the methods of Solarium. However, James Andrew Lewis of the Center for Strategic and International Studies²⁶ argued that the original Solarium was more successful in part because it differed in that its client was:

- a single person rather than many
- specifically, the President rather than Congress (that is, the most powerful person in the Executive) and
- highly knowledgeable — Eisenhower had deep personal expertise in the matters Solarium debated, allowing him to perform the interpretation, challenge, mediation, decision and integration functions entrusted to him (and his inner team) in the original Solarium.

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