Leadership in Unconventional Crises
A Transatlantic and Cross-Sector Assessment
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Introduction

The concept of "unconventional crises," or the proposition that they constitute a recent phenomenon, are by no means self-evident. Both tend to elicit pointed questions from those who have not had direct experience of such events, so have not tested first-hand the analytical, let alone strategic or operational legitimacy and value-added of the concept; though this value-added occasionally has been challenged by some who have in fact confronted complex or catastrophic disruptions.

When this push-back doesn't simply reflect a cultural inability to acknowledge emerging challenges and their daunting implications, it is grounded in an incontrovertible point, which in fact is helpful in order to determine the exact meaning that the word "unconventional" must assume if it is to be a relevant concept.

What is not "unconventional" about recent crises relates to the *general* categories of victims, assets, and interests that they have affected. There is nothing new in tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, famines, financial crises, or terrorism; nothing new in human despair, suffering, and confusion; or in polities breaking asunder. Characterizing current events as "unconventional," if it implies willful ignorance of valid historical precedents, is not only self-serving—to the point of being insulting to our forebears—and intellectually foolish: it also surely condemns us to repeat the history of past tragedies just as we claim to have transcended it.

Even quantitatively, though 6 billion human beings on Earth make for an unprecedented number of potential victims of crisis, and assets and infrastructure at risk are both more numerous and vulnerable than ever before (concentrated as they are in disaster-prone areas such as cities or littorals), it would be an inexcusable feat of historical short-sightedness to claim that 21st-century events systematically have had higher consequences than past disruptions. A look back at e.g. the Black Death, the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, the 1900 Galveston hurricane, or the devastation of 1945 Europe easily puts this illusion to rest.

What, then, is so "unconventional" about, say, 9/11, the 2004 tsunami, or Katrina? The answer lies in one word: *networks*; and its most

striking implication: a paradoxical combination of *extreme complexity* and *extreme simplicity* in the disruptions that modern networks enable.

The complexity of networks lies not only in the unprecedented variety of stakeholders who hold a legitimate claim to take part in planning, response or recovery efforts; or in the technological sophistication and bewildering interdependence of infrastructure systems; but more to the point, in the fact that not only the *superstructure* of networks (i.e. combinations of organizations or assets), but also their "*lifeblood*" is involved in causing, spreading, and responding to modern disruptions. Not only the "plumbing," but the "water that flows through it." Not only wireline or wireless facilities, but the intangible, nebulous mass of individual callers who will try to reach loved ones in the wake of a disaster, and will immediately raise the response environment to a new degree of complexity if they are unable to do so because infrastructure has failed (as it commonly does in such circumstances). The unconventional complexity of crises that affect modern networks stems from the fact that leaders today must take account of the individual free will, anxiety, irrationality, but also independent response efforts of *everyone* directly or indirectly affected by a disruption—at a time when modern technology implies that all, in a sense, belong in the latter category.

Yet this unprecedented complexity coexists with equally stunning simplicity—or is *identical* with it, the same object perceived from a different angle: the simplicity of societal collapse.

The lifeblood that flows through our systems does not do so haphazardly; millions or billions of individual free wills do not strike their own, aberrant courses; though it appears dauntingly variegated, the maelstrom hides consistent and predictable undercurrents, global dynamics that can emerge, change course, snap in an instant. The main collective dynamics of this kind is *trust* between "leaders" and those they would lead. Trust, however, is notoriously flimsy—never more so than among 21st century democracies. Today's major crises, then, are "unconventional" because responders face the very real possibility that their status as leaders, therefore their entire operating paradigm or "game plan," will lose all validity and legibility *in an instant*; that existing response systems will simply cease to operate; and will lose all traction on the course of events.

The French debacle in 1940 provides an eerie and telling comparison. It was so stunning because it was brought about by the unprecedented, paradoxical combination of two historical currents: the apex of technical complexity involved in military logistics, after several thousand years of continued refinement, coexisted with a strategic state-of-play where instant, utter collapse had been made more likely than ever before by emerging uses of speed and space, such as *Blitzkrieg*. Where French (and many German) commanders had geared up for a new attrition war, they were stunned by the sudden, unthinkable alliance between the apparent complexity of strategic systems, and the simplicity of their sudden collapse. Thus Erwin Rommel, to his surprise, found himself driving his Panzer division unopposed through open fields. Thus crises like Katrina *instantly* overwhelmed defenses in place, as the legitimacy of leaders collapsed with the levees; and wreaked havoc unimpeded among the ruins of failed systems.

"Unconventional" crises indeed, then: because the same old story of famines, plagues, and sundry "horsemen of the apocalypse" now impacts victims and their systems through unprecedented processes. As a participant summarized the point,

> "It isn't that the types of events themselves are unanticipated: but they acquire unconventional characteristics either by virtue of their *scale*; their *frequency*; when you have *multiple causes* at play; and when you see *rippling effects*, and *spillovers*."

Even once the existence of this type of events is acknowledged, a temptation often remains to argue one's way back to a state of denial, by relying on the false comfort of a simplistic equation according to which "high-consequence" events can only be *exceedingly rare*; thus setting a misleading zero-sum dilemma between spending one's time preparing for "realistic, low impact" events, or for nebulous, remote, and "unthinkable" catastrophic crises—as if the latter were the stuff of dreamers, naïve souls in need of a reality check, and trouble-making Cassandras.

The argument is fallacious, for three reasons.

First, by positing a mutually exclusive *alternative* between preparing for either end of the "crisis spectrum," it conjures a misleading straw man: the notion that, somehow, those who underline the risk posed by high-consequence events would have leaders ignore their responsibility to confront mundane disruptions. In fact, it should be made abundantly clear that the opposite is true. Speaking of the "age of unconventional crises" does not suggest that these have become *the rule*, in the sense that all events today are somehow unconventional—a bizarre oxymoron. In other words, it is self-evident that the vast majority of disruptions will remain run-of-the-mill, low consequence events. This, in fact, holds a critical corollary for the arguments laid out in the pages that follow. At all stages the reader should keep in mind that our analyses only concern *unconventional* events: and that the soundness of "traditional" planning and response methods is only questioned here *as it relates* to this specific category of crises. Their validity for more mundane situations is not in doubt; a blanket denunciation of their effectiveness would be unwarranted, and ultimately dangerous.

Second, what we question is the notion that the line runs perfectly straight from the upper left ("low consequence, high probability") to lower right ("high consequence, low probability") corners of the graph that would posit a strictly inverse-proportional relation between the impact of crises and their likelihood. In fact, the *rule* that makes our age that of "unconventional crises" is that they *will happen* with considerable, indeed increasing frequency. At the time of writing, 2009 has added an economic recession and the A(H1N1) pandemic to the already daunting list of e.g. the "mad cow" disease, 9/11, the anthrax attacks, the SARS outbreak, 2003 heat wave in Europe, 2004 tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, and 2007 forest fires in Greece. At some point, a series must be acknowledged as such, rather than as a laundry list of ultimately aberrant acts of God.

Lastly—and perhaps most importantly—even the typical conclusion drawn from the premise that "high-consequence events have a low probability" must be questioned: namely the apparently self-evident, but misleading proposition that, somehow, preparing for such "unthinkable" disruptions is a waste of leaders' time and societies' efforts—including because, "by definition", doing so is supposedly

"impossible." First, the "unthinkable" label is often affixed too generously to such crises, indeed sometimes with clear political afterthought, in a desperate attempt to explain away leaders' lack of preparation—infamous examples being the notions that "nobody could have anticipated" 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina, when the opposite is true.

But more to the point: *what if* some events truly are, as of now, "unthinkable"? How does it follow that our leadership and organizations cannot possibly be asked to prepare, or be held accountable for this type of disruptions? The only valid conclusion is that, faced with such risks, it behooves us *more than ever* to address them with enough intellectual audacity to reduce the field of what is "unthinkable"—or rather "unthought of."

Indeed, lest we should fall prey to "zero-sum game" arguments, it should be made clear that spending our energies, *in part*, on confronting the unthinkable will yield strategic insights, operational tools, and behavioral habits that will be relevant, and in fact priceless, when tackling more mundane occurrences.

Yet even if that was not the case; even if collectively opening our eyes to the unconventional, to that which can cause our polities to collapse, was "in vain": still our efforts would have been the exact opposite of a waste of time or resources—as they will have reflected our ultimate *responsibility*: to ensure that our societies will survive, and affirm our solidarity and dedication to that end. In other words, preparing for "high consequence" events is not, or rather should not be an afterthought for leaders: it is at the core of their legitimacy; that from which all the rest follows.

Recognizing that leaders and societies need to tackle unconventional events is a start—a frustratingly elusive start, often—but only a start. What, then, are we collectively to do in order to meet the challenge?

In 2006, the Center for Transatlantic Relations at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies launched the project "Unconventional Crises, Unconventional Responses" precisely to address this question.

Our initial seminar in 2007 began by highlighting strategic and cultural obstacles that must be overcome as a prerequisite for sound analysis and effective action in the face of unconventional events. This ground was covered extensively in the 2008 report by the same title: *Unconventional Crises, Unconventional Responses: Reforming Leadership in the Age of Catastrophic Crises and Hypercomplexity* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2007); we will do no more here than summarize its contents.

At issue, then, are:

- the *culture of organizations* (most notably resulting in bureaucratic "silos")—but also the *culture of leaders*, as too many have repeatedly shown themselves reluctant to anticipate the unconventional before it arises, and incapable of thinking out of the box to respond effectively once it does;

- the *identity of leaders*, as a lethal imbalance still exists between the public sector's traditional dominance, and the "subservient" role of private industry, NGOs and the greater public, which fails to recognize their critical input in planning, response, and recovery; while unconventional crises also produce leaders from unanticipated sources and strata irrespective of organization charts.

- *"hypercomplex" maps of actors*, which combine spontaneous coalitions and bewildering mosaics of stakeholders, to include the emerging role of *individuals* as critical drivers or spoilers of response efforts;

- the blurring of comfortable distinctions between "impacted ground zeros" and "*unscathed outsides*," as leaders and responders themselves must realize that they might well be among the first victims of unconventional events. Similarly, these disruptions blur frontiers and prevent linear transitions between planning, response, and recovery, as all three now must be integrated at once into analysis and decision-making.

- the limitations of *planning efforts* that aim to anticipate all potential hazards, and specify for each the behavior expected from every actor: when in fact systemic disruptions will wreak havoc on overly neat and abstract plans in an instant, leaving

those whose identity, status, and sense of purpose relied on such guidelines disarmed and rudderless.

In 2008, SAIS invited a broadened field of practitioners and experts from government, private sector, and NGOs, representing the U.S., Canada, France, and the U.K., to move beyond the mere recognition of these challenges, and elaborate practical answers to meet them—indeed, to *test* such answers, or lay out the results of such tests whenever they had already taken place.

The schedule of our seminar, and therefore the contents of the present report, directly reflect this process of maturation.

- In the first place, we threw down the gauntlet of our need collectively to *open our eyes to the unconventional*, based on the example that the loss of critical infrastructure has not been an aberrant side-effect, but a recurring, constitutive impact of major crises, which often fatally undermined preexisting plans that had failed to recognize the point ahead of time. In other words, we explored ways to turn the loss of critical resources and infrastructure into a founding paradigm of our plans, rather than an "unthinkable" obstacle, in order to ensure that workable systems can be rebuilt in spite of such disruptions.

- Second, we highlighted the value-added, across sectors and countries, of a *new analytical framework* that can serve as a basic guideline to recover one's bearings in unconventional crises—though it eschews the temptation simply to replace one set of discredited certainties with another. Based on participants' extensive experience in managing such events, this framework sets out not to provide "guiding answers," but four "guiding *questions*", namely

    A. *What is the essence of the crisis*? Behind comforting labels, chosen either by virtue of groupthink, or because we happen to have a plan for a familiar scenario that we choose to believe the crisis matches, *what are we really looking at*? To what weak point or blind spot in our defensive structures does the crisis genuinely direct its "ramming" or "liquefaction" effect? What interests, though not the most visible, are in fact most at risk?

B. *What are the critical pitfalls*? As noted above, unconventional environments combine considerable complexity with a stunning, instantaneous "simplicity of collapse": so they breed a clear distinction between missteps that will bear no serious consequences, and in fact are unavoidable, and "game-ending" mistakes that can trigger disastrous domino-effects. Flagging these traps is therefore critical: and such red flags should be the first landmarks, the first bearings inked on the new "map" of the unconventional event that responders will draft—most often starting from an otherwise blank page.

C. *Who are the unconventional stakeholders*? Leaders who remain within the comfort zone of their trusted and familiar partnerships will often find not only that they have missed, or stifled, useful potential inputs—but that they have in fact lost all real leadership in doing so, as protagonists with genuine traction on the course of events have emerged elsewhere, among their blind spots.

D. *What game-changing initiatives can be taken* to launch "virtuous circles" in otherwise chaotic environments? The silver lining in the "simplicity of collapse" that characterizes unconventional events is that it is matched by its symmetrical opposite, the "simplicity of salvation": meaning that perceptive and adaptive leaders can stem and even reverse processes of collapse through well though-out and well-timed decisions. All who have lived through and successfully emerged from unconventional crises can point to these rare, but astonishing "miracles at Dunkirk," when responders prevailed against all odds.

• Third, we examined the results of *unconventional crisis cells* which have *embedded in complex organizations* an architecture that lends itself to the dissemination and application, on the cultural, strategic, and operational planes, of the four-pronged framework just outlined. The most successful and conclusive instances have been the "Rapid Reflection Force" set up at Electricité de France; and crisis cell formats at the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the U.K.'s Cabinet Office.

- Based on an examination of planning and preparedness for flu pandemics—a topic which has been given added relevance and urgency since the outbreak of A(H1N1)—a further session discussed the *practical implications of redrawing allocations of roles and responsibilities* among government, private industry and NGOs—in other words, options for a "new Social Compact": an overarching, consensual architecture which would ensure that initiatives from all three sectors do not impede one another or undermine democratic accountability of response efforts.

- We also proposed a new approach to *resiliency*: first, setting apart "Maginot-line"-type *resistance* (i.e. defense mechanisms located in sections of systemic outer edges that seemingly are most at risk, though the choice might prove erroneous and unhelpfully static) from genuine *resilience*, which implies a system-wide capacity of all components in the architecture to react intelligently and adaptively to unconventional stresses. Second, consistent with the premise outlined above that catastrophic events will fuse response and recovery efforts into a single process, we underlined that resiliency should be built into systems as far "upstream" as possible when laying down the blueprint of organizations (beyond their "crisis management" segments) and their response plans.

- Turning to "complex maps of actors," we then examined the limitations of traditional concepts of *coordination*, to suggest strategic alternatives, and tactical or operational areas for improvement.
  At the strategic level, we explored the notion of *alignment* among international responders: meaning that instead of forcefully and artificially striving to coordinate their efforts—which always elicits push-back when it comes to determining who will be the coordinator, and who the "coordinatees"—intelligent response to unconventional events should rather lay out well thought-out, consensual objectives and norms, *de facto* creating a "behavioral magnetic field": i.e. ensuring that each stakeholder, though working independently or within organic coalitions, will define its remit based on this overarching purpose in such a way that will limit competition and duplication of efforts.

On a tactical and operational plane, the challenge, as Katrina made abundantly clear, often has been to create intelligent systems of "cross-awareness" internationally, so as to break down information – and bureaucratic silos among countries, prevent duplicative or inopportune offers of help, and make sure that traditional *exporters* of aid can also become *importers* should the need arise.

- Lastly, as noted above, there is no doubt that a common prerequisite to achieving these and other goals must be a change in the dominant culture of leaders, prodding them to recognize that preparing for the "unthinkable" is a foundational determinant and implication of the trust invested in them, rather than an inconvenient and secondary adjuvant to it. The next generations of decision-makers must be trained and selected accordingly. Our participants therefore laid out overarching goals and specific pedagogical contents which they suggest elite schools internationally should adopt to prepare future leaders to confront unconventional threats.