For my final project, I wrote a white paper detailing U.S. policy efforts to address existential risks. I chose to address policymaking around existential risks for several reasons. First, there is an increasingly diverse academic and non-governmental community interested in acknowledging and mitigating existential risks, but I argue the U.S. federal government has been relatively quiet on the subject. As of June 2021, the U.S. government has yet to issue a public, unclassified, comprehensive report that addresses efforts to research and address existential risks. Despite this, my analysis finds the United States is in a unique position to confront and ultimately mitigate these threats: currently a leader in the international system based on economic, diplomatic, technological, and military indicators, a good-faith effort by the United States to unilaterally commit to understanding and reducing existential risks—in addition to strengthening international efforts to do so—could be extremely cost-effective for humanity in the long run. I also wanted to explore policymaking as it relates to existential risks as our in-class polls were generally dismissive of government action to mitigate such risks. Although I consistently voted for “societal transformation” as the most promising path for averting “doom”, I would argue such transformation would nevertheless require some sort of government policy intervention to achieve intended goals.

The white paper explores three past policy products that I argue are representative of the U.S. government’s recent efforts to grapple with existential risks. These three examples cover three of the topics covered in class: risks from climate change, nuclear weapons, and artificial intelligence (AI).

First, I took a look at the Fourth National Climate Assessment (NCA4), the most extensive U.S. government analysis on the scientific evidence for climate change as well as its assessment of climate change’s likely impact on Americans in the years to come. According to the report, the National Climate Assessment “was written to help inform decision-makers, utility and natural resource managers, public health officials, emergency planners, and other stakeholders by providing a thorough examination of the effects of climate change on the United States.” The assessment is a product of the Global Change Research Act of 1990, a law passed by Congress mandating the U.S. Global Change Research Program (USGCRP) deliver a report no less than every 4 years that “1) integrates, evaluates, and interprets the findings of the Program…; 2) analyzes the effects of global change on the natural environment, agriculture, energy production and use, land and water resources, transportation, human health and welfare, human social systems, and biological diversity; and 3) analyzes current trends in global change, both human-induced and natural, and projects major trends for the subsequent 25 to 100 years.”

Second, I looked at the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), the most recent version of the U.S. government’s semi-regular unclassified publication detailing the role nuclear weapons play in U.S. national security strategy. The first NPR was announced in the 1990’s as “the first [Department of Defense] study of its kind to incorporate reviews of policy, doctrine, force structure, operations, safety and security, and arms control in one look.” Since then, the NPR has evolved into an important policy product that seeks to message to both allies and adversaries the scenarios in which the U.S. president would consider using nuclear weapons in a crisis or conflict, the status of arms control and nonproliferation efforts around the world, developments in the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and other details about U.S. nuclear doctrine.

Third, I looked at the final report of the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (NSCAI). Congress established the NSCAI as an independent national security commission in the fiscal year 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) “to consider the methods and means necessary to advance the development of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and associated technologies to comprehensively address the national security and defense needs of the United States.”

I compared the strengths and weakness of each policy product and ultimately offered my conclusion and some policy recommendations:

The United States government is in a unique position as it relates to understanding and preparing for threats to humanity’s long-term survival and flourishing. As arguably the state with the most responsibility to address existential risks in the international system—as well as the state with the most capacity to do so—the United States is well-positioned to significantly increase its contributions to the growing academic and non-governmental community working to safeguard humanity’s security in the 21st century and beyond.

Drawing on an analysis of the U.S. government’s previous approaches to existential risks, several potential avenues exist for how the United States can better address such risks in the future.

First, the United States Congress should mandate an independent commission to systematically research and report on U.S. efforts to mitigate existential risks (similar to the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence and the United Kingdom’s Blackett Review of High Impact Low Probability Risks in 2012). Such a commission would garner significant bipartisan support, be able to review classified materials, and issue a report to both Congress and the American public to increase awareness of existential risk issues.

Second, The Department of Defense should legally assign a role (such as the undersecretary of defense for policy) or establish a new position tasked with leading departmental efforts to reduce existential risks. Having a single role responsible for such efforts would allow the department to delegate resources to staff to research existential risks, formulate policy options, and signal the seriousness with which the U.S. government considers existential risks. This position would ideally be located in the Department of Defense given its involvement in a number of existential risk issues (including nuclear weapons policy as well as research and development on advanced military technologies) but could alternatively exist in the intelligence community (given its role in assessing risks and forecasting threats.)

Finally, efforts should be made within U.S. government research and development organizations to implement tabletop gaming, horizon scanning/strategic foresight methodology, and probabilistic forecasting to better predict and prepare for high impact/low probability technological risks. These organizations (including the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA), and others) work extensively at the intersection of emerging technologies and efforts to predict U.S. national security threats and are well-positioned to incorporate existential risk reduction into their missions. Innovative methods like tabletop gaming, horizon scanning, and probabilistic forecasting (among others) have been shown to be effective at generating both more accurate predictions and more creative thinking when analysts consider uncertain future scenarios. Implementing such methods into these organizations could help the U.S. government better prepare for technological risks that traditional research and analysis might miss.

I’m hopeful this analysis will lead others to consider ways the U.S. government can and should participate in the existential risk community and explore additional methods for addressing these pressing issues for humanity in the 21st century and beyond.

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