



Demystifying The National Security Council

Examining the NSC interagency relationships, structure, and strengths and weaknesses

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Introduction

Born in 1947, the National Security Council has become the central forum for shaping US national security. The NSC has flexed its muscles in all major foreign policy engagements, from the Cuban Missile Crisis to the War on Terror. NSC leadership has been credited with extraordinary success, such as coordination and planning during the first Gulf War, but also prominent failures, such as the Iran-Contra scandal. The decisions made within the NSC process cannot be understated: its daily activities impact billions of lives.

The NSC is unique given its location within the White House. Unlike other federal agencies like the Departments of Defense or State, it requires no direct oversight from Congress. Reinvented anew with every administration, the NSC has seen itself molded by personality, circumstance, and political pressures which meaningfully altered the systems that shaped the most important decisions of the last decades. Perhaps no national security agency has undergone as much change in the post-World War II era. Because of this, the NSC presents a vital case study of foreign policy reform.

This report unpacks how the NSC operates, who wields decision-making power, and how fourteen successive presidents have adapted it to respond to the priorities at hand. Understanding the NSC is foundational to recommending calibrated reforms for the rest of the national security apparatus.

Photo: President Truman signs amendments to the National Security Act in 1949.



Inter-Agency Coordination and the Relationship Between the NSC and the Department of State

Expressly Granted Constitutional Powers

Per the United States Constitution, the executive and legislative branches share the power to conduct foreign relations. While some powers are expressly granted, others are subject to the interpretation of ambiguities in the Constitution. As one scholar writes, “The Constitution, considered only for its affirmative grants of power capable of affecting the issue, is an invitation to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy” (Masters, 2017). Article I of the Constitution expressly grants to Congress the power to “regulate commerce with foreign nations, to declare war, to raise and support armies, to provide and maintain a navy, to make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces, to lay and collect taxes, to draw money from the Treasury, and to make all laws which shall be necessary and proper” (Masters, 2017). Per Article II of the Constitution, the President is expressly granted the power to “make treaties and appoint diplomats with the consent of the Senate, to act as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and to receive Ambassadors and other public ministers from abroad” (Masters, 2017).

Over the course of U.S. history, the president has accumulated great power over foreign policy and national security, typically with the consent and support of Congress. Today, the president’s authority over foreign policy at times approaches absolute, hemmed in by Congress only at the margins. That the National Security Council, the primary foreign policy decision-making body for the president, is funded by Congress but exempt from congressional oversight speaks volumes about the interest and ability for the legislative branch to actively shape international affairs.

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The Origin of the NSC

In order to understand the National Security Council, it is necessary to contextualize the body’s foundation in the international environment in which it was born and to understand its intended purpose at its outset.

A report by the Congressional Research Service explained that prior to World War II, US foreign policy was relatively simple compared to today due to “the small size of the Armed Forces, the relative geographic isolation of the nation, and the absence of any proximate threat” (The National Security Council, 2022). Policies, as coordinated by relatively independent military branches and by the State Department, may have been sufficient for the time.

In the wake of World War II, however, the United States “had the military, political, and economic power to dominate, [but] instead we chose to invest in rebuilding even our enemies and engaging them and others through a global civic architecture that surpassed anything ever before seen on the planet,” according to national security analyst David Rothkopf (2006). The United State’s security bureaucracy needed to evolve apace.

Under the Roosevelt administration, the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC) arose to manage an increasingly complex international security landscape. But Roosevelt was known to deliberately structure the foreign policy engine to be disorganized in order to maintain his own control over decision making. Roosevelt's foreign policy process was "highly personalized, ad hoc ... [and organized] around his principal formal advisers," said the powerful Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal (Manske, 2009). Ferdinand Eberstadt, a policy advisor to Forrestal in 1945, began laying the groundwork for deeper reform. He wrote an extensive report proposing national security reform, judging that the armed forces should be further unified - with the Navy maintaining its chief position amongst the armed forces - and that several statutory agencies and national security bodies should be developed to "enhance and facilitate governmental policy coordination" (Manske, 2009). The report was well-received and created momentum for reform of the national security apparatus.

In 1947, the SWNCC was renamed the State-Army-Navy-Air Force Coordinating Committee (SANACC) and was expanded to include a wider range of policy officials from deeper in the bureaucracy. Finally, in July, the National Security Act of 1947 was passed and the fledgling National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Department of Air Force were founded (Rothkopf, 2006). While the first iteration of the NSC met some of Eberstadt's outlined objectives, the NSC evolved into a purely advisory council - one that did not achieve his objective of positioning the Navy at the epicenter of foreign policy making and did not reserve the statutory powers required to enact policy (Zegart, 1999).

The changing of the international landscape begged for a more rigorous and coordinated policy strategy, and the structures created that year created a foundation that has endured through today.

The Intent of the NSC

After President Roosevelt died in office in 1945, he was succeeded by Harry Truman. Many in Congress doubted Truman's experience and abilities in foreign affairs; the NSC offered the hope of evolving into a collegial policy-making body to reinforce the President (History of the National Security Council, 1997).

The intention for the National Security Council was to deliver on that promise. As proclaimed by its principle author Ferdinand Eberstadt, the goal of the NSC was to institutionalize more formal procedures for dealing with US foreign policy in the long-term (Manske, 2009). He aimed to combat policymaking "on the basis of personal arrangements informally structured and responsive to specific circumstances," as was the common practice at the time (Manske, 2009). Eberstadt thus hoped that the NSC would "better conform to American democratic ideals, would protect civilian control of the military, and would prevent domination by one military service – while improving cooperation between services and integrating US military and foreign policies" (Manske, 2009).

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As the US has asserted a dominant role in the international order since the end of the second World War, Rothkopf proclaims that "the National Security Council has come to be the hub of all U.S. international engagement, the place where formal policies are adopted, agencies offer alternative choices to the president, and the president decides on the world's most powerful nation's course of action with (or without) regard to the rest of the planet" (Rothkopf, 2006).

The legacy of Eberstadt has endured: the NSC achieves the coordination of the armed services (precluding their unification), the integration of Defense officials into foreign policy decision making processes, and the amalgamation of federal agencies that are concerned with foreign policy making under one organization.

According to Title 50, U.S.C. §3021, the National Security Council, as of 2014, has four primary functions (The National Security Council, 2022):

1. Advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security so as to enable the Armed Forces and the other departments and agencies of the U.S. government to cooperate more effectively in matters involving the national security;
2. Assess and appraise the objectives, commitments, and risks of the United States in relation to the actual and potential military power of the United States, and make recommendations thereon to the President;
3. Make recommendations to the President concerning policies on matters of common interest to the departments and agencies of the U.S. government concerned with national security; and
4. Coordinate, without assuming operational authority, the U.S. Government response to malign foreign influence operations and campaigns.

Photo: President Truman in the Cabinet Room of the White House with the National Security Council. L to R around table: Unidentified man, Kenneth C. Royall, Sidney W. Souers, unidentified man, Roscoe Hillenkoetter, unidentified man, unidentified man, James Forrestal, George C. Marshall, President Truman, and W. John Kenney.



The Role of the National Security Advisor

While the position of National Security Advisor is not specifically outlined in the National Security Act of 1947, its relevance has been notable since Eisenhower's establishment of the position in June of 1953 (Rothkopf, 2006). Eisenhower, in stark contrast to his predecessor Truman, had a working knowledge of national security and foreign policy relationships and organizational expertise from his time as the Army Chief of Staff and as the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. Because he was better prepared for the presidency than Truman, he quickly assessed the needs of the NSC and adopted Robert Cutler's suggestions for the appointment of a Special Assistant to the President for National Security Advisors - to which he appointed none other than Cutler himself (Rothkopf, 2006). Thus the National Security Advisory position was born. According to Rothkopf, "the fact that the position survives to this day despite countless efforts to reinvent the NSC—and that it has only grown power—is testimony to Eisenhower's judgment in perceiving the need for this position" (Rothkopf, 2006).

The National Security Advisor gradually rose in prominence until its zenith, during Nixon's presidency, when Henry Kissinger was appointed to the station. Since then, the position has "been occupied by a succession of exceptionally important individuals, including Brent Scowcroft, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Colin Powell, Anthony Lake, Sandy Berger, and Condoleezza Rice" (Rothkopf, 2006). Each of these individuals have served the role in different ways, according to the organizational and stylistic structure of the NSC and the incumbent President's preferences for their relationship with their NSA. Their contributions are examined later in the context of the administrations they served, but ultimately it can be concluded that an effective NSA helps to enable robust and timely information sharing to subordinates that consequently enables subordinates to coordinate implementation across the interagency and prevents information "stovepipes" that end up "gumming up the works more often than not" and information being shared strictly on a "need-to-know basis" (former NSC Director, interview by Alexandra Blum, December 28, 2022). One experienced NSC staffer speculated that those who are the most effective at the NSC tend to be people with previous experience running large teams, such as former military leaders. Eisenhower's experience in executive organization enabled him to make full use of the bureaucracy, thus demonstrating the critical role that personalities of executives have on the efficacy of the organization.

The NSC is said to reflect the particularities of each president (Whittaker et. al, 2008). While the National Security Council's founding objective is to be the president's primary support for national security and foreign policy, other government agencies also have vested interest in influencing presidential decisions pertaining to foreign policy: (these include but are not exclusive to) the Departments of State, Defense, Treasury, Energy, Justice, Homeland Security, and Commerce; the US Armed Forces; the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Office of Management and Budget (Whittaker et. al, 2008). Despite the NSC's premier role as a coordinating body, the council has become a source of political power in its own right.

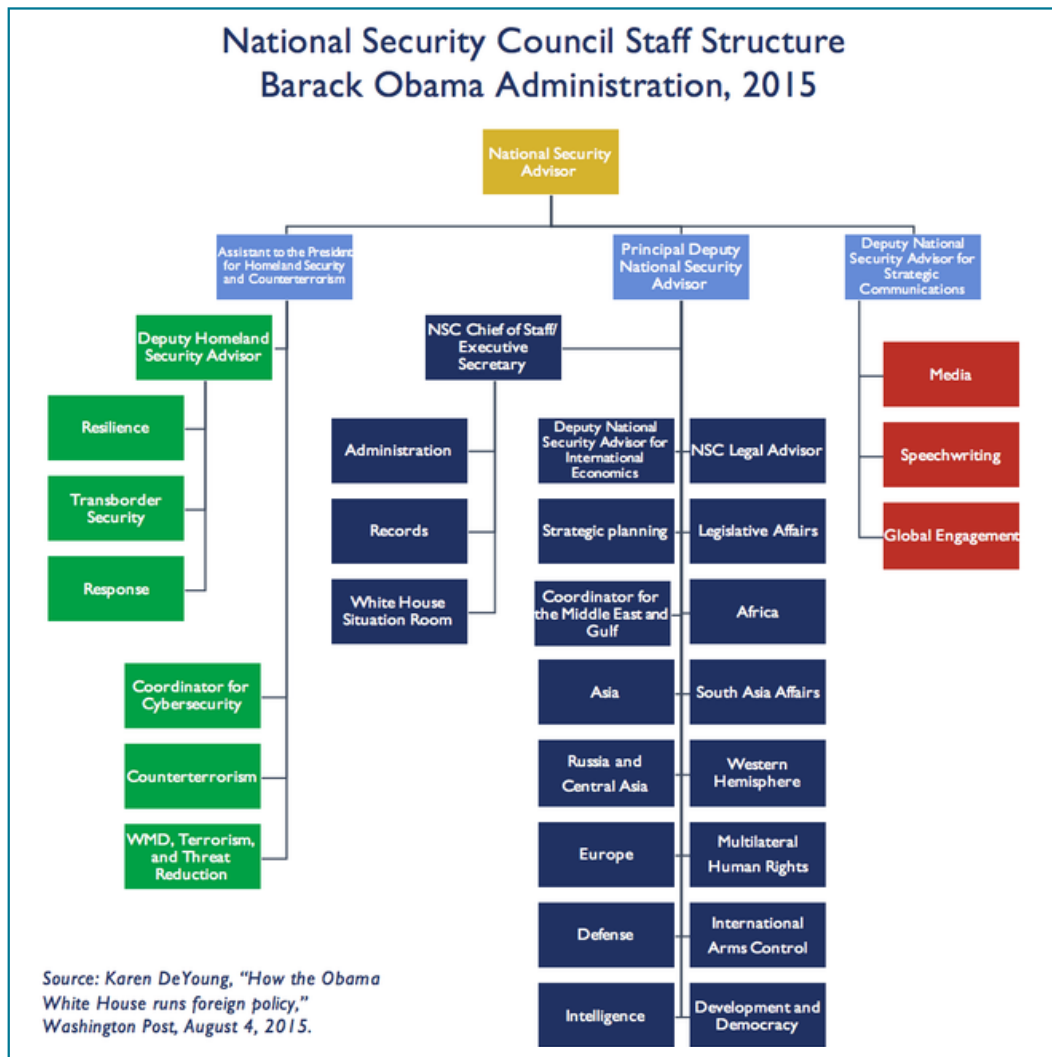
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This can be observed by the struggles for influence between the State Department and the National Security Council that have resulted in infighting between the National Security Advisor and the Secretary of State about who is and should be the president's principal advisor. Various presidents have shifted foreign policy coordination from the State Department in order to maintain close control over power and to shield policies from Congressional oversight. The NSC is the vehicle by which different administrations have tried to claim power over the foreign policy powers that lie in the Constitution's "gray area" and to redirect foreign policy procedure from the State Department (Whittaker et. al, 2008).

NSC Committees

Today, NSC process is organized at four levels: the Interagency Policy Committees (IPCs), the Deputies Committee (DC), the Principals Committee (PC), and the NSC itself. National security recommendations tend to originate at the lower levels and work their way upwards in the hierarchy until they reach consensus. On other occasions, some high-level or particularly sensitive challenges may begin at higher levels of consideration, or require the highest level of sign-off before enactment.

At the lower level, IPCs (sometimes referred to as Policy Coordination Committees (PCCs) depending on the administration) are made up of interagency subject-matter experts who convene to study a particular national security question and who help coordinate the construction and execution of policy responses. IPCs analyze policy issues by identifying objectives and the policy instruments that could be used for implementation. Assistant secretaries or similarly ranked officials may be included from a wide range of agencies: the Departments of State, Defense, Treasury, Justice, Homeland Security, the intelligence community, and more. Sometimes, sub-IPC level committee meetings are intended to work out policy implementation issues and broader strategic questions that can be deemed necessary by either NSC staffers or respective agencies.



The Deputies Committee (DC) is usually chaired by the Principal Deputy National Security Advisor and convenes at the deputy cabinet level (e.g. Deputy Secretary of Defense, the Deputy Secretary of State, etc.). The DC evaluates interagency policy challenges that could not be resolved at the IPC level before they are passed to the Principals Committee. And after the President and the NSC reach a consensus on policy action, the DC is responsible for overseeing the inter-governmental agencies' logistical planning and enactment of the approved policy actions (US Office of the White House, 2022).

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The Principals Committee (PC) is the senior interagency forum for consideration of policy issues affecting national security. Comprised of senior level officials - the Secretaries of State, Defense, Treasury, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Director of National Intelligence, etc. - the PC assesses lower interagency groups' policy recommendations and coordinate policy proposals for the President and the Vice President.

The National Security Council (NSC) is the principal forum for consideration of national security policy issues requiring Presidential determination. National Security Council meetings are chaired by the President and its regular attendees include the Vice President, the Secretaries of State, Treasury, Defense, Energy, Homeland Security, the Attorney General, the Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations, the Administrator of the US Agency for International Development, the Chief of Staff to the President, and the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (US Office of the White House, 2022). The Joint Chiefs of Staff serves as the military advisor to the council and the Director of National Intelligence as the intelligence advisor.

Photo: Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council- Cuba Crisis. President Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. White House, Cabinet Room.



Collaboration and Diversity of Thought

How Agendas Are Set & How the Summary of Conclusions Comes to Be

Objectives and agendas for National Security meetings are most often directed top-down from the President and other senior officials; in this way, the President and their team exercises control over the bureaucracies. Directorates whose expertise is relevant to the subject matter or scope of the scheduled meeting draft annotated agendas (AA) that outline policy options according to Senior Directors' stated objectives and set the scope of the meeting. Annotated agendas circulated within the NSC and to the participants from each agency. The speed and complexity of the international environment often overwhelms the capacity of the hierarchical system, and NSC staff work notoriously long hours. A common breakdown occurs when agencies are not provided with annotated agendas or discussion papers ahead of the meetings and arrive at the meeting insufficiently prepared.

One member of the Obama administration's NSC explained that after NSC meetings are concluded, policy actions are outlined in the "Summary of Conclusions" (SoC), and actions are assigned to individual agencies whose implementation is overseen by the Deputies Committee (former NSC Director, interview by Alexandra Blum, December 5, 2022). Details of the read-outs vary by leadership styles within the interagency departments and by the priorities of the NSC.

The Two-Way Transmission of Policy Suggestions and Policy Evaluations: Relationships between Agents

It is through the transmission of ideas in NSC meetings that the bureaucracies (including the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, etc.) send signals through the NSC that shape the President's priorities and policy decisions.

Administrations differ in the extent to which ideas flow from the bottom-up, or the top-down. Departments and agencies with unquestioned responsibility in a particular subject will typically make decisions without consultation with the NSC or the interagency. However, issues that sprawl across and between agencies, especially those that are more sensitive, high profile, or contentious, are much more likely to be picked up or even owned by the NSC.

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Most issues that arrive at the NSC will be handled within lower level meetings. The NSC will task the lion's share of the analytical or implementation work out to the agencies and coordinate the response. However, if there is disagreement, the policy issue may be raised to higher level meetings.

At least one observer suggests that consensus on policy issues is most often achieved within the IPCs, since these groups are more technocratic. Dissent is more likely in Principals Committee meetings and with regard to tendentious subject matter (in the case of arms control, the State Department and the Department of Defense have more hardened views that lead to more dissension) (former NSC Director, interview by Alexandra Blum, December 5, 2022). Ultimately, expressions of dissent are essential to the efficacy of the NSC process. Staffers may be encouraged to express dissenting views in order to open discussion for strategizing and to offer to the President a wide array of policy options.

Given the complexity of policy issues the NSC handles, obvious solutions around which all agencies agree are exceedingly rare. For example, a question levied to the NSC may be “Is integration or isolation more likely to change Iran’s strategic behavior?” Even the most serious and objective experts will disagree on how to answer this question. In such a setting, it is natural that bureaucratic politics may start to infect the process, which suggests that agencies will be most likely to favor a proposal that suits their narrow interests rather than what might be best for the country at large. In other words, the Department of Defense may support the policy solution which put the military in the lead, while the diplomatic solution may be favored by the State Department (former NSC Director, interview by Alexandra Blum, December 28, 2022).

Given the complexity and intractability of many policy questions, many challenges often receive continual scrutiny rather than definitive policy responses, thus requiring staff to regularly revisit the same questions (former NSC Director, interview by Alexandra Blum, December 28, 2022).

The Use of Intelligence in Decision Making

Intelligence is presented at the start of virtually all NSC meetings. Intelligence is intended to develop a shared and objective description of the policy environments. According to one former NSC Senior Director, intelligence briefers shy away from making policy suggestions and instead leave NSC staffers to formulate options in response to the given intelligence (former NSC Director, interview by Alexandra Blum, December 5, 2022). A secondary former NSC Senior Director corroborates this view: intelligence briefers respect the “firewall” that ostensibly prevents them from presenting policy views and instead focus on providing analysis (former NSC Director, interview, December 5, 2022).

The intelligence community can use its privileged position to set the agenda by highlighting what they see as the most important opportunities or threats. Furthermore, there are nuances to the transmission of intelligence that can either promote effective policymaking or that can result in collusion. While the President exercises his/her will on the bureaucracies by agenda-setting and the bureaucracies in turn shape the President’s response tactics through intelligence briefings, this process does not exclude NSC staffers from turning to agencies for cherry-picked evidence to support their own aims (as appeared to be the case with Iraq War policy that equated al Qaeda with Saddam Hussein) (Mitchell and Newman, 2022).

Photo: Director of the Central Intelligence Agency William Colby at a National Security Council Meeting to Discuss the Situation in South Vietnam - NARA



Reflections on Prior Administrations

The NSC's policy making processes have been largely dependent on the President's preferences: his preference for disparate or homogenous policy options from his committees, his inclination to wield centralized power as the executive officer of the council or to create a deliberative process, and the nature of his interpersonal relationships with his national security team. Examination of prior administrations demonstrates how policy formulation is dependent on the personalities of those in the federal government and helps to clarify the most effective practices for the NSC's future.

Policy formulation is dependent on the personalities of those in the federal government and helps to clarify the most effective practices for the NSC's future.

Harry S. Truman

Truman refrained from using the NSC, attending few meetings and sidestepping the agency by communicating with department heads directly on foreign policy matters. When the Korean War commenced, Truman was incentivized to hold more regular NSC meetings although he continued to defer policy advice to personnel outside of the organization ("History of the National Security Council," 1997).

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Eisenhower assumed his Presidency with an extensive working knowledge of foreign policy and national security concerns and with leadership expertise (Rothkopf, 2006). During these years, the NSC was a highly bureaucratic organization commanded by the National Security Advisor (and the head of the NSC Planning Board), Cutler. His "policy hill" stipulated the progression of policy recommendations from the Departments of State and Defense, to the Planning Board (a body that preceded the committee structure but performed a similar function) to be refined, and then to the NSC staff for approval before implementation by the Operations-Coordinating Board ("History of the National Security Council," 1997).

While this extensive process integrated policy review through multiple tiers of evaluation and institutionalized discussion and debate, its large staff sometimes precluded the flexibility necessary to adopt national views or to respond to immediate crises ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). In order for statesmen to be heard in the vast bureaucracy, they could be known to cling tightly to department attitudes and repurpose previous policies to fit their present-day demands. And on numerous occasions, the intelligence used to create policy was ill-founded, based on shaky estimates, or was not updated to keep pace with the volatile state of international affairs (Tuunainen, 2001). Such may have been the case with intelligence pertaining to Vietnam (Tuunainen, 2001). Insensitivity to cultural differences in Southeast Asia, misunderstanding of Vietnamese nationalism, and the use of pre-prescribed policy stipulated in the Policy Papers, generated ineffective decision making despite the thorough evaluation processes on "policy hill" (Tuunainen, 2001). The Policy Papers were intended to preemptively outline strategies to achieve "long range contingency planning," but were found to be largely inapplicable because of the vague prescriptions they made and because of the unique and variable circumstances that NSC staffers were faced with in times of crisis (Tuunainen, 2001).

John F. Kennedy

The Kennedy administration that followed Eisenhower capitalized on the strengths of Cutler's model while treating its faults. It reduced the size and frequency of meetings and conferred the role of the Operations-Coordinating Board back onto the State Department and other federal agencies ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, in assuming the responsibility of managing the development and implementation of defense policy, looked to institutionalize systems analysis as an instrument for planning and budgetary management within the Department of Defense. But much like during the Eisenhower years, the National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy, assumed a prominent role. Bundy redirected his energy to day-to-day operations while delegating long term and specifically foreign trade and economic sanctioning to his Deputy NSAs, Walt Rostow and Carl Kaysen ("History of the National Security Council," 1997).

The Situation Room, established in 1962, was a response to the failure to effectively coordinate federal agencies in real-time during the Bay of Pigs.

Despite these modifications, when it came time for the NSC to act on foreign policy, decisions transcended advice lent by advisory boards and the expertise of top staffers. In contrast to Eisenhower's NSC, Kennedy's NSC discouraged discord. The policy consensus reached about the Bay of Pigs invasion is a failure of these circumstances (Tuunainen, 2001). Instead, the CIA supplanted effective NSC decision making, and simultaneously excluded the Department of Defense from offering input to the military strategy of their plan (Thomas, 1989). The Situation Room, established in 1962, was a response to the failure to effectively coordinate federal agencies in real-time during the Bay of Pigs ("History of the National Security Council," 1997).

The Cuban Missile Crisis may also have exposed the weakness of Kennedy's NSC. The choice of a naval blockade as a means to remove the missiles from Cuba, while well reasoned and ultimately successful, preceded evaluation of alternatives. Furthermore, because Kennedy became entrenched in this policy decision, he never seriously considered other policy options (Anderson, 2022). The crisis may have resulted in detente action and deescalation from nuclear war, but the NSC's processes were not commensurate with the gravity of the situation.

Lyndon B. Johnson

While Bundy and Rostow were retained during the Johnson administration, the pair was sequestered to less pronounced roles due to Johnson's reluctance to use the NSC - for fear that its large staff might elicit security leaks ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). Instead, Johnson used the "Tuesday Lunch Group" to foster collegial discussions about day-to-day and crisis decision making with a more intimate group of staffers: the Secretaries of State and Defense, the National Security Advisor, and eventually his press secretary, the Director of Central Intelligence, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). He also conferred with trusted friends outside of the Tuesday Lunch Group for policy suggestions.

Photo: Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and President Lyndon B. Johnson at National Security Council meeting - NARA



Upon Rostow's assumption of the National Security Advisor position, he attempted to reincorporate the larger (then inactive) NSC staff into the decision making process by delegating to them "anticipatory-type" discussions for subjects that required more "careful" examination ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). Eventually, the disorganized nature of Johnson's policy making led to the adoption of the Senior Interdepartmental Group (SIG) and its subsidiary Interdepartmental Regional Groups (IRGs). In National Security Memorandum 341, Johnson stipulated that the State Department and the Secretary of State were to use the SIG and the IRGs, overseen by the Under Secretary of State and the Assistant Secretaries of State, to assist him in overseeing the "direction, coordination, and supervision of interdepartmental activities overseas (US Office of the White House, 2023).

Richard Nixon

The Nixon administration merged Eisenhower's Planning Group and Johnson's SIG into the NSC Review Group with sub committees chaired by the NSA. Nixon argued that secrecy in dealings between the superpowers was essential for effective dealing ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). Thus, Nixon "articulated his desire to focus control of foreign policy in the White House by cutting the State Department and the Congress out of the policymaking process ... a reorganization that compounded the existing exclusion of the Congress and the public form foreign policy ... and put the office of the national security advisor at the heart of the foreign-policy apparatus" (Sargent, 2017). Henry Kissinger, his NSA, asserted himself as the primary advisor for the President and eclipsed the inexperienced Secretary of State William P. Rogers and the role the State Department played in policy formation entirely. In fact, Kissinger's role was so prominent during the Nixon years that he traveled on behalf of the United States and the President to other countries to negotiate with foreign powers and opened "back channels" between himself and said foreign powers (particularly Western European allies, the Soviet Union, and China) that would maintain secrecy (Sargent, 2017). Policies of the Nixon era are therefore accredited to the close interpersonal relationship Nixon and Kissinger shared.

"[Nixon] articulated his desire to focus control of foreign policy in the White House by cutting the State Department and the Congress out of the policymaking process." (Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed*)

Photo: Meeting of the president's National Security Council, Nixon Administration, NARA



Gerald Ford

Kissinger, who had taken over for Rogers as Secretary of State during the Nixon administration, was the first to hold the NSA and Secretary of State roles simultaneously. During the Ford administration, he moved solely to the Secretary of State but maintained his pervasive influence since the new NSA, Brent Scowcroft, was inexperienced in foreign policy affairs and played a relatively minor role ("History of the National Security Council," 1997).

Jimmy Carter

In an effort to eliminate what he saw as abuses of power by Kissinger, President Carter reduced the size and centrality of the NSC, though NSA Zbigniew Brzezinski was still an active player ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). Carter's informal meetings were much like Johnson's while their objectives were more aligned with crisis management and oversight like Kennedy's and Nixon's. His process has been criticized as being overly complicated and lacked good record keeping ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). This complication was exacerbated by the infighting for premier influence on Carter between Brzezinski and the Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance ("History of the National Security Council," 1997).

Ronald Reagan

The Reagan administration expanded the role of Johnson's SIGs to foreign, defense, and intelligence challenges (Manske, 2009). The overuse of SIGs and the turf battles that occurred between NSAs and Secretaries of State earned criticism by Brzezinski who later called the period the "NSC's midlife crisis" ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). Reagan would cycle through six NSAs during his tenure. Long range policy fell to the State Department and the productivity of the NSC suffered ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). The Iran-Contra scandal and the subsequent Tower Commission left lasting procedural and cultural changes for the NSC. It is worth examining both in detail:

- **The Iran-Contra affair** was the predictable result of an NSC that accumulated too much unchecked power and operational authority. Senior government officials of Reagan's NSC including Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North and NSA McFarlane facilitated an illegal arms sale with Iran in exchange for American hostages being held there, and the profits were directed to the Contras of Nicaragua in 1985. This action violated the Boland Amendment that had been enacted by Congress to prohibit the funding of the anti-Sandinista rebel group in Nicaragua. These illegal actions escaped notice because the NSC is not congressionally supervised, unlike the Department of Defense or the State Department; and so the dealings could be made in private.

The Iran-Contra affair was the predictable result of an NSC that accumulated too much unchecked power and operational authority.

When the affair was exposed, President Reagan appointed an executive commission to investigate, comprised of Senator John Tower, Secretary of State Edmund Muskie, and former NSA Brent Scowcroft (Hadley, 2017). The Tower Commission, as it would come to be called, exposed the details of the affair and brought the operations of the National Security Council under heavy scrutiny. Reagan was heavily criticized for his lack of oversight and communication with his NSA Macfarlane; thus demonstrating that effective communication between the President and the NSA is crucial for achieving US objectives in the foreign sphere.

- **The Tower Commission** detailed the appropriate role of the NSA (US Presidential Commission, 1987):

He is an “honest broker” for the NSC process. He assures that issues are clearly presented to the President; that all reasonable options, together with an analysis of their disadvantages and risks, are brought to his attention; and that the views of the President’s other principal advisors are accurately conveyed.

He provides advice from the President’s vantage point, unalloyed by institutional responsibilities and biases. Unlike the Secretaries of State or Defense, who have substantial organizations for which they are responsible, the President is the NSA’s only constituency.

He monitors the actions taken by the executive departments in implementing the President’s national security policies. He determines whether these actions are consistent with Presidential decisions and whether, over time, the underlying policies continue to serve U.S. interests.

He assumes a special role in crisis management. The rapid pace of developments during crises often draws the National Security Advisor into an even more active role of advising the President. He fulfills the need for prompt and coordinated action under Presidential control (often with secrecy being essential) and in communicating Presidential needs and directives to the departments and agencies of the Executive Branch.

He reaches out for new ideas and initiatives that will give substance to broad Presidential objectives for national security.

He keeps the President informed about international events and developments in the Congress and the Executive Branch that affect the President’s policies and priorities.

The report emphasized that the NSC staff including the NSA is not to engage in operations “or the implementation of policy, as happened during the Iran-Contra affair” (Whittaker et. al, 2008). The modern day NSC still functions within the guidelines suggested by the Tower Commission.

Photo: President Ronald Reagan meets with aides on Iran-Contra



George H. W. Bush

Since the Iran-Contra scandal, the workings of the NSC have become regularized (Daniel J. Sargent, personal communication with Alexandra Blum, November 25, 2022). Bush replaced Reagan's interagency committees with coordinating committees in order to shore up their production; increases to the size of the NSC staff and to the number of PCCs were supplemented by interagency working groups strictly devoted to assessing US military commitments, reconstruction plans, and diplomatic concerns in Afghanistan and Iraq (Manske, 2009). Bush imitated Nixon's close relationship with his NSA in his relationship with Brent Scowcroft, who had also formerly served President Ford, and also maintained a good relationship with his Secretary of State, James Baker, thus preventing infighting like that of the Carter administration. He also extended participation in formal NSC meetings to his Chief of Staff, White House Counsel, Secretary of the Treasury, and special assistants for economic policy and homeland security (Manske, 2009).

Brent Scowcroft is often held to be the most effective National Security Advisor. His coordination with the Department of State through his relationship with Secretary of State James Baker and with the Department of Defense through his relationship with Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, lent to the "reunification of Germany within NATO, the eviction of Iraqi troops from Kuwait, and the almost entirely nonviolent collapse of the Soviet empire" (Sparrow, 2020). It is Scowcroft's redesign of the NSC system, his close relationships with the president and his national security team, and his skill in positioning himself as an honest broker that are said to have made him so effective. According to the scholar Bartholomew H. Sparrow, it was Scowcroft's "impartial referral of policy proposals from the national security principals and their staffs to the president; the organization of interagency committees at different levels of seniority to discuss, coordinate, and through the relevant departments, execute policy; and having the confidence of the president so he (or she) can give personal advice;" as well as his attention to short-term and long-term diplomatic objectives; aiding of inter-agency communication through open discussion; and his priority of preserving US "blood and treasure" that led to the successes in foreign policy witnessed during his time as NSA (Sparrow, 2020). These practices characterize what has since been coined the "**Scowcroft Model**": the best model for the effective operation of the National Security Council.

The Scowcroft Model: principles for effective operation of the NSC



1. Impartial referral of policy proposals from the national security principals and their staffs to the president;
2. The organization of interagency committees at different levels of seniority to discuss, coordinate, and through the relevant departments, execute policy; and
3. Having the confidence of the president so he (or she) can give personal advice

Bill Clinton

The Clinton administration continued to expand the NSC and included economic issues within its scope through the establishment of the National Economic Council ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). Like Bush, Clinton's Secretary of State and his NSA (Warren Christopher and Anthony Lake, respectively) maintained a cordial relationship ("History of the National Security Council," 1997). Interagency working groups that existed under Bush, compiled recommendations for the Deputies Committee and Planning Committees' approval before ascension to the NSC - a procedure much like that of Eisenhower.

George W. Bush

In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attack, some observers suggest that policy interests too often preceded intelligence findings and insufficient interagency policy review prevented countervailing opinions from gaining any exposure or traction (Daniel J. Sargent, personal communication with Alexandra Blum, November 25, 2022).

The Iraq War is a complicated case through which to examine the National Security Council's procedures. On the one hand, the NSC powerfully steered the US government into the war, which is no small undertaking. But rather than the NSC being used as a forum to evaluate strategy and generate consensus policy options, it was subordinated to the pre-ordained policy goals of a small group of individuals, especially Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. At seemingly every stage of decision-making and planning, the goals of political leaders seemed to outpace the capabilities of the bureaucracies to effectively execute the war. The NSC was ineffective at coordinating such an undertaking.

But rather than the NSC being used as a forum to evaluate strategy and generate consensus policy options, it was subordinated to the pre-ordained policy goals of a small group of individuals.

Photo: 911- President George W. Bush with National Security Council, 09-20-2001.



Barack Obama

The Obama administration greatly expanded the size and scope of the NSC. Under Clinton, interagency working groups had been chaired by the NSC with State maintaining operation of regional working groups. Under Bush, this same structure persisted, but instead the NSC served as the executive secretary at non-NSC committees (Rozen, 2009). The Obama NSC repossessed control of all committees and delegated their operation to the NSC (with some co-chaired by other agency heads) (Rozen, 2009). The size of the NSC approached 400 during the Obama administration, prompting criticism that the administration had taken “micromanagement and operational meddling to a new level” (Cancian, 2016). This led to action from Obama’s National Security Advisor Susan Rice, who in 2015, reduced the staff size by 15% (Rice, 2011). Further reductions brought the total number staff down to 180 persons by 2017 (Rice, 2011).

An experienced NSC Senior Director, made a correlation between “the size of the NSC and the level of day-to-day tactical operations: if you delegate more implementation to agencies outside of the NSC, then you can deal with a smaller NSC” (former NSC staffer, interview by Alexandra Blum, December 2, 2022). Many government officials complained that the Obama NSC’s micromanagement undermined their effectiveness. One member of Obama’s NSC, however, defended Obama’s interest “to be deeply involved with national security matters. He understood the decisions he was making to be high-impact and wanted to make decisions that would serve as a strong foundation for government after he left office.”

Donald Trump

Where Obama’s NSC could be characterized by a tight flow of information through the committees and higher-up officials, at least one former NSC Director asserts that the NSC during the Trump administration resulted in an “ad-hoc NSC” that was “constantly scrambling to figure out what its intent was” (former NSC Director, interview by Alexandra Blum, December 5, 2022). Nevertheless, excluding controversial policy decisions, such as in the immigration space, the ad hoc nature of the Trump NSC did not appear to cause any major foreign policy disasters.

Photo: President Barack Obama listens to National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice during a National Security Council meeting to prep for the United Nations General Assembly, in the Situation Room of the White House, Sept. 19, 2014. John Podesta, Counselor to the President, Senior Advisor Dan Pfeiffer and Chief of Staff Denis McDonough, right, also listen. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)



Conclusion

Given the wide scope and great diversity of the challenges the National Security Council may address, future administrations can consider the following as aids in meeting the demands of the international landscape. Foremost, the NSC benefits from inter-agency coordination (most specifically between the National Security Council and the Department of State). A National Security Advisor who (like Brent Scowcroft) prioritizes collaboration with other governmental agencies while simultaneously maintaining a close relationship with the President, best wields the power of the NSC as a coordinating body. Further, the collaboration and diversity of thought that arise from these inter-agency relationships is the most valuable asset the NSC has in effectively responding to international stimulus. With the use of intelligence to corroborate these suggestions and viewpoints, the NSC maximizes its ability to to achieve US objectives on a global stage.

As international diplomacy stands to expand in the impending decades, the role of the National Security Council within the US federal government becomes all the more paramount. It is therefore vital that the institution and its operations be well understood and continuously evaluated with this trend in mind.



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