

PAPERS

FOR THE NEXT

PRESIDENT



THE WHITE HOUSE  
SITUATION ROOM

JUNE 2015

# ENABLING DECISION:

Shaping the National Security  
Council for the Next President

By Shawn Brimley, Dr. Dafna H. Rand,  
Julianne Smith, and Jacob Stokes



Center for a  
New American  
Security

## About the Authors

**Shawn Brimley** is Executive Vice President and Director of Studies at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). He previously served as Director for Strategic Planning on the National Security Council staff.

**Dr. Dafna H. Rand** is Deputy Director of Studies and the Leon E. Panetta Fellow at CNAS. She previously served as Director for Development and Democracy on the NSC staff.

**Julianne Smith** is a Senior Fellow and Director of the Strategy and Statecraft Program at CNAS. She previously served as Deputy National Security Advisor to the Vice President.

**Jacob Stokes** is the Bacevich Fellow at CNAS.

## Acknowledgements

We wish to thank several individuals in the Executive Office of the President who agreed to be interviewed for the paper, as well as several National Security Council alumni, including Derek Chollet and Loren Schulman for their critical reviews. We also thank our CNAS colleagues Maura McCarthy, Melody Cook, and Michelle Shevin-Coetzee for providing superb production, design, and research support. We alone are responsible for any errors of fact, omission, or interpretation.

## About this Series

Over the course of the next 18 months the Center for a New American Security will release reports designed to assist the next president and his or her team in crafting a strong, pragmatic, and principled national security agenda. The *Papers for the Next President* series will explore the most critical regions and topics that the next president will need to address early in his or her tenure and will include actionable recommendations designed to be implemented during the first few months of 2017.

## INTRODUCTION

The next president will inherit a world in turmoil. Among the first and most consequential decisions he or she will make is how to organize, manage, and staff the National Security Council (NSC) system, which serves as the president's primary tool to make national security decisions and oversee their implementation. Deciding on the appropriate mission, management, and structure of the NSC system and the key personnel to run it can be a major factor in the success or failure of an administration's foreign policy. As the United States marches toward the 2016 election, now is the time to be thinking through changes to the NSC structure that will make it more agile and effective for the next president and her or his successors.

Over the course of its nearly 70-year history, the NSC and its structure have evolved, reflecting the personalities and preferences of the presidents and national security advisors (NSAs) at its helm. Over time, the formal, legally mandated NSC meetings, in which the president brings together cabinet officials to make high-level foreign policy decisions, have been accompanied by an increasing number of lower-level interagency meetings, often chaired by the NSA, his or her deputies, and other NSC officials.<sup>1</sup> In addition, informal processes have evolved to coexist at the NSC alongside these formal meetings; since President John F. Kennedy's time, the NSC has become a redoubt for small circles of trusted advisors to inform the president on central national security issues of the day and to help guide policy implementation.

Moreover, the mission and workflow of the NSC today reflect the information revolution of the 1990s and beyond, with a marked increase in the pace and scope of both classified and unclassified information flowing into the White House. Over the past two decades, this information has at times overwhelmed the decisionmaking process, forcing policymakers at all levels into what many call

the "tyranny of the inbox." Presidents are now expected to respond publicly to global crises within hours, if not minutes, placing unprecedented demands on the NSC staff to develop immediate responses. The national security bureaucracy, including the number of agencies working on foreign policy-related issues, is also bigger than ever, making the formulation, coordination, and implementation of national security decisions increasingly challenging.<sup>2</sup>

---

*Deciding on the appropriate mission, management, and structure of the NSC system and the key personnel to run it can be a major factor in the success or failure of an administration's foreign policy.*

---

Many of these challenges are well known; most have persisted for decades and are not the making of any one administration. The broad trend lines are also unlikely to change. That said, the next president should enter the Oval Office with a mature view concerning the proper functions of the NSC, how to balance informal and formal processes, and a plan on how best to manage inevitable crises while implementing an affirmative foreign policy agenda. Encouragingly, the current NSC staff recently undertook a thorough review of the NSC and has begun to revamp NSC management and processes in positive ways.<sup>3</sup> Those changes represent a good start. If the next administration follows that trajectory and adopts some of the additional recommendations in this report, they could lead to a much more effective National Security Council system.

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: GROWTH IN SIZE AND CENTRALITY OF THE NSC

The NSC system was created nearly 70 years ago, a relatively small part of a much larger battle to reshape the U.S. military bureaucracy that resulted in the National Security Act of 1947.<sup>4</sup> Since then, the NSC has grown into a powerful organization that allows the president to manage the sprawling machinery of foreign and defense policy. It has expanded not only in size but also in influence over foreign policy decisionmaking and implementation.

In the early years, the NSC staff consisted of a small group of career civil servants, Foreign service officers, and military officers. During Kennedy's presidency, the NSC began to include trusted political appointees, who served alongside detailees on loan from various agencies and departments.

Since that time, the size of the NSC staff has grown steadily, with an increased number of both political appointees and detailees. Kennedy's NSC was made up of fewer than 20 experts; that number grew to just over 40 in 1991 and more than 100 by 2000.<sup>5</sup> By 2010, the NSC staff had grown to more than 370 people, and it is currently just under 400.<sup>6</sup>

---

*Kennedy's NSC was made up of fewer than 20 experts; that number grew to just over 40 in 1991 and more than 100 by 2000. By 2010, the NSC staff had grown to more than 370 people, and it is currently just under 400.*

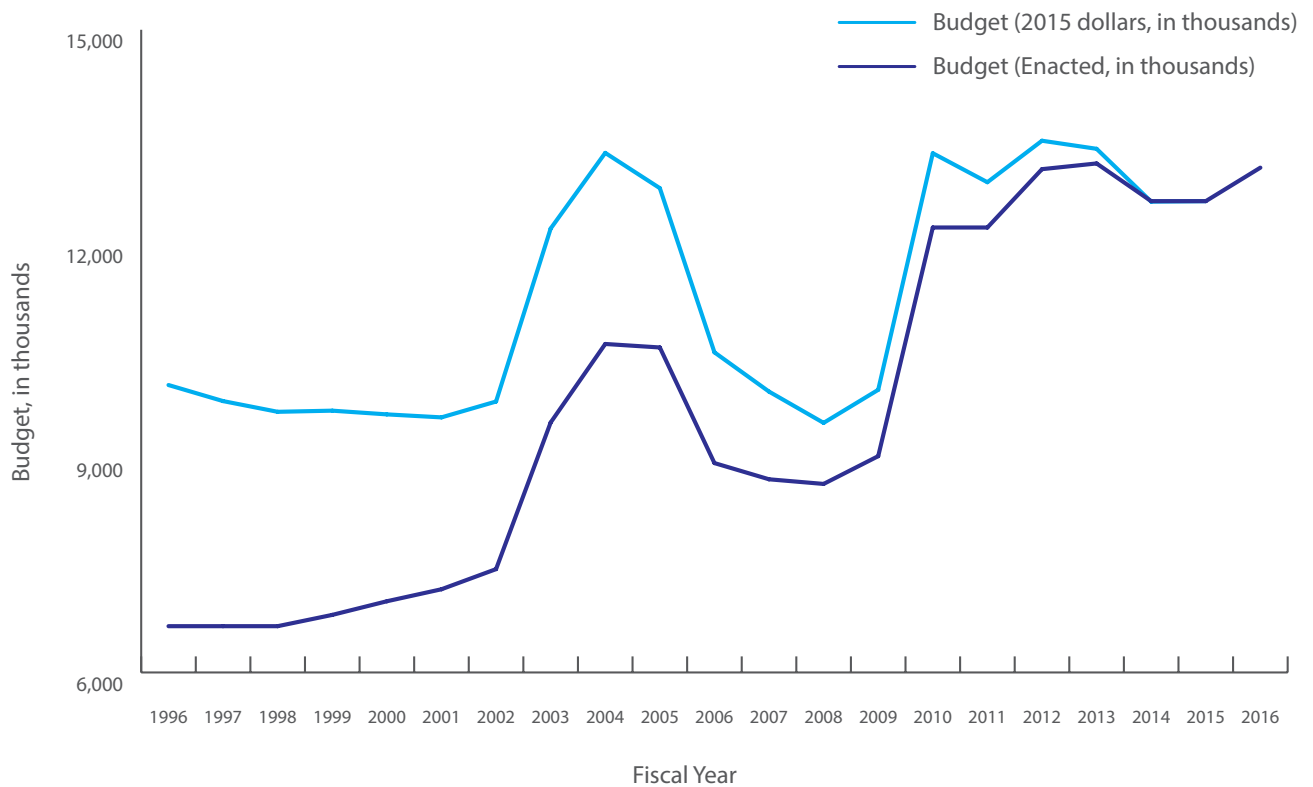
---



In 1948 President Harry Truman meets with the National Security Council in the Cabinet Room of the White House. Left to right 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.

(Source: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Record 8451352)

FIGURE 1: NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL FUNDING, 1996–2016



Sources: Fiscal year appendices for the Executive Office of the President, congressional budget submissions for the Executive Office of the President, and for fiscal years 2008–2010 the Consolidated/Omnibus Appropriations Acts

The increase in personnel can be attributed to several factors. First, the NSC relies quite heavily on detailed civil servants, foreign service officers, and uniformed military who are placed at the White House for one- to two-year rotations, even as their home agencies pay their salaries during this time. These “detailees” make up more than two-thirds of the NSC staff.<sup>7</sup> The availability of this “free” labor pool – often highly talented, motivated mid-career staff who see service at the NSC as critical to career enhancement – has been attractive for the NSC leadership. Second, structural changes have created surges in personnel as well. For example, in May 2009 the Obama administration merged the staffs of the Homeland Security Council and the National Security Council, contributing to the overall personnel growth.<sup>8</sup> Third, the nature of technology and changes in the international

environment have spurred growth in terms of ensuring the Situation Room is fully staffed, that more complex information technology and systems are managed well, and that emerging issues like cybersecurity and international economics are more robustly covered at the White House. Efforts to decrease the size of the NSC staff have already begun, but it will take several years, well into the next administration, to truly “right-size” the NSC.

There has also been a trend toward greater centralization of authority and power in the NSC, as compared with the cabinet agencies (e.g., State, Defense, Treasury). This trend goes back to at least the 1950s. President Dwight Eisenhower drew on his military background to expand and formalize the NSC, establishing committees for planning and operations.<sup>9</sup> Eisenhower also hired the first assistant to the president for national security

affairs, more commonly known as the national security advisor, Robert Cutler. Kennedy's NSA, McGeorge Bundy, elevated the position to the prominence that defines it today while empowering the broader NSC staff with increased influence in the making of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>10</sup> Centralization of policymaking power in the White House has been accelerated by the need to keep up with the increasingly rapid pace at which both the news media and the general public learn about events and expect a government response. Additionally, increasingly sophisticated information technology delivers greater amounts of all sorts of intelligence and analysis at faster speeds, often without having to go through the departments and agencies.<sup>11</sup> While there have been some exceptions to the overall trend, since at least the early 1960s national security decisionmaking power has flowed, as Leslie Gelb has written, from the "king's ministers" (the cabinet members and their respective departments) to the "palace guard" (the NSC staff and the national security advisor).<sup>12</sup>

The result of this trend toward NSC-centric decisionmaking is that the 20 men and two women who have served as NSAs, along with their staffs, have increasingly fulfilled several roles at once.<sup>13</sup> The NSC must manage the policy formulation process that develops and refines options for the president, staff the president on the day-to-day foreign policy demands (e.g., calls with foreign leaders), and ensure that the president's decisions get implemented faithfully. The national security advisor must also take the lead on managing the response to global crises and sometimes serves as a spokesperson for the administration both at home and abroad. Critics have accused the staff of mission creep, arguing that with just under 400 people, including many directors duplicating the work of Pentagon and State regional desk officers, the NSC has become a miniature agency, doing too much operational staffing work from policy formulation to implementation. Indeed, the majority of

NSC staff members are directors, and this job has become more operational. NSC directors provide information in real time to the NSA and president, prepare for presidential trips and bilateral meetings, review talking points used by White House press officers and for legislative hearings, and create the paperwork necessary for interagency meetings. Directors must also help prepare their immediate bosses (senior directors) for internal meetings and external engagements.

---

*Critics have accused the staff of mission creep, arguing that with just under 400 people, including many directors duplicating the work of Pentagon and State regional desk officers, the NSC has become a miniature agency, doing too much operational staffing work from policy formulation to implementation.*

---

In short, the NSA and the NSC staff are increasingly pulled in many directions as the mandate and purview of their work have grown. But irrespective of the unique crises and challenges that will confront the next president, two core missions will remain vital for the NSC system: managing the process of presidential decisionmaking on national security and ensuring implementation of those decisions.

## OBSTACLES TO FULFILLING KEY NSC MISSIONS

The National Security Council staff plays two key roles in the making and execution of U.S. foreign policy. The first is to coordinate the development and vetting of options for the president and to facilitate the process of his or her decisionmaking.<sup>14</sup> In government parlance, the NSC “tees up” the hardest decisions for the president to make, whether use-of-force, diplomatic, budgetary, or others. The second core mission of the National Security Council staff is to manage the implementation of a president’s foreign policy decisions. New presidents quickly find that simply expressing a view in the Situation Room or giving speeches does not mean those policies will be put into practice as intended. Several factors can hinder implementation. They range from a simple lack of clarity on what the president actually decided, to a mismatch between guidance and resources, to – in extreme cases – bureaucratic opposition that intentionally throws sand in the gears or seeks to carry out an alternative course of action. This section lays out the four most vexing obstacles hindering the NSC’s efforts to carry out these two core missions.

---

*New presidents quickly find that simply expressing a view in the Situation Room or giving speeches does not mean those policies will be put into practice as intended.*

---

## Too Many Meetings, Too Little Seniority and Decisions

The NSC runs numerous meetings to clarify and highlight disagreements among the different agencies. The majority of national security meetings at the White House are convened by NSC staff – directors or senior directors – in interagency policy committees (IPCs) and sub-IPCs that occur at the level of assistant secretary and deputy assistant secretary, respectively. Those committees develop issues for discussion by the Deputies Committee (DC), chaired by the deputy national security advisor and composed of the relevant deputy secretaries or their designees from across the national security bureaucracy. Hundreds of DC meetings are held every year. If the Deputies Committee is unable to come to a satisfactory decision, the issue goes to the Principals Committee (PC), led by the NSA with the secretaries of the major agencies or their designees. Ideally, only the most intractable and consequential issues are then sent to the full National Security Council, chaired by the president (see Figure 2).<sup>16</sup>

Today’s interagency decisionmaking process pushes too many decisions up to the Principals Committee and formal NSC level. It is common to witness cabinet secretaries, the vice president, and even the president debating what are arguably more tactical issues, which detracts from getting the fundamental strategic approaches right. While tactical decisions sometimes merit principals’ attention in order to get the overarching strategy right, it is easy for the national security apparatus to push all decisions upward. To be sure, some seemingly minor decisions require principal level attention because they involve tradeoffs that can be properly adjudicated only at the DC level. For example, assistant secretaries and their deputies are typically responsible for individual regional or functional areas, and thus are not well suited to – or held accountable for – adjudicating issues that allocate resources globally in ways that effectively balance competing strategic priorities. However, at the DC level, deputy secretaries or their designees (e.g. the undersecretary of Defense for

**FIGURE 2: STANDARD MEETING STRUCTURES OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL SYSTEM**

MEETING TYPE	CHAIR AND ATTENDEES
National Security Council Meeting (NSC) <sup>15</sup>	Chair: president Attendees: vice president, secretary of State, secretary of Defense, secretary of Energy, secretaries and under secretaries of other executive departments and of the military departments (when appointed by the president by and with the advice and consent of the Senate) Statutory advisors: chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of national intelligence
Principals Committee (PC)	Chair: national security advisor Attendees: relevant agency and departmental secretaries
Deputies Committee (DC)	Chair: deputy national security advisor Attendees: relevant agency and departmental deputy secretaries
Interagency Policy Committees (IPCs)	Chair: NSC senior directors Attendees: relevant agency and departmental assistant secretaries
Sub-Interagency Policy Committees (sub-IPCs)	Chair: NSC directors Attendees: relevant agency and departmental deputy assistant secretaries

Policy at the DOD), must balance priorities across different issue areas. When key decisions or discussions cut across or impact multiple issue areas, DC meetings can weigh competing priorities. However, when decisions that do not meet that threshold get pushed up, the meetings that occur below the Deputies Committee – IPCs and sub-IPCs – focus their work on basic information-sharing or just meeting for the sake of meeting, with little agenda-setting or decisionmaking function or outcome other than to bump decisions up to higher levels. This atmosphere leads to a common lament among cabinet officials and their deputies that they must start their jobs once a full regular workday’s worth of White House meetings concludes. Such a pace, once reserved only for the most serious of national security crises, has become the new normal.<sup>17</sup>

---

*While tactical decisions sometimes merit principals’ attention in order to get the overarching strategy right, it is easy for the national security apparatus to push all decisions upward.*

---



## Tyranny of the Inbox

NSC staff members, like many throughout the broader national security system, have several overlapping issue areas they must track. These workers typically receive hundreds of diplomatic cables, finished intelligence assessments, unfinished raw intelligence, and other types of information (e.g., news reports and even social media) in their email inboxes every day.<sup>18</sup> The assumption seems to be that senior directors and directors need to have the most up-to-date information on any given issue. But often this information flow borders on overload and can easily overwhelm rather than enable the development of policy recommendations. Paradoxically, some of the best NSC staffers try to ignore the tactical information flow in favor of reviewing finished intelligence analysis, but it can be difficult when senior White House officials expect everyone to be constantly up to speed.

---

*Any effort at NSC reform must also include reform at some of the agencies and departments to ensure that they have what they need to assume more responsibility where necessary.*

---

Moreover, with an inbox so full, an NSC staffer cannot help but spend a large portion of every day working between various email systems, both to monitor information and to respond to multiple internal documents that are sent around for signoff. It is arguably most damaging to have this “tyranny of the inbox” at the White House, where the most consequential decisions are made and where the president needs the most refined

and strategic advice. More thought should be given to what type of information and intelligence is vital to the NSC staff; how to encourage the NSC staff’s consumption of more strategic or analytical information and policy recommendations, as opposed to simply raw data; and whether the monitoring and memo clearance functions are constraining other key responsibilities. In addition, opportunities to transfer certain responsibilities to the agencies and departments should be explored to the extent possible, while taking into account the capability gaps of those organizations that prevent them from doing so. In other words, any effort at NSC reform must also include reform at some of the agencies and departments to ensure that they have what they need to assume more responsibility where necessary.

## Process Management Over Strategy Development

There is a natural tension between process-oriented work – such as preparing agendas, scheduling meetings, writing summaries of key meetings – and the ability to think strategically. An increase in NSC-run meetings has hampered the ability of the NSC staff to develop more robust strategies for various national security priorities or to connect them to the annual budget development process and ensure adequate oversight. In addition, because national security decisionmaking has become so centralized at the White House, there is insufficient priority given to developing classified strategies with implementation guidance that can clearly inform and hold accountable the hundreds of other senior civilian and military leaders across the national security bureaucracy who must implement the president’s decisions and understand his or her strategic intent.

## Interagency Implementation

The task of managing the interagency – work that is difficult, nebulous, and hard to teach and train – can often be overlooked and underresourced. At times, the relative junior professional status of directors makes it difficult and awkward for them to manage oversight and implementation of presidential decisions, particularly if these same detailees often depend on senior officials at their home agencies for professional advancement. There is little professional incentive to take on controversial issues or introduce tension at their home agencies, particularly if there is a risk of conflict that might adversely affect career prospects. In fact, in the worst-case scenario, detailees spend their time at the NSC advocating for the position or perspective of their home agencies, rather than being the president’s advocate and insisting that the president’s agenda be implemented in a timely and effective manner.

---

*Interagency management is difficult work, but it can and should be taught.*

---

The stature of the NSC staff and their time constraints are not the only impediments to effective interagency management. In practice, managing policies means much more than reiterating standing policy and tasking agencies to write papers at IPCs and sub-IPCs. It requires the NSC staff to reach out and build relationships with staff across the various agencies, often with individuals who may not frequent interagency meetings but are running critical initiatives and implementing important policies within the bureaucracy. Interagency management is difficult work, but it can and should be taught. A number of concrete

tools allow the NSC staff to manage the interagency and implement the president’s policy, including presidential policy directives, presidential study directives, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance, and executive orders (see Figure 3). There is also the simpler and more straightforward influence inherent when NSC staff determines the DC and PC agendas and finalizes the summary of conclusions that codifies the decisions and follow-up work from these meetings. These latter levers of management are the direct ways that the NSC staff can force agencies to follow up and implement decisions, locking in presidential policy prescriptions, decisions, guidance, and priorities. Finally, presidential speeches and statements, oral or written, issued by the president offer an opportunity for NSC staff to follow up with implementation guidance. Most NSC staff members are insufficiently trained on how to use these tools, and because of the staffers’ typical short tenure, by the time they become experts in employing the tools it is often time to return to their home agencies or leave government service.

---

*Focusing the strategic attention of the U.S. national security bureaucracy on a given set of issues over a sustained period is immensely challenging even for the most seasoned policymakers.*

---

The work entailed in implementing decisions, especially for initiatives that stretch beyond short-term crisis management, can be painstaking and often thankless. As previously described, there is a powerful gravitational pull toward the truly immediate and pressing daily challenges. Focusing the strategic attention of the U.S. national security bureaucracy on a given set of issues over a sustained period is immensely challenging even for the most seasoned policymakers.

**FIGURE 3: TOOLS FOR PRESIDENTIAL MANAGEMENT AND OVERSIGHT OF POLICY FORMULATION AND IMPLEMENTATION**

TOOL	DESCRIPTION
Presidential policy directive (PPD)	A directive used to disseminate decisions made by the president on national security issues
Presidential study directive (PSD)	A directive used to begin review procedures
Executive order (EO)	A legal order issued by the president to the executive branch
Meeting agendas and summaries of conclusions	<p>Meeting agendas: the topic of conversation to be discussed at NSC meetings, set by the national security advisor at the direction of the president and in consultation with other NSC members</p> <p>Summaries of conclusions: the decisions derived from meetings circulated to attendees and their respective agencies and departments</p>
OMB budget guidance	A memorandum issued by the director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to the heads of agencies and departments to assist in developing budget submissions for the upcoming fiscal year
White House memoranda	A document issued by the president to manage the actions, policies, and practices of executive branch agencies and departments
Public statements and presidential speeches	Statements issued and speeches delivered by the president on a variety of topics
Legislative submissions	Documents include congressional testimonies by government officials, as well as formal annual budget submissions and their justifications by the Executive Office of the President for each fiscal year



*The Eisenhower Executive Office Building houses the National Security Council. Its close proximity to the White House enables presidential coordination of foreign and defense policies carried out by the departments and agencies. The national security advisor has an office in the West Wing of the White House. (Nicholas Suzor)*

## PRINCIPLES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT NSC

The world is unlikely to become less crisis-driven and complex, or any more stable, during the next administration. The external pressures forcing the NSC to respond to crises in real time and update the president on an array of pressing issues will not abate. Any recommendations for NSC reform must accept this reality. But reforms in the areas of human capital, interagency oversight, and strategic and budgetary planning could help the NSC staff better juggle its many competing roles. The current administration, through its own internal review, has identified many of these same issues and is working to make a series of important changes that, if implemented, would make substantial progress towards alleviating the challenges identified in this paper.<sup>19</sup>

Over the years, it has become cliché to call for a more “strategic” NSC staff. That is, one that avoids having its presidential priorities and chief foreign policy objectives clouded by the need to react to a flood of unforeseen events. In reality, pushing for greater attention to big-picture objectives or an

emphasis on long-term or even medium-term U.S. interests and goals translates into daily, practical tradeoffs. There are a number of ways in which NSC staff members can operate more strategically, even though at times they will have to be reactive, making short-term, contingent decisions. In general, greater strategic thinking and planning often come down to greater intentionality and intellectual honesty about decisionmaking. Processes that consciously take into account tradeoffs and risks between short- and long-term interests, between tactics and strategy, between presidential priorities and daily decisions, are generally more strategic.

---

*In reality, pushing for greater attention to big-picture objectives or an emphasis on long-term or even medium-term U.S. interests and goals translates into daily, practical tradeoffs.*

---

Being “strategic” at the NSC is as much a mindset and managerial demand signal as it is a set of documents. The degree to which the NSC makes time for strategic deliberations versus day-to-day crisis management rests largely with the people in the top leadership positions and the messages they send to staff. Becoming “more strategic” will mean that the NSC is thinking, planning, and implementing across different lines of action and effort, depending on the topic at hand, the time horizon of the problem, and the types of interagency levers required to achieve the objective.

### Strengthen Human Capital

Investing in the NSC’s human capital should be prioritized at all levels, specifically in how it recruits, retains, and promotes talent. This investment is among the smartest ways in which the NSC can ensure its own organizational success. A clearly defined human capital strategy is also an important way to grow a cohort of mid- to senior-level national security experts, many of whom will return to home agencies after a tour at the White House, and some of whom might return later in their careers. Within the NSC itself, carefully recruiting the most talented civil and Foreign service officers, as well as active-duty military officers from across the services, and helping to place them subsequently in more senior positions in their home agencies, represents a critical function of the NSC. At the level of senior director, the current mix of political and career professionals makes sense, as long as the political appointees are leading experts in their fields who ideally have some familiarity with U.S. government processes. In truth, both types of employees – detailees and political appointees – come with their own comparative advantages. The former bring real-world policymaking experience and insight from another agency, and the latter bring fresh ideas and perspectives from the outside.

---

*Investing in the NSC’s human capital should be prioritized at all levels, specifically in how it recruits, retains, and promotes talent.*

---

In any organization, but particularly at the NSC, picking the right people is critical. NSC staff must bring a certain level of expertise and experience working on particular regions or functional issues to ensure that they remain credible in the eyes of the interagency (in addition to making good policy decisions). Yet they also need to understand how to run and drive the interagency process, work with experts outside of government, develop relationships with career professionals, and manage both up and down the chain of command within the NSC system. In general, the NSC tends not to emphasize formal training simply because the day-to-day tempo is so demanding and a tour at the NSC is often viewed as training in and of itself. That “hands-off” approach leaves a critical training gap. To fill it, the NSC chief of staff’s office should invest in professional development and training courses that focus on a few different skill sets. First, the training should offer overviews of the tools necessary to make policy decisions and to implement them at the White House (for example, when and how to employ executive orders or presidential policy directives). Second, the training should include a speaker series to introduce the NSC staff to other White House principals (from the Domestic Policy Council, OMB, and National Economic Council, among others). Finally, the training should include leadership seminars on managing, engaging the press, working with legislative-affairs staff, using the intelligence community’s products, and other topics less familiar to new NSC staffers with different professional backgrounds. Such training would not only help those

workers while they are at the NSC but would also assist those who are planning on returning to their home agencies after their tour at the White House.

It should not be too difficult for NSC leadership to prioritize talent recruitment: Most motivated, successful, midlevel professionals across the interagency will want to serve at the White House. The bigger challenge is determining the length of the rotations for detailees, as well as how they are returned to their home agencies. Ideally, rotations should last for at least 18 if not 24 months in order to instill an organizational cohesion that is weakened when detailees rotate through for shorter periods. When it comes time for staff members to rotate back to their home agencies, the NSC chief of staff's office should work to ensure that those home agencies reward NSC detailees for serving at the White House.<sup>20</sup> The president should make clear to agency and department heads that they too should prioritize reintegrating staff that return after tours at the White House. The goal of retention, therefore, should be considered in the broadest sense, in terms of placing NSC alumni in important jobs across the national security agencies, where they can build on their unique White House experiences.

### **Manage Down and Out**

Strategic thinking and planning occurs at many levels. In some cases, there will be an interagency-produced strategic document, such as one that outlines how to achieve a particular presidential priority. For example, if a rebalance to Asia or a diplomatic agreement with Iran is a chief presidential priority, then the NSC's role is to clearly articulate that priority publicly and within the U.S. government and to ensure interagency buy-in through an evolving strategy document, approved by principals. Just as important as a strategy document, however, is the more tedious work of managing U.S. foreign policy at every level of

decisionmaking – in Washington, in the field, and at multiple levels across the agencies – to advance these priorities and ensure that the right resources are invested to support them. Here, the NSC staff must steer a range of decisions and resource allocations, through the IPC and DC processes, and push for accountability of how choices are being made to reflect presidential priorities.

---

*Just as important as a strategy document, however, is the more tedious work of managing U.S. foreign policy at every level of decisionmaking ...*

---

A related strategic role of the NSC is to help balance the decisionmaking process against the natural tendency for regional experts in the interagency, particularly at embassies and at combatant commands, to make tactical decisions favoring short-term equities or the protection/establishment of relationships. At times, focusing only on relationships and equities, such as supporting certain military-to-military relationships or unpopular rulers diplomatically, may risk generating outcomes that are unfavorable to U.S. longer-term interests. Or, supporting short-term solutions can generate instability that will pose a strategic problem in the future. In short, the NSC should purposely work to elevate and address tensions inherent in the objectives or “ends” of U.S. national security, in addition to creatively organizing and managing the “ways” and “means.”

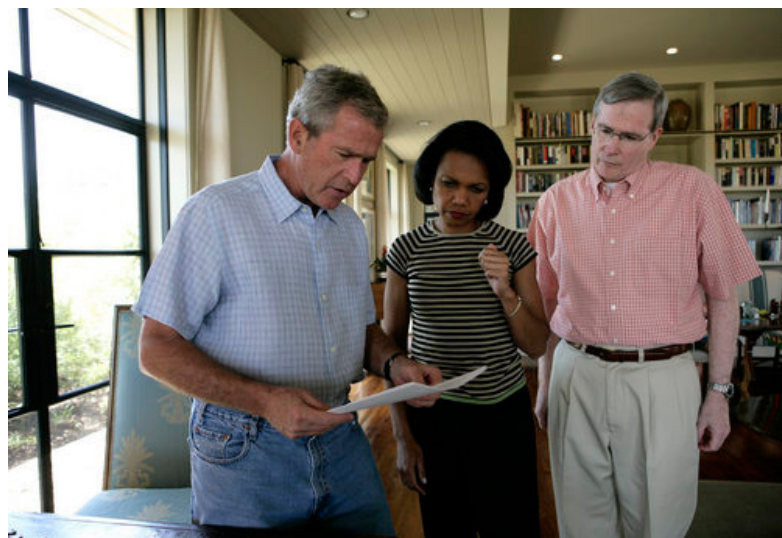
In some cases, a presidential study directive considering an emerging issue or threat will be strategic without having any implementation power, because it will force members of the interagency to come together to study a critical issue,

thereby forging ties and productive working relationships.<sup>21</sup> In some cases, presidential policy directives or actual strategies that are approved at the DC or PC level will be important documents that enable oversight and implementation. Sometimes, writing a presidential speech presents the best opportunity for a range of different NSC perspectives to discuss and deconflict strategy toward a given issue (although additional implementation work needs to be done to translate speeches into actual policy).

Interagency management can also break down when senior directors chairing IPCs are not, or feel they are not, empowered to make choices and therefore push all decisions – large and small – up to deputies and principals. It is therefore critical that the national security advisor and the deputy national security advisor provide clarity on what types of decisions they expect to be taken at lower levels and hold their staff accountable. If every type of decision is pushed upward, the NSC team is overburdened preparing for multiple DC and PC meetings.<sup>22</sup> This has a direct impact on the ability of deputies and principals to manage their home agencies as well as the ability of the NSC staff to carve out time for strategic planning.

### Make Time for Strategic Planning and Forecasting

Additionally, the NSC staff can help develop clear-cut scenarios for how various U.S. responses to crises might play out over the long term, bridging the gap between intelligence analysis and policy recommendations on issues such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Russia, and the rise of China. NSC staffers are perfectly positioned to help the DC and PC process identify and ensure that any tradeoffs between short- and long-term U.S. interests, or between security and economic interests, are intentional and done with full recognition of the opportunities and risks. Employing “options memos” as a format for IPC, DC, and



*In August 2006, President George W. Bush meets with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley at the Bush Ranch to discuss the Middle East. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)*

PC deliberations is a practical way to ensure that the pros and cons of various decisions are weighed fully. This approach can help NSC leadership encourage a culture of dissent among its own staff and across the interagency on the big strategic issues and then capture the key analytical basis for important disagreements in the paperwork prepared for DCs and PCs.

Strategic planning should also mean bringing to bear new technologies and ways to consider future trends and then determining how to plan for these trends, ranging from climate change and its effects to the rise of China.<sup>23</sup> Here, the NSC staff should work with the interagency intelligence and policy planning offices to ensure that in key regions of the world, those charged with minding bilateral relations create the time and space to also consider future scenarios and to anticipate potential crises.<sup>24</sup> Several examples of this kind of work have occurred in recent years and should be expanded. Creating the space, structures, and professional incentives to think through worst-case scenarios in some of the world’s hot spots requires discipline from those doing the work and support from their supervisors.<sup>25</sup>

## Master the Budget Process

Thinking and planning strategically also means that the NSC staff will have to master the budget process. This is an area of persistent weakness at the NSC, a weakness that can be exacerbated by the tendency to assume that a president's speech or statement will equate to actual shifts in resource allocation and spending. In practice, this means that each NSC directorate should work closely with its OMB counterparts, as well as the budgetary planning offices at the Pentagon, State, Treasury, and elsewhere, to plan for future budget cycles. While many presidential initiatives and priorities (e.g., the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief or post-9/11 homeland security) were quickly codified through annual budgetary cycles, over the past decade the NSC has often relied on temporary or off-budgetary measures such as Overseas Contingency Operations funding to resource presidential priorities. The last several years of budgetary trench warfare in Congress around the debt ceiling and the establishment of fixed budget caps through the Budget Control Act of 2011 have only made this problem worse.

directly from presidential priorities are elevated and receive adequate resources, often over multiyear time frames. Recent changes in this area, including detailing an OMB staffer to work with the NSC and including training on OMB processes as part of NSC staff onboarding, represent positive initial steps and should be retained by the next administration. While budgetary oversight is often viewed as one of the least appealing parts of the day-to-day work of directors, particularly by those who lack the know-how for it, the national security advisor and deputy national security advisor need to stress the importance of this work and periodically check in with senior directors on their progress in this area. The NSC chief of staff should also ensure that new arrivals have the training needed to help make this important link between policy formulation and implementation.

---

*Thinking strategically means mastering the budget process that makes any president's longer-term initiatives real ...*

---

Thinking strategically means mastering the budget process that makes any president's longer-term initiatives real, whether they include the so-called "rebalance" toward the Asia-Pacific or a new global health initiative. NSC staff should work with the OMB, and at times it may have to take an active role in ensuring that the programs stemming





*President Barack Obama convenes a National Security Council meeting in the Situation Room of the White House to discuss the situation in Ukraine, on March 3, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)*

## PREPARE NOW FOR THE NEXT PRESIDENT'S NSC SYSTEM

Unlike many other aspects of the U.S. national security system, the size, composition, and mission of the NSC system is entirely malleable to a president's wishes.<sup>26</sup> The next administration must therefore enter the White House with a clear sense of what role it wants the NSC system to play and how the management style of the next president can be best supported. Candidates on the short list to become either the national security advisor or the deputy national security advisor must devote significant time in advance to thinking about how they can best equip their NSC team to fulfill a number of often competing roles. Seeking out briefings on the current internal NSC reform process would be a good start. More specifically, the new NSC team should closely examine the frequency of meetings and overall staff size, two

key elements that shape NSC operations and the rhythm of presidential decisionmaking.<sup>27</sup>

Building the team itself should be handled carefully, ensuring that the new NSC has the right mix of experience, dynamic thinking, and detailed knowledge of the issues to be effective. Given the range of national security and foreign policy challenges facing the United States, it is critical to build a team and a culture inside the NSC system that can enable the next occupant of the Oval Office to protect and advance the nation's interests at home and abroad.

## ENDNOTES

1. This paper uses the terms NSC, NSC system, and NSC staff to describe various facets of the overall NSC organization. The formal National Security Council, as outlined in the National Security Act of 1947, is referenced as such in the paper. See Public Law 235–61 Stat. 495, *The National Security Act of 1947*, July 26, 1947, codified at 50 U.S.C. § 15, “War and National Defense”; Amy B. Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 76–108; and Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
2. Gordon Adams and Cindy Williams, *Buying National Security: How America Plans and Pays for Its Global Role and Safety at Home* (London: Routledge, 2009).
3. This paper was written while the current administration was undertaking its own reform process. As such, many of the conclusions of that internal review are similar and/or complementary to recommendations we make in this paper. As the implementation of the internal review begins, we recommend that the details be conveyed to those who are most likely to staff the nascent transition teams of both Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. Karen DeYoung, “White House tries for a leaner National Security Council,” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/white-house-tries-for-a-leaner-national-security-council/2015/06/22/22ef7e52-1909-11e5-93b7-5eddc056ad8a\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/white-house-tries-for-a-leaner-national-security-council/2015/06/22/22ef7e52-1909-11e5-93b7-5eddc056ad8a_story.html).
4. Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 76–108.
5. I.M. Destler and Ivo H. Daalder, “A New NSC for a New Administration,” Brookings Policy Brief #68 (The Brookings Institution, November 2000).
6. David Rothkopf, *National Insecurity: American Leadership in an Age of Fear* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), 207; Authors’ interview with senior NSC officials, June 2015.
7. Authors’ interview with senior NSC officials, June 2015.
8. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on the White House Organization for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism,” May 26, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/statement-president-white-house-organization-homeland-security-and-counterterrorism>. The Obama administration’s decision to merge the Homeland Security Council with the NSC only accounts for between one-third and one-half of the expansion. Authors’ interviews with NSC staff, April 2015.
9. The Eisenhower model was the first to attempt to break out “strategic planning” from day-to-day national security management. His system is outlined in Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*.
10. Ivo H. Daalder and I.M. Destler, *In the Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisers and the Presidents They Served – From JFK to George W. Bush* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 12–56. Also see Peter Rodman, *Presidential Command: Power, Leadership, and the Making of Foreign Policy from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush* (New York: Vintage, 2010).
11. For example, President Kennedy felt that he lacked sufficient information to properly evaluate the failed Bay of Pigs operation in Cuba. Following the episode, he created the Situation Room in the White House. An underexplored element of the history of U.S. national security decisionmaking is the role of technology and how different presidents and cabinet officials have employed it. See Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 85.
12. Leslie Gelb as quoted in Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 76.
13. For a full listing through Thomas E. Donilon’s tenure, including dates of service, see Richard A. Best Jr., “The National Security Council: An Organizational Assessment,” RL30840 (Congressional Research Service, December 28, 2011). Our count includes William H. Jackson’s short tenure as NSA from September 1956 to January 1957. It only counts once the two men who have served in the position twice, Robert Cutler and Brent Scowcroft.
14. We include the day-to-day “staffing” of the president as a component of this overall mission.
15. 50 U.S.C. § 3021, “National Security Council” states, “The Council shall be composed of—(1) the President; (2) the Vice President; (3) the Secretary of State; (4) the Secretary of Defense; (5) the Secretary of Energy; and (6) the Secretaries and Under Secretaries of other executive departments and of the military departments, when appointed by the President by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, to serve at his pleasure.” For more background, see Richard A. Best, Jr., “The National Security Council”; and Alan G. Whittaker, Shannon A. Brown, Frederick C. Smith, and Elizabeth McKune, “The National Security Policy Process: The National Security Council and Interagency System,” research report (Washington, DC: Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University, August 15, 2011).
16. Based on the authors’ experience, it is likely that dozens of formal meetings of the National Security Council (with the president presiding) occur every year.
17. Interviews with NSC officials suggest they are making some progress on this issue (e.g., reducing the number of Deputies Committee meetings), but there is still opportunity for significant improvement.
18. This is not a new phenomenon. Amy Zegart describes how, in the summer of 1961, the establishment of the Situation Room in the White House basement allowed President Kennedy and his staff to “monitor for the first time the outgoing cable traffic of the departments and agencies.” See Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 85. See also David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005), 459, for a general description of the “tyranny of the inbox.”
19. Authors’ interview with senior NSC officials, June 2015.
20. While many NSC staffers go on to positions of increased influence and responsibility at their home agencies, it is not uncommon to hear stories of excellent NSC alumni who were passed over for promotion or otherwise mistreated as a result of being away from their agency for several years.
21. The Atrocities Prevention Board offers a good example of a forward-thinking and planning process that suffered from inadequate implementation powers, or at least did not enjoy as much leverage on the interagency as its originators might have hoped for. However, the process of creatively generating ideas for how the interagency would respond to evolving crises is still useful. In the best-case scenario, if the NSC injects a methodology whereby choices today are also contextualized in terms of long-term tradeoffs, this adds nuance and intellectual rigor even in the Situation Room during a PC or DC crisis discussion.
22. The authors understand that the number of DCs and PCs meetings has decreased by 20 to 30 percent over the last six months and leadership is dedicated to further reductions where prudent.
23. Dafna H. Rand and Michael Horowitz, “The Crisis-Prevention Directorate,” *The National Interest* (May 21, 2014), <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-crisis-prevention-directorate-10500>.
24. An example of this kind of work is the NSC-led review of the Indian Ocean region, conducted in 2011–2012 that brought together key U.S.-government actors to consider U.S. interests and long-term strategy for a region that had never before been considered in a cohesive way.
25. Senior NSC officials have historically held periodic meetings to look at long-term trends. Current senior NSC officials report that these meetings are being held more frequently.
26. The only NSC position mandated by the 1947 National Security Act is the executive secretary.
27. Staff size and composition should reflect presidential priorities. For example, assuming Asia and the Middle East command similar levels of attention and resources in U.S. policy, then staff sizes for those directorates should also be roughly equal. In addition, if the next administration decides to transfer some press and legislative responsibilities to agencies and departments, NSC staff working on those functions could also be reduced.

## *About the Center for a New American Security*

The mission of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) is to develop strong, pragmatic and principled national security and defense policies. Building on the expertise and experience of its staff and advisors, CNAS engages policymakers, experts and the public with innovative, fact-based research, ideas and analysis to shape and elevate the national security debate. A key part of our mission is to inform and prepare the national security leaders of today and tomorrow.

CNAS is located in Washington, and was established in February 2007 by co-founders Kurt M. Campbell and Michèle A. Flournoy. CNAS is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt nonprofit organization. Its research is independent and non-partisan. CNAS does not take institutional positions on policy issues. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the authors.

© 2015 Center for a New American Security.

All rights reserved.

### **Center for a New American Security**

1152 15th Street, NW  
Suite 950  
Washington, DC 20005

TEL 202.457.9400  
FAX 202.457.9401  
EMAIL [info@cnas.org](mailto:info@cnas.org)  
[www.cnas.org](http://www.cnas.org)

## *Production Notes*

**Paper recycling** is reprocessing waste paper fibers back into a usable paper product.

**Soy ink** is a helpful component in paper recycling. It helps in this process because the soy ink can be removed more easily than regular ink and can be taken out of paper during the de-inking process of recycling. This allows the recycled paper to have less damage to its paper fibers and have a brighter appearance. The waste that is left from the soy ink during the de-inking process is not hazardous and it can be treated easily through the development of modern processes.





Center for a  
New American  
Security

*Bold. Innovative. Bipartisan.*

1152 15th Street, NW  
Suite 950  
Washington, DC 20005

TEL 202.457.9400  
FAX 202.457.9401  
EMAIL [info@cnas.org](mailto:info@cnas.org)

[www.cnas.org](http://www.cnas.org)



Printed on Post-Consumer Recycled paper with Soy Inks