The National Security Council: A Tool for Decision

By Luke Strange

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Key Points

- The United States faces a renewed period of great power competition, and the National Security Council (NSC), the principal institution for presidential national security decision-making, needs to be up to the task.
- A disciplined, effective process that is grounded in the NSC's statutory framework and the lessons of its history can give the president a chance to make good decisions.
- Rather than treating the NSC as a superagency for national security matters, presidents and their staffs should see the NSC for what it is: a powerful tool to help presidents make decisions.

America's post–Cold War holiday from history is over, and we now face a renewed period of great power competition. Competition between the United States and its two great power competitors—China and Russia—combined with the threats of rogue states, international terrorist networks, and the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction sets the context for American national security policymaking, as the new National Defense Strategy[1] observes. To protect and advance US interests and values, American national security policymakers must shake off the rust accumulated over our long hibernation and address the current task with discipline, vigor, pragmatism, and a clear-eyed appreciation of America's strengths.

The United States possesses enduring sources of strength, including our military might, our economic leadership, our institutions of republican self-government, and the strength of our values. To compete and win, it is essential to adapt our national security policy by realigning and coordinating US foreign policy, military strategy, economic statecraft, and other tools of national power to face a more competitive international environment. Meeting these challenges will require carefully considering the institutions and processes of national security decision-making, because the urgency of these challenges demands sharp judgment and pragmatic policymaking, supported by robust decision-making processes suited to the moment and grounded in prudence, statute, and historical practice. In particular, the tools of presidential national security decision-making through the National Security Council (NSC) should be reevaluated in the context of the emerging international order that this president and future presidents will face.

At a time of renewed challenge abroad and testing of many political institutions at home, reminding ourselves of the purposes toward which we design the institutions of national security can lay the groundwork for preserving what is good, while establishing a framework for renewal. For the presidency, that means asking

fundamental questions about process and purpose. Each president makes national security decisions differently, but to be successful, the president should adhere to three key principles: (1) The president should organize, staff, and operate his NSC in a manner consistent with the institution's statutory foundations; (2) how the president uses the NSC should be shaped by the lessons of the successes and failures of prior administrations of the postwar era, and (3) as much as possible, the NSC should do only the things that only the NSC can do. Rather than trying to reinvent the NSC to adapt to the changing international security environment, correct the perceived faults of a predecessor, or use the NSC to do things it cannot do, presidents should see the NSC for what it is: a powerful decision-making tool.

The president is solely responsible for national security decision-making under the constitution, and the NSC is an advisory body meant to help him make those decisions and oversee their implementation.

To provide the president with the right set of resources for decision-making and to oversee the implementation of those decisions require discipline and proper perspective on what the NSC is, its purpose, and what it can and cannot do. Presidents and the White Houses that serve them have a better chance at success if they treat the NSC as a staff component of the institution of the presidency with a unique and limited role and if they act as stewards of that institution with a clear recognition of the lessons of history. Under the crush of events and the responsibilities of presidential leadership, the NSC process can fail the president when it strays from the middle path laid out in its statutory foundations and institutional past.

A successful NSC does a few things well and does them the right way. It organizes decisions for the president on national security issues and oversees their implementation in a way that is consistent with the three key principles above: concurrent with the statutory foundations of the NSC, concerned exclusively with operating on the president's behalf, and consonant with the institutional framework built over the decades since its creation.

The Origins of the NSC

The National Security Council was established in the National Security Act of 1947 to do three things:

> (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 United States 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; and
> (3) Make recommendations to the President concerning policies on matters of common interest to the departments and agencies of the United States Government concerned with the national security.[2]

The members of the NSC are the president, the vice president, the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the secretary of energy, and the secretary of the treasury, with the director of national intelligence, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and others serving as statutory advisers.[3] The president is solely responsible for national security decision-making under the constitution, and the NSC is an advisory body meant to help him make those decisions and oversee their implementation, as opposed to an operational agency with responsibility for carrying out government policy.[4]

There are different ways of looking at the decisions and circumstances that led to the creation of the NSC. One is to see the NSC as an element of the post-WWII transformation of US foreign policy to that of a superpower and upholder of the postwar order, along with other pillars (e.g., the

Department of Defense and CIA) created by the National Security Act of 1947. Another is to see the NSC as a mechanism imposed on the presidency by Congress, in part as a reaction to President Franklin Roosevelt's ad-hoc and centralized decision-making style, to force collective decision-making by the executive branch.[5] In both cases, the NSC was clearly born together with the institutions of postwar American global leadership. To understand one we must understand the other.

In the end, the president decides how to model and enforce that discipline because the NSC, as a presidential instrument, is built to respond to the preferences and desires of the commander in chief.

In the broader context, we should recognize that Americans have less trust in many of the institutions of our political life than at any other time in the postwar era. As observers on the left and the right have persuasively argued, there are good reasons for that loss of trust. Many institutions of the federal government are not responsive to the preferences of large swaths of the voting public. This erosion dates back decades: the War on Poverty has failed to meaningfully reduce the poverty level after 50 years and trillions of dollars spent, Congress has not fulfilled some of its basic constitutional and legal responsibilities, and the US experiences in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere have rightly lead many Americans to question the credibility and competence of those who wield the instruments of American power. Renewing our institutions for a newly competitive era means reconnecting with the purposes for which they were created and reckoning with the reasons for this loss of confidence.

As Yuval Levin writes, conservatives proceed philosophically from a low opinion of human nature and an appreciation of the traditions and institutions that have survived the test of time. This properly leads to a kind of "politics of gratitude," he says, when it comes to institutions that have survived that test.[6] Holding the institutional failures of the past 70 years in balance against the increase in peace, prosperity, and freedom and looking at the institutions of American national security in that context, a politics of gratitude applied to the institutions of national security should lead conservatives to seek out the good in what has survived, to shore it up, and to build upon it as a surer foundation for facing the coming challenges.

For the institution of the presidency and the NSC specifically, the way a president uses the NSC should be fitted to the institution's statutory foundations and the practices established on those foundations by previous administrations that have stood the test of time, while hewing closely to its role as a staff office acting on the president's behalf. What gives life to these processes of national security decision-making is that the exercise is intended to enforce discipline on presidential national security decision-making. This discipline flows two ways: down from the president through the national security bureaucracy through his cabinet secretaries and up through the interagency process to the president in the form of an organized, informed decision on a set of national security issues.

In the end, the president decides how to model and enforce that discipline because the NSC, as a presidential instrument, is built to respond to the preferences and desires of the commander in chief; indeed, it depends on him. If the system works well, the president will benefit the most of all—from good information, the informed recommendations of his advisers, and the buy-in of the bureaucracy implementing his agenda. If the system fails, the president will suffer most of all—from strategic blind spots, infighting among his staff, and a deficient capacity to make his decisions real. It is the president's staff and the president's choice.

Understanding National Security Decision-Making

To equip the president and the NSC staff for decision-making in this new era of strategic competition, it is vital to understand the foundations of national security decision-making and why the

president is best served by hewing to the three principles listed above. At least since President Dwight D. Eisenhower, presidents have made national security decisions in part through the NSC, but no president has done so in the same way. There are at least three ways of understanding national security decision-making: a *right path/wrong path* framework, a *statutory history* framework, and a *golden-mean* framework. Rather than descriptions of how presidents have behaved, these three frameworks are collections of schools of thought about how presidents organize their national security decision-making processes.

To be useful, these frameworks must be descriptive and prescriptive, and they must give presidents and their staffs a clear understanding of the successes and failures of their predecessors and point the way to sound national security decision-making for the challenges of the future. Although the first two frameworks get some key elements right, the golden-mean framework combines the best points from each perspective, yields a fuller and more complete vision for understanding presidential national security decision-making, and points the way to developing recommendations consistent with the three principles of this paper. Understanding these frameworks is the key to arriving at an NSC system that is rooted in its statutory foundations, molded by the best of what has come before, and imbued with a sense of presidential agency. A disciplined presidential national security decision-making process equipped for the challenges ahead begins with this understanding.

Right Path/Wrong Path. One way to understand the different ways presidents have made national security decisions is to suggest two distinct models for the national security decision-making process and argue that each administration has employed one of two approaches. According to this view, presidents and their teams have adapted these models over time, successfully and not, to the challenges of national security decision-making in the White House, and the closer presidents and, in particular, assistants to the president for national security affairs (APNSAs, or national security advisors) stick to the right path as opposed to the wrong one, the better off they will be. There is an "honest broker" path, formalized by Brent Scowcroft in his work on the Tower Commission report[7] and put into practice by him in the George H. W. Bush administration, and an "operational" path, epitomized by Henry Kissinger as Nixon and Ford's APNSA but evident in other administrations as well.

Scowcroft is credited with conceiving of his role as APNSA to President Bush as that of an honest broker,[8] organizing decisions for the president by orchestrating a process in which cabinet secretaries and other interagency advisers air their views, engage in debate, and present options to the president. Policy options are debated and refined through the interagency process at the National Security Council—committees made up of agency representatives and NSC staff at the interagency, deputy, and principal level—through which the NSC staff also oversees implementation of presidential decisions.

Scowcroft developed this model through the course of his service in previous administrations and as the drafter of the Tower Commission report, which laid out NSC reforms in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra affair. In this framework, APNSAs should design and operate a process of national security decision-making wherein the APNSA dispassionately frames options for the president, helping him make decisions without tipping the scales or suppressing relevant information or advice, and then the APNSA oversees the implementation of the president's decision without micromanaging the line departments and agencies.

On the other side of the coin, the word "operationalized" has come back into currency in discussing the kind of things the NSC should and should not do. An operational APNSA or NSC staffer is someone who steps outside the NSC's advisory and coordinating roles into the operation or direct implementation of policy. This displaces the line departments and agencies, which have the statutory authority and often the capabilities directly relevant to the issue at hand. It is also a departure from the NSC's statutory charter as an advisory body only, not one charged with operational duties or given commensurate legal authorities (or congressional oversight). One of the early influential national security advisors, McGeorge Bundy in the Kennedy administration, placed himself and his staff in a greater operational role than the NSC staff in the Eisenhower administration

by eliminating the NSC's two advisory bodies under Eisenhower—the Planning Board and the Operations Coordinating Board—and consolidating the agenda-setting power in his own office, capitalizing on the freedom of movement afforded to him by the lack of formal structures.[9] Henry Kissinger, President Richard Nixon's national security advisor (then secretary of state *and* national security advisor), further centralized a great deal of national security decision-making in the White House by taking control of the development of options (and thus the power to set the agenda) away from the State Department, as John Prados[10] and David Rothkopf[11] detail in their histories of the National Security Council. In more extreme examples, NSC staff members have gone operational by making and carrying out policy in violation of US law, as in the case of Oliver North.

According to the right path/wrong path framework, the hero of the story of the National Security Council is Scowcroft; the villain is Bundy or Kissinger depending on your partisan preferences. There is a problem, though: The choice between them is a false one that does not capture the range of personal and structural dynamics that presidents and their staffs actually deal with in running an NSC process. Scowcroft served President George H. W. Bush, who had held several cabinet-level positions and knew what to expect from his appointees and his White House staff, and President Bush had Secretary of State James Baker, a man whose experience as treasury secretary and White House chief of staff prepared him well to work in an executive decision-making system.[12] Scowcroft would have had a much different experience if he had been tasked to run an NSC process for Bill Clinton, a former governor of Arkansas, just as Bundy would have had a different experience if he had served Eisenhower, a former logistician and supreme allied commander, rather than Kennedy, a former senator and an avatar of confident postwar liberalism.

Further, this framework ignores that some presidents who ended up with operational APNSAs chose their personnel in a way that made that situation possible, even likely. As Peter Rodman writes, Kennedy wanted Bundy to run his NSC in a far different—and White House–centric—way than Eisenhower's NSC. Both Kissinger and Nixon very much wanted to centralize the operation of foreign policy in the White House, away from Secretary William Rogers and the State Department.[13] That both Kennedy and Nixon ended up in foreign policy crises stemming from a foreign policy operated out of the White House may then be somewhat less surprising. To be sure, both administrations had other problems besides overcentralized decision-making. The key is that both Kennedy and Nixon were responsible for building their NSC systems, and through decision and indecision they got the NSC systems that they wanted. While the right path/wrong path framework helps illuminate some of what made Scowcroft a great APNSA *for President Bush* and where Kennedy and Nixon may have gotten off on the wrong foot, it does not tell us enough, and it does not tell future presidents or APNSAs how to avoid falling into the operational trap.

For an institution designed to respond to the president's needs for information, advice, and coordination, it is not enough to say that APNSAs should emulate Brent Scowcroft and deplore Kissinger or Bundy. A model with better descriptive fidelity would provide a better groundwork for policy and personnel prescriptions for presidents and their staffs.

Statutory History. In her valuable revisionist study of the origins of the NSC, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Central Intelligence Agency,[14] Amy Zegart puts forward another model for thinking about the NSC that could be called the statutory history model. While this model adds some important factors for policymakers to consider when understanding the history and development of the NSC, looking at the statutory history leaves the picture incomplete and does not provide a usable road map for future administrations.

Zegart writes in *Flawed by Design* that the NSC system is not, contrary to the received wisdom, the expression of a contentious debate between the executive and legislative branches in the drafting of the 1947 National Security Act and that NSC systems are not determined by each individual president. Instead, she argues, the NSC "has developed along a path made possible by the original National Security Act, made likely by the constellation of interests and capabilities of

political institutions, and made real by critical events of the day."[15] Rather than springing forth out of a vacuum or being designed by theorists of international relations, Zegart argues that national security agencies are created by political actors acting in their own interests, "who must operate in a reality suffused with conflict, contention, and compromise at the domestic level."[16] She writes that, once set in statute, institutions such as the NSC carry with them their essential features over the decades and into the present day.[17] The way to understand national security decision-making, according to Zegart, is to understand the domestic political interests at play among the framers of the postwar institutions of national security and to recognize that variations in national security decision-making systems and processes among administrations are fundamentally bounded by the NSC's statutory history.

The statutory history framework illuminates a few significant factors that are essential to understanding how the NSC works, but it is incomplete as a prescriptive road map. Statutory history emphasizes two truths: (1) The NSC is an artifact of a larger political compromise and therefore cannot be abstracted from its political context, and (2) the NSC has an essential structure set by statute, the boundaries of which it cannot leave too far behind. These points are important because they underscore the risks that arise when presidents and their staffs try to use the NSC for something other than its original purposes of organizing decisions on the president's behalf and overseeing implementation. Administrations that have gone beyond those bounds have found themselves in operational, legal, and political trouble.

The Golden Mean. So what is the golden mean when it comes to national security decision-making? In the context of the NSC, it is found in the expression of its institutional purpose, laid out in the 1947 National Security Act and refined through the years by a process of holding onto the features and characteristics that survive the test of time. This framework rests on the insight that, when presidents and their advisers have hewed closely to the critical tasks and best practices of national security decision-making, acted strictly on the president's behalf, and inhabited the statutory and traditional roles, they have had a better chance of avoiding the failures and pathologies of bad decisions and bad staff work. James Q. Wilson makes this essential point in his study of bureaucracy:

> These successes were the result of skilled executives who correctly identified the critical tasks of their organizations, distributed authority in a way appropriate to those tasks, infused their subordinates with a sense of mission, and acquired sufficient autonomy to permit them to get on with the job.[18]

The NSC's history exhibits a number of pathologies: personal pathologies such as presidential disengagement with the decision-making process and poisonous personal relationships, structural issues such as the growth of the national security state over time or the decline of the State Department, pathologies of bad information or poor analysis, and tendencies to misunderstand the NSC's role and critical tasks. What these pathologies have in common is that they represent deviations from the statutory functions of the NSC, the posture of proper stewardship of the institutions of national security, the exercise of good character and the qualities of leadership, or many of these simultaneously.

For all the NSC-related crises and controversies in which presidents have found themselves, some presidents have gotten the balance right and found a way to run a successful national security decision-making system. Success is not a secret. The outlines of such an approach have been available for decades. The tenets of a high-functioning and valuable NSC have been evident since at least the late 1950s, when Sen. Henry C. "Scoop" Jackson (D-WA) held his series of hearings on Organizing for National Security, up through the Tower Commission's report three decades later. So why doesn't everyone else just "do it right"?

If there is a defined best model—the one formalized by Scowcroft, designed according to the recommendations of the Eastern establishment mandarins who testified before Jackson's committee, or some other framework—why does the NSC and its staff consistently veer off course? The golden-mean framework answers some of these questions and outlines a way for policymakers and observers of the national security decision-

making process to understand how to do better by hewing closely to the properly understood purposes of the NSC.

For example, when President Kennedy inherited the Bay of Pigs operation from the Eisenhower administration, he and his APNSA, Bundy did not ask the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CIA the right kinds of questions about their assumptions of operational secrecy, contingency plans, prospects for support on the Cuban mainland, and other issues.[19] A process that integrated these inputs, overseen by a president engaged with the decision and demanding cooperation among his subordinates, may have been better positioned to avoid the debacle that the operation became. When Reagan NSC officials ran the operation that provided funds to Nicaraguan Contra rebels from arms sales to Iran in violation of legal restrictions on funding for that group, they clearly deviated from the purpose of the NSC staff.

Although secrecy is occasionally necessary to preserve the president's freedom of movement in sensitive diplomatic matters, as Kissinger and others have observed,[20] there is a distinction between secrecy in the service of actions that are consistent with the purpose of the NSC and its staff and secrecy with the intent to conceal NSC operations from Congress, the public, and potentially the president himself. The key point of failure, in both cases, is the president failing to keep his NSC staff and process on a path consistent with the statutory purposes of the NSC and the body of traditions, norms, and procedures that govern its successful operation.

What are this framework's weaknesses, why has it not prevailed over others, and what other considerations that fall outside each of these frameworks might be added to the debate? First, the golden-mean framework relies on actors in the system buying into it. Rather than a plug-and-play solution, which can be forgotten once implemented, a change in the temperamental approach and expectations of the NSC process must be deliberate and sustained to have an impact. In any institution, shifting the cultural context can be a challenge; for the NSC, pushing back against status quo bias and the human tendency to hedge against risk by pulling all decisions into a close circle will be a constant, vital struggle.

Second, there are surely a variety of explanations for why the golden-mean framework has not prevailed over others. One is that many presidents come into office arguing that their predecessor did it all wrong, so they put new systems in place to follow through on campaign promises to shake things up.

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Third, some elements of how national security decision-making works in practice are not fully captured by any of the three frameworks. For example, whatever the framework a president or APNSA brings to the NSC, there will usually be some degree of policy formulation at the NSC level, as opposed to filtering up from the interagency, as the honest broker system would have it, or arising through an "operational" APNSA taking matters into his or her own hands. While an experienced president and his staff may recognize that the pace of the policy process may sometimes result in making policy on the fly from the White House, whether in crisis situations or because of the necessity of secrecy, the golden-mean framework argues for treating these instances as clearly defined exceptions to a strictly enforced rule.

Finally, the NSC is extremely flexible, but it is the product of an idea of the presidency growing out of the 1947 National Security Act. If the organization of the executive branch or the institution of the presidency were to change in some fundamental way, this framework would lose some of its explanatory and prescriptive power.

It is not enough to say that one president had it right and the others had it wrong, that the

statutory history set the course for the institution, or that the NSC is nothing more than a function of the president. There is truth in both of these frameworks, but the presidency is too powerful, and the institution of the NSC is too flexible for either framework to fully capture what goes on and, more importantly, to provide presidents and their staffs with a guide for what to do in the future. The golden-mean framework, then, encompasses three meanings: a mean between the two frameworks discussed above, a description of the proper personnel outlook and temperament of a chief executive, and a road map for the APNSAs of the future.

Recommendations

For presidents and those advising them on how to construct and operate their NSC process, the first question should be: So what? How does the framework offered above translate into actionable recommendations? The bottom line is that there is no one perfect NSC system, and previous administrations have gotten things wrong in many ways. While no system will be perfect and any setup is inevitably—and by design—contingent on the personalities and circumstances involved, these recommendations could better ground the NSC according to the three key principles of this paper: consistent with the NSC's statutory foundations, restricted to acting on the president's behalf, and mindful of institutional history. A better grounding in these principles would position the president and his NSC staff to shape, be shaped by, and benefit from a disciplined process that is fitted to its purpose, making the NSC a powerful tool for presidential national security decision-making.

Presidential Leadership. First, the president's personal investment in the NSC process is an indispensable element of success because it is a powerful tool for decision-making that operates explicitly on the president's behalf. Even if the NSC will inevitably not be the exclusive forum or mode for presidential decision-making on national security, it should be the primary one. As Robert Cutler, one of President Eisenhower's APNSAs, said, "You have to have a mechanism provided to each president which he finds useful and attractive."[21] If the president finds that the NSC process is not serving his decision-making needs well and if he is not invested in fixing the situation, he is apt to go elsewhere for advice, depriving himself of the considerable resources of his own staff and the departments and agencies that are led by his appointees. Cutler's recommendation is echoed by every other witness testifying before the Senate investigation of which he was a part and has been echoed by presidents and APNSAs since. It is also honored in the breach; one of the findings of the Tower Commission on Iran-Contra was that President Reagan's detachment from the NSC process led to staff adventurism that got themselves and the administration into significant trouble later.

The primacy of the NSC as the president's decision-making forum for national security issues recognizes and protects the vitally important web of trust and collaboration among the president and his senior cabinet members.

Although informal decision-making structures have been a part of every White House since before the creation of the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC), it is worth considering Cutler's words of caution as a veteran of the SWNCC era: "Nothing is so dangerous to any form of government or any private enterprise as the *ex parte* decision, based on the advice of only one of several sides, privately spoken to the head man."[22]

The primacy of the NSC as the president's decision-making forum for national security issues recognizes and protects the vitally important web of trust and collaboration among the president and his senior cabinet members. As Steven Hadley found in his experience as national security advisor for President George W. Bush, ensuring that the secretaries of state and defense had confidence in him as the president's agent for national security and that they were receiving a fair hearing relative

to other cabinet secretaries was vital to the smooth flow of information and advice to the president.[23] After all, that is what the NSC is all about; this is the web of relationships in which the president must invest. Only the president can make sure that happens.

Second, to resituate the NSC in its proper place with regard to its statutory history, institutional evolution, and relationship with the president, it is important that the NSC staff and the APNSA take ownership of their role as *presidential* staff. In other words, to carry out the third recommendation of this paper—that the NSC should do only those things that only the NSC can do—the APNSA should act exclusively as the president's agent in the national security decision-making process, as opposed to acting as a principal decision maker in his own right, much less a partisan on behalf of a particular agency or part of the government. Honest brokerage is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition. It must be honest brokerage on the president's behalf, privileging his need for information, advice, and the views of his advisers above other considerations.

Because the NSC is fundamentally a tool to enable presidential decision-making, the options laid before the president must be genuine, clear, and differentiated from one another and the status quo.

Colin Dueck writes that "among the principal players in the foreign policy process, only the national security advisor can represent the president's distinct, overarching perspective, separate from specific departmental responsibilities and representations."[24] The alternatives of an APNSA as a principal or an APNSA carrying water for one party in the interagency process conflict with the statutory history and historical best practices that inform the other two recommendations of this paper. In the past such practices have put APNSAs on dangerous ground, politically, professionally, and legally. To be effective, the APNSA should privilege the first four words in his title—"assistant to the president" above the second four.

Third, the recent presidential transition was the focus of a cluster of new studies on the operation of the NSC, and they offer three insights in common that are consistent with the golden-mean framework: (1) Draw out coherent disagreements between competing parties rather than pre-litigating issues for the president, (2) elevate strategic planning in the NSC, and (3) empower the line agencies and departments, in part by shrinking the size of the NSC staff. Each of these three recommendations has pitfalls, but together they point to the same lesson that was drawn from the NSC's history: understanding the NSC as a tool for presidential decision and as an institution with a past, a present, and a future and recognizing the need to operate within it as a steward of that institution.

Coherent Disagreement. The NSC is structured to accommodate divergent viewpoints among the president's advisers—arising from their backgrounds, bureaucratic interests, and competition for status vis-à-vis other members of the cabinet. Instances of the NSC functioning well have usually included debates among advisers with the goal of developing viable options for the president. If a president is so inclined, he can use this structure of multiple advocacy[25] as a tool for arriving at better decisions.

While many thinkers and practitioners on NSC issues have touched on this in various ways, Colin Dueck's essay on strategic planning addresses particularly important aspects of this point. Dueck writes that the "presentation of meaningful choices to the chief executive is central to his authority. Prior bureaucratic consensus is overrated."[26] Because the NSC is fundamentally a tool to enable presidential decision-making, the options laid before the president must be genuine, clear, and differentiated from one another and the status quo. Doing otherwise—using the NSC as a platform to display the appearance of genuine consensus or to exclude line departments and agencies from the process of options development—takes the NSC out of the position of being a forum for presidential decision-making.

One of the NSC's fundamental purposes is to draw out coherent recommendations, distilled and hashed out through honest, structured debate

among presidential advisers; otherwise, why have advisers and why have an NSC? Elite praise for assembling an impressive cabinet or for message discipline or a superficial appearance of agreement will not benefit the president nearly as much as good advice from trusted advisers who buy into his decisions and implement them in their respective agencies.

Strategic Planning. While many observers have argued for the importance of elevating strategic planning in the NSC process, implementation matters but can easily go off track. Notably, nearly every report, testimony, or NSC staff veteran's account describes the feeling inside the White House of being buried under the avalanche of current events of unimaginable difficulty and complexity and of giving short shrift to long-term thinking because of an all-consuming "tyranny of the inbox" that privileges responding to the crisis of the moment over contemplation of future interests.

An Atlantic Council report proposes to deal with this problem by designating a strategic planning staff in the NSC, chaired by the deputy APNSA or a senior director, to coordinate the development of a strategy and oversee its implementation.[27] The reasoning behind this decision is understandable: We want senior decision makers to be able to think strategically and to integrate strategic plans across the interagency that account for the complexity of US foreign policy interests and challenges. However, a dedicated staff for strategic planning runs the risk of being hived off from the rest of the NSC process, reducing its effectiveness and, crucially, depriving the president and his team of the benefits of sustained attention to strategic planning.

A better solution would recognize that structuring an NSC process is not about creating the perfect staff structure that incorporates everything the government does or should do; it is about serving the president's needs for national security decision-making. That means that the president draws the line about what is and is not relevant to the NSC. In strategic planning and as a general principle, the president should ask, "What can my departments and agencies be doing, in their areas of responsibility, and what can only the NSC do?" The NSC is powerful because the president is powerful; it takes presidential discipline to keep the NSC acting as an agent of the president by coordinating among the interagency strategy cells to fashion national strategy. The NSC was created to provide that coordination, and strategic planning in the NSC, with or without a designated staff billet, should be incorporated with that in mind.

A Staff, Not an Agency unto Itself. The size of the NSC staff became a controversial issue in the final years of the Obama administration, when it topped 400.[28] Critics, including former Obama cabinet secretaries, charged that the NSC had grown too large and was micromanaging departments and agencies, including military officers engaged in operations in the field.[29] Yet the key decision that the president and his APNSA must make is how to define the NSC's role: What it is, what it does, and whom does it serve. Choices about staff size and the role of the national security interagency process should flow from that principal decision. It will be different for each president, but a smaller staff that is tightly focused on supporting the decision-making needs of the president in national security matters and overseeing implementation of those decisions, while not getting involved in actually implementing them, is consistent with the framework above.

To prevent NSC staff from straying into policy implementation, presidents should ensure that line departments and agencies are staffed with political appointees at the assistant and deputy assistant secretary level who are charged with doing that work. Leaving senior policy positions in the departments and agencies unfilled or filled with temporary appointees in acting roles encourages the unhealthy temptation on the part of any given administration to centralize decision-making in the White House. While the Obama administration was rightly faulted for this tendency, the temptation goes back decades. To bring the departments and agencies along, it is not enough to make a decision in the West Wing. Political appointees in the bureaucracies, empowered with the budgetary and policy authority of their positions, must be able to drive the bureaucracy to implement that decision, consistent with the agenda of the president and the cabinet secretary appointed to oversee it.

Of course, simply putting one's people in place is not enough. The process must run well, and presidential investment in getting a good result

from his national security decision-making process is essential. Otherwise, political appointees might act on faulty assumptions, foreclose promising policy options, and lead the nation into dangerous situations. To his credit, Gen. H. R. McMaster, the current APNSA, knows these risks intimately. He literally wrote the book on how Presidents Kennedy and Johnson were ill-served by their political appointees and the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Vietnam War.[30]

Although decisions about the NSC's size and role are almost exclusively the president's, Congress has intervened to restrict the NSC from extending its reach beyond its appropriate grasp. A recent example is the Fiscal Year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act. Section 1085 of the 2017 NDAA caps the number of NSC staff members at 200,[31] a move that House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mac Thornberry (R-TX) had telegraphed months before as a response to what he saw as the inappropriate growth of the NSC staff.[32] While Congress usually defers to the president on decisions about the White House staff, the size of the NSC in the late Obama years made it look more like a government agency in its own right, putting a target on its back for congressional oversight. The recommendations above, which flow from the three key principles of this paper, would help executive branch policymakers steer clear of circumstances that would prompt similar congressional intrusions in the future.

Conclusion

McGeorge Bundy once wrote to Scoop Jackson that the "peculiar virtue" of the NSC is its flexibility; each new president can shape it to his preferences.[33] The challenge for any administration is to determine how best to take advantage of that peculiar virtue. The particular challenge for the Trump administration and future administrations is to adapt the peculiar institution to a newly complex national security environment, characterized by the return of geopolitical competition among great powers in addition to the manifold threats of terrorism, proliferation, technological changes shifting the character of warfare, and many other challenges.

Successful decision-making at the presidential level in this new environment hinges on a clear-eyed understanding of the NSC's purpose and the roles of the constituent players in the system. Each president and presidential team will bring with them particular perspectives, experiences, and agendas that will shape how they come into office. By the same token, all administrations are formed to some extent by how they respond to events beyond their control. Within these boundaries, however, there clearly are better and worse ways to use the NSC. What should those who operate and observe the NSC system know about how to make those crucial determinations?

The NSC is not merely a function of each president, rendering any further analysis academic. Nor did the 1947 National Security Act set the course for everything that came afterward, meaning that nothing significant outside the realm of personality has happened since. Similarly, the assertion that all APNSAs should be more like Scowcroft and less like Kissinger is not the final word on the matter. However, there is a kind of golden mean in how presidents have used the NSC. Finding this mean will be a different process for each president, but the common threads laid out above can help shape the way the current administration and future administrations put together their NSC processes.

American institutions are going through a sustained period of public doubt and mistrust, but the challenges they were built to address are not going away. Indeed, the return of great power competition and the multiplicity of international threats and challenges will put new stresses on institutions and individuals in the government. For the institutions of national security, particularly for national security decision-making at the presidential level, recognizing the validity of these doubts about our institutions needs to be joined by an affirmation of our strengths: our military might, yes, but also the strength of our values and the pragmatic outlook Americans have always brought to our challenges.

Despite facing the significant threats and challenges of today, America is not without its advantages in terms of strategic position, in both absolute terms and relative to the past 70 years. To observers of national security debates in

Congress over the past several years, there is a familiar catechism at the top of many testimonies to the Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees. Witnesses cannot help but point out that America now operates in uniquely challenging times or that the proliferation of threats is unlike anything they have seen before. These are often senior military commanders, general or flag officers, or current or retired cabinet secretaries; it is right to take them at their word. In this, too, some perspective is in order.

> The operation of our governmental machinery today is complicated by a number of factors which we must not only comprehend but to which we must also readjust. We see in the world today a rate and variety of change which in our history has never been equaled. We not only have to face the challenge of bold, new scientific and technological advances, but also to adjust to changing conditions created by the emergence of new and independent countries and a growing sense of nationalism in many parts of the world.

Robert Lovett, one of the men responsible for creating the NSC system, gave that testimony in 1959.[34] The point is that we should have perspective on the scope of our challenges, just as we should have perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of the institutions at our disposal. The world has always been dangerous, and at least since 1945, Americans have had unique responsibilities in it. The men and women from whom we inherited our national security decision-making institutions and processes faced a world at least as complex, difficult, and frustrating as the one we face now. They defeated fascism and faced down communism.

Presidents must understand what the NSC is and what it is not. It is a powerful instrument for decision, not a superagency or a praetorian guard. Presidents should work within the statutory foundations of the National Security Act in a manner consistent with the lessons of their predecessors. As much as possible, they should use the NSC to do the things that only the NSC can do: to act on the president's behalf to facilitate national security decision-making and oversee implementation. If the president employs the NSC consistently with these purposes in mind, it can serve him well. When past presidents have failed to do so, the pitfalls have been many.

The powers of the leader of the free world are immense, and the peace he keeps was hard won. We owe it to those who went before and those whom we send into battle now and in the future to use the tools of national security policymaking wisely and with a clear-eyed appreciation of the imperfections of human nature, the dangers of the world around us, and our own deep strengths as a nation. To borrow from Camus, the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine McMaster happy.

About the Author

Luke Strange is the government relations associate director for foreign and defense policy at AEI.

Notes

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