

The National Security Council: Recommendations for the New President

By D. Robert Worley

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National security and the use of the instruments of national power is one of the most important challenges facing a new administration. Since 1947, presidents have had the use of the National Security Council (NSC) as an advisory body on issues of national security policy. In addition to the Council itself, a hierarchy of committees and working groups is involved in the process.

Through the years, presidents have taken different approaches to structuring their national security process. Some chose to manage national security centrally from the White House; others distributed this function through the cabinet. Some chose strong secretaries of state to lead in this area, while others elevated the position of national security advisor. Some used the National Security Council strictly for policy formulation and oversight of implementation, while others allowed it to become involved in policy implementation.

This report examines 60 years of history of how presidents have used the National Security Council organization and process. From the administration of Harry Truman to George W. Bush, the report analyzes which approaches succeeded and which failed.

The report is organized into three parts:

- *Memorandum to the New President* presents recommendations for the next administration regarding management of national security, particularly with regard to the use of the National Security Council. Some of the recommendations are dependent on the structure of the new administration and its choice of national security strategy.
- *An Assessment of the NSC System* presents the findings and conclusions of the study—what works and what doesn’t—derived from NSC organization and process since its inception but emphasizing the post–Cold War era.

- *History of the NSC (1947–2008)* presents a more detailed history of the NSC including the specific organizations and processes employed by past administrations.

Memorandum to the New President

The National Security Council is your principal mechanism for orchestrating the instruments of national power. It is an advisory body and not a decision-making body, and it has no directive authority over the departments and agencies of government. The president decides after receiving advice from inside and outside the NSC system and directs the departments and agencies that have the statutory authorities and capacities to implement policy.

The NSC system implements a collaborative interagency process to inform and engage the departments and agencies that wield the instruments of power. When the process works well, it produces clear policy statements that guide the actions of the executive branch. More importantly, it builds throughout the bureaucracy a deep understanding of objectives and the methods for achieving them.

By properly employing the NSC you extend your reach, magnify your vision, and amplify your energy in furtherance of national security.

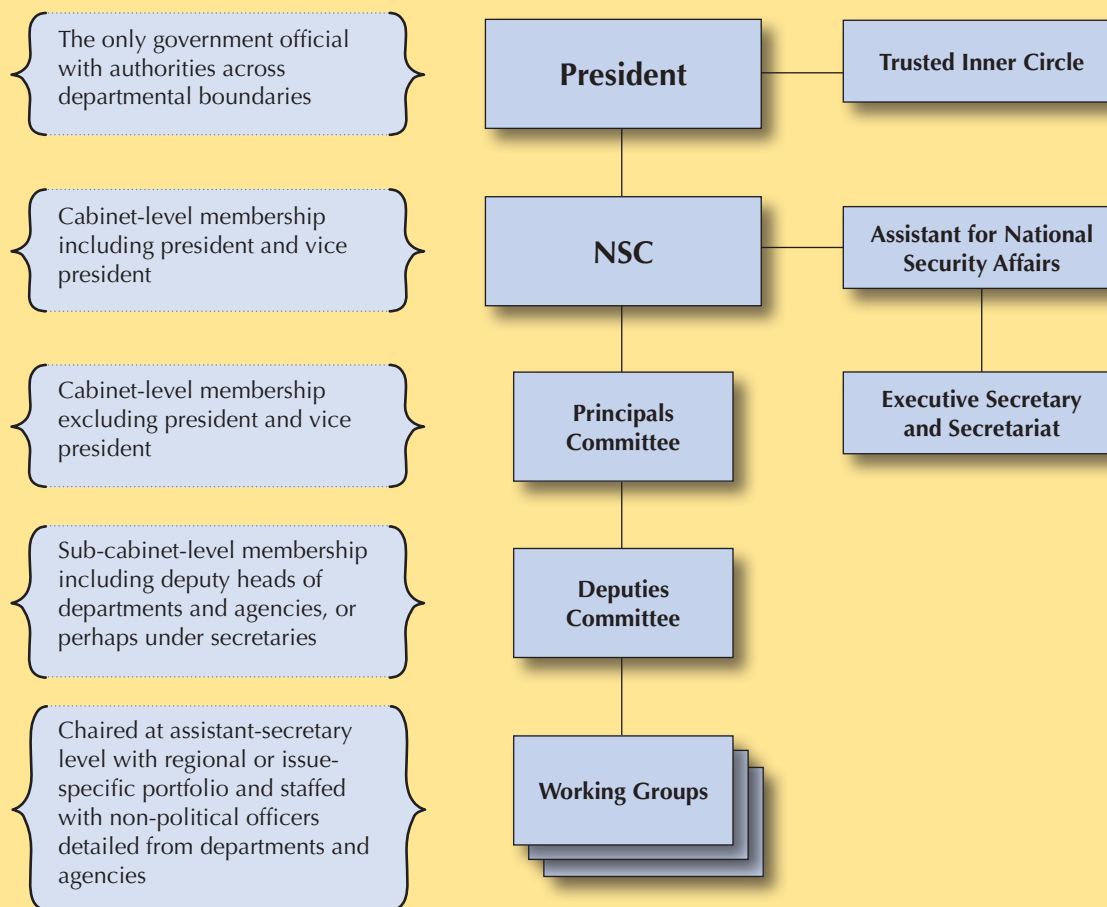
Recommendations

Recommendations for your administration are organized below into those that should be taken immediately upon Inauguration Day, those that should be undertaken during your first year in office, and those that will require sustained effort throughout the full term of your administration.

On Inauguration Day

Initiative in the first year of your administration is critical. There are several actions you can take prior to entering office to reduce the risk of delays and missteps.

Figure 1: National Security Council System Organization



1. Determine your approach to national security management as you are considering cabinet nominees.

There are three broad options for managing national security. You may adopt cabinet government and delegate to department secretaries. You may designate State or Defense as lead agency and delegate to its secretary. You may instead manage national security through your assistant for national security affairs. In all cases, you will provide high-level guidance, reserve the most critical and crosscutting decisions for yourself, and delegate. Ensure that political nominees are aware of the role they are expected to play to avoid the destructive competitions that have plagued some administrations. The design of your National Security Council—its role, size, and staffing—supports and must wait on your choice of approach to managing national security.

2. Center policy formulation in the NSC initially.

It is recommended that you initially center the interagency process for policy formulation in the NSC.

- If you choose to manage through the NSC, then you will need a robust NSC staff to lead in policy formulation and to manage the interagency process.
- If you choose to manage through your cabinet, then the department staffs will formulate their respective policies and you will need a robust NSC staff to assist in their integration and to manage the interagency process.
- If you choose a lead agency approach, it may be that no department staff has the capacity to manage the interagency process for policy formulation. It will take time to remedy the shortfall, but you need an interagency process that works on Inauguration Day. Instead, assign NSC committee and working group chairs to the lead agency. Responsibilities can be transferred from the NSC staff to the lead agency staff if and when capacity is assured.

3. Direct the State Department to establish explicit bodies for oversight of policy implementation and for coordination of day-to-day operations.



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Managing national security is more than formulating a unifying policy. There are separate interagency processes for policy formulation, oversight of implementation, and coordination of day-to-day operations. Achieving unity of effort requires orchestration of *all* instruments of national power at *all* levels of government.

4. Continue with the organization established by George H. W. Bush and adopted by successive post-Cold War presidents.

Critically important time at the beginning of your administration will be lost experimenting with new organizational arrangements between the NSC and the departments and agencies. You will have time to fine-tune organization as your administration gains experience.

5. Issue a presidential directive on Inauguration Day announcing your NSC.

Be prepared to issue a presidential directive on Inauguration Day announcing the organization and process of your national security system. It is an assignment of roles and missions to the departments and agencies and to your cabinet nominees.

6. Defer reduction of the NSC staff until your administration's second year.

It is common to criticize the outgoing administration for having a large, bloated staff. But the demands of office invariably create upward pressure on staff size. Policies are formulated early in an administration for the departments and agencies to implement. A large staff is needed immediately to provide adequate processing capacity. The staff later shifts from formulation to oversight of implementation and to crisis response. Reduce staff then if justified.

7. Resist the temptation to effect a clean sweep of NSC staff and to overload the NSC staff with partisans.

Civilians and military detailed to the NSC staff are on staggered rotations, providing continuity in the interagency teams. The experience of detailees is invaluable. Loyalty to person or party comes at the expense of experience and competence.

If you value multiple options and diversity of view, appoint outside subject-matter experts as well.

In the First Year

The first year of your administration provides the greatest, and perhaps only, opportunity to set your administration's national security agenda.

8. Initiate a series of policy reviews to set the agenda and to begin building the interagency teams that will support you during crisis management.

The first year of your administration is the time to initiate changes in policy direction. Set the agenda by initiating a range of policy reviews. Maintain continuous policy review; it not only allows you to adapt to the evolving landscape and to adjust course, it prepares your staff to respond to the crises that certainly will emerge.

9. Use the NSC interagency process to thoroughly engage the expertise resident in the executive branch and to direct its energies.

Secretaries, deputy secretaries, and assistant secretaries chair NSC committees, as may your assistant for national security affairs. The experience and expertise lies not with your appointees, however, but with the professional civil servants and uniformed military detailed to the NSC staff and those otherwise engaged in the interagency process from their parent agencies. The energy to change direction must come from the chief executive. Through engagement you provide the energy to overcome friction. To engage is to benefit from the experience and to gain buy-in from those who must implement your policies. To not engage is to virtually guarantee policy failure in implementation. The NSC system is your most direct mechanism for control and change.

10. Seek advice beyond the NSC, and use the NSC's process to extend your reach, magnify your vision, and amplify your energy.

You will likely choose to receive advice in private from a range of sources. Regardless, your regular attendance at formal

NSC meetings, with departmental staff in attendance, provides you with your best opportunity to communicate your strategic vision and to enable government to pursue your objectives.

Throughout Your Administration and Beyond

A major challenge of your administration is organizing for the 21st century. Post–Cold War strategies have relied heavily on state-building operations that have exposed the weakness of some instruments of power and have exacerbated the problems of orchestrating the many instruments. It isn't at all clear that these missions have widespread public support. And the wisdom of the mission as a way to achieve national security ends is not yet apparent. Not all national security strategies rely on state building.

11. Foster a public debate on national security strategy.

Formulating national security strategy—the linkage of ends, ways, and means—is a statutory responsibility of the president. Throughout the Cold War, a bipartisan strategic consensus held under the rubric of containment. But post–Cold War strategies have fluctuated wildly with no consensus or stability in sight. Your policies are formulated in the context of strategy, and without sustainable political consensus to commitment, your policies will suffer from lack of support and will expire with your administration. Consensus is built only through engagement with the public.

12. Balance the instruments of national power.

The instruments of national power are many, including military, informational, diplomatic, law enforcement, intelligence, financial, and economic instruments. Your options for action are limited by the instruments available. The instruments wielded by the departments and agencies of government can be balanced only in the context of a national security strategy.

13. Align the instruments of national power within the departments and agencies to facilitate their orchestration and to produce unity of effort.

The division of labor represented by the current organization of the executive branch is the product of a decades-long era of major power conflict. Largely through accidents of history, the instruments are spread across the departments and agencies that wield them. Their number, diversity, and distribution, compounded by the demands of state-building operations, make their orchestration increasingly problem-

atic. Resolution of interagency conflicts can only be decided by presidential intervention.

Ongoing efforts are considering fundamental reorganization of the national security apparatus driven by evidence that state-building operations are problematic and not supported by the current division of labor. A massive reorganization of government without a sustainable political consensus on strategy is ill advised. From legislative authorization and appropriation to fielded capabilities may take a decade or more. Government cannot be reorganized for each incoming administration's strategy.

14. Preserve congressional confidence in the NSC.

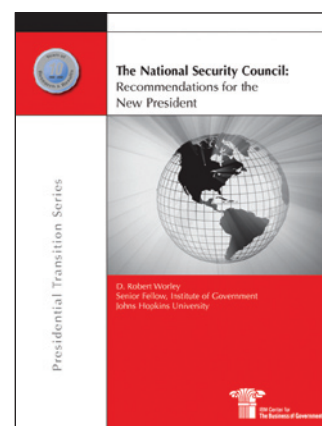
The NSC is a privileged organization. It is an advisory body to the president. There is a tension between providing candid advice that is dependent on privacy versus the transparency necessary for democracy. When the NSC is in high repute, Congress yields to the president's privacy. The president must maintain congressional confidence.

Much can be done with executive orders and presidential directives. Use them for the less contentious issues or for immediate need. For policies to survive your administration, Congress must take ownership. Ownership requires congressional engagement, authorization, and appropriation. The chief executive initiates change; Congress institutionalizes change. ●

TO LEARN MORE

The National Security Council:

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The report can be obtained:

- In .pdf (Acrobat) format at the Center website, www.businessofgovernment.org
- By e-mailing the Center at businessofgovernment@us.ibm.com
- By calling the Center at (202) 515-4504
- By faxing the Center at (202) 515-4375