

American National Security

Seventh Edition

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Foreword by
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Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore

To
Amos A. Jordan and W

Two exceptional scholars, educators, me
officers, who taught and inspired generati

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

Johns Hopkins University Press
2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland
21218-4363
www.press.jhu.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Meese, Michael J., author. | Nielsen, Suzanne C., author. |
Sondheimer, Rachel M., author.

Title: American national security / Michael J. Meese, Suzanne C. Nielsen,
Rachel M. Sondheimer.

Description: Seventh edition. | Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, [2018] |
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018007463 | ISBN 9781421426938 (hardcover : alk. paper) |
ISBN 9781421426778 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781421426785 (electronic) |
ISBN 1421426935 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 1421426773 (pbk. : alk. paper) |
ISBN 1421426781 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: National security—United States. | United States—Military policy.
Classification: LCC UA23 .J66 2018 | DDC 363.340973—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018007463>

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

*Special discounts are available for bulk purchases of this book. For more information,
please contact Special Sales at 410-516-6936 or specialsales@press.jhu.edu.*

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A successful approach to the challenges of a dynamic and complex world must be based on a strategy that is open, clear, and unambiguous. This book provides an impressive, comprehensive discussion of the past and history that have influenced national security and its direction in the future. Just as America has changed, the authors have significantly revised this edition to reflect the initial policy approaches of the Trump administration.

A comprehensive approach to American national security must avoid the strategic myopia that can often result from a "soda straw" examination of individual issues. It is important to take a holistic approach to understand trends and to anticipate challenges throughout the world.

For example, in the Middle East, the challenges that have affected and will continue to have a profound impact on the First, Sunni Islamic extremism, which is embodied in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and their support of violent attacks that foment instability. Similarly, Iran and its proxy forces fighting throughout the region and exploiting state weaknesses. The Arab-Israeli conflict remains salient throughout the efforts of the United States and others to address it in spite of recent increases in US energy production.

Putting the Pieces Together

National Security Decision Making

National security decision making is complex and fascinating because it occurs at the nexus of two worlds. As Samuel Huntington explains: “One [world] is international politics, the world of balance of power, wars and alliances, the subtle and brutal uses of force and diplomacy to influence the behavior of other states. The other world is domestic politics, the world of interest groups, political parties, social classes with their conflicting interests and goals.”¹ National security affairs influence and are influenced by both the domestic and international worlds, for national security involves the application of resources at home and abroad in an attempt to make the domestic society more secure.

The institutional arrangements developed to advise and assist the president in security matters are often referred to as the *national security decisionmaking process*. It is an interagency process because it necessarily involves multiple governmental organizations across a range of issue areas, some of which are not traditionally associated with national security (for example, commerce and the environment). When trying to understand American foreign and national security policy and actions, factors such as international affairs or domestic politics tell only part of the story. The process of how decisions are made can be at least as important: understanding the national security decisionmaking process is essential.

The national security decisionmaking process is a system of formal and informal coordination within the executive branch to ensure that senior leaders identify national interests and objectives clearly; that issues requiring presidential attention are identified and raised in a timely manner; and that viable options, costs, benefits, and risks are thoroughly considered. Occasionally, this includes coordination with Congress (see chapter 5). The process encompasses the full breadth of national security decisions, from developing national strategy to determining the content of

particular presidential speeches. The national security decisionmaking process is also a management system that helps the president carry out his responsibilities as head of the executive branch by enabling the president’s staff to adjudicate and coordinate issues that fall within the responsibilities of more than one department or agency.

The president’s staff—specifically the National Security Council (NSC) staff, in concert with others in the Executive Office of the President—actively administers this process. The backbone of the formal process is a constant churn of interagency meetings, commonly referred to as the *NSC system*, supported by formally prepared and staffed memoranda, intelligence estimates, and other papers. At the top, meetings include the president, the president’s senior advisors, and the heads of departments and agencies, known as the *principals*. Below this level, presidents are supported by a structure of subordinate councils and working groups. Most of the activity occurs in these subordinate meetings, without the direct participation of the president or the principals. Around this formal apparatus, a set of informal arrangements continually evolves in response to the needs of the president.

The national security decisionmaking process is aligned with the annual budget process (described in chapter 9). A wide range of internal department and agency systems feed into both of these processes. These internal systems are augmented by a growing number of lateral agency-to-agency coordination mechanisms, and increasingly by interagency centers, such as the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC, discussed in chapter 7), which integrate elements of various agencies into a single organization with a specific mission. The national security decisionmaking process is actually a system of processes that extends from the White House into a variety of executive branch entities.

It is tempting to assume that the interagency process operates in a regularized way according to rules and timelines. Sometimes it does; more often, it does not. For every rule governing how the interagency process is supposed to function (such as “this committee handles that issue”), there are exceptions. Indeed, there is no real manual or rulebook, although documents that purport to be such abound.² The processes used to support major decisions differ significantly from one administration to the next and even within an administration, depending on the issues.

Factors that Shape Decision Making

Several institutional dynamics affect the national security decisionmaking process. This section surveys the most important of these factors.

The Presidency. The president’s job is unique. In the words of Richard Neustadt: “No one else sits where he sits or sees quite as he sees; no one else feels the full weight of his obligations.”³ The president, unlike many of his foreign counterparts, is both head of state—the country’s symbolic leader—and head of government—the chief executive. Broad executive power is vested in the president directly by the Constitution, not granted by Congress. The president’s national security powers are

formidable and, as discussed in chapter 4, continue to expand over time. As a result, the president's attention is often stretched thin.⁴ Moreover, domestic and international publics have high expectations of the most powerful leader in the world. In addition to these demands, foreign and national security policies also present the president's best opportunity for a legacy. The national security decisionmaking process belongs to the president and is responsive to these imperatives.

Separation of Powers, Pluralism, and Federalism. The national security decisionmaking process reflects the basic characteristics of the US political system.⁵ For the purposes of this chapter, two features stand out. The first—the subject of chapters 4 and 5—is the US system of separated powers, or more accurately, of separate institutions that share power.⁶ The second is political and social pluralism: the more pluralist the society—that is, the more numerous and distinct are its ethnic, cultural, religious, or other disparate groups—the greater the number of entities that interact with the decisionmaking process and structure, and the more difficult it becomes to develop coherent national strategy and policy.⁷

While pluralism is the defining characteristic of the American domestic policy realm, the foreign policy realm is different. There are fewer interest groups, and most do not have the political clout of domestic policy groups. Apart from the mass media, whose influence in both spheres is comparable, the most influential voices in foreign policy debates emanate from a small population of national security elites, from a few public policy think tanks, and from America's top academic institutions. While the number of influential actors continues to rise, the foreign policy arena is less crowded than the domestic policy arena.

In 1966, Aaron Wildavsky argued that two presidencies exist: one for domestic affairs and one for foreign affairs. Wildavsky's thesis is no longer quite as accurate in some areas (for example, international trade), but it remains useful in the national security realm. Says Wildavsky: "The President's normal problem with domestic policy is to get congressional support for the programs he prefers. In foreign affairs, in contrast, he can almost always get support for policies that he believes will protect the nation—but his problem is to find a viable policy."⁸

Until relatively recently, the "two presidencies" thesis meant good news for the president in national security affairs. Presidents have been able to act without the express approval of Congress far more often in foreign affairs than on domestic issues. However, the political reality of two presidencies now cuts both ways. The importance of domestic security concerns to the president's national security responsibilities began to grow in the early 1990s with the first World Trade Center attack in 1993 and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, and then dramatically increased in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (see chapter 6). Further domestic terrorist threats in the last decade, including the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013 and the San Bernardino and Orlando shootings in 2015 and 2016, respectively, increased the linkages between foreign policy and domestic security. Moreover, recent high-profile mass shootings, to include Sandy Hook in 2012, Charleston in 2015, Las Vegas in 2017, and Parkland in 2018, further blur the

lines between domestic and security policy. Protecting the country now requires, in the words of the 9/11 Commission, "unity of effort across the foreign-domestic divide."⁹

From the average American's perspective, the conceptual distinction between national security and homeland security may be largely meaningless. However, the distinction has practical significance. First, the domestic implications of homeland security policy mean that the president must share power with Congress on such issues. As Wildavsky observes, "It takes great crises . . . for Presidents to succeed in controlling domestic policy," and a president's domestic policy proposals succeed only half as often as his national security proposals.¹⁰ The events of 9/11 triggered such a crisis, but President George W. Bush's ability to pass domestic legislation eroded more quickly than his ability to enact foreign policy initiatives. For example, Bush's proposal to provide first responders with smallpox inoculations failed, but three months later he was able to take the country into war with Iraq. President Barack Obama was able to enact several important foreign policy initiatives, including withdrawal of US military forces from Iraq, deploying forces back to Iraq to confront the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran, despite vocal challenges to his foreign policy endeavors. Obama's domestic policy agenda faced stiffer opposition and met with less success; a notable example was his inability to secure substantive gun control legislation in the wake of the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting tragedy and other mass shootings.

Second, the vigorous engagement of interest groups with Congress and the bureaucracy impinges on the president's power in homeland security matters. Because homeland security policies touch the daily lives of Americans and frequently collide with competing domestic priorities, interest groups and private sector firms become involved. These may include organizations ranging from the National Rifle Association and Lockheed Martin to Facebook and Google.

Third, the president shares power with the states, and governors are frequently uncooperative: the president has his interests, and they have theirs. For example, with regard to immigration policy—an issue that affects both foreign policy and domestic concerns—seventeen state governors sued the Obama administration over its immigration policy in 2015 and four state governors sued the Trump administration over its refugee and travel ban in 2017. Both policies were implemented by presidential executive orders and both were challenged in the courts. For all of these reasons, since 9/11, the president's national security predominance simply no longer exists across a critical range of security policies.¹¹

The effect of the distinction between national security and homeland security on national security decision making is threefold. First, even as expectations that the president will protect the country have risen since 9/11, the heightened relevance of domestic issues to security has meant that the president's power has diminished. Second, the development and implementation of coherent national security policy has become more challenging due to the involvement of more domestic agencies and policy instruments that were previously outside of the realm of national security policy. The durable relationships among interest

groups, relevant executive branch agencies, and corresponding congressional committees—sometimes known as *iron triangles*—mean that policy making takes longer, involves more compromise, and is incremental. Third, the center of gravity for many security issues has shifted from the Senate to the House of Representatives, whose members' votes more often reflect how policy affects their districts rather than the nation as a whole. As a result, security policy today is increasingly influenced by public opinion. For example, the tension between local and federal priorities is seen in communities concerned about the regional economic impact of the Department of Defense (DoD)'s Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) proposals. While the closure of excess infrastructure may enable DoD to produce more military capability for the nation for a lower cost in taxpayer dollars, the economic impact of the loss of a military installation can be significant to a specific local community.

Domestic Politics. During the Truman administration, the Republican chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg from Michigan, famously claimed that “partisan politics stops at the water’s edge.” Now, though, this view is harder to sustain. While domestic politics do not necessarily preclude desirable courses of action, they do make some presidential decisions tougher or more costly. Domestic politics can narrow or influence options (that President John Kennedy had talked tough on Cuba during the 1960 presidential election surely influenced his decision to approve the Bay of Pigs operation), put new options on the table (it was Richard Nixon, the ardent anticommunist president, who could open up relations with Communist China), or simply roil the waters (an example was the 2015 speech by Israel’s prime minister to a Joint Session of Congress just when the Obama administration was negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran). Domestic politics can also remove some presidential options completely, albeit rarely, and usually through a conflict over the formal powers of the president and Congress; an example was congressional opposition to Obama’s military strike on Syria in 2014, or to his executive order in 2009 to close the US detention facility at the US Naval Station at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.¹² Similarly, domestic politics can lead to specific foreign policy actions, such as when Congress overwhelmingly approved significant sanctions on Russia over President Trump’s objections in 2017.¹³

Perhaps the most important domestic political factor affecting many of the president’s power calculations is the electoral cycle. In a first term, a president’s prospects for reelection constrain choices; in a second term, the president may have more freedom to act, but less influence with Congress. In either case, foreign leaders may use their understanding of the US political and electoral systems to enhance their own bargaining positions.¹⁴

The impact of domestic politics does not always happen at the margins, nor is it new. Ernest May argues that the Monroe Doctrine, which opposed European colonialism in the Americas and became the bedrock of American strategy toward Latin America for nearly a century, is best understood in terms of domestic poli-

tics.¹⁵ The geopolitical situation mattered to President James Monroe, but it mattered most in terms of what it spelled for the domestic political fortunes of his party. John Quincy Adams, who helped formulate the doctrine as Monroe’s secretary of state, was elected to succeed Monroe at least in part because of the domestic popularity of this international policy. Domestic politics is a critical variable—sometimes the most important variable—in the national security decisionmaking process. This need not be cause for cynicism; in a democracy, good policy is policy that gets enacted, and politics is how it gets enacted; good strategy is strategy that can be maintained. To be effective, a policy maker must be a pragmatist, not a perfectionist.

Ever-Increasing Complexity in National Security Affairs. No realm of affairs has grown more complex more quickly than national security, which must integrate political, diplomatic, military, economic, technological, cultural, and psychological dimensions.¹⁶ Each new challenge creates a policy demand. Government adds a function, agencies specialize, and jurisdictions overlap. Integrating national security policy becomes simultaneously more important and more difficult. The burden on the president becomes greater.

As complexity rises, so does the interrelatedness of issues. The most familiar example is the connection between security and international economic policy, but interrelatedness is growing in many specific policy areas (for instance, counterterrorism intelligence) and individual programs. Fewer problems fall solely within the purview of a specific agency, and it is increasingly unlikely that an individual department or agency is cognizant of all the ways in which its policies and programs relate and interact to those of others.¹⁷ At a minimum, agencies differ in their priorities. For example, although both the Department of Justice and DoD had legal authorization to investigate the disclosure by WikiLeaks of top-secret documents related to Afghanistan, the departments’ internal priorities differed. Ultimately, DoD took the lead on the investigation, with the Justice Department in a supporting role.¹⁸

For most of the last sixty years, this phenomenon of interrelatedness affected domestic and economic policy more than national security policy. The Department of State, DoD, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were granted distinct, even exclusive statutory authorities for most of what they do. This is no longer the case. The 9/11 Commission report observed that, even when national security professionals are committed to collaboration, it is difficult to force cooperation. The NSC system must increasingly and deliberately foster these interconnections to forge coherent policies.

With respect to each new challenge of interrelatedness, the president has three choices: (1) assume a new coordination burden, (2) decide that a particular issue is not a sufficiently high priority to warrant presidential attention, or (3) provide guidance or impose requirements on the agencies to effect lateral coordination on their own. The first option has the cost of increasing the size and diffusing the focus of the president’s staff. The second runs the risk of miscalculation, as a seemingly

low-priority issue may surface later as a major problem. The third option is problematic at best: presidential commands are “but a method of persuasion . . . and not a method suitable for everyday employment.”¹⁹

Growth of the Federal Government. As policy needs expand, government tends to expand as well. The number of executive agencies with national security interests continues to grow in order to address new demands; so does the number of specialized bureaus, offices, and centers.²⁰ Meanwhile, Congress creates new committees and subcommittees. In 2003, for example, George W. Bush created the position of the undersecretary of defense for intelligence, one of five new undersecretaries added between 1998 and 2004. This political appointee is responsible for the coordination of DoD-wide intelligence activities. While this is an important function, it adds to the number of actors involved in the interagency process. Similarly, the NSC staff “has become bigger, roughly doubling since 1992 to about 400 people” by the end of the Obama administration in 2016.²¹ The Trump administration has said that its NSC staff will be smaller and less operational, but it is unclear whether this will remain true as the administration confronts the myriad demands of national security decision making.

Departmentalism, Parochialism, and Turf. Many civil servants stay in the same department for their entire careers, allowing agencies to develop expertise and provide continuity to changing administrations. The executives at the tops of government organizations must develop support within their bureaucracies to get things done, even when their means of doing so may not exactly align with the president’s priorities.²² The views of government employees within particular departments and agencies and the views, over time, of their politically appointed leaders, are naturally more parochial than the president’s. Cabinet secretaries become defenders of their departments’ functions and constituencies; they seek to stake out and to defend their “turf.”²³ Elliot Richardson, who held four cabinet positions, stated that “cabinet members are forced by the very nature of their institutional responsibilities to be advocates of their departmental programs.”²⁴ Since cabinet members respond to more than just the president’s agenda, the president has an incentive to centralize decision making in the White House and to use the national security decisionmaking process to assert control.

The National Security Act of 1947 and the National Security Council

Both the president and the agencies involved need an agreed upon process for national security decision making. As interrelatedness increases and as the president’s coordination burden rises, so does that of the agencies. The result is an increase in conflicts that only the president can adjudicate. Describing Kennedy’s cabinet during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Graham Allison and Richard Neustadt wrote: “What top officials needed from the President [was] . . . a forum for discus-

sion, a referee for arguments, assurance of a hearing, and a judgment on disputes. Their jurisdictions were at once divided and entangled. . . . None could act alone.”²⁵ As the Tower Commission, which was formed in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal in 1986, stated: “The NSC system will not work unless the president makes it work.”²⁶

The National Security Act of 1947 established the fundamental institutional architecture for the formal national security decisionmaking process. After World War II ended, the wartime structure of ad hoc relationships and temporary committees dissolved, but the nation’s security interests could not be pursued effectively by agencies acting independently. With an appreciation for this challenge, President Harry Truman gave a speech in December 1945 that called for a unified defense establishment.²⁷ Supporting his call for unification were the Army and War Departments. The Navy, which opposed this proposal, favored decentralization; it persisted in this stance through various reorganizations, including Goldwater-Nichols in 1986 (which is described in chapter 8).

The National Security Act that emerged in July 1947 was a compromise. The act created a secretary of defense (but not yet a unified defense department), the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the Air Force, the CIA, and several other entities. It also created the NSC to “advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security so as to enable the military services and the other departments and agencies of the Government to cooperate more effectively in matters involving the national security.”²⁸ The NSC was authorized to have a staff, managed by an executive secretary. As flaws of the initial plan became apparent, Congress amended the act in 1949, creating a DoD with full authority over the military services, removing the service representatives from the cabinet and the NSC, and creating a chairman of the JCS who would serve as the military advisor to the NSC. Additional adjustments occurred in 1958, 1986 and in 2004 (table 10.1).

Table 10.1 The National Security Council (NSC) as Established by the National Security Act of 1947, as Amended

<i>Chair:</i>	President
<i>Members:</i>	Vice President (added 1949) Secretary of State Secretary of Defense (Secretaries of Army, Navy, and Air Force removed in 1949) Secretaries and under secretaries of other executive departments and of the military departments, when appointed by the president with advice and consent of the Senate
<i>Statutory Advisors:</i>	Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (added 1949), or vice chairman in chairman’s absence (added 1986) Director of National Intelligence (added 2004, replacing director of Central Intelligence)

Source: US Code, Title 50, Chapter 15, Subchapter 1, Section 402, as amended by the National Security Act Amendments of 1949, the Defense Reorganization Act of 1958, the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, and the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004.

The National Security Council in Practice. By the end of the Truman administration, the current basic structure was in place: the statutory NSC with an executive secretary responsible for facilitating meetings, communicating with the president, and overseeing a supporting staff. The staff was given responsibility for coordinating interagency committees and managing the preparation of policy papers.²⁹ The position of national security advisor was created in 1953 (see also chapter 4).

The National Security Act authorized the president to appoint other cabinet secretaries and undersecretaries to the NSC, with Senate approval. No president has sought such approval, although every president has added participants. Table 10.2 compares how each of the recent administrations has tailored the NSC to its needs. After the Eisenhower administration and before 9/11, formal meetings of the NSC were generally infrequent—on average slightly more often than once a month. George W. Bush convened the NSC more frequently: every day for a period following 9/11, and once or twice a week thereafter (often by secure video teleconference [VTC]).³⁰ As with the George W. Bush administration, in the Obama and Trump administrations, crises typically generate a flurry of formal NSC meetings; between crises, meetings occur less frequently.³¹

Formal meetings occur less often than lower-level meetings for a number of reasons. First, the president does not need a formal meeting to confer with his national security team. Decisions can be made any time the president gathers the right people or the right advice. Second, much of the value of the NSC system is created in meetings that occur below the principals' level without the president. These meetings improve the decisionmaking process by coordinating policy, crafting distinct options, clarifying differences, and minimizing the issues that require the president's attention.

The NSC Staff. The NSC staff has three enduring purposes: to advise the president; to coordinate the development of policy across the executive branch; and to monitor the implementation of presidential decisions, policies, and guidance.³² The most important staff position is the national security advisor, supported by one or more deputy national security advisors. Each president and national security advisor customizes the structure of the NSC staff based on the needs of the president, the challenges at hand, and the capabilities of the individuals on the NSC staff. Colin Powell, President Ronald Reagan's national security advisor, said that "at the end of the day, the duty of the National Security Council staff and the assistant is to mold themselves to the personality of the president."³³

Clinton added to the NSC staff a second deputy, for international economic affairs, who also reported to the director of the National Economic Council (NEC). The NSC under George W. Bush grew to include six deputies for key policy functions; the number was reduced to four deputies under President Obama and this continued at least through the early years of the Trump administration, albeit with some slight differences in responsibilities.³⁴ The rationale for additional deputies is to attract a sufficiently senior person to the position and to ensure that he or she has appropriate status within the White House and with the departments and agen-

Table 10.2 The National Security Council (NSC) as Augmented and Organized by Recent Presidents, 1989–2018

	<i>George H. W. Bush</i>	<i>William J. Clinton</i>	<i>George W. Bush</i>	<i>Barack Obama</i>	<i>Donald J. Trump</i>
Nonstatutory members or regular attendees added by the president (in addition to statutory members listed in table 10.1)	Secretary of the Treasury (unless asked not to attend) National Security Advisor Chief of Staff to the President US Representative to the UN Assistant to the President for Economic Policy	Secretary of the Treasury National Security Advisor Chief of Staff to the President US Representative to the UN Assistant to the President for Economic Policy	Secretary of the Treasury National Security Advisor	Secretary of the Treasury National Security Advisor Secretary of Homeland Security Attorney General Secretary of Energy US Representative to the UN Homeland Security Advisor CIA Director	Secretary of the Treasury National Security Advisor Secretary of Homeland Security Attorney General Secretary of Energy US Representative to the UN Homeland Security Advisor CIA Director
May attend all meetings	Chief of Staff to the President Assistant to the President for Economic Policy Counsel to the President	Chief of Staff to the President Assistant to the President for Economic Policy Counsel to the President	Chief of Staff to the President Assistant to the President for Economic Policy Counsel to the President	Chief of Staff to the President Assistant to the President for Economic Policy Counsel to the President	Chief of Staff to the President Counsel to the President Deputy Counsel to the President for National Security OMB Director
May attend when invited	Attorney General Department and agency heads Other senior officials NSC special statutory advisers	Attorney General Department and agency heads Other senior officials NSC special statutory advisers	Attorney General OMB Director Department and agency heads Other senior officials	Attorney General OMB Director Department and agency heads Other senior officials	Secretary of Commerce US Trade Representative Assistant to President for Economic Policy

cies. Below the deputies on the NSC staff are senior directors responsible for key geographic and functional policy areas; each senior director typically oversees three to eight directors, who are the “action officers” of the NSC staff. Directors are a mix of policy generalists and subject-matter experts, each with a specific portfolio. They range from very senior officials with long-time policy experience to talented up-and-comers. A director’s influence is only partially determined by seniority; it is mostly determined by policy acumen, political skill, relationships, and results. The White House is an entrepreneurial place—results earn relevance—and there is no shortage of strong individuals seeking to engage in the policy process. Tactful and effective directors can earn access, while some senior directors and even deputies may find themselves marginalized.³⁵

Members of the NSC staff come from a variety of backgrounds: government, academia, the private sector, and think tanks. Many individuals’ careers cross sectors, offering multiple vantage points on security issues. Military officers in every rank from captain to four-star general have served in positions on the NSC staff, from director to national security advisor. They have essential military knowledge and experience, understand how to organize and run staffs, are nonpartisan, and may offer critical continuity during changes of administration. Common challenges for military officers are adapting to the unfamiliar fluidity of the White House and walking a careful line between policy and politics in a place where partisanship can profoundly shape the policy process.

The specific policy demands facing an administration shape the staff structure. If the NSC staff and agencies begin to have routine meetings on a particular topic, then it becomes practical to designate an NSC official of appropriate rank, supported by a handful of NSC directors, to manage that portfolio. For example, the George W. Bush administration created the Iraq and Afghanistan directorate, the Combating Terrorism directorate, and the Strategic Communications and Global Outreach directorate.³⁶ Later, signaling shifts in focus, the Obama administration eliminated the posts of deputy national security advisors for Iraq and Afghanistan and for global outreach.

The Interagency Process

Although details and titles have varied across administrations, the national security decisionmaking architecture has been relatively stable since 1989. It comprises a principals committee (PC), a deputies committee (DC), and subordinate interagency policy coordination committees (PCCs).

Principals Committee. A principals committee meeting is an NSC meeting without the president. The PC’s main functions are to advise the president and to coordinate and resolve interagency policy issues at the national strategic level. The frequency of PC meetings increases to meet demands. The core participants are the NSC members and advisors and the national security advisor. The vice president and the White House chief of staff also attend some PC meetings, and others

may attend from time to time. The national security advisor convenes and chairs the meeting and ensures that the necessary documents (usually three-to-six page memos called “PC papers”) are prepared and disseminated in advance. The PC may meet daily or even twice a day during crises and often handles rapidly unfolding or time-sensitive issues.

Deputies Committee. The deputies committee, which has been called “the engine of policy,” is particularly useful.³⁷ The DC resolves those interagency issues that can be handled without engaging the principals; it elevates critical or contentious issues that require the attention of the principals or the president; and it presents issues to the principals in a manner that sets a foundation for deliberation. While it makes few truly strategic decisions, there are many important policy decisions that may require dissemination and action more than confidentiality. Essential White House and departmental staffers regularly attend DC meetings, which are less formal than NSC or PC meetings. The DC supervises the work of the subordinate committees, where most policy issues are introduced and some are settled. Occasionally, for high-priority initiatives or during crises, important issues begin at the DC level rather than in the subordinate committees.

The NSC DC is generally chaired by the deputy national security advisor; it includes the deputy secretaries of state, treasury, energy, homeland security, and defense; the deputy attorney general; the deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB); the deputy to the US representative to the United Nations; the deputy director of national intelligence (DNI); the vice chairman of the JCS; and the assistant to the vice president for national security affairs. If the issue concerns a particular area (such as Iraq or Afghanistan), the relevant ambassadors and commanders (or their deputies) may participate (by secure VTC).³⁸ The deputy national security advisor generally convenes and chairs the meeting; the deputy national security advisor for international economic affairs chairs meetings that concern economic issues and have a slightly augmented membership. As with the PC, the NSC staff typically prepares and circulates a DC paper before the meeting. During crises, DC meetings often parallel PC meetings to prepare for or follow up on the principals’ decisions and to ensure clear communication and coordination. This rhythm can drive an intense cascade of recurring meetings in the agencies to support both policy formulation and implementation.

Policy Coordination Committees. Policy coordination committees (PCCs) are organized around specific geographic or functional policy areas. PCCs accomplish the bulk of the work of integrating policy, adjudicating conflicts, and framing issues for the deputies and principals. Sometimes the PCC elevates an issue to the DC for resolution; sometimes the DC makes a policy decision and sends it to the PCC to work out the details. The number and composition of PCCs vary over time.

The scope, membership, rank of participants, frequency, and authority of an PCC depend on the issues the PCC handles and the level of responsibility given to it. Members typically include political appointees at the level of deputy assistant

secretary or occasionally assistant secretary, senior agency officials, senior military officers from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff, and other experts. Membership is a mix of political and career officials. Although attendance is controlled, the roster is relatively flexible: agencies will send representatives they feel should be involved, and White House staff will attend as circumstances and their portfolios require. An NSC senior director usually chairs the PCC to coordinate the actions of the departments and agencies and to ensure that they are consistent with the administration's overall policy.

A properly led PCC cultivates a sense of teamwork, encouraging collaboration and communication outside of scheduled meetings. Membership and working relationships often endure from one administration to the next, so few issues are new to PCCs. Since PCC chairs have no formal authority to override any agency, a single agency can be obstructionist and prevent consensus. In response, the PCC has three choices: compromise to achieve consensus, continue to search for common ground, or elevate disputes to the DC. Because PCCs must be selective about what they elevate, there is strong pressure to achieve consensus, which can quash bold or innovative policies.³⁹

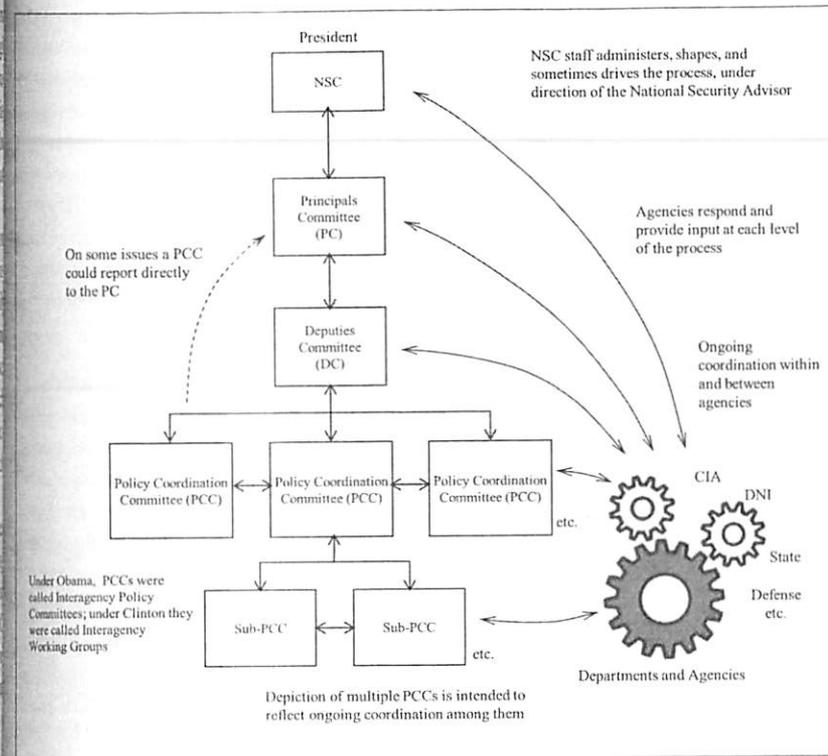
PCCs often establish subordinate groups (sub-PCCs) for high-priority initiatives or to coordinate certain activities. Some of these groups endure as standing bodies, but many are short term. Occasionally, the DC may establish an ad hoc working group, or the national security advisor may direct a member of the NSC staff to form a focused interagency working group on a policy initiative with the intent of introducing that initiative at the DC or PC level. The operations of the NSC, PC, DC, PCCs, and sub-PCCs are depicted in figure 10.1.

Substantive Products. Some presidential decisions are not written down but are conveyed orally, directly to the president's advisors and cabinet secretaries. However, most decisions are communicated in writing, either as overarching statements of policy (such as the *National Security Strategy* [NSS]), guidance to the executive branch (as in a presidential directive on human trafficking), or statements that meet legal requirements. Some of these are common and important enough to warrant description.

Strategies. Important articulations of national strategy occur in presidential speeches, which reflect the president's thoughts and the essence of policy. Recent presidents have also found value in articulating policy in the form of national strategy documents; some of these are required by law. The 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, for example, requires the president to submit an annual NSS to Congress. Producing such documents can become a major task of PCCs, the NSC staff, and relevant agencies. The Trump administration was the first administration to have published its NSS before the end of the administration's first year in office.⁴⁰

While the Pentagon has a formal system of generating strategic documents, the process within the White House and the interagency system does not follow a similarly cyclical or systematic sequence. The lack of a rigorous long-term strategy

FIGURE 10.1 Machinery of the National Security Council System



and planning function within the national security decisionmaking process has long been criticized.

Presidential Directives. Presidential directives are legally binding instruments for communicating presidential decisions about the national security policies of the United States. Most presidential directives include language intended to articulate an overarching approach or strategy that must be interpreted, implemented, and regularly reassessed. Because of their broad nature, the degree to which they remain legally binding from one presidential administration to the next is open to interpretation.

Executive Orders. Executive orders are generally narrower in nature than presidential directives. They address issues by giving specific and unambiguous direction. Executive orders are legally binding orders issued to federal agencies under the president's constitutional authority to "take care that the Laws be faithfully executed." Most executive orders are issued to carry out laws passed by Congress or rulings by the courts. Some executive orders set new policy.

As of 2018, presidents had issued more than 13,800 numbered executive orders. Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued the most: 3,721 executive orders during his more than three terms in office. In their two terms of office each, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama issued 364, 291, and 276 executive orders, respectively. A handful of Obama's earliest executive orders, including changes to interrogation practices in intelligence collection and the directive to close the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base Detention facility, signaled his intentions to alter some national security policies established by his predecessor. Donald Trump issued fifty-eight orders in his first year in office. Several of those orders affected national security policy, including banning immigration of foreign nationals from specific countries, imposing sanctions on Venezuela, and expanding sanctions on North Korea.⁴¹

Assessing the Value of the Formal Interagency Process. Sometimes the formal process does exactly as intended: it ensures that the key details of important policy decisions are fully developed and coordinated by agency experts and are endorsed by the principals, enhancing the likelihood of a significant and lasting national security or foreign policy success. As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger recognized, "A foreign policy achievement to be truly significant must at some point be institutionalized."⁴² The formal process adds value by establishing the setting. The routines of the formal process create an essential foundation of coordination and foster relationships that are helpful when nonroutine situations arise.

The formal process is particularly useful for coordinating the details of policy implementation once the president has made a decision. It helps ensure that information is not distorted as it moves upward to or downward from the president. It also helps reveal unexamined assumptions, minimizes the chance of overlooking viable alternatives, and provides an opportunity for the full airing of costs, benefits, and risks. A solid body of scholarly research strongly suggests that such practices improve presidential decision making.⁴³ The process also provides a foundation for department and agency "ownership" of decisions: organizations that have had the opportunity to have their views considered by policy makers are more likely to support the resulting decision.

Shortcomings of the Formal Process. The formal process also has flaws. This section briefly reviews some of the shortcomings that are most often cited by presidents or their advisors.

Lack of Presidential Control of the Bureaucracy. The formal process can help the president rein in the bureaucracy, but it can also be a hindrance. Sometimes it is the president who is reined in. In the words of Senator Henry M. Jackson (D-WA) in 1965, the president "has been left in an unenviable position. He has found it necessary to undertake an endless round of negotiations with his own department heads."⁴⁴

Lack of Accountability. The formal process, with cumbersome and dense interagency procedures and committees, may result in an overemphasis on coordination and end up diluting responsibility for policy planning and implementation. On the other hand, pulling decision making out of departments and agencies and into the White House can undermine responsibility and accountability within the president's cabinet.

Inflexibility, Lack of Creativity, and Over-Cautiousness. Formal meetings of bureaucrats sitting in their usual seats—with their agendas, position papers, and enumerations of second-order effects—may not generate fresh thinking or innovative policy. A powerful example is seen in the result of a formal interagency policy review on the question of German unification in early 1989—just months before the fall of the Berlin wall. National Security Review-5 (NSR-5) concluded that "it serves no U.S. interests for us to take the initiative to raise" the question of German unification.⁴⁵ George H. W. Bush thereafter decided to "create action-forcing events, including [two] presidential trips [to Europe] and speeches that would oblige the [US] government . . . to deploy ideas about the direction of policy."⁴⁶ Approximately eighteen months after the formal interagency review and its pessimistic assessment, a treaty reunifying Germany as a full member of NATO was signed. The formal national security decisionmaking process did not assist, and may in fact have impeded, a major foreign policy success at the end of the Cold War.

Inability to Keep Pace. The world, the White House, and the bureaucracy move at different speeds. As exemplified by the rapid political change across North Africa and the Middle East that began in 2011—commonly known as the "Arab Spring"—international events occasionally move at a very rapid pace. When this occurs, the formal process can be hard pressed to keep up. Opportunities must be seized; nuance must be understood and accommodated. It is often the march of events, not the methodical deliberation of White House and agency policy makers, that forces the broadest strokes of American policy to emerge.

The president's best chance for a legacy is in the foreign policy arena, and the president must assume that only four years will be available to accomplish it. But the formal process, in particular the PCC-level forums that survive in one form or another for successive administrations, does not ordinarily respond to the electoral cycle.

"Death by a Thousand Cuts." The formal system is geared toward consensus. The deputies, the principals, and the president cannot be called on to settle what a former NSC senior director described as "extended interagency disputes too small to be seen without the aid of a magnifying glass."⁴⁷ Accommodation requires compromise; as a result, specific and prescriptive words are often replaced with broad, noncommittal language in PCC and DC meetings. Presidential advisors have no

authority to act as tiebreakers; if they were to do so without the explicit acquiescence of the group, they would corrupt the integrity of the process. Even when conflict reaches the president, consensus usually rules.

Lack of Confidentiality. The creation of security policy, especially concerning negotiations with other nations, often requires secrecy at one point or another. This becomes increasingly difficult to maintain with the involvement of more personnel across the bureaucracy.

Lack of Strategic Coherence. A major criticism of the NSC system and the NSC staff is its inability to do long-range planning. The NSC staff is uniquely positioned to administer such a function, but it tends to be drawn into the short-term world of deadlines and immediate political needs. President Dwight Eisenhower established a formal planning board to conduct strategic (if not grand-strategic) planning, but that architecture was dismantled in the Kennedy administration, and nothing similar has yet been resurrected.⁴⁸

Role of the National Security Advisor

Power in the executive branch is often determined by proximity to the president, and few are more proximate than the national security advisor. That one person sits at the crux of the formal process and the unique needs of the president. Debate about the proper role of the national security advisor revolves around the degree to which he or she should be a policy-neutral honest broker, a policy advocate, or some combination of the two. Within the boundaries of the law, the national security advisor serves the president's needs, and the president largely determines the role that he or she plays.

Honest Broker. There is broad consensus that the national security advisor and the NSC staff must be the custodians of the formal interagency process. This involves exercising quality control, conveying (and by necessity filtering) information, ensuring that relevant information and intelligence are available, conveying the president's views when authorized and appropriate, ensuring that a full range of options has been developed and considered, ensuring that agency heads have an opportunity to express their views, accurately presenting those views to the president, guaranteeing the confidentiality of advice, accurately communicating decisions, and monitoring implementation of presidential decisions and policies.⁴⁹

Policy Advocate. Because national security advisors who act as advocates risk alienating the principals, policy advocacy is often seen as undermining the honest broker role. However, even effective "brokers" have an obligation to express their views to the president within appropriate boundaries. For example, the president may need to hear an under-represented point of view.⁵⁰ Sometimes national security

advisors faced with intransigent agencies and an unresponsive process have resorted to advocacy to move policy forward.⁵¹

Other Roles of the National Security Advisor. Although the role of policy advocate in some circumstances is now an accepted one for the national security advisor, extensions of this behavior are more controversial. Policy design, public communication, diplomacy, and implementation tend to associate the advisor with specific policies. Such additional roles could also serve as a source of tension with principals. For example, if the national security advisor represents the president's policies in the media, this may compete with the traditional role of the secretary of state as the principal voice on foreign affairs.

What the President Needs: The Importance of Informal Process

Every president must balance the need for high-quality decisions with the need for consensus and the prudent use of time and other policymaking resources. The president also has limited windows of opportunity when circumstances and political forces align to make certain choices possible. Presidents need to be able to make decisions at different speeds and with different levels of effort.⁵² For these reasons, every president has from time to time stepped outside of the formal process to seek counsel.

Smaller, informal meetings foster essential collegiality, are more confidential and candid, and can be more productive. Principals devote their energy and time preparing for such meetings in a way that they do not for formal committees.⁵³ In such meetings, principals may bargain with one another, breaking the logjams produced by the formal process. Informal and one-on-one consultations may also allow the president to draw on input from others without yielding any power in the process.⁵⁴ Because they have greater freedom to brainstorm and engage ideas, informal groups can be more conducive to creativity.

Small, informal groups become particularly important to presidents during crises. During such situations, the factors affecting presidential decision making become more acute and the constraints more formidable. The best-known example occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis. President Kennedy's ad hoc advisory executive committee arrived at a course of action that was a successful result of the informal process. Neustadt and Allison argue that the improvised procedures of this group gave Kennedy's advisors "the very things they needed, under circumstances bound to minimize parochialism, strengthening their sense of common service to the top."⁵⁵

However, small informal groups are prone to some of the same flaws common to many decisionmaking processes. "Groupthink" may lead to excessive optimism and risk taking, discounting warnings, ignoring ethical and moral consequences, stereotyping adversaries, pressuring group members who express strong dissenting arguments, self-censorship of doubts and counterarguments, shared illusion of

unanimity concerning judgments, or self-appointed “mind guards” who shelter the group from adverse information that would challenge the group’s thinking.²³ Another problem with small groups is that they shut out of the process officials in the departments and agencies who need access and guidance. Departments and agencies across the government need the interagency process as much as the president does. Moreover, there is reason to be concerned that small groups might have difficulty managing multiple crises at once.

Looking Ahead

The president’s job is unique and uniquely demanding with impossibly broad responsibility, high expectations, and a relatively weak management hand in practice. Domestic politics frame every choice, even if the president decides to disregard or minimize their significance. The challenges will continue to multiply as the problem of homeland security further blurs distinctions between the traditional realms of national security and domestic policy. The complexity of national security policy has increased, resulting in more specialized functions, greater inter-relatedness among issues, and a larger bureaucracy, while congressional committees remain as dispersed and distinct as ever. The DNI and interagency centers represent attempts to improve coordination in key functional areas, but they also complicate decision making.

As a result, the incentive will continue for future presidents to centralize national security policy in the White House even further. Presidents’ use of informal process and confidential advice will continue to rise, as will the role of the national security advisor more as an advocate than as an honest broker. Large White House national security policy staffs are likely to remain the norm, and a hierarchical, multilayered interagency committee architecture is likely to endure. Even as the formal national security decisionmaking process becomes more important to facilitate interagency coordination, its value as an advisory system may decline.

Can the institution of the presidency realistically handle the full burden of national security policy development and coordination throughout the executive branch? Constitutionally, of course, the president alone bears the responsibility. Practically, someone with a manageable scope of responsibility is needed to coordinate the efforts of the departments and agencies. In addition to the three options noted earlier in this chapter for a president faced with any coordination challenge (coordinate it, leave it alone, or tell the agencies to coordinate with each other), there is a fourth option. The president may delegate sufficient authority to someone else, such as the DNI. The role of the DNI may become a model for further reforms in the national security decisionmaking process in the coming years.

Future adjustments to national security decisionmaking may well involve changes in the management of the personnel involved in the process. There continue to be calls for legislation to require national security personnel to receive some form of interagency education, or to serve in agencies other than their “home agency” as a prerequisite to career advancement (similar to the joint service

requirements for military officers created by the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, as discussed in chapter 5). Whether the Goldwater-Nichols Act can serve as a useful precedent for the broader national security community remains to be seen.

Discussion Questions

1. If you had just joined the policy staff of the NSC, what issues from chapters 4 through 10 would you most keep in mind?
2. How does the nature of the US political system affect the national security decision-making process? How has this changed over time?
3. Why does the power of the president in foreign policy differ from that in domestic policy? To what extent is that changing?
4. Given the importance of career civil servants, should Congress require that national security professionals rotate through various agencies throughout their careers?
5. How have the coordination challenges facing the NSC and its staff grown more complex since 9/11?
6. Is it possible to move some of the growing interagency coordination burden outside of the White House? How? What would the president gain or lose as a result?
7. Can the formal interagency process be improved? What changes might be appropriate, and what would be their advantages and disadvantages?
8. How could the national security decisionmaking process be modified to emphasize development of long-range strategy, instead of being reactive to urgent crises?
9. What are the appropriate roles for the national security advisor? Why? How might those roles evolve? What would happen to decision making as a result?
10. If you were the president of the United States, what management style for national security would you adopt, and why? How would you structure the formal and informal processes to get information and to make decisions most effectively?

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III

Ways and Means of National Strategy