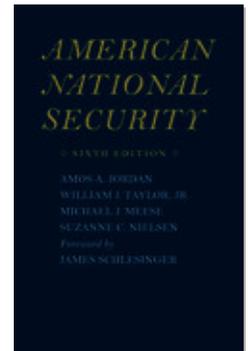




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Putting the Pieces Together: National Security Decision Making

National security decision making is complex and fascinating because of the two worlds it involves. 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 have an impact on and are influenced by both worlds, for national security often involves the application of national resources to the international arena in an attempt to make the domestic society more secure.

The institutional arrangements that have evolved to advise and assist the president in security matters are often referred to as the *national security decision-making process*, or the *interagency process* (after the agencies that participate). When trying to understand American foreign and national security policy and actions, such factors as the global environment or domestic politics will tell only part of the story. How decisions are made can be at least as important, so understanding the national security decision-making process is essential.

The national security decision-making process is a system of formal and informal coordination within the executive branch intended to ensure that issues requiring presidential attention are identified and raised in a timely manner; national interests and objectives are clearly defined; viable options are thoroughly considered; costs, benefits, and risks are deliberately evaluated; and overall coherence of policy is maintained. 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 decision-making process doubles as a management system that helps the president carry out his or her

responsibilities as head of the executive branch by enabling the president's staff to adjudicate and coordinate issues that straddle department and agency seams.

The president's staff—specifically, the National Security Council (NSC) and Homeland Security Council (HSC) staffs in concert with others in the Executive Office of the President—actively administers the process. The backbone of the formal process is a constant churn of interagency meetings, commonly referred to as the *NSC system* (and, since 2001, the *HSC system*), supported by formally prepared and staffed memoranda, intelligence estimates, and other papers. At the top, the meetings include the president, the president's senior advisors, and the heads of departments and agencies, known as the *principals*. Below this level, all presidents have been served by some structure of subordinate councils and working groups (see Chapter 4). The majority of activity occurs in these subordinate meetings, without the president's or the principals' direct participation. Around this formal apparatus, a set of informal arrangements invariably evolves in response to the needs of the president.

The cousin of the national security decision-making process is the annual president's budget process. These processes are fed by many diverse and important systems internal to departments and agencies. These internal systems are augmented by a growing number of lateral agency-to-agency coordination mechanisms and an increasing number of interagency centers, such as the National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC) discussed in Chapter 7, that integrate elements of various agencies into a single organization with a specific mission. The national security decision-making process is actually a system of processes that extends from the White House deeply 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 (e.g., "this committee handles that issue"), there are exceptions. Indeed, there is no real rule book, though documents that purport to be such abound.² The processes used to support major decisions have differed significantly across administrations and even within the same administration on different issues.

Factors That Shape the Formal Process

A key component of the national security decision-making system is the formal process. This section surveys the important factors that shape its nature.

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 most of his foreign counterparts, is both head of state (the country's symbolic leader) and head of government (the chief executive of the unitary executive branch). Executive power is broadly 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, have continued to expand over time. As a result, the president is stretched thin.⁴ Moreover, domestic and international publics place high

expectations on 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 decision-making process belongs to the president, enabling him or her to respond to these imperatives.

Separation of Powers, Pluralism, and Federalism. The national security decision-making process reflects the basic characteristics of the U.S. political system.⁵ For the purposes of this chapter, two features stand out. The first, the subject of Chapters 4 and 5, is the U.S. system of *separated powers* or, more accurately, separate institutions sharing power.⁶ The second is *political and social pluralism*. The more pluralist the society—that is, the more there are distinct ethnic, cultural, religious, or other disparate groups within it—the greater the number of entities that interact with the decision 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 far fewer interest groups, and most do not pack the political clout of domestic policy groups. In *Fortune* magazine's 2001 list of the twenty-five most powerful interest groups, only one—the American Israel Public Affairs Committee—had a foreign policy or national security focus.⁸ Excepting the 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 lobbies is on the rise, the foreign policy arena is less crowded than the domestic policy arena.

Political scientist Aaron Wildavsky asserted in 1966 that there are, in fact, two presidencies: one for domestic affairs and one for foreign affairs. Wildavsky's thesis has lost traction in some areas (for example, on 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."⁹

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 in domestic ones. However, the political reality of two presidencies now cuts both ways. Since the first World Trade Center attack in 1993; the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995; and, most dramatically, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the president's national security responsibilities have expanded decisively in the domestic realm (see Chapter 6). Protecting the country now requires, in the words of the 9/11 Commission, "unity of effort across the foreign-domestic divide."¹⁰

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 cedes power to Congress. Wildavsky says, "It takes great crises . . . for Presidents to succeed in controlling

domestic policy,” and a president’s domestic policy proposals are more than twice as likely to fail as his national security proposals.¹¹ The events of 9/11 triggered such a crisis, but the president’s ability to get his way at home eroded far more quickly than his ability to get his way abroad. For example, President George W. Bush’s proposal to give first responders smallpox inoculations died, but three months later he was able to lead the country into war with Iraq. Second, the president’s power in homeland security matters is eroded by the vigorous engagement of interest groups with Congress and the bureaucracy. Because homeland security policies touch the daily lives of Americans and frequently collide with competing domestic priorities, interest groups become involved. Third, the president shares power with the states, and governors are frequently not compliant: The president has his interests, and they have theirs. For all these reasons, since 9/11, the president’s national security prerogative simply does not exist for an enormously important range of security policy.¹²

The impact on national security decision making is three-fold. First, as post-9/11 expectations that the president will protect the country have risen, the heightened relevance of domestic issues to security has meant that the president’s power has diminished. Second, developing and implementing coherent national security policy has become more challenging due to the involvement of domestic agencies (e.g., the Department of the Interior) and policy instruments (e.g., regulation) traditionally far outside the realm of national security policy. *Iron triangles*—the durable relationships among interest groups, relevant executive branch agencies, and corresponding congressional committees—mean 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 as opposed to the nation as a whole (immigration policy and port security provide examples).

Domestic Politics. Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg may have rightly claimed that “politics stops at the water’s edge,” but this perspective is currently misleading.¹³ Domestic politics do not necessarily preclude desirable courses of action, but they do mean that some presidential decisions will be tougher to make or more costly. Domestic politics can narrow or color options (President John Kennedy’s talking tough on Cuba in the 1960 presidential election surely influenced his decision to approve the Bay of Pigs operation), put new options on the table (President Richard Nixon, the ardent anticommunist, could open up relations with Communist China), or simply roil the waters (the 1995 budget showdown between President Bill Clinton and congressional Republicans complicated the final negotiations of the Dayton Accords).¹⁴ Once in a rare while, domestic politics can remove some presidential options completely, usually through a showdown between the formal powers of the president and Congress (for example, the congressionally mandated halt to bombing in Cambodia toward the end of the Nixon administration).¹⁵

Perhaps the most important domestic political factor affecting many of the president’s power calculations is the electoral cycle. The president’s prospects for reelection constrain choices. In the second term, more freedom to act is likely to be accompanied by less influence with Congress. In both cases, options may be

significantly affected by foreign leaders whose understanding of the U.S. political system rivals that of Americans.¹⁶

The impact of domestic politics is not always felt at the margins, nor is it new. Ernest May argues that the Monroe Doctrine, the bedrock of American strategy toward Latin America for nearly a century, can also be explained in terms of domestic politics.¹⁷ The geopolitical situation mattered to President James Monroe, but Monroe also believed that boldly trumpeting American primacy in Latin America would enhance the political prospects of his party. In fact, John Quincy Adams, who helped formulate the Monroe Doctrine as Monroe's Secretary of State, was elected to succeed President 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 decision-making process. This need not be cause for cynicism; in a democracy, good policy is policy that gets done (and politics is how it gets done), and good security strategy is strategy that can be maintained. The effective 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.¹⁸ Each new challenge creates a policy demand. Government adds a function, agencies specialize, and jurisdictions overlap. Integrating national security policy simultaneously gets more important and more difficult. The burden on the president rises.

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 (e.g., counterterrorism intelligence) and individual programs. Fewer problems fall solely within the purview of a specific agency, and it is increasingly unlikely that individual departments and agencies are sensitive to all the ways in which their policies and programs relate and interact.¹⁹ At a minimum, agencies differ in their priorities.

For most of the last sixty years, this phenomenon affected domestic and economic policy more than national security policy—the Department of State, the Department of Defense (DoD), and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) enjoyed distinct, even exclusive statutory authorities for most of what they do. This has changed. The 9/11 Commission report observes that, even given national security professionals committed to collaboration, it has become harder to get agencies to act in concert. The NSC and HSC systems must untangle these interconnections to forge coherent policy.

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. Option 1 has the cost of increasing the size and diffusing the focus of the president's staff. Option 2 runs the risk of miscalculation, as a seemingly low

Table 10.1 Senate-Confirmed Positions

	1940	1960	1998	2004
Secretaries	10	10	14	15
Deputy secretaries	0	6	23	24
Under secretaries	3	15	41	46
Total	13	31	78	85

Source: Paul C. Light, *Fact Sheet on the Continued Thickening of Government* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2004).

Note: Positions without a title of “secretary”—such as Director, FBI; Director, CIA; Administrator, Environmental Protection Agency—are not included.

priority issue may surface as a major problem later. Option 3 is problematic at best. Presidential commands are “but a method of persuasion . . . and not a method suitable for everyday employment.”²⁰

Growth of the Federal Government. As policy needs expand, so does government. The number of agencies with national security missions is growing—including cabinet departments, such as Agriculture; independent agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency; quasi-independent agencies, such as the Coast Guard; and unique entities, such as the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI). Congress adds new committees and subcommittees. Not only do agencies proliferate, but they sprout new specialized bureaus, offices, and centers to address new demands.²¹

The number of political appointees grows apace, as does the White House staff. For the most part, each of these officials has an important job, and the departments they administer are responsible for key functions. For example, the undersecretary of defense for intelligence is one of five new undersecretaries added between 1998 and 2004 (see Table 10.1). The political appointee in charge of all intelligence functions of the DoD has an important role to play but simultaneously adds to the number of players involved in the interagency process.

Departmentalism, Parochialism, and Turf. As articulated by Elliot Richardson (who has held four cabinet positions), “Cabinet members are forced by the very nature of their institutional responsibilities to be advocates of their departmental programs.”²² Career civil servants almost always stay in one department and have the power to passively stymie political leaders.²³ To get things done, agency executives need the support of their bureaucracy.²⁴

Inevitably, the views of agencies and, over time, of their politically appointed leaders are 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.²⁵ Because 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 decision-making process to assert control.

What Executive Officialdom Needs. Not only the president but also the involved agencies need the national security decision-making process. As interrelatedness increases and the president's coordination burden rises, so does theirs—the result is more conflict that only the president can adjudicate. Writing about Kennedy's cabinet during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Graham Allison and Neustadt state: "What top officials needed from the President [was] . . . a forum for discussion, 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."²⁶ As reported by the Tower Commission, "The NSC system will not work unless the president makes it work."²⁷

The Foundation: The National Security Act of 1947 and the National Security Council

The bedrock institutional architecture for the formal national security decision-making process was established by the National Security Act of 1947. When 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.²⁸ Supporting his call for unification were the Army and War Departments. Opposing it was the Navy, which favored decentralization—a stance that persisted through various centralizing reorganizations, including Goldwater-Nichols in 1986.

The National Security Act that emerged in July 1947 was a compromise. The act created a secretary of defense (but no unified 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."²⁹ The NSC was authorized a staff managed by an executive secretary. As flaws became apparent, Congress amended the act in 1949, creating a DoD with full authority over the military services, removing the services from the cabinet and NSC, and installing a chairman of the JCS who would serve as the military advisor to the NSC. Additional adjustments occurred in 1958, 1986, and, most recently, in 2004 (see Table 10.2).

The Council in Practice. By the end of the Truman administration, the basic structure was in place: the statutory NSC with an executive secretary responsible for facilitating meetings, interfacing with the president, and overseeing a supporting staff. The staff was responsible for coordinating interagency committees and managing the preparation of policy papers.³⁰ The position of national security advisor was created in 1953 (see 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, though every president has added participants. Table 10.3

Table 10.2 The National Security Council as Established by the National Security Act of 1947, as Amended

Chair:	President
Members:	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
Statutory advisors:	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: U.S. Code, Title 50, Chapter 15, Subchapter 1, § 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*.

Table 10.3 The National Security Council as Augmented and Organized by Recent Presidents

	<i>George H. W. Bush</i>	<i>William J. Clinton</i>	<i>George W. Bush</i>
Nonstatutory members or regular attendees added by the president	Secretary of the treasury (unless asked not to attend) National security advisor Chief of staff to the president	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
May attend all meetings			Chief of staff to the president Assistant to the president for economic policy Counsel to the president
May attend when invited	Attorney general Department/agency heads Other senior officials NSC special statutory advisers	Attorney general Department/agency heads Other senior officials NSC special statutory advisers	Attorney general Department/agency heads Other senior officials Director, Office of Management and Budget

Sources: National Security Directive-1 (NSD-1): Organization of the National Security Council System, January 30, 1989; Presidential Decision Directive-2 (PDD-2): Organization of the National Security Council, January 20, 1993; National Security Presidential Directive-1 (NSPD-1): Organization of the National Security Council System, 13 February 2001.

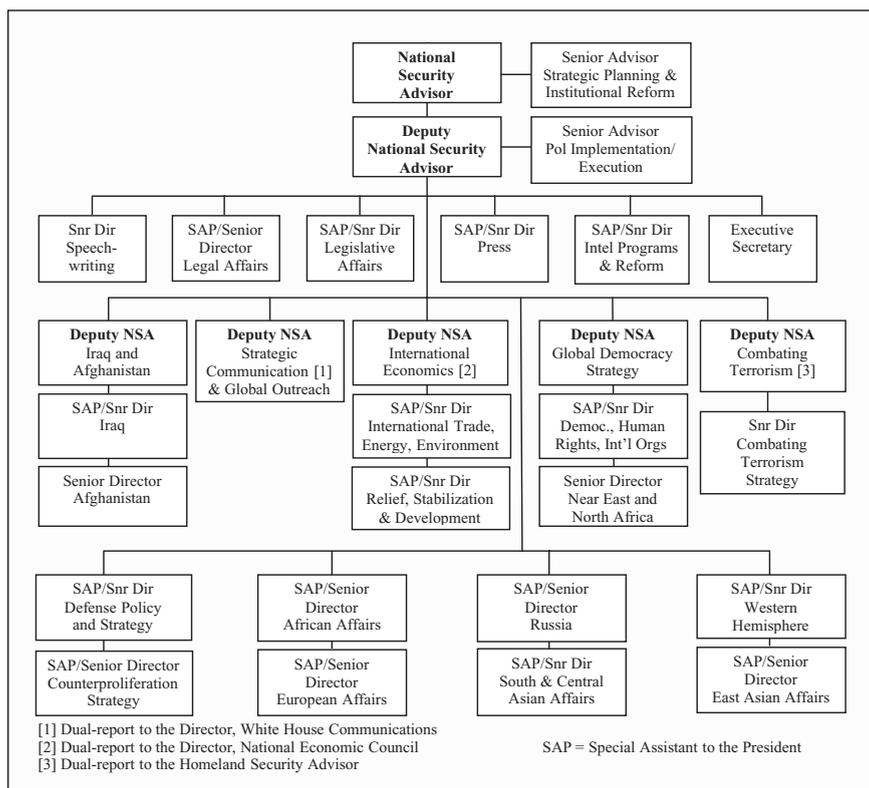
compares how Presidents George H. W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush tailored the NSC to their needs. Except for during the Eisenhower administration, when they were more frequent, formal meetings of the NSC have been infrequent—on average, occurring slightly more often than once a month. George W. Bush convened the NSC more frequently: every day for a period following 9/11, and then once or twice a week thereafter, often by secure video teleconference.³¹ Whether this remains the practice for his successors remains to be seen. Crises typically generate a flurry of formal NSC meetings; between crises, meetings have been less frequent.³²

Formal meetings occur relatively infrequently 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 by meetings that occur below the principals' level, without the president. These meetings improve the decision process by coordinating policy, crafting distinct options, clarifying differences, and minimizing the issues requiring the president's attention.

The Staff.³³ The NSC and HSC staffs have three enduring purposes: (1) advise the president; (2) coordinate the development of policy across the executive branch; and (3) monitor the implementation of presidential decisions, policies, and guidance. The most important staff position to fill is the national security advisor, supported by a deputy national security advisor. Clinton added a second deputy for international economic affairs, who also reported to the director of the National Economic Council (NEC). The George W. Bush NSC staff grew to include six deputies for key policy functions (see Figure 10.1). The rationale for additional deputies is to attract a sufficiently senior or high-ranking official to take the job and to ensure that the official has status and clout within the White House and with the departments and agencies. Below the deputies are senior directors responsible for key geographic and functional policy areas, and each senior director typically oversees three to eight directors (the "action officers" of the NSC and HSC staffs). Directors are a mix of policy generalists and expert specialists, each with a specific portfolio. They range from very senior officials with long-time policy experience to talented up-and-comers. A senior director's or director's influence is only partially determined by seniority and is mostly determined by policy acumen, political skill, relationships, and results. The White House is a very entrepreneurial place—results earn relevance—and there is no shortage of strong individuals who are intent on carving out a piece of the action. Tactful and effective directors can earn access to the president, while senior directors and even deputies can be subtly marginalized.³⁴

Members of the NSC staff come from a variety of sources: government, academia, the private sector, and think tanks. Many have revolved through several of these categories. Military officers form a special and important category. They have served in every position, from national security advisor to director, and included every rank from four-star general to captain. They have essential military knowledge and experience, and they know how to make staffs function. Perhaps most importantly, officers are bound by their profession to be nonpartisan, so their military advice can be trusted as such, and they offer critical continuity during

FIG. 10.1 National Security Council Staff



Source: Stephen J. Hadley, "Memorandum: National Security Council Staff Reorganization" (Washington, DC: The White House, 2005).

changes of administration. The challenge for military officers is how to make the transition to the fluidity of the White House and how to walk the line between policy and politics in a place where politics is omnipresent.

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, when hundreds of thousands of veterans of the 1991 Gulf War experienced the mysterious symptoms commonly known as the Gulf War syndrome, Clinton created a Gulf War Illness Affairs directorate, which was later absorbed into the Defense Policy and Arms Control directorate.³⁵

The First Post-9/11 Reform: The Homeland Security Council. During the 1990s, the NSC architecture that had served the country reasonably well throughout the Cold War was forced to adapt. Clinton instituted a variety of

Table 10.4 The Homeland Security Council as Enacted by Congress, November 25, 2002

President	Attorney general
Vice president	Secretary of Defense
Secretary of Homeland Security	Others designated by the president

Source: U.S. Congress, Title IX of *Homeland Security Act of 2002*, Public Law 107-296.

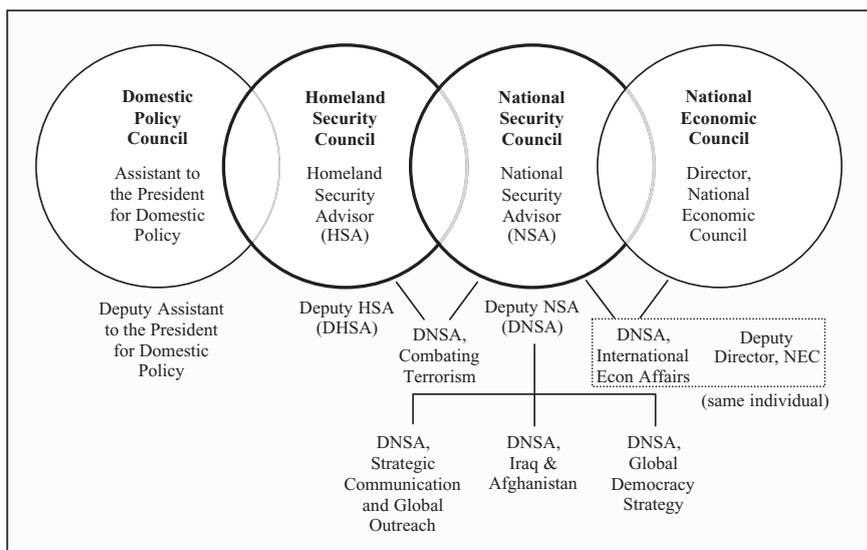
changes, creating a bureau for Transnational Threats, the Counterterrorism Security Group (CSG), and the position of coordinator for Counterterrorism. By the end of his administration, the NSC staff had grown to the largest it had ever been but remained strained. Many current and former government officials recognized that the changes needed were more fundamental than normal institutional evolution would allow.³⁶

The events that finally provided the impetus for dramatic change occurred on 9/11. About a month after the attacks, George W. Bush established the Office of Homeland Security (now referred to as the HSC staff), to be headed by a new homeland security advisor, and created the HSC, a cabinet-level committee modeled on the NSC, which was later enshrined in statute (see Table 10.4).³⁷ The HSC staff was given the task of developing a national strategy for homeland security and for bringing the broad range of domestic agencies with important security responsibilities into the formal system of national security coordination. Given the inexperience of many agencies in the formal interagency process, the HSC staff's coordination task was immense and extended into details of implementation. The staff grew quickly to over one hundred policy people. Much of this staff migrated to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) after its creation in 2003, and, as the HSC system settled into a more regular pattern of activity, the policy staff was reduced to approximately thirty by 2006.

The coordination challenge is broader than the NSC and HSC staffs. The integration of security and international economic policy was institutionalized when Clinton created the NEC in 1993, with a deputy national security advisor for international economic affairs who is "dual-hatted" as the NEC deputy. However, many homeland security issues also have economic dimensions (e.g., cargo security). In addition, there is a greater need to coordinate national security policy with the White House's domestic policy staff, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), White House Counsel, and others. Also, Clinton and George W. Bush both gave their vice presidents significant roles in national security affairs, requiring more coordination with the Office of the Vice President than in the past. Figure 10.2 provides an illustration of the basic conceptual overlap between White House coordinating councils.³⁸

A Further Post-9/11 Reform: The Director of National Intelligence. The establishment of the DNI was the second major post-9/11 reform to the national security decision-making apparatus. The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 established the DNI as the head of the Intelligence Community and the principal intelligence advisor to the president, the NSC, and

FIG. 10.2 Intersection of White House Policy Coordinating Councils



the HSC (see Chapter 7 for a discussion of the DNI and the relationship between policy makers and intelligence).

The DNI is a unique and unprecedented entity in the executive branch structure. The DNI reports directly to the president, but the office is not part of the Executive Office of the President, and the DNI must be confirmed by the Senate. The DNI has statutory authority as head of the Intelligence Community, as did the director of central intelligence (DCI), but unlike the DCI sits formally above the departments and agencies. For the first time, responsibility for coordination of a critical component of the national security decision-making process is lodged outside of the White House but above departments and agencies, and it is subject to congressional oversight.

The DNI is also authorized to create interagency centers, such as the NCTC. These centers, which are not subordinate to a lead department or agency, are new and have significant effects on the national security decision-making process. They add one more entity to the interagency table, and although they improve interagency coordination within their functional area, they complicate the national security decision-making process in the NSC and HSC systems.

The Interagency Process

Though details and titles have varied across administrations, the national security decision-making architecture has been relatively stable since 1989, being comprised of a Principals Committee (PC), a Deputies Committee (DC), and subordinate interagency policy coordination committees (PCCs). It seems likely this structure or one like it will endure.

Principals Committee. A PC meeting is an NSC or HSC meeting without the president (for brevity, the discussion below will use the term NSC, though the process is essentially the same for the HSC). The PC's principal functions are to advise the president and coordinate and resolve interagency policy issues at the national strategic level. The PC historically has met once or twice a week, though in the George W. Bush administration it has met more frequently. The core participants are the council members and advisors (see Tables 10.2 and 10.4) and the national security advisor. Some PC meetings are also attended by the vice president and the president's chief of staff. Others may attend if needed. The national security advisor convenes and chairs the meeting and ensures that the necessary papers (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 (such as the 2005 London subway bombings).³⁹

Deputies Committee. The DC resolves interagency issues that can be handled without engaging the principals, elevates critical or contentious issues that require the attention of the principals or the president, and presents issues to the principals in a manner that sets a foundation for deliberation. The DC, "the engine of policy," has proven particularly useful.⁴⁰ While there are few truly strategic decisions, there are many important policy decisions that usually require dissemination and action more than confidentiality. Essential White House and departmental staffers, known as *straphangers*, 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 settled. Occasionally, for high-priority initiatives or during crises, important issues are initiated at the DC level and not in the subordinate committees.

The NSC DC typically includes the deputy secretaries of State, Treasury, and Defense; the deputy attorney general; the deputy director of OMB; the deputy DNI (or the director of the NCTC, for counterterrorism issues); the vice chairman of the JCS; the deputy chief of staff to the president for policy; the vice president's national security advisor; and the deputy homeland security advisor.⁴¹ The deputy national security advisor convenes and chairs the meeting (the deputy national security advisor for international economic affairs chairs meetings concerning economic issues with 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 in order to follow up on the principals' decisions and 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. PCCs are interagency committees organized around specific geographic or functional policy areas. PCCs accomplish the bulk of the work of policy integration, adjudicate conflicts, and identify and frame 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.

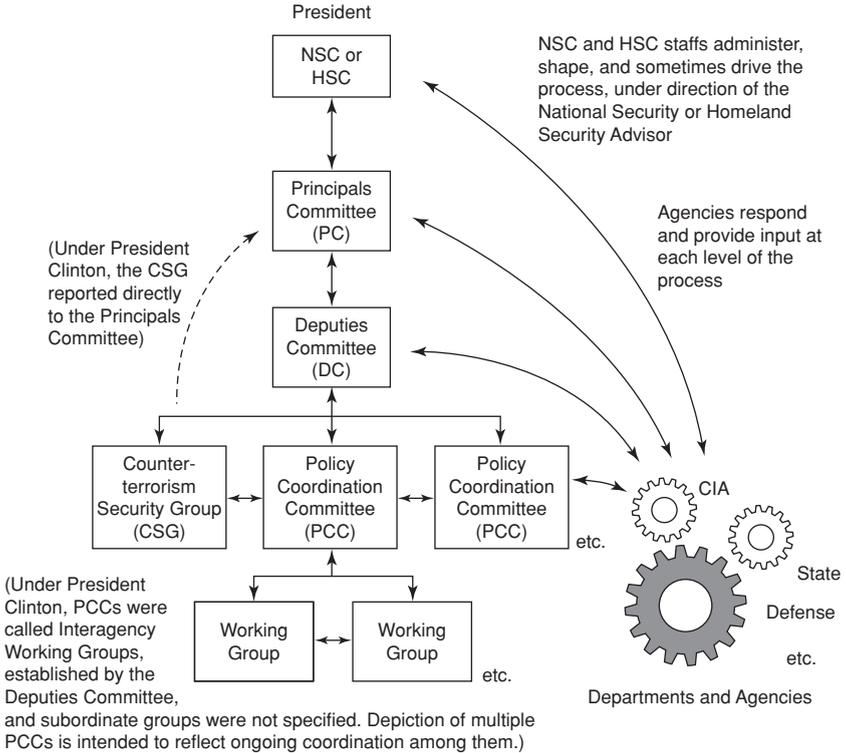
The scope, membership, rank of participants, frequency, and authority of a PCC depend on the issues the PCC handles and the level of responsibility afforded it. Members typically include political appointees at the deputy-assistant-secretary or occasionally assistant-secretary level, senior agency officials, senior military officers from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and Joint Staff, and other experts. Membership is a mix of political and career officials. Though 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 or an assistant secretary from a “lead agency” usually chairs, sometimes with an HSC cochair. Post-9/11, the number of NSC PCCs has expanded significantly, from seventeen PCCs at the start of the George W. Bush administration to thirty in 2005.⁴² With HSC PCCs included, the number approaches forty.

A properly led PCC cultivates a sense of teamwork, encouraging collaboration and communication outside of scheduled meetings. Membership and working relationships straddle administrations, so PCCs handle few truly new issues. PCC chairs have no formal authority to override any one agency, making it easy to play defense and prevent consensus on a policy decision. 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 unfortunately can result in watered-down, least-common-denominator policy.⁴³

The Counterterrorism Security Group. The CSG warrants its own discussion, because a group like it will undoubtedly remain part of the decision-making system. The CSG is an NSC-chaired group of high-level counterterrorism and intelligence officials in the departments and agencies. It was established early in the Clinton administration as a midlevel working group that met two or three times per week (see Figure 10.3). After 9/11, George W. Bush created a new deputy national security advisor and director for combating terrorism who reported to both the national security advisor and the homeland security advisor and who assumed responsibility as chair of the CSG. In the years following 9/11, the CSG met every morning, usually by secure video teleconference, prior to the president’s daily threat brief to share information and coordinate the U.S. response to evolving threats. During the George W. Bush administration, the CSG included the head of the FBI’s Counterterrorism Division, the head of the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center, the director of the NCTC, the Department of State coordinator for counterterrorism, the assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, and other officials in the Department of Justice, the Joint Staff, and the DHS.

Interagency Working Groups. PCCs often establish subordinate working groups for high-priority initiatives or to coordinate certain activities. Some of

FIG. 10.3 Intersection “Machinery” of the Formal NSC and HSC Systems
(George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush Administrations)



these groups endure as standing bodies, but many dissolve. 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.

Substantive Products. Many presidential decisions are conveyed orally in confidence to the president’s advisors and cabinet secretaries. However, many decisions are communicated in writing, either as overarching statements of policy (e.g., the National Security Strategy [NSS]), guidance to the executive branch (e.g., a presidential directive on human trafficking), essential clarification (e.g., a presidential finding authorizing covert action), or requirements by law. Several such documents are common and important enough to warrant description.

Strategies. Important articulations of national strategy occur in presidential speeches, which unequivocally reflect the president’s thoughts. However, recent presidents have also found value in articulating policy in the form of national

strategy documents, some of which are required by law. Since 1986, for example, the president has been required by the Goldwater-Nichols Act to prepare an annual NSS. As of mid-2007, George W. Bush had signed no fewer than fifteen NSSs. Producing such documents can become a major task of PCCs, the NSC and HSC staffs, and the key policy organs of the agencies.

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 methodical process. The lack of a rigorous, long-range strategy and planning function within the national security decision-making process has long been a criticism of the NSC staff and interagency system.

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 provide an overarching approach or strategy that must be interpreted, implemented, and reassessed. Because of their broad nature, the degree to which they remain legally binding over time is open to interpretation.

Executive Orders. In contrast to presidential directives, which are generally broader in nature, executive orders are suitable for issues that can be addressed with specific and unambiguous direction to agencies. 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 2006, there were over thirteen thousand consecutively numbered orders, many of which concern national security (and many of those are classified). For example, 97 of the 220 executive orders issued by George W. Bush through the end of 2006 (or about 44%) dealt with foreign policy, military, or homeland security issues (vs. about 33% of Clinton's orders). A modest number of other executive orders issued by both presidents dealt with international economic issues that have some bearing on national security.⁴⁴

Assessing the Value of the Formal Interagency Process. Sometimes the formal process does exactly as its billing promises: It ensures that the key details of important policy decisions are fully coordinated by agency experts and endorsed by the principals, paving the way for a significant and lasting national security or foreign policy success. The formal process adds value by establishing the setting. The routine machinations of the formal process create an essential foundation of coordination and foster relationships that are needed when nonroutine situations arise.

The formal process is particularly useful for coordinating the details of policy implementation once a presidential decision has been made. 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.⁴⁵ The process also provides a foundation for buy-in by the agencies. As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger recognized, “a foreign policy achievement to be truly significant must at some point be institutionalized.”⁴⁶ Agencies that have had the opportunity to have their views considered are more likely to support the resulting decision.

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

Lack of Presidential Control of the Bureaucracy. In the words of Senator “Scoop” Jackson 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.”⁴⁷ The formal process can help the president rein in the bureaucracy, but it can also be a hindrance—sometimes the president himself is the one reined in.

Lack of Accountability. The formal process, with cumbersome and dense interagency procedures and committees, may produce an overemphasis on coordination and dilute responsibility for policy planning and implementation. Pulling decision making out of the committee process and into the White House helps the president establish responsibility and accountability among his cabinet and key advisors for carrying out important decisions.

Inflexibility, Lack of Creativity, and Overcautiousness. Formal meetings of bureaucrats sitting in their usual seats—with their agendas, position papers, and enumeration of second-order effects—do not tend to generate fresh thinking or risky policy. A powerful example is the formal interagency policy review on the German unification question, National Security Review-5 (NSR-5), which concluded in early 1989 that “it serves no U.S. interests for us to take the initiative to raise [German unification].”⁴⁸ Frustrated and impatient, George H. W. Bush decided to “create action-forcing events, including [two] presidential trips [to Europe] and speeches that would oblige the government . . . to deploy ideas about the direction of policy.”⁴⁹ A year-and-a-half after the formal interagency review, a treaty reunifying Germany as a full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was signed. The formal national security decision-making process did not assist, and in fact impeded, a major foreign policy success of the last half century.

Inability to Keep Pace. The world, the White House, and the bureaucracy move at different speeds. The formal process is hard pressed to keep up with rapid developments. 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 mobilize in response to the electoral cycle.

"Death by a Thousand Cuts." The formal system is geared toward consensus, because the deputies, principals, and the president cannot be called on to settle what a former NSC senior director has described as "extended interagency disputes too small to be seen without the aid of a magnifying glass."⁵⁰ Accommodation requires compromise; specific and prescriptive words get replaced with broad, noncommittal language in committee meetings. Presidential advisors have no authority to act as tiebreakers; if they do so without the explicit acquiescence of the group, they corrupt the integrity of the process. Even when a conflict reaches the president, consensus usually rules. "At every meeting," says Kissinger, "to gain the acquiescence of the potential recalcitrant, Nixon would offer so many modifications that the complex plan he was seeking to promote was eventually consumed."⁵¹

Lack of Confidentiality. Nixon's explanation to his staff about the close-hold process that led to U.S. rapprochement with China effectively illustrates the problem of confidentiality: "Without secrecy, there would have been no invitation or acceptance to visit China."⁵² Nixon argued that his bold stroke would have been impossible if he had received his advice through the formal national security decision-making process.

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 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 by Kennedy, and nothing similar has been resurrected.⁵³

Role of the National Security Advisor

One person sits at the crossroads of the formal process and the unique needs of the president. It is often said that power in the executive branch is determined by proximity to the president, and few are more proximate than the national security advisor. 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. This is largely determined by

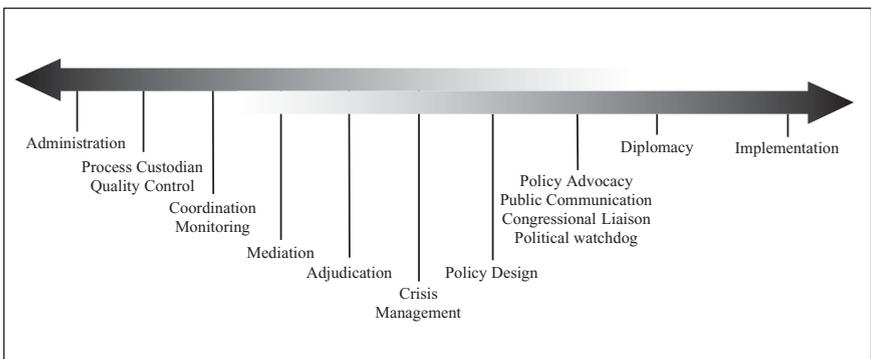
the president. Within the boundaries of the law, the national security advisor serves the president's needs.

Honest Broker. There is broad consensus that the national security advisor and 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 is available, conveying the president's views when authorized and appropriate, ensuring that a full range of options has been considered and prepared, 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.⁵⁴

Policy Advocate. Because national security advisors who act as advocates risk alienating the principals, policy advocacy is often seen as undermining effective brokerage. However, even effective brokers may have an obligation to express their views to the president within appropriate boundaries. For example, the president may need to hear an underrepresented point of view.⁵⁵ Sometimes, national security advisors faced with intransigent agencies and an unresponsive process have resorted to advocacy to move policy forward.⁵⁶

Other Roles of the National Security Advisor. Other controversial roles of the national security advisor, depicted in Figure 10.4, can be seen as extensions of the policy advocacy role. The roles of policy design, public communication, diplomacy, and certainly implementation all associate the advisor with specific policies. These additional roles may 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

FIG. 10.4 Roles of the National Security Advisor and NSC Staff



Modified and adapted from Christopher C. Shoemaker, *The NSC Staff: Counseling the Council* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1991), 23.

may compete with the secretary of state's traditional role as the sole voice on foreign affairs. For reasons such as this, presidents are wise to ensure that their national security advisors can work collegially with the secretaries of state and defense.

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.⁵⁷ For these reasons, every president has stepped outside the formal process to get advice.

Smaller, informal meetings foster essential collegiality and are more confidential, candid, and productive. Principals devote their energy and time for such meetings in a way that they do not for formal committees.⁵⁸ Principals bargain with one another, breaking the logjams produced by the formal process. Informal and one-on-one consultations also allow the president to draw on input from others without yielding any power in the process.⁵⁹ Because they have greater freedom to brainstorm and backtrack, informal groups can be more conducive to creativity.

Small, informal groups become particularly important to presidents during crises. All the factors impinging on presidential decision making become more acute, and the constraints become more formidable. The most famous example is Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis. His ad hoc, advisory Executive Committee arrived at a course of action (a naval "quarantine") that can be interpreted as a successful result of 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."⁶⁰

However, small informal groups are prone to a variety of flaws common to faulty decision processes. There is the possibility of groupthink, which can 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-censoring of doubts and counterarguments, sharing the illusion of unanimity concerning judgments, and self-appointed "mind guards" who shelter the group from adverse information that challenges the group's thinking.⁶¹ Another problem with small groups is that they shut out of the process officials in the departments and agencies who need access and guidance. Moreover, there is reason to be concerned that small groups might have difficulty managing multiple crises at once.

Improving the Prospects for Good Decisions

Presidents choose management models that fit their personality, their management style, and their needs. Richard Tanner Johnson has categorized presidential management models into three types: formalistic (president at the top, orderly

policy procedure, hierarchical; example: Eisenhower), collegial (president at the center, informal procedures, decision-making team led by the president; example: Kennedy), and competitive (president at the top, organizational ambiguity, multiple channels of communication to the president, encouragement of debate; example: Franklin D. Roosevelt).⁶² One can group the descriptions of presidential management and leadership in Chapter 4 into these categories, which each have advantages and disadvantages. A formal decision-making process is less prone to erroneous assumptions but restricts the information flow to the president and obscures covert bargaining among advisors.⁶³ A collegial approach gives the president greater control of the process but is extremely demanding of the president's time and energy.⁶⁴ A competitive approach ensures that the president retains control over the majority of decisions but breeds dysfunction and mistrust in the staff and cabinet.

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 chooses to disregard or minimize their significance. The challenges are multiplying as the problem of homeland security has blurred distinctions between the traditional national security and domestic policy realms. The complexity of national security policy has increased, resulting in more specialized functions, greater interrelatedness among issues, and a larger bureaucracy, while congressional committees remain as dispersed and distinct as ever. New entities, such as the DNI and interagency centers, promise to improve coordination in key functional areas, but they also complicate decision making.

As a result, the incentive for future presidents to pull national security policy further into the White House is growing. Their use of informal processes and confidential advice is likely to rise, and the trend that national security advisors perform roles other than that of the broadly accepted honest broker is likely to continue. Large White House national security policy staffs are more likely to exist than not, and a hierarchical, multilayered interagency committee architecture is likely to endure. While the formal national security decision-making process becomes more important as a means to effect interagency coordination, its value as an advisory system may decline.

Can the institutional presidency realistically handle the full burden of national security policy development and coordination across the executive branch? Constitutionally, of course, the president alone bears the responsibility. Practically, someone with a manageable scope of responsibility is needed to sit above the departments and agencies with the legal authority to herd their efforts. Earlier in this chapter, it is noted that the president has three options with any coordination challenge: (1) coordinate it, (2) leave it alone, or (3) tell the agencies to coordinate with each other. There is a fourth option: Delegate to someone else with sufficient legal authority. The DNI is the first such entity and may become a model for further reforms in the national security decision-making process in the coming years.

Post-9/11 changes to the national security decision-making process have been largely structural, as this chapter emphasizes. However, future adjustments may well involve changes in how national security personnel are managed. A growing chorus is calling for legislation to require national security personnel to receive some form of interagency education or serve in agencies other than their “home agency” in order to advance in their careers. As discussed in Chapter 5, the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 created similar requirements among the military services. 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 were just hired to the policy staff of the NSC, what issues from Chapters 4 through 10 of this book would you most keep in mind?
2. How does the nature of the U.S. political system affect the national security decision-making process? How has this changed over time?
3. What factors have contributed to the growth of government over the last decade? What positive or negative effects might this have on policy and decision making?
4. Given the importance of career civil servants, should the Congress require that national security professionals rotate through various agencies throughout their careers?
5. How have the coordination challenges facing the NSC and HSC and their staffs grown more complex since 9/11?
6. Is it possible to move some of the growing interagency coordination burden outside of the presidency? 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. What are the appropriate roles for the national security advisor, and why? How might those roles evolve? What will happen to decision making as a result?
9. If you were the president-elect of the United States, what management style—formalist, collegial, competitive—would you adopt, and why?
10. If you were president, what informal advisory arrangements would you institute? What would you look for in the first six months of your term to determine whether your advisory structures were serving you well?

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