

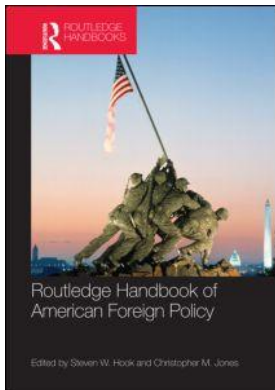
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The National Security Council

Vincent A. Auger

When the National Security Act of 1947 created a “National Security Council” to advise the president on issues of foreign and military policy, few of the authors of that legislation imagined that they were laying the foundation for an institution that would dramatically increase the president’s ability to manage national security policy from the White House. Just as the National Security Council (NSC) staff and the assistant to the president for national security affairs (the national security adviser) eventually came to play a dominant role in the shaping of U.S. foreign policy, scholarship in this field also turned to an examination of why this has happened and the consequences of this development for the practice of American foreign policy.

This chapter reviews some of the most important themes and questions that have emerged from several decades of scholarship concerning the National Security Council, its staff, and the national security adviser. As is the case in some other areas of the study of U.S. foreign policy, there is little grand theorizing about the National Security Council, and most scholarly research on the subject combines description and qualitative analytical techniques. The theoretical bases for those analyses are quite eclectic, including approaches such as the new institutionalism in American politics, paradigms of small-group decision making, and theories of presidential power. However, while the conceptual approaches used to study the topic remain very diverse, there has emerged a significant degree of consensus concerning the place of the NSC system in the conduct of American foreign policy.

Much of the research on the NSC can be also characterized as what George (1993) has termed *policy-relevant* theory, and more specifically a subcategory of that concept known as *process theory*. According to George (1993: 20), “process theory focuses on how to structure and manage the policymaking process to increase the likelihood of producing more effective policies.” George stipulates that a good process cannot guarantee a successful policy, but a poorly designed or poorly managed process can significantly increase the likelihood that the policy will fail or be less successful than expected. Much of the research on the NSC system is explicit in trying to identify process variables or issues that may be useful to presidents as they determine the role that the NSC staff and the national security adviser will play in their administration’s foreign policy decision making.

The chapter is organized in three parts. The first portion discusses research that traces the origins and development of the NSC and its staff, as well as studies that offer explanations for the particular trajectory that development has taken. The second part discusses three

enduring policy debates concerning the role of the national security adviser, the relative roles of the NSC and the State Department, and the scope of the policy areas for which the NSC should be responsible. The final section summarizes the current state of our knowledge and understanding of the National Security Council, and points to areas where future research might further expand that knowledge and understanding.

Development of the National Security Council

The National Security Act of 1947 created a council “to advise the [p]resident with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security,” and requires that the council “shall have a staff to be headed by a civilian executive secretary who shall be appointed by the [p]resident” (reprinted in Inderfurth and Johnson 1988: 38). The founding legislation (as amended in 1949) also specified that the council would be composed of the president, vice president, secretary of state, and secretary of defense, with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of Central Intelligence as advisers to the council. These six individuals are often labeled the “statutory members” of the National Security Council. Each president has the authority to expand the membership in the council beyond that core group, and most presidents have done so; President Bill Clinton, for example, included the secretary of the treasury, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, and the White House chief of staff (Auger 1997: 52–53). Since the 1970s, however, most scholarship and public commentary on the National Security Council has emphasized the role of the assistant to the president for national security affairs (more commonly called the national security adviser, or NSA) and the NSC staff that reports to the adviser, reflecting the changes in the way presidents since John F. Kennedy have used the advisory system. Unless specifically noted by the term *statutory NSC*, the discussion of the NSC in this chapter will normally refer to the staff and the adviser.

The Origins and Evolution of the National Security Council System

When considering the historical development of the National Security Council system from 1947 until the present, it is possible to distinguish three distinct stages while recognizing significant variations within each stage. This framework is similar to one described by Brzezinski (1987–88), although it differs concerning the timing and the nature of the second and third phases. The first stage comprised the initial experiences in using the NSC and developing its staff capacity, including the creation of the position of special assistant to the president for national security affairs (the exact title has varied slightly over the years), under the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. In this phase, the statutory NSC played a significant role in the development of foreign policy (especially under Eisenhower), while the NSA and staff had clearly defined supporting roles. The general expectation under both Truman and Eisenhower was that the staff for the NSC would be comprised primarily of career officials, who would provide “neutral competence” and continuity from one administration to the next (Destler 1977: 155–157).

Although some of the seeds were planted near the end of the Eisenhower years, the second stage began with the Kennedy presidency and the appointment of McGeorge Bundy as national security adviser in 1961. During this phase, the statutory NSC fell into disuse while influence shifted dramatically to the NSA and the staff. The composition and orientation of the staff also began to change, from that of neutral professionals to servants of a particular president’s foreign policy goals (Destler 1977: 156–158). There was also considerable uncertainty and great

inconsistency concerning the relationship between the NSA and the other major foreign policy actors in the government, especially the secretary of state. Some national security advisers assumed a dominant role as policy makers, with Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski respectively becoming the public faces of the Nixon-Ford and Carter foreign policies. The Reagan administration saw an initial attempt to downgrade the importance of the national security adviser and NSC staff, only to see that staff expand enormously in size and influence later in Reagan's presidency. Robert McFarlane and John Poindexter even veered into an operational role in the Iran-Contra fiasco. However, this period also saw a number of self-effacing advisers, such as Brent Scowcroft (under Ford), Richard Allen, William Clark, Frank Carlucci, and Colin Powell (all under Reagan), with each holding the position for a relatively short time.

The third (current) stage can be dated from the second coming of Brent Scowcroft as national security adviser in the George H. W. Bush administration in 1989. Under Scowcroft, the modern system of organizing the NSC system (with three levels of committees below the statutory NSC) and the model of the national security adviser as an "activist counselor" (Johnson and Inderfurth 2004b) was established. While individual advisers and presidents have varied in their specific use of this approach (and have varied greatly in the foreign policy records they compiled while doing so), neither the Clinton, George W. Bush, or Obama administrations attempted to change significantly the basic structure of the interagency process or the parameters of the NSA role as established by the senior Bush and Scowcroft.

In the literature on the NSC, several authors have provided broad historical overviews that encompass more than one of the three stages, helping to fill the gap identified by Lord (200: 433) when he suggested that there was no satisfactory history of the NSC. While these studies are primarily descriptive, they provide a wealth of detail concerning the evolution of the NSC system and the activities in which the adviser and staff engaged. Best (2009) provides a clear and concise overview and introduction to the evolution of the NSC system from the Truman to the Obama administrations. Prados (1991) distinguishes between the prominence of the statutory National Security Council under the Truman and especially the Eisenhower administrations, and stresses the shift of power away from that advisory body towards the national security adviser and NSC staff that began in earnest with the Kennedy administration and eventually culminated in the excesses of the Iran-Contra affair. Rothkopf (2005) discusses the history of the NSC through the first term of President George W. Bush. His treatment is somewhat more analytical in its discussion of the context in which the NSC operates and in its emphasis on the very tight-knit group of elites who have served as national security advisers since the Nixon administration. Rothkopf's volume is also notable for its extensive use of interviews with many NSC staffers, providing valuable insights into participants' views of the policy process and the outcomes that process produced. Both these authors situate their reviews of the NSC system in the context of the major foreign policy issues and crises that the U.S. government faced during the periods discussed in their volumes.

Two other comprehensive studies analyze the changing role played by the national security adviser, based in each case on analytical comparisons of individual NSAs. Daalder and Destler (2009) review the performance of each NSA from Bundy in the Kennedy administration to Condoleezza Rice in the George W. Bush administration, using the nature of the relationship between the advisers and the presidents they served as the organizing principle for their analysis. More theoretically oriented is Burke's *Honest Broker* (2009), which uses the literature on the "custodian-manager" (or honest broker) role for the national security adviser in a "multiple advocacy system" of decision making (George 1980: 191–208). Burke establishes the practical feasibility of the "honest broker" role in an analysis of the NSC of the Eisenhower years, and he then analyses the performance of that role by four individual NSAs (Bundy, Kissinger, Scowcroft, and Rice) and the group of six advisers who served under Reagan.

Burke concludes that “honest brokerage” by the NSA is still necessary and feasible, although that role must also be combined with others that an individual president may wish the adviser to play.

Daalder and Destler have assembled another source of valuable materials for studying several different aspects of the NSC system, the National Security Council Project. This project, a joint effort by the Brookings Institution and the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland, is especially notable for a series of oral history roundtables hosted by Daalder and Destler (1998–2000). These discussions with former policy makers cover the Nixon, G.H.W. Bush, and Clinton NSC systems, as well as issue-specific discussions on policy in the areas of arms control, China, and international economics.

Other important research contributions focus on one of the specific periods in the NSC's history. Stevenson (2008) analyses the assumptions prevalent in 1947 about how the NSC system would function, and shows how some of those assumptions proved untenable in practice. Sidney Souers (1949), the first executive secretary of the NSC, provides the classic account of the original structure and process of the NSC system as implemented under President Harry Truman, while Falk (1964) illustrated how presidential priorities reshaped the role of the NSC in the Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations (also see Hammond 1960; Nelson 1983, 1985). Henderson (1988) provides a careful examination of the Eisenhower NSC structure and process, arguing that the movement away from that model after 1961 eventually created the environment which permitted the NSC staff to play such a destructive role in the Iran-Contra affair under Reagan. Greenstein and Immerman (2000) and Schlesinger (2000) analyze the Eisenhower system as well, debating the applicability of Eisenhower's NSC model in the twenty-first century.

Concerning the second historical phase, the transformation of the NSC staff into “a little State Department” under McGeorge Bundy is catalogued by Preston (2001), while the controversial tenure of Bundy's successor Walt Rostow is defended by Mulcahy (1995a, 1995b). Humphrey (1994) finds that the use of the formal, statutory National Security Council by Lyndon Johnson varied considerably throughout his presidency, although Johnson rarely used the NSC for serious consideration of policy options after his first twelve months as president. The Kissinger ascendancy is well-discussed in the works by Prados, Rothkopf, Daalder and Destler, and Burke noted above; and Crocker (1975) provides a contemporary analysis of the Nixon-Kissinger approach to national security management during Nixon's first term. Kissinger's own perspective is presented primarily in volume one (1979) of his memoirs (see Hersh 1983 for an extensive rebuttal to many of Kissinger's assertions). Burke (2009: 324–337) examines the role of Brzezinski during the Carter years. The Carter and Reagan NSC systems are carefully examined by Shoemaker (1991); and the Reagan system is criticized harshly by Burke (2009) and by the Tower Commission (1987) report that investigated the Iran-Contra affair. Destler, Gelb and Lake (1984: 182–239) provide a clear review the 1961–1983 period, emphasizing the rise of presidential “courtiers” on White House national security staffs at the expense of the “barons” who headed the cabinet departments.

Examination of the start of the third stage of the NSC system's evolution is provided by Rothkopf, Daalder and Destler, and Burke in their careful discussions of Scowcroft's tenure as national security adviser; see Bush and Scowcroft (1998) for their own account of how the NSC operated. Rothkopf also provides a clear account of the NSC system during the Clinton years, while Burke (2009: 337–361) profiles Clinton's two national security advisers, Anthony Lake and Samuel Berger. Auger (1997) analyzes the first few years of the Clinton NSC system, contrasting the continuity of the structure inherited from the Bush administration with the confusion produced by a process that encouraged delay in moving policy forward. Burke (2005, 2009) discusses the dysfunction of George W. Bush's NSC system, especially while Condoleezza Rice was the national security adviser. Rothkopf

(2009) provides a very early assessment of the Obama administration's approach to the NSC, where he finds that national security adviser James Jones seemed intent on adhering to the Scowcroft model.

Explaining the Evolution of the National Security Council

While it is indisputable that the role of the national security adviser and of the NSC staff has expanded tremendously since the Kennedy administration, there is no scholarly consensus on the reasons for this development. In fact, four distinct reasons have been offered as explanations for the centralization of foreign policy decision making in the NSA and NSC staff: as a response to international imperatives; as a consequence of the organizational origins and advantages that the NSC has over competing foreign policy bureaucracies; as a result of the aggressive personalities of some national security advisers; and as a function of presidential preferences and needs. While these explanations are not mutually exclusive (and as indicated below, some analysts combine two or more of these factors in their own studies), they do imply different sources of the phenomenon as well as different possibilities for reversing that centralization if that was deemed to be desirable or necessary.

The idea that the nature of the foreign policy problems facing the United States creates strong incentives, or even the necessity, to integrate decision making in a White House-led agency was present in the immediate post-World War II environment. Stevenson (2008: 130–131) points out that the debates leading to the passage of the National Security Act of 1947 recognized that the United States would play a leadership role in the postwar international system and that the ad hoc method of policy coordination used during the war would not suffice. Since then, the argument that international imperatives require centralization of foreign policy has been offered consistently by supporters of a larger NSC role (despite the fact that the actual international environment has changed significantly since 1947). Shoemaker argues that “only the White House could effect the coordination demanded by the mounting complexity of the international system” (1991: 18). Brzezinski offered the classic justification in his memoirs (1983: 537), arguing that “today, foreign affairs, diplomacy and global security need above all to be coordinated. They cannot be made subject to decisions by a single department. Rather, someone close to the [p]resident has to make certain that the [p]resident does not become a prisoner of departmental briefs.”

The end of the Cold War has not undermined this argument; in the view of some, the explosion of new foreign policy problems since 1989 has only strengthened the need for a prominent NSC role. Anthony Lake describes what he calls “systemic reasons” for “the increasing emphasis on the national security advisor,” referring to “a world in which practically every issue now has an economic, military, political, diplomatic, etc., dimension” (quoted by Burke 2009: 282). In such a complex international environment, a White House-centered process is a rational response to the nature of the problems to be addressed.

Other scholars have pointed to a second reason for the rise of the national security adviser and the NSC staff: the characteristics that flow from the way those positions were created and how they operate compared to other foreign policy agencies. Zegart (1999) situates her analysis of the NSC system in a variation of the new institutionalism literature from the study of American politics. She argues that the political bargaining among foreign policy elites that led to the creation of the NSC resulted in an organization that was uniquely responsive to presidential control, with virtually no role for congressional oversight and limited input from existing foreign policy bureaucracies (unlike the other two agencies created by the National Security Act of 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Joint Chiefs of Staff). These two factors reinforced each other: “because presidents were able to change the NSC system

without congressional involvement, the Departments of Defense and State could not turn to Congress for support” (Zegart 1999: 101). The combination of a staff apparatus that could be quickly reshaped to meet a president’s needs and the absence of any political counterweight led very naturally to the NSC emerging as most presidents’ preferred vehicle for placing their stamp on foreign policy.

Another scholar who discusses an organizational explanation is Rockman (1981), who distinguishes between what he calls “irregulars” and “regulars” in the foreign policy-making process, where the former refers to personnel who enter and leave government after relatively short stays (sometimes referred to as “in-and-outers”) while the latter are career employees of a line agency such as the State Department. Rockman argues that “irregulars” who serve in a context such as the NSC staff are more likely to be activists and “simplifiers” who are concerned with coordinating policy than the “regulars,” who are more likely to have organizational commitments, implementation responsibilities and a wariness of new initiatives that comes from longer experience in dealing with particular foreign policy issues. Presidents who feel the need for fresh thinking or who require rapid responses in the context of a crisis—and “foreign policy is often nothing but crises” (Rockman 1981: 918)—will turn more frequently to their national security adviser and the NSC staff than to the State Department and other bureaucracies.

A third set of explanations places the spotlight on the personalities of the national security advisers as the crucial variable in determining the shift in power to the NSA and NSC staff. The examples of Kissinger and Brzezinski are most often singled out (e.g., see Prados 1991; Burke 2009) as high-profile advisers who helped to permanently shift power into the NSC offices, even if some of their successors did not use that power quite as visibly as they did. George (1980: 163) suggests that “Kissinger succumbed to the temptation of using his control of the many NSC committees ... to enhance his influence with Nixon at the expense of others in the system ...” Destler, Gelb, and Lake (1984: 216) discuss the way that Brzezinski was “the first national security adviser who had actively, even relentlessly, campaigned for the position” (see also 218–223).

A final explanatory factor emphasizes that the personalities and preferences of presidents determine the degree to which the foreign policy decision process is centered in the White House. From this perspective, the previous two explanations for the increasing power of the national security adviser and NSC staff might be seen as subsets of the basic issue of presidential needs. Rockman (1981: 924) suggests that “[w]hatever system of advice and decision making exists can only exist with the president’s approval.” Destler clearly points to this explanation in the subtitle of one of his articles, “National Security Management: What Presidents Have Wrought.” In that study, Destler (1980–81: 575) argues that “it is the president’s operating style and personal relationships as they evolve that structure U.S. policymaking on the most important issues.” He documents how Kennedy, Nixon, and Carter all wanted to increase their personal influence over foreign policy, and so they chose and encouraged advisers who facilitated that centralization of decision making (for Nixon and Carter, also see Henderson 1988: 123–143).

Brzezinski also emphasizes the role of the president in determining the clout of the NSA and NSC staff. When the president is determined to play an active role in shaping foreign policy (Kennedy, Nixon, and Carter), the national security adviser “became the bureaucratic beneficiary of direct presidential involvement in foreign affairs” (Brzezinski 1987–88: 82). When the president is less involved in the daily management of foreign policy issues (Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, and Ford), then a strong secretary of state will overshadow the NSA and the NSC staff.

As this discussion indicates, the centralization of control over foreign policy in the White House in some fashion is probably overdetermined. Given the political stakes for the president

of success or failure in foreign policy, the flexibility and responsiveness of the NSC staff compared to the permanent foreign policy bureaucracies, the lack of congressional oversight or influence over the NSC system, and the ambitions of at least some who have held the national security adviser position, it would be more surprising if control over foreign policy had *not* shifted towards the president's staff. However, recognition of that fact has not settled all debates about the specific role of the NSC staff and the national security adviser in formulating foreign policy and managing the decision process.

Enduring Policy Debates

During the past four decades, there have been several policy debates concerning the NSC system and the national security adviser that have consumed a great deal of energy and produced a great outpouring of analysis and opinion. Three of particular note concern the respective roles of the Department of State and the NSC staff/NSA in making foreign policy; the role that the national security adviser should play within the NSC system; and the breadth or scope of issues that should come under the jurisdiction of the NSC system. While debate over the first two issues has tempered in recent years, the third has arguably increased in importance and is very much an active topic.

What Roles for the State Department and the NSC Staff and NSA?

As the Nixon-Kissinger NSC system eclipsed the State Department and Secretary of State William Rogers by the early 1970s, a spirited debate arose concerning the effects that this development would have on the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Much of this early discussion focused on the desirability or feasibility of returning to a "State Department dominant" system of foreign policy making. Destler (1980) suggested that the post of national security adviser be abolished so that the secretary of state might more easily play the role of chief foreign policy adviser to the president. Others suggested that an influential White House foreign policy adviser was an inevitability, and that the State Department would never regain a position as unchallenged architect of U.S. foreign policy; Shoemaker (1991: 110) argued that "the chaos of the Reagan NSC was due, in large measure, to the efforts of [Edwin] Meese and [Alexander] Haig to turn the clock back to a system now rendered irrelevant by the evolving demands of national security" (also see Brzezinski 1987–88: 94). This view has largely won the day among analysts of the NSC system as well as with most administrations since the late 1980s. While some secretaries of state since that time have achieved a significant ability to define foreign policy, all have worked with an NSC staff and national security adviser with significant powers and prerogatives. Some analysts have argued for even more expansion of the staff to give the NSA greater control over the foreign policy bureaucracy (e.g., Lord 2000: 447–448).

What Is the Appropriate Role for the National Security Adviser?

Whatever the balance of authority between the NSC and line departments, the exact role and duties of the national security adviser within the system has fluctuated considerably, depending both on the interests of the person filling that role and the president he or she served. Kissinger conducted secret negotiations with the Chinese and Soviets; Brzezinski became the most visible spokesperson for Carter's foreign policy; Poindexter ran a covert (and illegal) operation

from his office; and Richard Allen was barely seen or heard outside the Reagan White House during his tenure in the adviser position.

This range of activities has sparked considerable research, both in an attempt to understand the consequences of having the NSA assume different roles in the foreign policy process and in an effort to identify an optimal set of functions that the adviser must or should perform. A constant theme in these analyses is the potential for conflict among the many possible roles that the national security adviser might play. Strong public advocacy of specific policy options might undermine the role of honest broker of policy proposals within the government, by reducing the trust of other participants that the adviser will accurately and fairly represent their views to the president. Involvement in negotiations or operations might lead to neglect of the management of the decision process or of monitoring the implementation of policy decisions.

Destler (1980–81: 576–578) provided an early breakdown of the NSA’s “job description,” differentiating between “inside management” functions (such as briefing the president, managing the decision process and analyzing policy options) and “outside leadership” roles (such as being a public spokesperson, conducting negotiations, and strong policy advocacy). Destler (1980–1981: 587) argued that the adviser should avoid the “outside leadership” roles because it would increase conflict with other foreign policy officials (especially the secretary of state) and would undermine the adviser’s internal management role. He preferred that the NSA adopt the role of a “low-profile White House facilitator.”

A second typology of the roles played by the national security adviser was offered by Crabb and Mulcahy (1991: 175–192). They categorized the roles in a matrix based on two variables, the level of policy-making responsibility and the level of implementation responsibility. They identified four types of NSAs: the administrator (low policy making, low implementation); the coordinator (low policy making, high implementation); the counselor (high policy making, low implementation); and the agent (high policy making, high implementation). A fifth possibility (the rogue “insurgent” who commandeers the process to pursue his or her preferred policy is also possible, represented by Poindexter’s role in the Iran-Contra affair). This typology allowed for the examination of sets of traits in each role, and has proved very influential in shaping subsequent analyses of the adviser’s activities (see Johnson and Inderfurth 2004b; Burke 2005a).

Johnson and Inderfurth (2004a, 275–276) suggest that learning has occurred over time, with the activities of all national security advisers since Carlucci in 1986 converging around a conception of the job that Johnson and Inderfurth call “an activist counselor:” an honest broker of others’ views while also offering one’s own analysis; an advocate for the president within the government and in a low-profile manner in the media; and a careful steward of the policy process (perhaps not coincidentally, a description that very closely mirrors Scowcroft’s conception of the job). While there will always be individual differences based on the preferences of the president and the personality and abilities of the adviser, this analysis provides a template for how future NSAs should approach the position and represents a growing scholarly consensus (see also Burke 2009; Daalder and Destler 2009).

What Should Be the Scope of the NSC’s Competence?

When the National Security Council was created, it was designed explicitly to promote the “integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security” (National Security Act of 1947, cited in Inderfurth and Johnson 1988: 38). Despite the inclusion of the word “domestic” in the legislative language, the statutory membership of the council made it clear that in practice the NSC would be a vehicle for integrating military

and diplomatic policy and for promoting cooperation among the military services, the State Department and the White House.

Since that time, however, some analysts and policy makers have questioned whether this role for the NSC system is adequate given the changing mix of issues that foreign policy makers must consider. This perceived gap between the competence of the NSC and the variety of national interests that the United States must pursue in its foreign policy has only continued to grow, especially after the Cold War (Best 2009: 26–29). As expressed in a report by the Project on National Security Reform (PNSR), “National security now encompasses economic security, environmental security, homeland security, and technology security, among others” (PNSR 2009, ii).

Few analysts deny the reality of the complexity of the foreign policy agenda; rather, the debate has revolved around the desirability and feasibility of three options for addressing that complexity: the expansion of the existing NSC’s competence to include those additional issues; the creation of a parallel organization to handle the new issues while leaving the NSC system to manage politico-military affairs; or the replacement of the NSC system entirely by some other set of organizational arrangements.

Expanding the portfolio of the NSC has long been the approach favored by a large number of studies and analyses. In 1975, the Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy (the Murphy Commission) recommended that the secretary of the treasury be made a statutory member of the NSC, that the jurisdiction of the council should encompass international economic issues, and that the president appoint an assistant for economic policy who would work with the NSC staff (34–35, 58–59). Garten (1992) proposed expanding the NSC to cover a variety of economic and social priorities; and Destler (1977: 173–174) advocated adding staff responsibility for analyzing the domestic political context of foreign policy decisions to avoid train wrecks in Congress or with the public. Over time, the NSC staff has tended to expand, both in size and in responsibilities, to better cover the range of issues important to foreign policy (Destler and Daalder 2000).

Others have suggested that separate, parallel organizations are a better solution for managing the complex national security agenda (see, e.g., Carnegie Endowment 1992–93). This direction was the solution adopted by the Clinton administration when it created the National Economic Council (NEC) in 1993, and by the George W. Bush administration in 2001 when it established a Homeland Security Council (HSC) explicitly designed to mirror the structure and process of the NSC in the hope of coordinating the efforts of a very wide range of policy issues and actors (Daalder and Destler 2002: 72–73). Advocates of this approach have argued that the natures of different policy realms are so distinct that combining them in a single organization will either create an impossible managerial task for the national security staff, or lead to neglect of those issues not in the core competencies of the national security adviser and the NSC staff. Scowcroft suggested in 1980 that the NSC “has enough on its plate now. I would not look towards its spreading its net wider” (quoted in Best 2009: 27), while Odeen claimed that it would be “impractical for the NSC to be the predominant player in the economic arena” (1985: 39). Destler (1994: 144) argues that Clinton’s creation of the NEC “was desirable, even necessary” to ensure consideration of both the international and domestic sides of economic policy; he also warns that such an arrangement may harden the divide between what he labels the “security complex” and the “economic complex” in the absence of strong presidential efforts to manage the parallel agencies. Stockton (2009) argues that in the area of homeland security, the number of federal agencies involved, the need for vertical integration of policy between the national, state and local levels of government, and the distinct political culture of the NSC staff indicates that a distinct HSC is a preferable way to address that set of issues. The Obama administration partially rejected this approach when it abolished the HSC in 2009, although it did retain a separate NEC.

The third set of proposals has involved more radical reform, the replacement of the NSC system with a new set of advisers and organizations. These also date back to the 1970s; Cleveland (1975) proposed abolishing the position of the NSA, relocating the NSC staff to the State Department, and creating an “Interdependence Council” to more adequately manage the intertwined domestic and international issues (economic, political, and military) that were growing in salience. Allison and Szanton (1976) advocated replacing the NSC with “an executive committee of the Cabinet” to include officials involved with the foreign, economic and domestic policies spheres. Berkowitz and Schake (2005), arguing that the national security adviser and his staff are too weak to coordinate policy effectively, recommend replacing the NSC system with four to six cabinet-rank “presidential policy directors.” More recently, the Project on National Security Reform (2008) advocated the replacement of both the NSC and HSC with a President’s Security Council, the creation by law of a new director for national security, and the formation of a corps of national security professionals who could serve within a broad range of agencies. Whatever the merits of this approach, few administrations seem interested in taking on the political and bureaucratic obstacles to such substantial reorganization, and recent presidents have settled for a combination of the first two approaches in managing the complex national security agenda.

Conclusion

The study of the National Security Council system has produced a large number of quality analyses of individual presidencies and national security advisers. It has also produced a growing (but not universal) consensus among both scholars and policy makers concerning the permanent centrality of the NSC system to the foreign policy-making process, the appropriate role that the NSA should play, and how the NSC process should be structured.

Whatever the theoretical merits or weaknesses of a White House-centered foreign policy-making system, few scholars or practitioners expect a return to a decentralized process. While the exact degree of influence will vary with the individual president and the national security adviser, the combination of the issues on the foreign policy agenda, the advantages of proximity and flexibility that the NSC staff has over its bureaucratic competitors, and the political and policy needs of presidents increases the likelihood that the NSC will be at the core of most administrations’ decision-making process.

Wide agreement also exists concerning the appropriate role for the national security adviser. Whether labeled the “honest broker” (Burke 2009) or “activist counselor” (Johnson and Inderfurth 2004b) role, most students of the NSC system believe that the model established by Brent Scowcroft in 1989 is likely to persevere because it serves the process well while also giving the national security adviser a powerful role in shaping policy. In doing so, it meets presidential needs for an orderly process and an adviser in whom the president has confidence, while assuring potential NSAs that they will be more than managers of White House paperwork.

After adoption by several consecutive administrations, the three-tiered NSC structure created by Scowcroft is regarded by many scholars and practitioners as the “gold standard” for organizing the process of foreign policy formation and integration. While using this structure is no guarantee of policy success, it has brought more stability and predictability to the process than any system since Eisenhower’s model, but with more flexibility in meeting the president’s needs than did Ike’s very formal approach. It is unlikely to be discarded or superseded any time soon.

One area where considerable disagreement continues to exist concerns the scope of the NSC’s authority—how narrowly or broadly should the concept of national security be

construed? Should economic issues, homeland security, and even environmental issues be folded into the portfolio of the NSC? Or should parallel organizations dealing with these issues be created or maintained? Future research might explore further the costs and benefits of each arrangement, perhaps examining particular policy decisions involving the NSC and NEC in more detail or looking for lessons from the sphere of domestic policy organizations or in other countries' experiences.

A second way in which current research could be extended would be additional use of structured comparisons between different advisers or between different NSC structures, building on the model used by Burke (2009). In cases where the NSC structure and process were similar, research might be able to differentiate more clearly how the personalities and values of different NSAs affected policy; where administrations using different NSC structures dealt with similar policies, studies might be able to discern the effects of structure more precisely.

A third related area where current research might fruitfully be expanded would be detailed comparisons of how a particular administration's NSC system handled several distinct policy issues (e.g., China policy, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, relations with the NATO allies, and humanitarian crises). This type of inquiry might allow a more nuanced evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the NSC staff working for a particular president (rather than a blanket judgment of a strong/weak, effective/dysfunctional NSC). If done across several different administrations, such studies might discern patterns of issues which were handled well by several different NSCs as well as those which proved troublesome across administrations. The Daalder and Destler (1993) oral histories (1998–2000) are a useful start in this area, but much more could be done to examine this systematically. Such an examination would be interesting from both a policy and a theory-building perspective, following George's idea of policy-relevant conditional generalizations; this course of research might also provide data that could help to address more satisfactorily the previous question of what issues should be included in the NSC's portfolio.

A final area where new thinking might prove useful is developing measures for determining the effectiveness of the national security adviser, and the NSC system more generally, that are less subjective and tautological than those now used. Very often, the success or failure of an administration's policy is used as a proxy for evaluating the NSA/NSC—if the policy failed, the adviser or staff did not do their jobs properly; if the policy is deemed successful, this indicates effectiveness on the part of the NSC. Logically and practically, policy outcomes are at best an indirect measure of how well the NSC system functioned in any given case (also see Crocker 1975: 89). Daalder and Destler (2009: 312–316) identify potential standards such as the accumulation of power, achievement of policy change, responsiveness to the president, or making the process work; while these considerations are a good place to start, they are still ambiguous and subjective in nature. The Project on National Security Reform (2008: 98–105) identified “outcomes,” “efficiency,” and “behaviors” as “performance criteria” by which to assess a national security system. The report provides no clear way to operationalize these measures, however, and the subsequent case studies do not draw clear conclusions based on these criteria. Given the nature of the problem and the many idiosyncratic factors that would have to be accounted for, creating more “objective” measures would be a daunting quest, but one that might advance our understanding of the NSC's effectiveness considerably.

However these issues are addressed in the future, the National Security Council system and the national security adviser are likely to stay at the center of the American foreign policy-making process. The study of those actors and their relationships with the other important players in the process will remain a vital area of research for scholars and for those in government who seek the insight and guidance which that research might provide.

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