

IMPROVING DECISIONMAKING IN A TURBULENT WORLD

Charles P. Ries



Perspective

Expert insights on a timely policy issue



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Foreword

Three years ago, RAND embarked on a project to take a fresh look at America's role in the world. What are America's international ambitions, what choices does the country face, and what are the feasible options for achieving the nation's goals? How might the next President exercise leadership in this turbulent world, and to what end? The result is our *Strategic Rethink* project, in which we have gathered some of our best minds to produce guides for policymakers and citizens, educators and the media, on the most critical choices likely to face the United States during the next administration.

The first volume, *Choices for America in a Turbulent World*, was anchored by Ambassador James Dobbins, RAND's distinguished Chair in Diplomacy and Security. It analyzed the major choices available to the United States in diplomacy and defense, in the global economy, and on such emerging new challenges as climate change and cyber-security. The second report, by defense researcher David Ochmanek and RAND senior vice president Andrew Hoehn, outlined the key defense challenges and their financial implications in *America's Security Deficit: Addressing the Imbalance Between Strategy and Resources in a Turbulent World*. In the third, Hans Binnendijk examined the state of U.S. alliances in *Friends, Foes and Future Directions: U.S. Partnerships in a Turbulent World*.

This fourth volume is different. It is a Perspective, in which RAND attempts to capture the wisdom, in addition to the analytical insights, of one of our most distinguished foreign policy practitioners.

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Ambassador Charles Ries retired from the U.S. Foreign Service in 2008, after a distinguished career of more than three decades. His career has taken him from the consular office in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, to London, Brussels, Ankara, and Athens, where he served as U.S. Ambassador from 2004 to 2007. It has also landed him in Baghdad, Kabul, and the White House Situation Room.

I asked Ambassador Ries to write this Perspective because of his extensive experience not only in diplomatic circles, but also with the management aspects of government and the Executive Branch decisionmaking process. In all, Ries has participated in senior interagency decisionmaking meetings in four successive administrations.

In this volume, Ries' analysis of the U.S. decisionmaking process is broadened and deepened by more than 20 off-the-record interviews with senior and midlevel officials in a number of different agencies and positions—candid discussions that produced invaluable information about the challenges faced by U.S. officials inside the trenches.

The recommendations, however, derive from his own lessons learned. His prescription for shrinking the size of the National Security Council staff is widely shared by his interlocutors, but it was also informed by his experience in the Executive Office of the President, where he helped negotiate the 1994 North America Free Trade Agreement. This required coordinating and supporting more than 30 U.S. negotiating groups from an office with a staff of just seven. “People think they can get more done with a large staff, but actually, the opposite is true,” Ries said. “We had a ‘smaller turning radius’ . . . The smaller you are, the more you have to use others.”

His views on the need for more-effective civil-military cooperation crystalized in Iraq and Afghanistan, where he saw firsthand how such coordination could be highly effective—and what happened when it failed. “Civilians have to set the political objectives,” he said. “The military plans for ‘end-states’ but for diplomats nothing ever really ‘ends.’”

His observations about the struggle to preserve organizational messaging—the authorized, authenticated issuance of official instructions to all who need them, despite the current explosion of email—stem from his service on the committee that developed the State Department's current system, the State Messaging and Archive Retrieval Toolset (SMART). “Email was killing us,” Ries recalled. “No one was reading the [official]

telegrams. By the time they arrived, people would have already heard about it on email and they would say, ‘I already saw that.’” But final cables, which have been vetted by all the stakeholders in a critical decision, often differ from their first drafts. Such problems persist today, Ries reports. “It’s like [the game of] ‘Telephone’: multiple, uncoordinated, inconsistent instructions and records.” The use of social media has complicated matters even more, Ries says, noting that “People are reading Tweets as official U.S. policy.”

Ries now serves as a RAND vice president overseeing all of our overseas offices and international client relationships. I am pleased to share his Perspective, in hopes that it will spark more thought and debate about how the U.S. government can better organize itself to meet the challenges of a turbulent world.

Michael Rich
President and CEO, RAND Corporation

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The analysis also benefited from extensive, off-the-record conversations with more than 20 senior and midlevel policy officials from the current and previous administrations with hands-on experience at the Executive Office of the President and in national security agencies. RAND colleagues who have held senior positions in the U.S. government and in journalism provided vital perspective and criticism as the study progressed. Special thanks in that regard to James Dobbins, Richard Solomon, Seth Jones, Andrew Liepman, Andrew Parasiliti, Linda Robinson, and Jack Riley, and to Sonni Efron for editing.

This paper was initiated with the special encouragement of Ambassador Richard Solomon, who also hosted an important luncheon discussion in March 2014 involving a select group of senior policy officials with White House, Cabinet, and sub-Cabinet-level experience. RAND is very grateful for their insights and willingness to contribute to the project. Karen Donfried, Lynn Davis, and Sina Beaghley provided thoughtful comments and suggestions as formal quality assurance reviewers. All errors of fact or analysis are the author's.

Introduction

In a turbulent and disorderly world, where bandwidth is no longer a technical term relating to radio frequencies but rather a synonym for the limited capacity of decisionmakers to deal with simultaneity, the United States must have a national security decisionmaking system to support its global role.

Every President needs a decisionmaking system that harnesses the full capabilities and accumulated wisdom of the U.S. government and the nation's many stakeholders. Yet national security professionals—the officials who must advise the President on the most difficult decisions—cite a range of structural problems that hinder effective policymaking. Since 2004, the American public has been expressing sharp dissatisfaction with foreign policy outcomes. In a 2015 Gallup poll, 61 percent reported dissatisfaction with the position of the United States in the world.¹ While a more focused and timely decisionmaking process will not necessarily improve outcomes for the United States, poor choices could be calamitous.

This Perspective analyzes a range of management challenges in the national security system and presents eight recommendations for strengthening U.S. decisionmaking and oversight of policy implementation. The analysis is based on in-depth, off-the-record interviews with more than 20 former and currently serving officials, and on the large literature on contemporary national security decisionmaking both by former senior offi-

¹ Gallup, *U.S. Position in the World*, undated.

cials and academic experts. The recommendations are my own, stemming from my experiences over more than 30 years as a Foreign Service Officer, beginning in the Carter administration. Among my conclusions: The NSC staff size should be reduced to better focus on high-priority areas. Civil-military operations should be planned by a new joint office at the State Department with a military general officer as deputy. Red-team and lessons-learned efforts would help ensure that the system is adaptive and responsive. Better integration of intelligence insights and secondments of senior officials across agencies can improve the quality and coherence of decisionmaking. And the use of special envoys, or “czars,” should be limited.

The time to debate and decide on systemic changes is as a new administration prepares to take office. Therefore, this contribution to RAND’s *Strategic Rethink* series may be of particular interest to the next presidential transition team, as it hones policy priorities and updates its decisionmaking and management systems to respond to new demands and realities.

Evolution of Strategies and Systems

Over the more than six decades since the National Security Act of 1947 established the Department of Defense (DoD), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the post of Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (also known as the National Security Adviser), U.S. systems for formulating strategy and making decisions have evolved both organically and by presidential direction.

Successive study groups and experts have noted inefficiencies and the dysfunction of U.S. interagency systems, proposing reforms and adaptations,² yet little has changed. Operations still often trump strategy; the decisionmaking system is overcentralized,

² This study draws upon the exhaustive work of the report of the congressionally mandated Project on National Security Reform (PNSR), including its 793-page volume of case studies of U.S. government policy management cases. See PNSR, *Forging a New Shield, the Project on National Security Reform*, Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of the Presidency, 2008; or, more recently, David J. Rothkopf, *National Insecurity: American Leadership in an Age of Fear*, New York: Public Affairs, 2014.

overburdened, and parochial; and resources are at times seemingly distributed without reference to priorities or a national strategic conception. Across administrations and decades, neither root-and-branch reform proposals nor marginal changes have taken hold or made a significant difference. Yet the nature of national security challenges is changing quickly, as is their simultaneity. The time and attention of top decisionmakers dedicated to each issue is increasingly scarce, the threats diverse, and the focus of public, media, and policy attention shifts ever more quickly, threatening policy coherence and public support.

Threats stemming from other great powers (in China's case, a growing power), rogue states, nonstate actors with transnational reach, and the new risks to prosperity in a globalized economy suggest the United States now needs a determined effort to increase the *vision, efficiency, and effectiveness* with which it uses the instruments of national power. Just as the United States successfully—though painfully—reformed the efficiency of its economy in the 1980s, it must now reform itself to become more strategic; that is, more coherent in matching resources including time and attention of top leaders, to key security and foreign policy objectives. Such an updating of the government's decisionmaking machinery should increase the odds that the United States can make prudent foreign policy choices in a timely manner, and avoid major strategic mistakes. Seizing such opportunities will require that the extensive resources and capabilities of the nation in the fields of foreign affairs, defense, intelligence, and economics (as well as the other sources of soft, hard, and coercive power) are coordinated and applied in support of a coherent strategic approach to international engagement. Otherwise, the United States will miss opportunities to make the most effective use of its great power and influence in international affairs.

This report is intended to distill and analyze the perspectives of national security practitioners, current and former, as well as other senior U.S. government officials who have firsthand experience in managing the challenges described here. More than 20 senior and midlevel officials were interviewed between August 2014 and November 2015, a period of near-constant crisis in international affairs. Four others who served on the National Security Council (NSC) were kind enough to read and comment on this report. These discussions took place under promise of anonymity. There was broad

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Dysfunctionalities in U.S. decisionmaking structures are . . . the consequences of a steady Washington trend toward increasing the size and specificity of senior-level positions, use of email rather than organizational messaging, and frequency of meetings.

consensus on the current problem: an increasing number of bureaucratic barriers to getting things done. My conclusion, and that of most of those I interviewed, is that the dysfunctionalities in U.S. decisionmaking structures are not ideological; nor are they unique to the present administration or the two that preceded it. They are the consequences of a steady Washington trend toward increasing the size and specificity of senior-level positions, use of personal messaging (email) rather than organizational messaging, and frequency of meetings.

Inside government, policymakers complained of an inability to prepare adequately and to triage between developments that require senior-level decisions and those that do not. They cited an overwhelming number of senior White House–led meetings with meager outcomes, overly reactive policies, choices made on short-term political considerations, and failures to consider second-order effects. Unintended consequences litter the geopolitical landscape.

Outside of government, commentators skewer administrations for policies adopted with insufficient analysis and preparation (and scant chances of success), or for a deliberative process that fails to develop viable policy options. Analysts bemoan difficulties in managing whole-of-government efforts, repeated failures to learn from history, and the habit of measuring inputs rather than outcomes. And despite awareness of the harm of overly reactive stances, policymakers said they feel that the social media and new media landscape demand instantaneous reaction to events, despite the murkiness of initial facts.

Some days the White House Situation Room (WHSR), the apex of the policy process pyramid, is booked solid with Deputies and Principals meetings. Video teleconferences are held by the WHSR with military commanders and ambassadors in the field. In the White House and in State Department and Defense Department briefing rooms, spokespersons feel obliged to make ephemeral comments on breaking news at Twitter-speed, even before all the facts (and certainly before the implications) are known.

And yet, despite (or perhaps because of) the reality of constant motion, policymaking often seems driven by the news cycle and is reactive to the latest crisis or media focus, to the exclusion of long-term strategic planning. Tactical and rhetorical responses are chosen with uncertain reference to, or in support of, a national strategic orientation

to the world. Decisions are delayed by competing claims on principals' schedules in an overly centralized system.

There is a natural tendency to attribute each successive administration's decision-making style and processes to the personality and predilections of the President, the National Security Adviser, and senior cabinet members. Yet the American national security decisionmaking system has endured and evolved across many administrations, and its deterioration in particular has extended across the last several administrations, despite presidents of very different styles and with different priorities. Organization, therefore, matters.

President Dwight Eisenhower once observed that “organization cannot make a genius out of an incompetent . . . [but] disorganization can scarcely fail to result in inefficiency and can easily lead to disaster.”³ Good organization is necessary but not sufficient for effective national security decisionmaking. Its presence enables presidents and their advisers to make informed decisions in the context of a considered strategy, though they may still make the wrong decisions; but the absence of good decisionmaking processes raises the risks of failure.

³ Quoted in Fred Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, “Effective National Security Advising: Recovering the Eisenhower Legacy,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 3, 2000, p. 338.

Why Process Matters

A global superpower such as the United States needs a process under the President's leadership for formulating and testing strategies for the real world; incorporating information and perspectives in real time from within and outside of government; and fashioning and communicating messages relating to our strategies to allies, friends and adversaries, and the American people. This process must be tightly linked to resourcing decisions: What resources are needed to credibly undertake a proposed strategy? What are the opportunity costs of using resources—financial, moral, personnel, military, credibility, etc.—in one way rather than another?

The most important function of a decisionmaking system is to ensure the development of coherent and sustainable strategies for advancing U.S. national interests, and recommendation of those strategies to the President. Feasible and sustainable strategies are based on American interests and values, rooted in a sophisticated understanding of the international context, with realistic goals and elaborated plans for achieving them, and a clear sense of the resources that will be required. Military planning doctrine requires that all plans begin with a specification of the desired “end state.” While international “relationships” never actually “end,” having a clear goal is vital for good strategy. In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, “If you don't know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else.”¹

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¹ Yogi Berra, BrainyQuote.com, undated.

Related to this first function is the importance of prioritization. Even a nation as powerful as the United States, with its strong government institutions and unmatched defense capabilities, cannot tackle every challenge or take advantage of every opportunity in all corners of the world. So, in addition to formulating feasible and sustainable strategies, the decisionmaking process should generate results that inform the President on relative priorities between policy objectives, in light of U.S. interests and values. It must also make judgments as to which issues require presidential involvement and which do not.

The development of feasible, sustainable, and prioritized strategies is only the first part of national security decisionmaking. Also important are:

- oversight of strategy implementation by agencies
- crisis management
- development of public presentation materials and approaches (press statements, questions and answers, speeches, fact sheets, social media strategies, etc.)
- engagement with stakeholders (domestic agencies, Congress, business, nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], political interest groups, etc.)
- resource planning for national security affairs
- utilization of the best available information and analysis from the intelligence community (and direction and guidance on priority-setting for the use of intelligence assets)
- information-sharing among agencies on non-crisis developments, to ensure situational awareness and to foster teamwork and coordination.

Each of these seven subsidiary functions is important, and collectively they may consume most of the time of the principals of the NSC staff and policy-level officials representing national security agencies (and supporting staff) under the President's authority. But a critical aspect of effective national security decisionmaking systems—albeit one that is extremely hard to accomplish—is that they do not let the urgent overwhelm the important and do not let oversight or crisis management overwhelm strategy formulation and implementation.

In addition, senior NSC officials play a diplomatic role from time to time as direct representatives of the President, most famously in the case of Henry Kissinger's China diplomacy, but also on an everyday basis. The National Security Adviser or senior deputies can represent the President's views to counterparts in chancelleries and prime ministries, and from time to time to heads of state directly. Utilizing such channels helps make U.S. diplomacy as effective as possible. A more efficient and effective decisionmaking system can help ensure that such diplomatic functions of the NSC reinforce coherent strategies, and free up senior leader time to develop such direct personal relationships.

How Did the National Security System Evolve?

The United States entered World War II with completely separate Army and Navy departments and no structures for their common oversight. Chief of Staff of the Army George Marshall compared the U.S. system—or rather, lack of system—unfavorably to the British secretariat supporting Prime Minister and Defense Minister Winston Churchill, observing “[O]n our side there is no such animal and we suffer accordingly. The British therefore present a solid front of all officials and committees. We cannot muster such strength.”¹ As the war progressed, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed Admiral William Leahy as his personal representative to the Chiefs of Staff Committee alongside Marshall and Navy Chief Earnest King. Leahy was also appointed Chairman of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, which also included the British service heads, and through which all major strategic decisions were passed. Leahy had no dedicated staff, however, nor was his position formalized in legislation. Roosevelt reserved all of the important decisions to himself, and tended to consult senior officials one by one rather than collectively.

After the war, the Truman administration and Congress undertook several initiatives to streamline and clarify the U.S. national security strategy and oversight process for what was seen as a challenging future. The Congress consolidated several oversight

¹ Ray S. Cline, *United States Army in World War II: the War Department: Washington Command Post: the Operations Division*, Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2003, p. 106 (Quoted in PNSR, *Forging a New Shield, the Project on National Security Reform*, Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of the Presidency, 2008, p. 53).

committees into the Senate and House Armed Services Committees. After more than a year of politicking and debate, the National Security Act of 1947 was adopted. It established the DoD, the CIA, and the NSC, which included statutory members (the President, Secretaries of State and Defense, the three service secretaries, and the Secretary of a new National Security Resources Board). The legislation made scant mention of staff support; it set out the functions of 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.²

Over the subsequent years, the NSC grew to play a more influential role in devising and overseeing U.S. national security policies and operations, and developed a staff support structure. President Eisenhower, who was most familiar with military doctrine separating planning and operations, mirrored the military model by establishing a separate White House–led interagency body specifically for planning.³

President Richard Nixon was especially preoccupied by the issue of dysfunctional government decisionmaking on foreign affairs. He tapped as his National Security Adviser a man who had been part of a study group at Harvard University that was developing ideas for improving U.S. foreign policy management: Henry Kissinger.⁴

During the Nixon-Ford years, Kissinger dominated national security policy formulation and implementation, first from his National Security Adviser position, and

² Public Law 80-253, § 101(a), 61 Stat. 496, Coordination for National Security, 1947 (Quoted in PNSR, 2008, p. 57, emphasis supplied).

³ Raymond Millen, “Cultivating Strategic Thinking: The Eisenhower Model,” *Parameters—The Journal of the United States Army War College*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2012, pp. 56–70; and Paul D. Miller, “The Contemporary Presidency: Organizing the National Security Council: I Like Ike’s,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2013, pp. 592–606.

⁴ Historian Niall Ferguson documents this as a strong factor in Nixon’s decision to hire Kissinger in his book, *Kissinger: 1923–1968: The Idealist* (Penguin Press, 2015, pp. 855–866). Ferguson concludes “Kissinger’s appointment needs to be understood as more than just a meeting of minds . . . It was part of a radical overhaul of the machinery of foreign policy making, an overhaul for which Kissinger himself had coauthored the blueprint.”

then from the State Department in Nixon's second term and during the Ford administration. The Carter administration under National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brezinski brought back structure and the practice of interagency policy consultation, though it had to cope with some serious reversals, including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the failure of the "Desert One" Iran hostage rescue mission.

During the two terms of Ronald Reagan's administration, there were six National Security Advisers and serious foreign policy management failures (e.g., the Marine barracks bombing in Lebanon, Iran-Contra, Siberian gas pipeline). Yet the administration also managed to coordinate policies for contesting the Soviet Union across the range of policy domains and to strengthen the U.S. economy (e.g., tackling inefficiencies at home and reforming the international exchange rate system through the Plaza Accords), while articulating a compelling soft-power vision for the role of the United States in the international system (e.g., "shining city on the Hill"). The administration saw serious State-Defense struggles over policy approaches, but did not face major military operations.

The current policy process has generally evolved from the design set out in 1989 by General Brent Scowcroft, National Security Adviser to President George H.W. Bush. The system created a Principals' Committee (PC), comprising the NSC minus the President; a Deputies' Committee (DC), comprising the deputy secretaries of State, Defense, and other departments and agencies; and a series of interagency policy committees (IPCs) to staff and support the Deputies on specific issues sets. The committees were intended to be a hierarchy such that policy options were developed and refined as they passed upward from the IPCs to the DC, PC, and the full NSC. Presidential decisions were then communicated back down the chain for implementation by the various departments and agencies.⁵

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⁵ Alan G. Whittaker, Shannon A. Brown, Frederick C. Smith, and Elizabeth McKune, *The National Security Process: The National Security Council and Interagency System*, Washington, D.C.: The Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University, 2011. See also Scowcroft's reforms of 1989, which had their roots in changes made late in Reagan's second term as a response to the Iran-Contra affair. President Bill Clinton's NSC system was established 1993; President George W. Bush's in 2001; President Barack Obama's in 2009 (White House, *Implementation of the Recommendations of the President's Special Review Board*, NSDD-266, Washington, D.C., March 31, 1987; White House, *Organization of the National Security Council System*, NSD-1, Washington, D.C., January 30, 1989; White House, *National Security Council Interagency Process*, NSDD-276, Washington D.C.,

With an NSC staff count of about 100 (and without a Homeland Security Council, or a Director of National Intelligence [DNI]), that administration formulated and applied a coherent strategy for constructing a Europe “whole, free, and at peace” following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and then the Soviet Union. Designing a farsighted strategy for achieving German reunification, the redirection and enlargement of NATO, and the help offered to the new Russian Federation were not self-evident approaches, nor conventional wisdom, nor easy to accomplish. While the George H.W. Bush administration did not deter Saddam Hussein’s rash invasion of Kuwait, once it took place, the United States built a diverse multinational coalition to reverse it. This was a model of aligning ends, ways, and means successfully. The administration also avoided the temptation to seek a regime change that would have fractured the coalition.

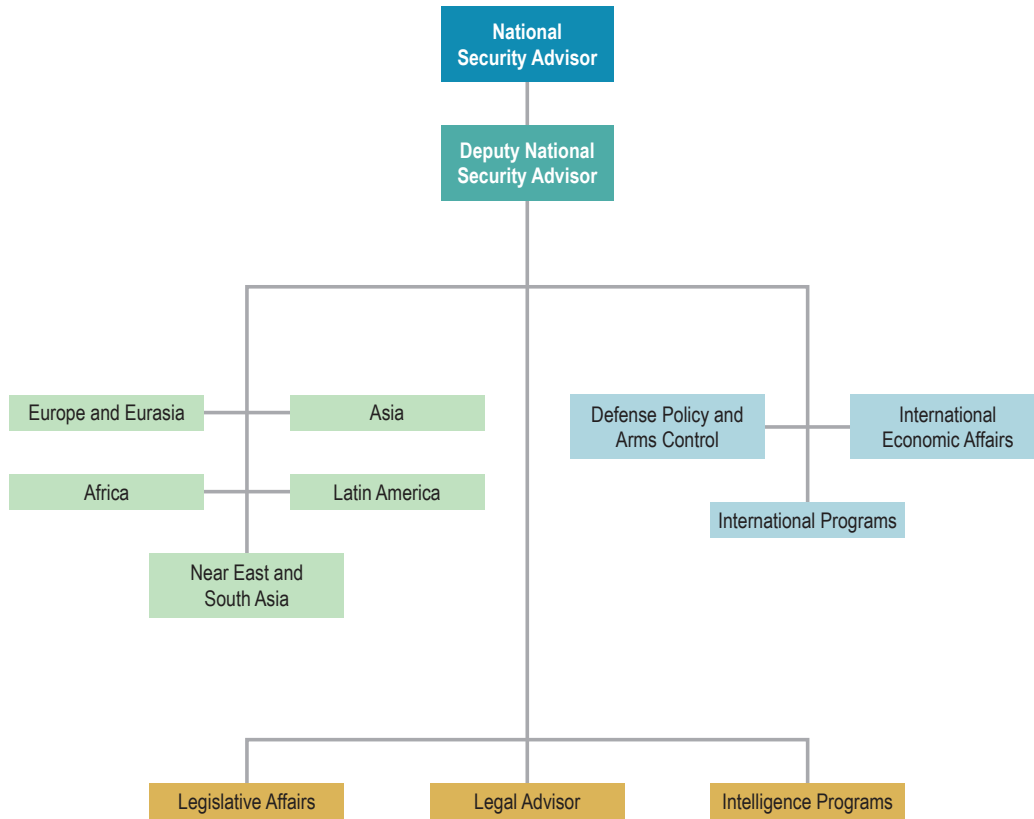
Overall, the foreign accomplishments of this Bush administration were the result of good decisions by President Bush himself, but the policy process under General Scowcroft was unusually strategic and less operational than that of successor administrations. Scowcroft also carefully separated his policy advice to the President from his role in running a coordination process where all views are heard. That is why some consider the George H. W. Bush administration to be the “gold standard” in effective, efficient policy processes (Figure 3.1).

The Clinton administration created the National Economic Council to integrate domestic and international economic policymaking (Figure 3.2). After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the George W. Bush administration established a separate Homeland Security Council (Figure 3.3), but in 2009 it was reintegrated with the NSC staff by the Obama administration.

In the last two administrations, American national security policy development and management has been characterized by significant staff growth, and is considered

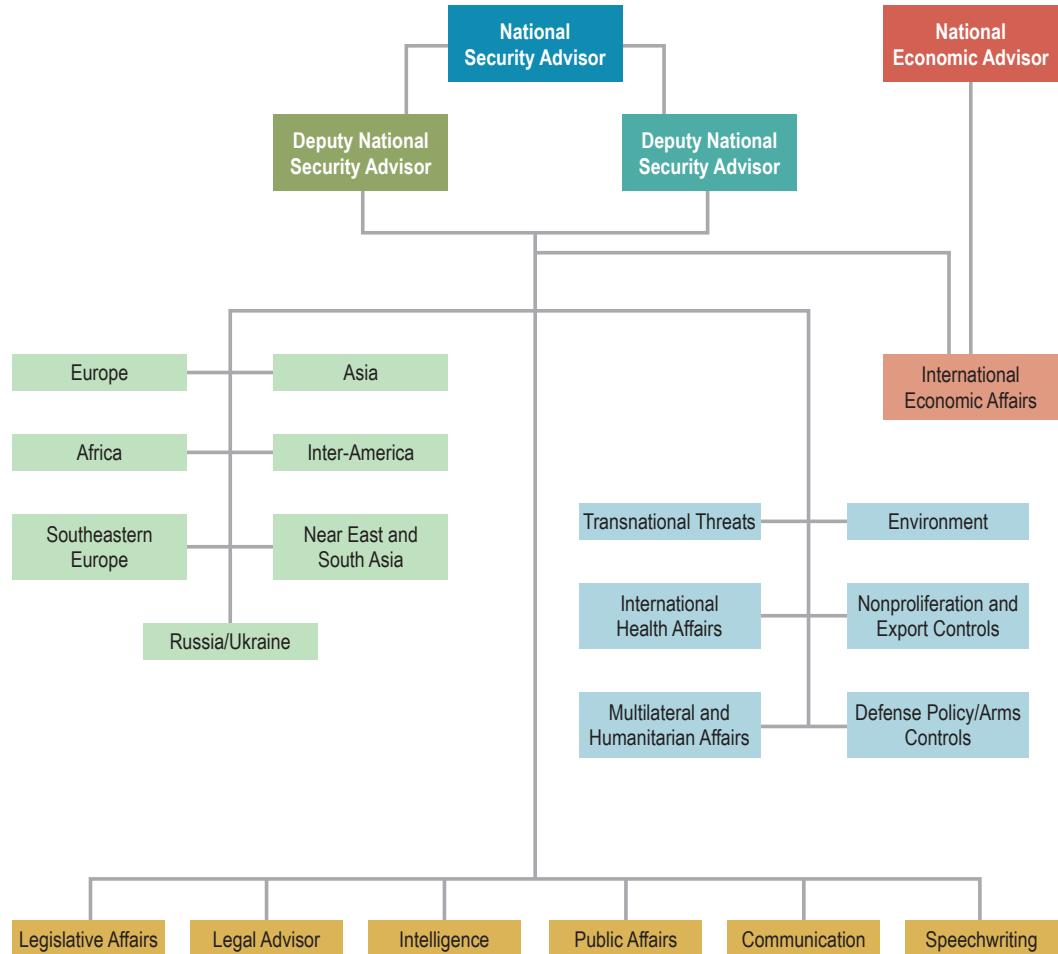
June 9, 1987; White House, *Organization of the National Security Council*, PDD-2, Washington, D.C., January 20, 1993; White House, *Organization of the National Security Council System*, NSD-1, Washington, D.C.: February 13, 2001; White House, *Organization of the National Security Council System*, PPD-1, February 13, 2009).

Figure 3.1
National Security Council Structure (End of George H.W. Bush Administration), 1992



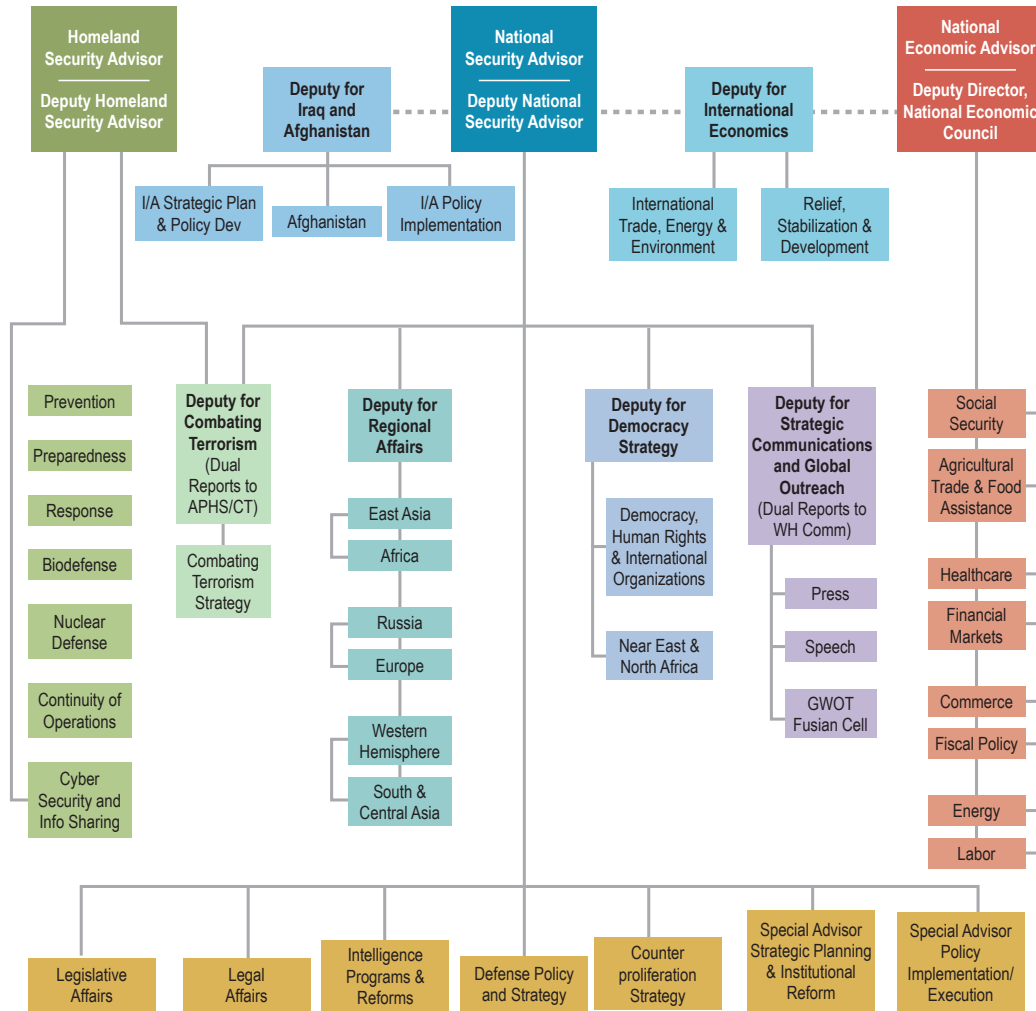
SOURCE: Figure courtesy of PNSR

Figure 3.2
National Security Council Structure (End of Clinton Administration), 2000



SOURCE: Figure courtesy of PNSR

Figure 3.3
National Security Council Structure (End of George W. Bush Administration), 2008



SOURCE: Figure courtesy of PNSR

increasingly dysfunctional, even by some of its own practitioners.⁶ IPCs have proliferated without a discernible improvement in the formulation of options. DC and PC meetings are held with increasing frequency, without adhering to a regular schedule, and often on short notice, putting unsustainable demands on policymakers' time, frequently with little chance to prepare. David Rothkopf notes that by the second term of the Obama administration, the NSC staff was ten times the size it had been during the Nixon-Kissinger years.⁷

Yet the sharp increase in NSC staff size was tested as Washington sought to prevail in new foreign policy challenges, such as Iraq (from 2003 onward), Georgia (2008), Libya (2011), the Syrian civil war (2011 onward), Ukraine (2014), or the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (2014).

Such examples should not be seen primarily as intelligence failures, strategic surprises, or random acts. In many cases (especially in hindsight), the underlying fundamentals and risks were evident in advance of events and pointed out even by the intelligence community. And memoirs demonstrate that senior policymakers—engaged in crisis response on other fronts and coping with detailed management of ongoing operations and the era's new emphasis on public diplomacy—may not have had the bandwidth to appreciate all the risks of these situations.⁸

⁶ “These issues [of micromanagement] did not begin under Obama. There has been a steady trend towards more centralized White House control over the national security apparatus ever since Harry Truman . . . As recently as the Scowcroft-led NSC staff in the early 1990's, professional staff numbered about 50. Today the NSS numbers more than 350. The controlling nature of the Obama White House and NSS staff took micromanagement and operational meddling to a new level.” Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014, p. 587. During the George W. Bush administration, the NSC staff was renamed the “National Security Staff” (NSS). Secretary Gates used both acronyms to describe the White House national staff function in different eras.

⁷ Rothkopf, 2014, p. 9. He later acknowledges that “some of that [the large NSC staff size] is the carcass of the Bush-era Homeland Security Council as it is slowly being digested” (p. 358).

⁸ Former Secretary of Defense Gates recalled an NSC (which he referred to as NSS) PC meeting in February 2011 on whether to support a continuing presence of U.S. trainers in Iraq: “At the principals' meeting later that day, I said ‘Whoa’ when we quickly dived into the details. Basic questions had to be answered first, including whether we all agreed we wanted a U.S. military presence in Iraq after December 31. . . . As so often, I said, the NSS was already in the weeds micromanaging before basic questions had been addressed” (Gates, 2014, p. 553).

So why have four administrations' NSC staffs, all composed of brilliant overachievers, failed to produce better foreign policy decisions under two very different presidencies? The problem seems not to be resources per se, but effective organization for managing national security policies. Issues need to be managed by officials who understand them. Information and analysis need to be available when and where required. Intelligence insights must be reflected in the policy process. Strategy formulation needs to consider interagency perspectives. Leaders need to pay attention to the strategic options and avoid allowing the immediate to overwhelm the important. For effective and timely policy development and implementation, “wait and see” shouldn't take precedence over proactive policies. The views of congressional leaders need to be incorporated into strategy formulation and key decisions. Perspectives of those outside the government (businesses, NGOs, academics) also should be incorporated to ensure that an administration doesn't become a captive of groupthink.

How Do Other Nations Make Decisions?

Superpower status—and U.S. resource disparity—in some ways disguise the importance of how decisionmaking challenges are addressed. It may therefore be useful to examine how two much smaller governments tackle some of their key national security management issues (albeit on a far different scale). Though their bureaucracies are far smaller, they, too, must make critical decisions on short time frames amid information overload.

For most of Britain's history, its national security and foreign policies have been made informally, coordinated by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, with special roles for the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of Defence. Both cabinet departments have internal policy development and oversight processes traditionally run by Permanent Under Secretaries (senior civil servants). Intelligence coordination was run by the Joint Intelligence Committee.

Superpower status—and U.S. resource disparity—in some ways disguise the importance of how decisionmaking challenges are addressed.

In 2010, Britain established a formal National Security Council, based in the Cabinet Office.⁹ Like its American analog, the British National Security Council has a National Security Adviser and standing members (the Deputy Prime Minister; secretaries for Foreign Affairs, Defence, International Development, a Home Secretary responsible for immigration and internal affairs, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer; as well as the Cabinet Office Minister of State). Subcommittees were established for Threats, Hazards and Contingencies (chaired by the Home Secretary), Emerging Powers (chaired by the Foreign Secretary) and Nuclear Affairs (chaired by the Prime Minister). The National Security Adviser also chairs the Joint Intelligence Committee.

With this reorganization, Britain modernized and gave structure to an inherited, informal system of national security decisionmaking and implementation. The new system also was notable for attempting to integrate the comprehensive resource review with the national security strategy. However, Parliamentary reviews in 2010 and 2012 were highly critical of the results. Over time, the British system reverted to its traditional system for dealing with foreign policy and security issues coordinated in the Cabinet office, illustrating that for the British, small and informal works better than large and formalized.

Singapore, while small and without the global responsibilities and interests of the United States or Britain, illustrates a disciplined approach to another critical aspect of national security decisionmaking support: risk assessment. A city-state only 3.5 times larger than Washington, D.C., Singapore has two imperatives: maintaining favorable external relations—especially with the two giants of the Asia-Pacific, China and India—and countering Islamist terrorism. In 2003, following consultations with the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the government created a Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning (RAHS) program to assist its national security apparatus. *Foreign Policy's* Shane Harris reported that Singapore

uses a mixture of proprietary and commercial technology and is based on a “cognitive model” designed to mimic the human thought process. . . . It’s a tool that

⁹ Prime Minister’s Office, “Establishment of a National Security Council,” press release, London: May 12, 2010.

helps human beings sift huge stores of data for clues on just about everything. It is designed to analyze information from practically any source—the input is almost incidental—and to create models that can be used to forecast potential events. Those scenarios can then be shared across the Singaporean government and be picked up by whatever ministry or department might find them useful. Using a repository of information called an ideas database, RAHS and its teams of analysts create “narratives” about how various threats or strategic opportunities might play out. The point is not so much to predict the future as to envision a number of potential futures that can tell the government what to watch and when to dig further.¹⁰

In an October 2012 report for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars on modernizing America’s “legacy systems of management to meet today’s unique brand of accelerating and complex challenges,” Leon Fuerth cited RAHS as one of eight foreign “units to promote foresight and whole-of-government policy integration” that “offer models for approaches that could—with suitable modification—work in the United States.”¹¹ In a similar vein, Sheila Ronis, former chair of PNSR’s Vision Working Group, argues that the United States could improve its national-security decisionmaking processes by conducting the sort of work done by Singapore’s Center for Strategic Futures.¹²

¹⁰ Shane Harris, “The Social Laboratory,” *Foreign Policy*, July 29, 2014.

¹¹ Leon S. Fuerth and Evan M. H. Farber, *Anticipatory Governance, Practical Upgrades: Equipping the Executive Branch to Cope with Increasing Speed and Complexity of Major Challenges*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, October 2012.

¹² Sheila R. Ronis, *Executive Office of the President of the United States: The Need for New Capabilities, Lessons From Singapore and the Project on National Security Reform*, remarks at the World Future Society, Washington, D.C., Chapter, January 17, 2013.

Previous Attempts at Reform

For some time, analysts, practitioners, study groups, and professionals have urged improvements for the U.S. national security policymaking system.¹ Perhaps the most comprehensive review was undertaken by the PNSR, which was mandated by the National Defense Authorization Act of 2008 (PL 110-181). The study was undertaken by the Center for the Study of the Presidency and led by James L. Locher III, one of the architects of the Goldwater-Nichols Act that modernized and institutionalized “jointness” for the U.S. military services. The study was guided by a board of 22 distinguished experts, including former congressmen, ambassadors, flag officers, and senior policymakers. The PNSR’s report, *Forging a New Shield*, was more than 800 pages in length and accompanied by more than 1,000 pages of detailed, scholarly case studies.²

The PNSR’s key insights were that the “U.S. national security system was grossly imbalanced, supporting strong departmental capabilities at the expense of integrating mechanisms.” It observed that resources were allocated to departments, not missions, and departments tended to focus on their “parochial” core missions. The study found that the resulting need for presidential integration “overly centralizes issue management

¹ For example, Daniel W. Drezner, ed., *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2009; and Ivo H. Daalder and I. M. Destler, “A New NSC for a New Administration,” in Karl Inderfurth and Loch Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

² PNSR, 2008.

and overburdens the White House,” and that the basic deficiency was that “parochial departmental and agency interests, reinforced by Congress, paralyze interagency cooperation even as the variety, speed and complexity of emerging security issues prevent the White House from effectively controlling the system.”³

The study noted that Presidents have resorted to two methods of reducing policy management when the burdens of new issues or challenges become overwhelming: designating a lead agency, or appointing a lead individual—a “czar.” It observed that neither approach has worked well in practice.⁴ The PNSR aptly concluded that centralization “tends to burn out National Security Council staff, which impedes timely, disciplined, and integrated decision formulation and option assessment over time When there are fires to put out every day, there is little opportunity to see and evaluate the larger picture.”⁵

Another prominent advocate for NSC reform is Bruce W. Jentleson, professor of public policy and political science at Duke University and foreign policy adviser to numerous presidential campaigns and administrations. In 2009, he advocated the creation of a Strategic Planning Inter-Agency Group (SPIAG),⁶ with a membership that would parallel the NSC structure. The SPIAG was envisioned as supporting a new Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Planning, which would have been the most senior level official with specific planning responsibilities since the Eisenhower era.⁷ (Eisenhower famously empowered a “Solarium Group” of senior officials from various agencies to take a longer look at strategic choices the United States faced at the time.⁸)

³ PNSR, 2008, p. vii.

⁴ PNSR, 2008, p. viii.

⁵ PNSR, 2008, pp. viii–ix.

⁶ Bruce Jentleson, “An Integrated Executive Branch Strategy for Policy Planning,” in Drezner, 2009, pp. 76-79.

⁷ While there is currently a Special Assistant to the President (and Directorate) for Strategic Planning, the responsibilities of the position are narrow: mainly to oversee the periodic production of the congressionally mandated “National Security Strategy.”

⁸ Miller, 2013.

A third concept for decisionmaking reform is contained in RAND's series of studies of specific U.S. experience in managing nation-building in postconflict settings, which highlighted the difficulty of managing complex, expensive, interagency teams to the success (or otherwise) of strategic U.S. national security undertakings.⁹ Consistent with the PNSR, RAND's *After the War* recommended that the United States manage such interventions and reconstruction efforts by employing a dedicated senior level interagency working group to oversee implementation, and by employing personnel buttressed by cross-agency experiences. RAND also recommended developing a fully integrated single political-military plan, with civilians giving advice on military options and military providing advice on civilian tasks while maintaining clear delineation of responsibilities ("when all are responsible, no one is").¹⁰

None of these reform proposals were adopted. Nor have government management practices kept pace with the general trend toward decentralization of private-sector management as a means of adapting to rapid change.

⁹ For example, see James Dobbins, Michele A. Poole, Austin Long, and Benjamin Runkle, *After the War: Nation Building from FDR to George W. Bush*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-716-CC, 2008.

¹⁰ Dobbins et al., 2008, pp. 135–141.

Changing Environment

As other studies in the *Strategic Rethink* series have made clear, the environment for America's strategic concept development, planning, and implementation (and related national security decisionmaking) has changed radically since the days of Harry Truman, George Marshall, and Dean Acheson. While Truman encountered strategic surprises, he did not have to contend with 196 other states plus nonstate actors capable of striking the U.S. homeland; economic, media, and social globalization; the emergence of environmental and energy issues as top-tier concerns; or the Internet and the 24/7 news cycle. Further, American politics once was more bipartisan, particularly with regard to foreign policy.

There are now several key factors impinging on U.S. national security strategy formulation:¹

- Large states are presenting new types of security challenges—especially a China that is more repressive at home and assertive abroad, and a Russia whose aggression in Ukraine and intervention in Syria may undermine stability on two continents.

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¹ See also the introductory paper in this series: James Dobbins, Richard H. Solomon, Michael S. Chase, Ryan Henry, F. Stephen Larrabee, Robert J. Lempert, Andrew M. Liepman, Jeffrey Martini, David Ochmanek, and Howard J. Shatz, *Choices for America in a Turbulent World*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1114-CC, 2015.

- Nonstate actors play a bigger role and have a longer reach. ISIS; al Qaida and its affiliates (Jabhat al-Nusrah, Shabaab, al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, and al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula); Boko Haram in Nigeria; drug cartels across the Americas; pirates off the coast of Africa; and cyber criminals in the former Soviet space and China play autonomous roles in fostering mayhem and raising costs to nation states everywhere.
- Environmental stress is an increasing concern. With population growth, urbanization, and climate change, the risks and costs of natural disasters (flooding, extreme storms, earthquakes, and droughts) now have more immediate international significance, imposing costs on the global system, generating refugee flows, and destabilizing regions.
- The interconnected global economic system means that a failure of a large investment bank (such as Lehman Brothers), poor policies, fraud, or even crop failure in one corner of the world can quickly affect the rest of the world, putting growth and stability at risk.
- The proliferation and dispersion of weapons technology (nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, computer malware, man-portable air-defense systems [MANPADs] and even just high-powered automatic weapons) and delivery systems (missiles, drones, improvised explosive devices, suicide bombers) means that conflicts can quickly escalate in violence levels and jump across borders.
- An era of fiscal pressure and public aversion to international engagement is reducing the resources (development assistance, military aid, diplomatic funding) that the United States has traditionally used to bind its allies and pressure its adversaries. Similar trends are evident among key European allies, aggravated in their case by economic stagnation, energy vulnerabilities, and a crisis of confidence in European institutions.
- Patterns of energy supply and investment, always important in geopolitical terms, have changed more quickly and more thoroughly than ever before. Technological developments in the United States, for decades the largest importer of hydrocarbons but now re-emerging as an exporter of gas and oil on the success of new drilling techniques, have radically changed global markets.
 - Climate change poses a new challenge—both urgent and long-term—to economic security and resilience.

A special implementation challenge for this era is the effective coordination of civil-military planning and the use of military for political objectives. Much has been written about the problem,² especially in the context of the recent Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. And while it is difficult to synchronize civil and military operations in the field, in part because of the discrepancy in resources that can be brought to bear on the ground (the military has much more), achieving agreement at the strategic level on the use of military force for political ends is equally difficult. The United States is managing such a challenge in the current conflict against ISIS. It faces the need to utilize our air power, materiel, and special force trainers and advisers in such a way to achieve the desired end state against ISIS (“degrade and destroy”) while being mindful of the political interests and ambitions of the rival superpower, Russia, and the Syrian, Iraqi, and regional players.³ A good example of such joined-up strategy was the conditional and partial application of U.S. airpower in September 2014 that resulted in the departure of then–Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki of Iraq. Effective civil-military coordination at the strategic and tactical level requires deep habits of cooperation in planning, resourcing, and operations that challenge each end of the civil-military continuum. There is considerable progress: For example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) established an Office of Civil Military Cooperation,⁴ and the State Department established the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations.⁵

² Linda Robinson, Paul D. Miller, John Gordon IV, Jeffrey Decker, Michael Schwille, and Raphael S. Cohen, *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-816-A, 2014, p. 44; Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011; Nora Bensahel, Olga Olikier, Keith Crane, Rick Brennan, Jr, Heather S. Gregg, Thomas Sullivan, and Andrew Rathmell, *After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-642-A, 2008; Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, New York: Penguin, 2007; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan*, New York: Knopf, 2012.

³ Robinson et al., 2014, p. 52.

⁴ Ben Kauffeld, *USAID & DOD: Analysis and Recommendations to Enhance Development-Military Cooperation*, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army War College Press, August 2014.

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations*, undated.

The incoming President should ponder the managerial as well as strategic advantages of delegating more to the Cabinet secretaries.

The NSC itself has evolved in response to these changes and other pressures. The NSC staff traditionally was divided into geographic directorates with fewer devoted to functional issues. Now there are a plethora of functional NSC staff directorates as well as geographic ones, with predictable turf-fighting among them. As noted earlier, the George W. Bush–era Homeland Security Council staff was incorporated into the NSC staff directly. Even with these organizational changes, interviewees with whom RAND spoke said that the NSC staff frequently faces difficulties in meeting the challenges of this new environment while performing the essential functions of the national security decisionmaking process.

As a consequence of the country’s global agenda and the concentration of power in the Executive Office of the President, it is the contention of this study and others⁶ that the NSC staff and staff support at top levels in the national security agencies have gotten too big and too “operational”—too preoccupied with issues of implementation that would be better delegated to the Cabinet agencies. Senior White House officials are bogged down in “small” and operational issues at the expense of focus on strategic planning and policy formulation, at times duplicating the work of agencies. Officials recount cases in which NSC staff has sought to direct diplomatic strategies in support of U.S. initiatives, or tinker with talking points.

Any President will naturally want to make the most-sensitive diplomatic and military decisions—and keep them to his or her innermost circle. Nevertheless, the incoming President should ponder the managerial as well as strategic advantages of delegating more to the Cabinet secretaries. As in many other institutions (corporations, NGOs, other governments), the information technology revolution and management principles argue for a leaner, disciplined, decentralized, and strategic approach to formulating U.S. national security policies.

⁶ Rothkopf, 2014, p. 358; Shawn Brimley, Dafna H. Rand, Julianne Smith, and Jacob Stokes, *Enabling Decision: Shaping the National Security Council for the Next President*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, June 2015, p. 10.

Recommendations for the National Security Decision Structure

Despite the checkered results of previous attempts to reform and restructure America's national security decisionmaking system, and the importance of personalities in policy-making in general, a focused reform of a limited number of aspects of the system could pay real dividends.

There is broad agreement—dating back to the 1960s¹—that the time to debate and decide on changes is as a new administration prepares to take office. Newly named White House officials are especially jealous of their new prerogatives, and adversaries and friends are testing the new administration's intentions.

As the next administration (preferably the next presidential transition team) weighs its desired new NSC structure, it may wish to weigh the RAND recommendations that follow. These are ordered in terms of priority. In combination, they are designed to ameliorate the wide range of overlapping management problems already discussed.

¹ Ferguson, 2015, p. 849.

NSC Staff Size

While the exact number of professional NSC staff is unclear (and obscured by the sizable number of officials “detailed” to the White House by departments and agencies), insiders cite the Obama administration’s NSC staff as numbering “over 500.”² Having White House senior officials able to dedicate time and attention to every corner of the world and every functional challenge that the United States might face may seem attractive, but, in practice, such a large staff has a number of downsides. Most NSC senior directors chair an Inter-Agency Policy Committee or Committees, which in turn claim the time and attention of policy officials at national security agencies, even though many of the issues discussed never emerge for presidential involvement. With such staff numbers, the NSC staff has less need to rely upon—or delegate decisions to—line cabinet agencies, demoralizing Senate-confirmed officials at those agencies.³

In this spirit, the NSC recently began an overdue pruning—“rightsizing”—of its staff and procedures.⁴ The White House blog post on the reforms noted that “taken together, they are designed to result in fewer, more-focused meetings, less paper to produce and consume, and more communication that yields better policymaking for the

² Number quoted by former administration official at RAND seminar, March 18, 2014, and separately at RAND Workshop on *Lessons from 13 Years of War*, June 19, 2014.

³ In a public “forum on the role of the national security adviser” at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars on April 12, 2001, Zbigniew Brzezinski responded to a proposal by former NSA Sandy Berger that NSC STAFF Senior Directors coordinate working-level officials in policy implementation by coordinating interagency groups of working-level officials: “I don’t think it should be at the working level, because at the working level there are a great many decisions that are really not of Presidential type. And if you try to make decisions at the desk-officer level you will end up with a staff on the NSC which, in my view, is too large . . . [t]he happy medium is [an NSS] of 50, 60 or so given the role that the U.S. plays today.” In reply, Berger gives the example of the Bosnia intervention where day-to-day decisions, while not at the presidential level, were “critically important” to the success of the policy and, while generally made at the Deputy Assistant Secretary level, the Deputies Committee was an “extremely important part of the decision coordination.” Colloquy quoted in Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁴ Karen DeYoung, “The White House Tries for a Leaner National Security Council,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 2015.

benefit of the American people.”⁵ Senior staffers explain privately that the rightsizing effort is being undertaken by reducing most directorates by one or two persons, rather than informed by a more strategic view of staff functions.

Senior staff expansion at the White House level has been duplicated at State, Defense, and the DNI. State now has two deputy secretaries and six under secretaries, rather than just one under secretary (and no deputy), as was the case in Acheson’s day. It now has six regional bureaus (rather than four under Acheson and Marshall, dealing with many fewer sovereign states) but 32 officials overall with the rank of assistant secretary and an additional 22 coordinators, special envoys, and representatives, all of whom in theory report directly to the Secretary of State.⁶ All of this places the country desks and functional action offices ever further from the policymaking process and leads to policy development uninformed by on-the-ground reality.

In 2012, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) had 2,700 civilian and military staff positions. In 2013, then–Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel asked former Air Force Secretary Michael Donley to look for places to cut OSD, services, Joint Staff, and combatant command headquarter staff positions. Donley’s report recommended a 20-percent cut, to 2,200 staff positions.⁷

When it opened in the spring of 2005, the Office of the DNI comprised 11 staffers, crammed into a small office suite a block from the White House. A year later, the budding agency moved to two floors of another building. In April 2008, it moved to its permanent home at the Liberty Crossing Intelligence Campus in McClean, Virginia, and had a staff numbering well over 2,000.⁸

Better ways must be found to efficiently use senior leadership time and attention and to empower lower levels to manage second-order problems. While senior officials

Better ways must be found to efficiently use senior leadership time and attention and to empower lower levels to manage second-order problems.

⁵ Suzy George, “Fine-Tuning NSC Staff Processes and Procedures,” White House blog post, June 22, 2015.

⁶ Larry Pope, *The Demilitarization of American Diplomacy: Two Cheers for Striped Pants*, Basinstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 21.

⁷ “DoD Begins Cutting Staff Sizes, Will Reorganize Policy Office,” *Defense News*, December 5, 2013.

⁸ Dana Priest and William M. Arkin, “A Hidden World, Growing Beyond Control,” *Washington Post*, July 19, 2010.

often believe they can accomplish more with a large staff, in my experience, the opposite is true. The negotiations for the North American Free Trade Agreement—a highly complex diplomatic challenge—were run from the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) in the Executive Office of the President. We coordinated and supported more than 30 U.S. negotiating groups from an office with a staff of just seven. This required us to rely on others, focusing our efforts on giving the teams clear and coordinated instructions. This created a diplomatic agility that benefited the accomplishments of our objectives. The more complex the task, the more the need for a small staff to support a large hub-and-spoke model, of the sort used by many corporations to maintain control of decisionmaking while decentralizing implementation.

New issues and challenges do not necessarily require new stove-piped bureaucracies—and in fact, are best managed in conjunction with existing relationships.

Recommendation: Reduce Senior Staff Size

As described, the NSC staff size has ballooned⁹ and its organizational complexity has increased at a time when corporate America is moving toward flatter, leaner organizational structures to foster more-efficient decisionmaking. The U.S. government will necessarily remain hierarchical but the experience of businesses—and other countries—indicates that it could benefit from fewer staff. A thinner layer of middle management would help curb the impulse for the NSC to become too operational.

While nearly every senior official interviewed for this study identified staff bloat as a problem, it is, of course, not easy to determine objectively the proper NSC size. Even the criteria for such a benchmark have not been put forward. One way to estimate the optimum NSC staff size might be functionally. The staff model should start with the President's National Security Adviser, whose time is protected by two or three Deputy National Security Advisers so that he or she can focus on the highest presidential priorities. Next, there would need to be senior managers for the Executive Secretary and strategic planning functions, and for press and public affairs functions. A senior director should be in charge of each of State's regional bureaus/military combatant commanders

⁹ The NSC did recently begin an overdue pruning—"rightsizing"—of its staff and procedures (DeYoung, 2015).

(COCOMs) (per subsequent recommendation to align bureaus and COCOMs), plus senior directors for major functional categories (Homeland Security/counterterrorism, intelligence, cyber threats, economics, environment, energy, and perhaps a half-dozen others). With four or five supporting staff per senior director (not counting the 24-hour Situation Room staff) one can envision the resulting streamlined NSC staff sized at perhaps 120 professionals—although this would still be roughly five times the size of President Jimmy Carter’s NSC.¹⁰ In this way, the next administration can reduce and cap NSC staff and the number of State, Defense, and DNI subcabinet principals (and their respective staffs) in order to devolve responsibility to appropriate levels and ensure that the most-senior officials focus on the strategic picture.

An NSC staff sized at roughly 120 professionals could ensure enough staff support for White House principals and to manage crises, but not be so large that staff members are inclined to impinge on operations that can be appropriately delegated to agencies. While the resulting sharp cut in the NSC staff and such an arbitrary cap would be dramatic, there would be no clearer signal to agencies and foreign governments that the new administration intends for the NSC staff to step back to a coordinative role and leave operations to the designated departments. In parallel, the President should direct State, Defense, and the DNI to evaluate their staffs and similarly consolidate duplicative staff level functions in their organizations. This would result in more responsibilities being delegated to line offices and to embassies and commanders abroad.

Civil-Military Cooperation and Resource Sharing

At a moment when the United States is increasing military action against ISIS, attempting to stabilize Afghanistan, trying to end the Syrian civil war, and confronting aggression by Russia and China, it must coordinate use of its military and civilian tools to maximum effect. To be sure, cooperation between military commands and civilian agencies abroad has improved through a decade of war, but unresolved issues remain. I

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¹⁰ Karen DeYoung, “How the White House Runs Foreign Policy,” *Washington Post*, August 4, 2015.

have seen one embassy where civil-military relations were excellent due to the close relationship between the ambassador and the U.S. military commander, and another where the two did not speak. The effects on U.S. efficiency were apparent to all.

Military officials often comment that they consider civilian response capabilities inadequate for the scale and scope of stabilization and nation-building tasks following recent conflicts, leading those tasks to fall on the military. Civilians also bemoan the sharp resource discrepancies between military and civilian programs, urge diplomatic and longer-term approaches to security challenges, and institutionally focus on state-to-state relations, although nonstate actors also are increasingly relevant. The State Department's Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations has been allocated neither the resources nor the responsibility to manage complex operations in the field. While DoD has most of the resources to implement most aspects of strategy, ownership of those "means" should not be allowed to militarize the process or skew the choice of "ways" to mainly military approaches. Civilians must set the political objectives.

A balanced civil-military relationship is critical to managing the different time lines under which military officials and diplomats operate through conflict and post-conflict situations. The military plans to accomplish specific goals, achieve defined "end-states"—and then leave. For American diplomats, nothing ever truly "ends." The embassy stays on to manage the long-term relationship with the host nation.

Technology such as secure video-conferencing now allows ambassadors and commanders in the field to take part directly in Washington strategy discussions. In practice, ambassadors do not have the authority, training, or the staff support to play a strong role in on-the-ground coordination once strategy decisions are made,¹¹ yet aside from the NSC-led process, an Ambassador's Country Team is often the only other standing interagency process. Both military and civilian policy-level officials have in the past

¹¹ Dennis Blair, Ronald Neumann, and Eric Olson, "Fixing Fragile States," *The National Interest*, August 27, 2014.

neglected to take account of the likely political effects of changes in military commitments.¹² These considerations apply equally in Washington and in the field.¹³

Recommendation: Empower State on Policy, Leave Implementation to the Agencies

A solution to the mismatch of resources and strategy for complex operations might be to empower State, as foreign diplomatic lead, to lead in the formulation of policies and direction of resources, but leave the implementation to the agencies best placed to undertake it.

Under this construct, planning of complex, blended, “whole of government” operations would be the responsibility of a new and robust strategic planning office under one of the two existing Deputy Secretaries of State, with a very accomplished and senior-level civilian director and a two-star military officer as deputy. This would allow State to tap military expertise at the behest of the White House and develop true civil-military strategies, while leaving implementation questions to case-by-case decisionmaking depending on the specific approaches selected. It would clarify that the role of Bureau on Conflict and Stabilization Operations is to focus on recruiting and managing civilians in such operations, and at the same time allow reductions in resources for strategic planning for such operations in the offices of the Joint Chiefs and OSD.

The boundaries of State’s regional bureaus and DoD’s COCOMs’ areas of responsibilities also should be aligned, with State policy advisers (POLADs) to the COCOMs reporting directly to regional assistant secretaries, and each COCOM assigning a senior (O6 level) liaison officer to its corresponding regional bureau.

As our military power is used for defined ends (including assistance for building partner capacity), doctrine and practice in Washington and on the ground should ensure that military force is used in ways that support U.S. political objectives and interests (even beyond the defined “end state”). “Reward our friends, punish our enemies, deter our potential adversaries” should be the mantra.

¹² Robinson et al., 2014, pp. 52–59.

¹³ Gordon Adams, “Democracy Pushing Is Not Cutting Edge Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, May 11, 2015.

In our hyperconnected age, the clearance and approval processes associated with formal organizational communications have made them seem cumbersome.

Decline of Disciplined, Organizational Messaging Systems

In many ways, the communications revolution and especially the advent of the Internet have helped in the management of national security decisionmaking. Easy, immediate access to press reporting in hundreds of local languages (and now social media postings) gives intelligence analysts and decisionmakers news of important events and an immediate feel for foreign perspectives and political pressures. Secure video teleconferencing technology lets ambassadors, overseas commanders, and traveling policymakers participate remotely in Washington policy debates, which likely injects realism and immediacy into conversations.

But the communications revolution has hindered the coherence of decisionmaking in one important way: It has led to the decline of the use of formal organizational messaging systems, and its effective replacement by informal email messaging. Email is, of course, vital for context and for supplementary information, but organizational messages—which flow between institutions, such as the State Department’s “telegrams,” and which constitute searchable, retrievable records—have long been the way that instructions are issued and developments reported to all foreign affairs agencies at once. In our hyperconnected age, however, the clearance and approval processes associated with formal organizational communications have made them seem cumbersome.

Moreover, what had been a tendency of the State Department and other agencies to make organizational messages available interagency on the SIPRnet¹⁴ was disrupted by the damaging leak of more 200,000 State cables in the Wikileaks disclosures that had been downloaded from this network. As a result, practitioners admit to an explosion of official instructions and reporting now first taking place by classified or unclassified email channels.¹⁵ One problem with the email channel is that the messages are

¹⁴ The “Secure Internet Protocol Router Network” between U.S. government agencies allows exchange of messages up to the “Secret” level.

¹⁵ In two terms of the Clinton administration, there were 1 million emails in the White House system. In George W. Bush’s two terms, 5.3 million. After six years of the Obama administration, thus far there have been 10 million emails logged in the NSC system. (See Rothkopf, 2014, p. 366). Similarly, the State Department’s Office of the Historian estimates that the department produces 2 billion emails a year. (See Matthew Connelly and Richard Immerman, “What Clinton’s Emails Really Show,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2015, p. A25).

routed to and from individuals, rather than organizations. In the State Department’s new “SMART” (State Messaging and Archive Retrieval Toolset) messaging architecture, emails can be preserved as “record” messages, but few actually are.¹⁶

Another problem is that NSC, State, Defense, and Treasury all have separate classified email systems. Though this may have security benefits and the systems interconnect, some key functions, such as directory search, are not available between systems. In the interagency context, this means that offices and organizations that perhaps are not directly involved, but do have a need to understand and act in accordance with U.S. government strategies and policies, often are left in the dark (or reliant on press coverage).

Recommendation: Enforce Use of Organizational Messaging Systems

The Executive Secretaries of the NSC, State, and Defense should be instructed to crack down on abuse of email channels for instruction and reporting, and institute wide U.S. government usage of the State Department’s “SMART” messaging architecture to send, retrieve, and archive organizational messages of all sorts.¹⁷ They must also ensure that every relevant agency “gets the memo” the first time, a task that is surprisingly difficult but that would greatly improve policy coordination.

Including the Right Agencies

National security policy increasingly involves interests and expertise that are beyond the confines of State, Defense, or even Intelligence Community domains. Economic and

¹⁶ The Office of the State Department Inspector General found that in 2011, employees identified only 61,156 record emails out of more than 1 billion emails sent (Office of Inspections, Office of the Inspector General, Department of State, *Review of State Messaging and Archive Retrieval Toolset and Record Email*, ISP-I-15-15, 2011, p. 1).

¹⁷ With a similar logic, the PNSR suggested: “To enable cross-departmental information sharing, we recommend the creation and development of a collaborative information architecture. Parallel with the construction of this information architecture, the PSC Executive Secretariat must develop overarching business rules for interdepartmental communications and data access in order to eliminate bureaucratic barriers presently hindering the flow of knowledge and information” (PNSR, 2008, p. xiv).

financial issues affect the stability of our economy and thereby our national security. Financial crises can affect the political stability of such key allies and partners as Greece. Trade issues are strategic as well, as is evident in the negotiation of new comprehensive trade and investment agreements with Asia and Europe. Environmental threats and natural disasters affect political stability in fragile states. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Agriculture, and Department of Energy (DOE) officials have much to contribute. Development issues should benefit from the analyses and policy insights of senior USAID officials. Policymaking in other fields is improved by bringing in other agencies, such as health (Department of Health and Human Services), environment (EPA), or aviation (Department of Transportation). DOE Secretary Ernest Moniz made a major contribution to the recent Iran nuclear deal.

Nevertheless, some administrations simply interested in getting things done in a bloated system succumb to the temptation to exclude officials and agencies that are known to be skeptical of bruited policy approaches. This is almost always a mistake, as Richard Haass writes in the context of his analysis of the Iraq war decisions: “Formal decision making can be time consuming, can increase the chance of leaks, can stifle innovation, and are no guarantee against groupthink and error. Nevertheless, rigorous and inclusive policy development mechanisms can improve the quality of policy, protect leaders from themselves and the shortcomings of those around them, and increase the odds that implementation faithfully reflects what is sought.”¹⁸

Recommendation: Issue Clear Presidential Instructions to Ensure Representation

The next President should establish guidelines and specific instructions to the NSC to ensure broad representation of interests and points of view during the analysis phase prior to decisionmaking, and in the oversight of implementation. Financial crises are a good example. For example, senior Treasury officials should continue to participate in NSC staff-led discussions when countries of concern find themselves in financial crisis, and Treasury should open up its internal debates on such issues to foreign and defense officials. This need not mean large numbers of officials representing duplicative views,

¹⁸ Richard Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice*, New York: Simon and Shuster, 2009, p. 272.

but if the topic is a trade dispute with a major country, there is a case for including the departments of Agriculture and the Treasury along with State and Commerce and the USTR. A smaller NSC staff can be tasked with reaching out to all of the affected stakeholders, making sure the right officials from the right agencies are invited to the conference table, flushing out disagreements, identifying shared priorities, formulating choices, and moving the issue upward for decision by senior officials. In cases when the President or deputies deem an issue not ripe for decision, the NSC staff should be encouraged not to hold more meetings in the meantime.

Integrating Intelligence Insights

It has always been a tricky task for national security decisionmaking systems to appropriately factor in intelligence analysis and insights. The United Kingdom has long had a single, senior-level Joint Intelligence Committee led by a senior career official. The U.S. government has a number of coordination structures and processes, the Office of the DNI (which itself has a large staff), the National Intelligence Council, and the tradition of requesting periodic National Intelligence Estimates and/or Special National Intelligence Estimates. Yet many after-the-fact analyses of the run-up to the Iraq war were critical of the intelligence communities of the United States and the United Kingdom for in some cases providing the findings that policymakers expected to see and ignoring contrary indications.¹⁹ And the tendency is not limited to the Iraq case or the Bush administration.²⁰ Histories of the Kennedy administration generally conclude that President Kennedy relied for intelligence in the Bay of Pigs on CIA's proponents of the operation, who had an incen-

It has always been a tricky task for national security decisionmaking systems to appropriately factor in intelligence analysis and insights.

¹⁹ See, for example, Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004, p. 437–440.

²⁰ Vali Nasr describes the distortion of intelligence analysis to support policy assumptions in discussing how the United States saw what it wanted to in Pakistan President Musharraf's conception of "Jinnah's Islam:" Nasr said he remarked to an analyst that "the whole thing is a shameless autocrat's cynical and transparent manipulation." The analyst replied, "Well, our customers are very interested to know how we can support it . . . You have no idea how much of this [our customers] lap up. We have to write a report" (Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*, New York: Anchor Books, 2013, p. 67).

tive to predict success.²¹ And even had the processes been better and less politicized, the findings might not have been different, merely more qualified with uncertainties.²² But the pendulum has swung. Now, intelligence insights are more systematically integrated into the policy process, though recent senior officials note the effect may be to reinforce risk aversion. And there seems to be an effort to protect analysts, not so much from policymaking process²³ as from the wider scholarly and analytical communities.²⁴ That seems unwise, and not justified by security considerations.

Recommendation: Integrate Intelligence Analytical Insights into Decisionmaking, and Ensure Intelligence Analysts Have Appropriately Wide Scope

Intelligence insights—whether based on classified matter, open-source materials, or interaction with experts outside of government—should be factored in at all stages of decisionmaking. We should seek clear understanding of adversaries and appreciate the political dynamics affecting our allies (which can be best understood from open source and the insights of outside specialists). Iconoclastic judgments and views should be encouraged and factored in.

Groupthink and Embedded Assumptions

A corollary to making effective use of intelligence is making room for outside-the-box thinking. Former participants in national security decisionmaking processes at all levels

²¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.

²² Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010.

²³ One former senior administration official observed that National Intelligence Managers (responsible for coordination of taskings and working for the DNI) have generally replaced the National Intelligence Officers at NSC staff-led IPCs, which perhaps facilitates downward information flows but deprives the IPCs of relevant analytical insights (Interview with former Obama Administration policy official, July 25, 2014).

²⁴ Henri Barkey, “Clapper’s Gag Order Could Hurt Intelligence Analysts More Than Journalists,” *Washington Post*, May 2, 2014.

often observe that the range of options considered are often narrow, constrained by previous decisions and public statements, assumptions not sufficiently examined, and branches and sequels of proposed policy decisions not systematically examined. Decisionmaking processes have a tendency toward minimalism, taking decisions sufficient unto the day. But there is a benefit to explicit “red teams” tasked with challenging assumptions, anticipating the reactions of adversaries, allies, and neutrals to proposed courses of action, and challenging the path dependence of previous decisions. In any case, adaptive, responsive organizations normally have established reflective lessons-learned efforts to capture insights from policy initiatives at all levels, both to understand those that work well and therefore should be replicated, and approaches that failed to work for reasons that could have been anticipated but were not.

Recommendation: Increase Use of Red Teams and Lessons-Learned Efforts

Reform of the national security decisionmaking system should include ways to ensure trusted “red teaming” for important policies before the decision, and careful lessons-learned reviews afterward.²⁵ Ideally, the Intelligence Community would recruit and manage red teams to challenge assumptions on policy directions of high strategic importance.

Continuity, Integration, and Professional Staff Development

In 2008, the PNSR recommended “the formation of a *National Security Professional Corps (NSPC)* in order to create a cadre of national security professionals specifically trained for interagency assignments.”²⁶ The concept was that these senior national security managers would rotate among agencies with national security responsibilities as a way to foster cooperation and “joint-ness” among the agencies. Such managers would

²⁵ Lessons-learned analyses are carried out sporadically by the military, but seldom, if at all, in civilian agencies (recently, USAID is a notable exception). Not only should State, Treasury, and OSD set up dedicated lessons-learned programs, but civilian perspectives should be brought into the military studies.

²⁶ PNSR, 2008, page xiii.

undoubtedly help in the ways the project envisaged, but the proposal faced daunting opposition from agencies, the complexities of differing civil, foreign, and military personnel systems, and skepticism from political appointees that such managers would constitute a class of “mandarins” resistant to political guidance. Some of the benefits of cross-agency perspective, however, can be obtained by easing bureaucratic and legal obstacles to systematic secondments between and among national security agencies (especially if Congress would fund dedicated personnel slots for the practice), and by supporting training initiatives. Generations of State, Commerce, and USDA officials, for example, have been seconded to USTR for trade negotiation functions, and the practice of American trade policy is much stronger for it.

Recommendation: Build National Security Professionals

While some Foreign Service Officers have been seconded to OSD’s Policy and to military commands as POLADs, and senior Defense managers have been seconded to State, the practice can and should be strengthened and given a legislative basis. The smaller, more strategic NSC staff advocated here also would attract the best and brightest of senior managers.

A formal program for Senior Executive Service SES and GS14/15-level secondments between national security agencies should be established and funded by Congress. Moreover, steps should be taken to ensure Civil Service and Foreign Service personnel seconded to the White House or other agencies are eligible for step and grade increases during their secondments. The best and the brightest deserve the same opportunities as their counterparts who are working at their home agencies or departments.

The Foreign Service Institute, the National War College, and the CIA’s training directorate should collaborate on the establishment (or re-establishment) of a cooperative joint training program for fast-track versatile officials on the cusp of senior inter-agency responsibilities, akin to the State Department’s highly respected (but canceled) Senior Seminar.

Overuse of Czars

In light of the difficulties of organizing effective and sustained action on a complex area of policy, or to demonstrate that the United States takes an issue area seriously, successive administrations increasingly have resorted to the use of special envoys, special representatives, coordinators, or, more colloquially, “czars” to assume responsibility for an area of policy. Rothkopf identified more than 40 regional and functional bureaus, and other “coordinators” at State who in theory reported directly to the Secretary.²⁷ The American Diplomacy at Risk study identified 59 diplomatic functions headed by individuals titled Special Adviser, Envoy, and Representative as of January 30, 2015.²⁸ Across the administration, there are many more such single purpose “czars.” Some of these positions have been established by Congress to goad an administration to take action (or at least pay attention to) an issue; others were set up by the White House as prestigious jobs for prominent political supporters.

In some critical situations that merit a short-term focus or sustained whole-of-government approach but have no obvious lead, a special envoy-type position might make sense. For example, former chief of staff for Vice President Al Gore and coordinator for the 2009 stimulus plan implementation Ron Klein took on the troubled Ebola response effort for a short period of time, and Lt. General Douglas Lute was appointed to follow the Iraq war developments from the White House and across administrations (and the Afghanistan war somewhat later).²⁹ But our friends and allies rarely have counterpart envoys. Used too widely, these positions can lead to rivalries with existing bureaucracies and impede cross-issue trade-offs with allies or adversaries.

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²⁷ Rothkopf (2014, p. 248) recalls observing in 2009 that the Obama administration alone was responsible for producing more czars than the Romanof dynasty.

²⁸ American Academy of Diplomacy, *American Diplomacy at Risk*, Washington, D.C., March 2015, Appendix C, p. 55.

²⁹ Peter Baker and Robin Wright, “Bush Taps Skeptic of Buildup as War Czar,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 2007, p. A01.

Recommendation: Make Rare Use of Czars

All special envoy, coordinator, or representative positions should sunset with each presidential term (if not before) and the clear presumption should be that existing senior officials take responsibility for pressing national security issues.³⁰

³⁰ A good example is the Iran nuclear issue, where negotiations in the P5+1 format (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; plus Germany) were led by the State Department's Under Secretary for Political Affairs (with direct engagement by the Secretary of State as needed) rather than a special envoy. This allows the Under Secretary to engage with her counterparts on a wide range of other policy areas that are important to our allies in this effort.

Conclusion: Strategizing, Decisionmaking, and Policy Implementation

As long as the United States is a world power with global interests and responsibilities, the development of a coherent national security and foreign policy strategy will be essential to effective international engagement. Otherwise, our dealings with the world will be reactive, short term, and tactical. Even presidential statements of strategic intent will be declaratory, without the credibility of operational significance. With simultaneous, serious challenges facing the nation across the globe, new arenas for competition and cooperation, and a widening scope of actors that can help or harm the United States, national security decisionmaking structures need to change.

The next President has an opportunity to put in place more strategic, adaptive, reflective, coordinated, and faster-moving structures. He or she can force the sclerotic U.S. government to achieve coherence and sustainability in national security policy by breaking organizational stovepipes, reducing bloat at the top of the structures and the agencies, improving internal and external messaging, and becoming better at looking ahead. Simply put, our institutions need to do less at the top, delegate more, and insist on accountability. That will help ensure a focus on what is important, rather than having those issues overwhelmed constantly by the immediate.

When considering American national security decisionmaking and management arrangements, elements of the system are based on statute, but each President can shape the system to his or her management style and perceived needs. That may be true for

Simply put, our institutions need to do less at the top, delegate more, and insist on accountability.

the President's immediate aides and work style. But every President needs a decision-making system that harnesses the full capabilities and accumulated wisdom of the U.S. government and the nation's many stakeholders. The trimmer, more-focused system recommendations proposed here are intended to help the nation effectively formulate and carry out the more agile and aware national security strategies the nation will need in the 21st century. The adoption of such principles and arrangements could prove to be critical to the next President's success in advancing U.S. interests in a turbulent world.

Abbreviations

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COCOMs	combatant commanders
DC	Deputies' Committee
DNI	Director of National Intelligence
DoD	Department of Defense
IPC	interagency policy committee
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NSC	National Security Council
NSS	National Security Staff
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
PC	Principals' Committee
PNSR	Project on National Security Reform
POLAD	policy adviser
RAHS	Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning
SMART	State Messaging and Archive Retrieval Toolset
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USTR	U.S. Trade Representative

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About the Author

Ambassador Charles Ries is the vice president, International, at the RAND Corporation, and a Senior Fellow, whose research has focused on the economics of development, the Middle East, and Europe. He retired from the U.S. diplomatic service in 2008 after a distinguished career that began during the Carter administration.

Among other assignments, he has served as an economics officer in three embassies, as Deputy Assistant U.S. Trade Representative (1990–1992), Minister-Counselor for Economic Affairs in London and Brussels, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (2000–2004), Ambassador to Greece (2004–2007), and Coordinator for Economic Transition In Iraq (2007–2008), where he received the Department of the Army’s Outstanding Civilian Service Award.

Ries has also received the State Department’s Cordell Hull Award for Senior Economic Officers, the Distinguished Honor Award, the Presidential Meritorious Service Award, the Rockwell Schnabel Award for U.S.-EU Relations, and several Superior Honor Awards. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Academy of American Diplomacy.

During a leave of absence from RAND in 2010, Ries was executive vice president of the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund.



Ambassador Ries makes remarks at a medal ceremony in 2007 aboard the *USS Barry* for a Greek liaison officer who served in the U.S. Navy. Photo courtesy of Charles Ries.

Every president needs a decisionmaking system that harnesses the full capabilities and accumulated wisdom of the U.S. government and the nation’s many stakeholders. Yet national security professionals—the officials who must advise the president on the most-difficult decisions—cite a range of structural problems that hinder effective policymaking. While a more focused and timely decisionmaking process will not necessarily improve outcomes for the United States, poor choices could be calamitous. This Perspective analyzes a range of management challenges in the national security system and presents eight recommendations for strengthening U.S. decisionmaking and oversight of policy implementation. Among the conclusions: The National Security Council staff size should be reduced to better focus on high-priority areas. Civil-military operations should be planned by a new joint office at the State Department with a military general officer as deputy. Red-team and lessons-learned efforts would help ensure that the system is adaptive and responsive. Better integration of intelligence insights and secondments of senior officials across agencies can improve the quality and coherence of decisionmaking. And the use of special envoys, or “czars,” should be limited.



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