



Research

Reforming the National Security Council

ALEXANDER BOBROSKE | DECEMBER 21, 2016

Summary

- The National Security Council (NSC) has grown too large and assumed a role beyond its original purpose while the role of the Principals Committee (PC) has been diminished.
- The incoming Trump Administration should shrink the size of the NSC staff and refocus the organization on its key function of interagency coordinating and long-term strategic advising rather than micromanaging national security policy implementation.
- A smaller and reformed NSC would increase the efficiency of interagency coordination, improve policy implementation, and enhance congressional oversight.

Introduction

One of the first personnel announcements President-elect Donald Trump made was his National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, and there was consensus that he would play a major role in shaping the Trump Administration's national security policy—in part because of how the NSC has grown and evolved in recent years.

In the leadup to the presidential election, there were numerous bipartisan efforts calling for the next administration (whether Trump or Clinton) to reform the NSC. A recent [report](#) from the Atlantic Council, spearheaded by one former Republican and one former Democratic National Security Advisor, made several key recommendations: reducing the size of the NSC staff, returning the organization to its core function of coordinating policy, better utilizing strategic planning and interagency task forces, and bringing in cost analysis of policy options. Legislatively, a [provision](#) included in the final version of the National Defense Authorization Act, which Congress recently passed, would start the process of NSC reform by capping the organization at 200 professional employees. This paper will examine the evolution of the NSC and evaluate several potential reforms.

History of the NSC

Congress created the NSC through the National Security Act of 1947 during the Truman Administration, shortly after the end of World War II. In addition to creating the NSC, the Act overhauled the entire national security apparatus, unifying the military under what would eventually become the Department of Defense, separating the Air Force from the Army, and creating the Central Intelligence Agency.

The purpose of the NSC was to create an interdepartmental body within the White House to offer advice to the president pertaining to national security. A small group of presidential advisers and staff would focus on developing whole-of-government national security strategy and coordinating across the interagency. The NSC staff was granted executive privilege to protect them from congressional oversight. Statutory members and

advisers currently include the President, Vice President, Secretaries of State, Defense, and Energy, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Director of National Intelligence.

The National Security Advisor was intended to act as an honest broker within the NSC to ensure the president heard various viewpoints from his cabinet and advisors. The execution of daily operations and policy was to remain with the cabinet secretaries and senior leaders of the relevant departments and agencies, who serve in their positions subject to Senate confirmation.

Changes to the NSC by Presidential Administration

Every NSC has adapted to the working habits of the incumbent president. President Truman did not make much use of the NSC until the Korean War. President Eisenhower expanded and institutionalized the NSC staff, relying on his military experience to dictate clear lines of responsibility and authority and splitting the staff's time equally between day-to-day crisis management and long-term strategic planning. President Kennedy took the opposite approach, preferring ad-hoc task forces to drive decision-making. President Johnson relied on select sources for advice outside of the formal NSC structure, a process criticized for attributing to group think throughout the Vietnam War.

The Nixon Administration marked a revival of the purpose of the NSC for long-term planning. While Nixon wanted policy options laid out before him rather than his advisors finding consensus before meeting with him, his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger imposed his control on the NSC and the broader foreign policy apparatus. President Ford did not make major changes, even keeping on Kissinger in his NSC role until eventually replacing him with General Brent Scowcroft. The Carter Administration aimed to lessen the dominant role of the NSC staff to make it a coequal with the Departments of State and Defense, but the rivalry between National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance led to Carter's wavering between differing advice for a number of key decisions. The Reagan Administration was marked with uncertainty in lines of responsibilities and an absence of orderly decision-making, leading to the Iran-Contra Scandal, until Ambassador Frank Carlucci became National Security Advisor and restored NSC effectiveness.

Scowcroft's second tenure as National Security Advisor under President George H.W. Bush is often considered the "gold standard" for running a successful NSC. Scowcroft kept the staff to a manageable size of around 50, personally chaired most key committees, and ensured all the President's advisors had their opinions heard. Roles and issue areas were clearly defined. The President drove policy decisions along with the heads of departments and agencies.

National Security Council Staff Structure George H.W. Bush Administration, 1992

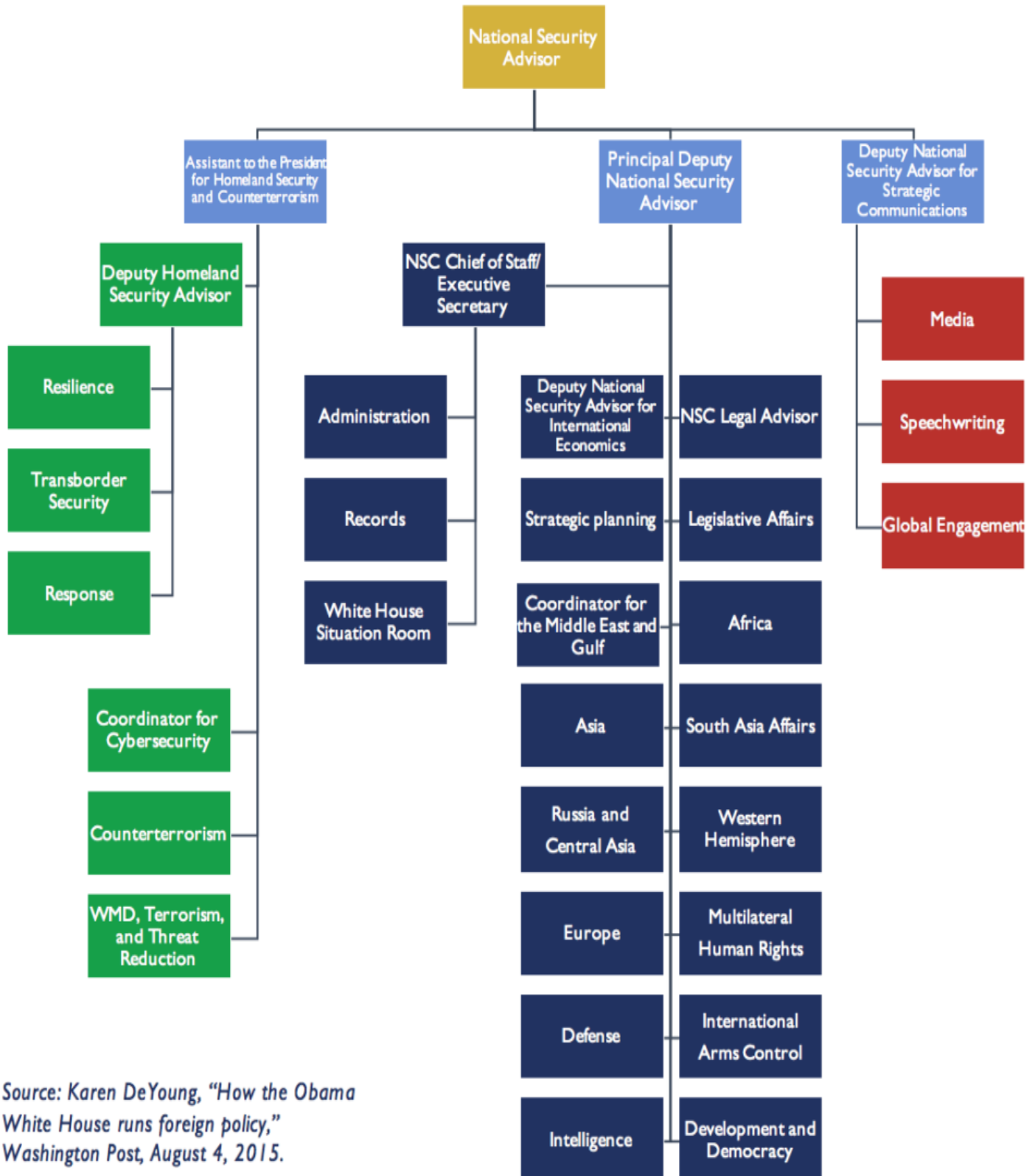


Source: Atlantic Council, "The National Security Council Reform Project," 2016

Since then, the size of the NSC staff has steadily increased. President Clinton created a National Economic Council (NEC) to integrate economic policy and “double-hatted” some NEC staff as NSC officials. President George W. Bush’s first National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, had formerly served as a junior staffer under Scowcroft and hoped to replicate his NSC structure. Following 9/11, however, with two wars and the rise of transnational threats, the NSC grew significantly. During the Obama Administration, the NSC staff has doubled to around 400 staffers. President Obama’s NSC has been heavily criticized for consolidating decision-making in the White House and micromanaging the execution of policy— sidelining the State and Defense Departments and other agencies and far exceeding its intended mandate.

National Security Council Staff Structure

Barack Obama Administration, 2015

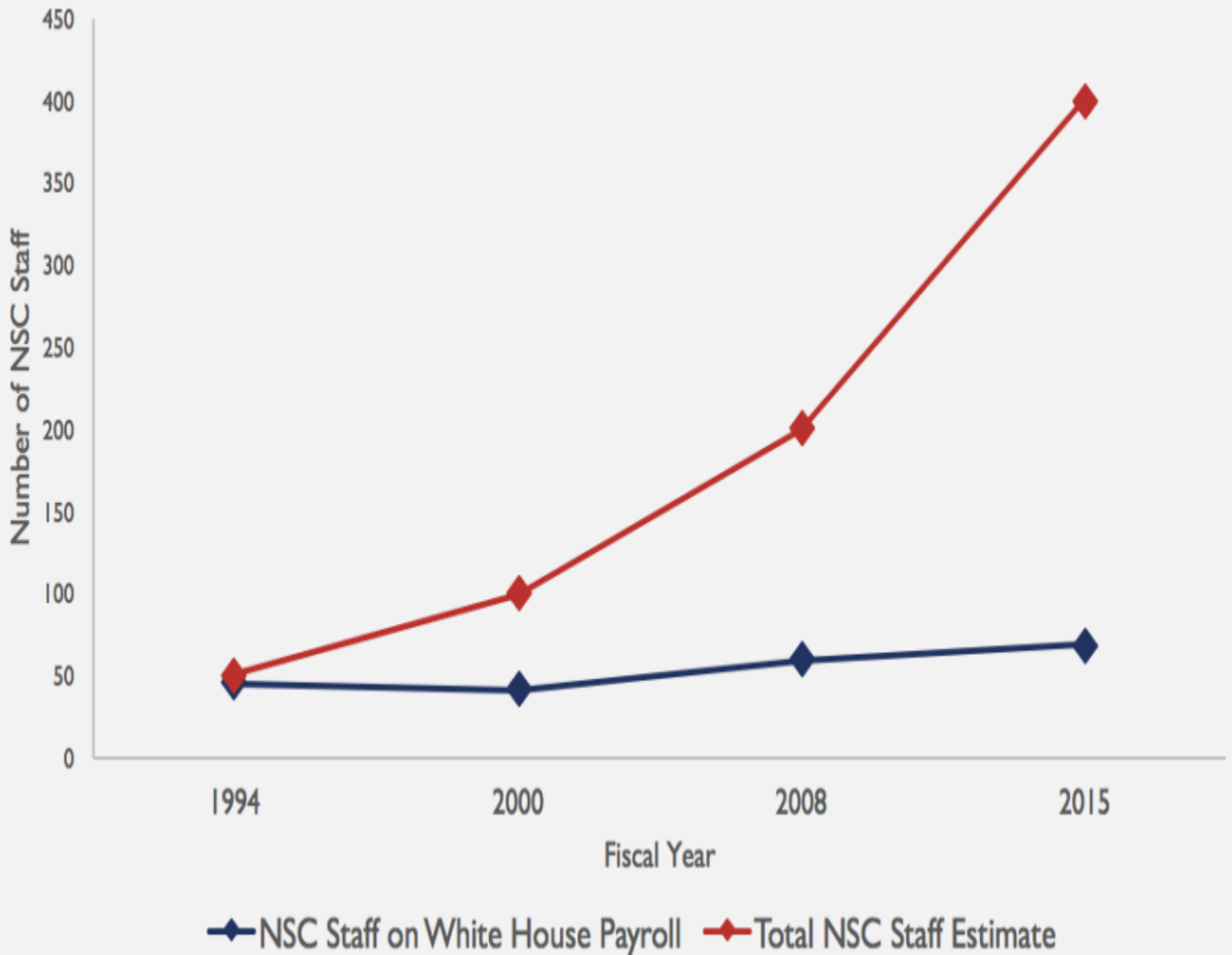


Source: Karen DeYoung, "How the Obama White House runs foreign policy," *Washington Post*, August 4, 2015.

Shrinking the NSC

The incoming administration should reduce the NSC staff from its peak of an estimated 400 members in 2015 down to 100-150 professional staff members. The White House allocates \$10.5 million a year as payroll for around 70 NSC staff members. Besides technical support and human resources staff, additional staff are detailees on loan for one to two years from federal departments and agencies that pay their salaries, such as State or Defense. The use of detailees allows the president to sidestep NSC budgetary restrictions and has led to the expansion in NSC staff in recent years. The Executive Office of the President has a budget of \$397 million, compared to \$26.5 billion for the Department of State and \$562.5 billion for the Department of Defense. The departments and agencies are purposefully funded, sized, and mandated to execute day-to-day management of diplomatic and defense policy—not the NSC.

Growth of NSC Staff Overtime



Sources: Office of Management and Budget, Fiscal Year Appendices, Executive Office of the President; Karen DeYoung, "How the Obama White House runs foreign policy," *Washington Post*, August 4, 2015.

A smaller professional staff will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the NSC. Returning to the Scowcroft model of the NSC coordinating policies amongst the various departments and agencies will allow the organization to balance managing day-to-day crises with strategic planning for long-term threats and opportunities. The vast majority of the NSC professional staff should assume their roles with a wealth of experience, having already served as directors and mid-level personnel in various departments and agencies. This will reduce the need for unnecessary "on the job training" of junior personnel.

Many of the detailees to the NSC should return to their home departments and agencies, where policy should be implemented. This will better ensure a clear and proper chain of command and avoid current problems like

micromanaging junior NSC staffers giving directives to U.S. military commanders or ambassadors.

Returning Power to Congress

With a reduced staff and more clearly defined role for the NSC, national security decision-making on key issues will return to the president and the PC rather than mid-level bureaucrats. Upon presidential nomination, the Senate confirms many of the members of the PC, but Congress has no oversight over the NSC staff who are protected with executive privilege. Reforming the NSC would help strengthen the congressional role in U.S. foreign policy. By rebalancing power in this way, the president would have to rely more on Senate-confirmed senior officials for advice and policy execution rather than consolidate decision-making power within the White House itself.

Developing Strategic Plans

Currently, the NSC structure is often chaotic with confusion over authorities and responsibilities. A smaller NSC staff should focus on interagency coordination role and long-term strategy planning rather than micromanaging day-to-day policy-making and implementation. Interagency teams and task forces headed by a lead department or agency, rather than an NSC staffer, can then be utilized to formulate and execute policies. This is particularly salient for complex global issues involving non-state actors like terrorist groups.

One major criticism of the Obama Administration's efforts to fight the Islamic State has been the lack of strategic planning involving coordination of the whole national security apparatus. General John Allen noted that there was "no grand strategic campaign plan for defeating ISIL" because "departments were operating in relative isolation from each other." Interagency task forces headed by a senior department official appointed by the president can formulate and implement long-term policies on key issues such as defeating the Islamic State. Clearly defined task forces that are institutionalized to deal with a particular type of crisis will more quickly formulate policies rather than ad-hoc committees formed each time a crisis emerges.

With a smaller NSC staff, the president will be able to consider the advice of Senate-confirmed Cabinet members and department and agency heads with the National Security Advisor playing the role of an "honest broker" of diverse viewpoints within the interagency process.

Increasing Accountability

Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who served in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, said, "The heart of the bureaucratic problem is the inclination to avoid responsibility." A smaller staff with more clearly defined roles would promote responsibility and therefore accountability of the NSC. A well-defined chain of command would reduce confusion across the broader national security apparatus.

Integrating Budget Considerations

The Office of Management and Budget should be involved in national security decision-making and strategy development to ensure that the NSC always considers issues of resource allocation and cost. As the Atlantic Council report notes, "Right now, departments and agencies use resources for capabilities required by their core mandates rather than those required for national missions." By determining funding sources such as departments and agencies, supplemental funding, and Overseas Contingency Operations, the president can make more informed decisions. Knowing both the sources of funding as well as the cost of various options will allow the

president to consider national security policies in response to threats and opportunities within the context of his broader agenda and priorities.

Congress can begin to move away from considering resource allocation that fulfills department-specific mandates and instead move toward a comprehensive budget allocation based on overarching national priorities and objectives. National security budgetary considerations range from \$1.1 billion for fighting Zika to \$54 billion in humanitarian aid and military assistance to foreign countries, with many national security policies cutting across multiple agencies. Ensuring national security strategy and objectives rather than bureaucratic politics determine budget allocation and costs benefits the taxpayer and U.S. national security.

Conclusion

Reducing the size of the NSC staff and refocusing the organization on its core mission of interagency coordinating and long-term strategic planning will have a wide range of benefits. Reforming the NSC will help the president make better informed national security decisions, enhance strategic planning, allocate resources effectively, and strengthen accountability and congressional oversight. President-elect Trump and National Security Advisor-designate Flynn should make reforming the NSC one of their top priorities.