

The National Security Council: Recommendations for the President-Elect

The National Security Council was established in 1947 to advise presidents on the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies into a unifying national security policy. Through the years, presidents have taken different approaches to structuring their national security process. Some chose to manage national security centrally from the White House; others distributed this function through the cabinet. Some chose strong secretaries of state to lead in this area, while others elevated the position of national security advisor. Regardless of the approach, national security and use of the instruments of national power remains one of the most important challenges facing a new administration.

This report provides recommendations for the president-elect regarding management of national security. Based on 60 years of history of how presidents have used the National Security Council organization and process, this report can serve as a guide for the new administration to avoid the pitfalls of previous administrations and to use the National Security Council system effectively in its formulation of national security policy. By properly employing the NSC, the next president can extend his reach, magnify his vision, and amplify his energy in furtherance of national security.

Recommendations to the President-Elect

On Inauguration Day: There are several actions you can take prior to entering office to reduce the risk of delays and missteps.

1. Determine your approach to national security management as you are considering cabinet nominees.
2. Center policy formation in the NSC, at least initially.
3. Direct the State Department to establish explicit bodies to oversee policy implementation and coordinate day-to-day operations.
4. Continue with the organizational structure established by George H. W. Bush and adopted by successive post-Cold War presidents.
5. Issue a presidential directive on Inauguration Day announcing the organization of your NSC.
6. Defer any reduction of the current NSC staff until your administration's second year.
7. Resist temptation to make a clean sweep of NSC staff and to overload the NSC staff with partisans.

In the First Year: The first year of your administration provides the greatest, and perhaps only, opportunity to set your national security agenda.

8. Initiate a series of policy reviews to set the agenda and to begin building the interagency teams that will support you in managing crises.
9. Use the NSC interagency process to thoroughly engage the expertise that exist in the executive branch and direct its energies.
10. Seek advice beyond the NSC, and use the NSC's process to extend your reach, magnify your vision, and amplify your energy

Throughout the Administration and Beyond: The major challenge for your administration is organizing for the 21st century.

11. Foster a public debate on national security strategy
12. Balance the instruments of national power

13. Align the instruments of national power within the departments and agencies to facilitate their orchestration and to produce unity of effort.
14. Preserve congressional confidence in the NSC.

Trends from Previous NSC Systems

Since 1947, each administration has organized and utilized the NSC organization and process in its own way. Below are trends from an assessment of the past 60 years.

1. Cold War administrations experimented with new NSC organizations with little positive effect. Post-Cold War administrations achieved organizational stability.
2. The long-term trend in NSC staff size is toward growth as policy work shifts out of the departments and into the NSC.
3. Formulating policy and overseeing its implementation are necessary and sufficient functions for the NSC system.
4. Presidents have used the NSC less for advice and more for engaging the expertise of the departments and agencies in a collaborative interagency process.
5. Policies formulated in an administration's first year have the greatest chance of success in implementation.
6. Presidents manage national security either centrally from the White House or distributed through cabinet government.
7. Destructive competitions have developed for the lead role in foreign policy formulation and presentation.
8. Cold War administrations held to relative stability in national security strategy under the label of "containment." Post-Cold War strategies have fluctuated dramatically with no consensus or stability in sight.
9. Post-Cold War state-building operations have exposed flaws in the national security system designed for an era of Great Power conflict. The applicable instruments of national power are more diverse and out of balance, and their orchestration increasingly problematic.

The NSC mechanism is the president's most direct mechanism for control and change. To create lasting change, however, the president must gain buy-in from those who implement the policies and constructively engage Congress in order to institutionalize the change. ■

Resources

D. Robert Worley, "The National Security Council: Recommendations for the President-Elect" (IBM Center for The Business of Government) 2008.

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