

**Prepared Statement for the Record**

**“Reforming the National Security Council: Efficiency and Accountability”**

**Derek Chollet**

**Counselor and Senior Advisor for Security and Defense Policy,  
The German Marshall Fund of the United States**

**Committee on Foreign Affairs  
U.S. House of Representatives  
September 8, 2016**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Engel, members of the Committee, it is an honor to have this opportunity to appear before you again. As we approach this November’s election and prepare for a new Administration taking office next year, it is a good time to assess our government’s national security decision-making process – what works, what needs improvement, and what innovations may be required.

I approach this topic with the perspective of participating in the recent national security decision-making process from all sides – having served on President-elect Obama’s NSC transition team eight years ago, then for six years in the Obama Administration at the State Department, Defense Department, and on the National Security Council Staff at the White House. Therefore, I’ve followed the assessment of this Administration’s NSC system with great interest, since I both experienced and am partly responsible for many of the critiques one hears.

The NSC is the engine room of U.S. national security and foreign policy. As the president’s closest national security staff, it leads and coordinates the interagency process. It integrates policy across agencies to ensure coherence. And it is the key mechanism to implementing the President’s priorities across the government. To perform such essential roles, the NSC must be strong, effective, tightly-focused, and well-managed. This is a tough task, and no Administration’s process has ever worked as well as the experts – and many officials – believe it should.<sup>1</sup>

Consider the three most common complaints one hears about the current NSC: first, that it is too big; second, that it is too operational and does the work Agencies should do; and third, that it has a proclivity for too much micro-management and too little strategic thinking.

---

<sup>1</sup> This statement draws on Derek Chollet, “What’s Wrong With Obama’s National Security Council?” *Defense One*, April 26, 2016; and Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America’s Role in the World* (PublicAffairs, 2016).

The NSC staff has become larger – it has nearly doubled since 1992, and this trend has been steady under presidents of both parties.<sup>2</sup> Most experts and former officials believe that the NSC is too big. We certainly thought so during the transition in 2008 – and the current NSC leadership believes so today. Yet as of now the trend is headed in the right direction: today’s NSC policy and leadership staff consists of fewer than 200 people, of which almost 90% are civil servant detailees. And my understanding is that with current downsizing underway (there has been a 13% staff reduction since January 2015), the NSC staff size Obama leaves next year will be roughly the same as what he inherited from President Bush in 2009.

It is crucial to consider these numbers in context. Some of the widely cited higher numbers of the Obama NSC staff size reflect the “back office” functions like those staffing the White House Situation Room, as well as the integration of the Homeland Security Council in 2009. Moreover, even despite its growth, the current NSC remains comparatively small – the Joint Chiefs of Staff is over seven times larger, the State Department’s Office of the Secretary is nearly twice the NSC’s size, as is the staff of the Congressional Research Service.

It is also important to understand what’s behind this growth over the past few decades. It is not just bureaucratic ballooning or a turf-grab. In many ways the NSC’s evolution reflects global complexity, and how much the world – and our government -- has changed. During the George W. Bush years, when the U.S. government underwent structural innovations in an attempt to address new threats (such as the Director of National Intelligence or the Department of Homeland Security), the NSC changed as well, a trend that has continued under Obama.

For example, the “traditional” regional policy offices – Europe, Asia, Latin America, etc. – have looked similar in both size and function during the past several decades (there are some exceptions, especially concerning the Middle East and South Asia). Yet there are now new policy dimensions the NSC must cover, such as cybersecurity, climate change, WMD proliferation, biosecurity and global health, homeland security, global economics, and counter-terrorism. None of these issues reside in a single Agency, which is why close coordination across the government is so important.

Because of this complexity – and the importance for the President to maintain flexibility in how she or he can respond to events – I believe it is a mistake to impose arbitrary caps on the NSC’s staff size. Nor do I believe it wise to make the position of National Security Advisor require Senate confirmation. Here I can do no better than echo the 1987 Tower Commission in its warning that doing so would undermine the presidential advisory role the National Security Advisor must play, and only create more bureaucratic confusion and tension than it would resolve.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the NSC staff grew 28% under President Clinton, 38% under President George W. Bush, and thus far 16% under President Obama.

<sup>3</sup> As the Tower Commission concluded, “confirmation would tend to institutionalize the natural tension that exists between the Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor. Questions would increasingly

Concerns about the NSC's size relates directly to a second common critique: that the NSC is too operational, getting into the business of other government agencies, stifling the process with too many taskings and meetings and, at times, inappropriately assuming the lead.

Agencies must be given the responsibility for doing their job – and in my experience, that is what Presidents and those on his NSC staff wanted (which is why it is so frustrating when many key Agency officials get held up in the confirmation process). But at the same time, Agencies must operate within the policy parameters set by the President. So in many ways, such frustrations are inherent, as every White House struggles with managing the rest of the government. In my experience and close observation of Administrations of both parties, I've found that White House officials (whether civil servants or political appointees) tend to approach the bureaucracy in one of two ways: believing it is doing too much and going beyond what the president has decided, or that it is doing too little and not fulfilling what the president wants done.

The answer to both is more oversight – whether by meetings, taskings, and questions -- which can sometimes evolve into bureaucratic overreach. Even when a White House tries to focus more on the strategic issues and leave tactical implementation to the Pentagon or State Department, the process seems to gravitate back to the Situation Room. Given that the President will be the one held accountable by the public, press, the Congress, and the American people, the incentives usually are for the White House to take more control, not less.

Sometimes, when the White House tries to enforce “regular order” and place the agencies in charge of a policy, then it is accused of taking its eye off the ball and abdicating leadership (one hears this in many of the complaints about the Obama Administration's handling of postwar Libya in 2011). And of course, where you stand often depends on whether you agree with the policy direction. Take, for example, the use of the military. Yes, on behalf of the President, the Obama NSC has held tight control over U.S. troop levels in Iraq and Afghanistan. But it is important to remember that the Bush White House conducted the same intense oversight when managing the surge in Iraq from the West Wing in 2007-08.

Moreover, some policy issues lend themselves to a strong White House lead. For example, the White House has dominated U.S. policy toward China since the days of Kissinger. As George W. Bush's National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley, recently put it, “the China account is so important that it requires a whole-of-government approach, which can only be coordinated by the White House.”<sup>4</sup> And many of the most

---

arise about who really speaks for the President in national security matters. Foreign governments could be confused or would be encouraged to engage in ‘forum shopping’ ...if the National Security Advisor were to become a position subject to confirmation, it could induce the President to turn to other internal staff or to people outside the government to play that role.”

<sup>4</sup> See David Ignatius, “In Kissinger's footsteps, Susan Rice steers smooth U.S.-China relations,” *Washington Post*, September 1, 2016.

delicate tasks require such secrecy and agility that can only be managed by a tight circle at the White House (the planning for the Bin Laden raid or the diplomatic opening to Cuba in 2014 are prime examples). Yet these must be the exceptions rather than the rule.

Which brings us to the third critique: that by micro-managing, the NSC is not doing enough strategy.

As someone who ran the NSC's strategic planning directorate during 2011-12, I can attest to the difficulty of keeping one's eyes on the horizon while there is such turmoil right in front of you. Especially in today's tumultuous policy environment, where a President is expected to respond to almost everything instantly, it is very difficult to keep the urgent from overwhelming the important. Crisis management tends to dominate the NSC's operations, particularly in recent years. Although during my time (and since), the NSC staff has worked to allow senior officials the opportunity to think about long-term strategy or examine cross-cutting issues, it has not been nearly enough.

But there is another element of the NSC's role in the design and coordination of national security strategy, which relates back to the question of oversight. There is a structural imperative for the White House to assert itself, especially when the President is trying to execute a strategic move. A firm hand on the tiller is required to implement a policy that is sustainable and precise, and often that can only come from the White House. To be clear, that does not mean that the NSC should be the lead in implementing the strategy. But on behalf of the President, I believe it is an essential part of the NSC's role to hold Agencies accountable for progress and to help ensure that decisions do not throw the policy off-course.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Engel, members of this Committee, the recent focus on the NSC's design and operation has generated an important debate about the making of America's national security policy and the proper role of the NSC in that process. I welcome Congressional attention to this issue. My hope is that by opening up this conversation we can make some necessary changes, empower Agencies to do their jobs, while ensuring that the President gets the advice and support he requires to conduct a strong, coordinated and strategic national security policy that serves the interest of the American people. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

###