



### LESSONS FOR THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

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#### **Introduction**

Chairman Royce, Ranking Engel, and Members of the Committee:

I am very pleased to be here this morning, in particular to see Congressman Royce before whom I enjoyed testifying a few years ago on African issues. You are taking valuable time to discuss a very important issue: management of the National Security Council. While examining the management of the National Security Council (NSC) hardly grabs headlines, it is of great national importance.

I am here to present a report by the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security. The report is entitled "A Foundational Proposal for the Next Administration" written by a core group composed of Ambassadors Tom Pickering and Chet Crocker, Dan Levin, a lawyer with extensive national security legal experience, and myself. The report is part of the Atlantic Council's National Security Council Reform Project. Copies of the report has been provided to your offices and I submit it for the record today. Rest assured that all of us involved with the report will be available to discuss with you and your staff members our observations for as long as you find it productive.

Our core group, with the help of many colleagues discussed, debated, interviewed, reflected, and wrote for almost two years. The Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center took our writing, added to it, improved it, and turned it into the report you have with you. In this process, we were superbly supported by the Council's Air Force Senior Fellow and special operations pilot, Colonel (select) Jason Kirby, who made a major contribution to the report you have received.

I expect that in the question period, you will want to concentrate on the recommendations of the report and our perceptions of why the National Security Council has seen its mission expand, and personnel grow, over the past few decades. So, let me take these few minutes at the outset to quickly review the procedure and intent of our writing.

#### **The spirit of this report**

First and foremost, let me emphasize at the outset that this is a nonpartisan report. It is not meant to be critical of any particular administration: neither the current one nor its predecessor, nor that

administration's predecessor. Working at the NSC is tough, demanding, and frequently thankless. We mean this report to offer guidance going forward. It is not meant to criticize all who have worked hard in service of our country. To be specific, we have been in touch with the current leadership of the NSC who have offered helpful comments on our report and have taken some of our recommendations to heart.

### **Why did we spend so much time on the NSC?**

If the NSC is not working well, it is like congestive heart failure. The Executive Branch's foreign policy, intelligence, and military structure suffers. To quote one of our most helpful, intelligent, and wise contributors: "Bad process beats good people nine times out of ten." Further, as General Scowcroft said in his foreword to the report: "Good structure does not guarantee success, but bad structure almost always overcomes good people and leads to poor results."

### **How would we describe this document?**

I frequently describe this document as an "owner's manual" for the NSC. It describes in some detail the mission, procedures, practices, and staffing that has worked well for decades for many presidents faced with many crises. It also reviews shortcomings that have been widely observed in administrations when these accepted principles and practices have been ignored. The report is the distilled wisdom of many people who have served on the NSC going back to the Nixon Administration and Dr. Kissinger as the national security advisor.

### **How did we conduct the research?**

Our core group—Tom, Chet, Dan, and I, supported by Colonel (select) Kirby—interviewed a very wide range of retired senior leaders: former national security advisors, military commanders, intelligence officials, as well as State Department and NSC officers. More than sixty are listed at the back of the report. I suspect that you know many of them well. The interviews were conducted by us in person as some of the discussions were sensitive and were best done among people who have shared the responsibilities and faced the issues discussed. It is important to remember that the recommendations you find in the report are not those of us in the core group, but the distillation of these interviews.

### **What was most striking about the results?**

We were surprised—indeed, somewhat stunned—at the uniformity of views expressed by each of the "communities" that we interviewed. We interviewed political appointees from both parties and nonpartisan career officials. The uniformity of their observations and the vigor with which they were expressed were remarkable. If this had not been the case, had we simply found a random pattern of criticism, we would have stopped our work. It was the consensus of views that allowed us to make recommendations that we, and they, believe would improve the functioning of the NSC.

### **What are the recommendations?**

*Focus the National Security Council mission.* The NSC should return to its original mission of managing the development of policy options for the president using the recommendations of the principals to

optimize the use of diplomatic, economic, military, and intelligence resources. When policies are adopted, the NSC should coordinate implementation, provide support when necessary, and insure that the President's intent is being followed.

*Define the national security advisor's role.* The selection of the national security advisor is probably the most important appointment a president will make without the advice and consent of the Senate. The national security advisor must be compatible with the president and ideally should be a nationally recognized foreign policy and security leader with significant government management experience.

*Reduce and restrict the size of the NSC staff.* Limit the NSC staff to 100 to 150 professionals with the background and expertise necessary to execute their principal duties. Prior significant government and management experience should weigh heavily in the selection process. Multi-year service should be expected.

*Designate a strategic planning staff.* A key function of the NSC is the development of strategic plans for the president, monitoring their implementation, and giving the relevant department planning staffs representation on the NSC senior staff.

*Use interagency teams and task forces.* Recognizing new strategic threats and opportunities, the NSC should foster the creation of a limited number of interagency teams to deal with emerging multi-disciplinary strategic issues. These teams should be led by the appropriate Department or Agency that have the resources to execute the mission, and supported by NSC senior staff when required.

*Coordinate legal advice.* During times of crisis, there is significant pressure to receive legal advice supporting the president's policy in a timely manner, even if some relevant general counsel's offices are not included in the decision making process. The national security advisor should insure that the Office of Legal Counsel coordinates this effort. Speed can sometimes trump wisdom and legal precedent, leaving substantial legal confusion in the aftermath.

*Prepare for a different transition.* Preparations for the transition are underway. We would emphasize that, with the unusually "operational" nature of the current NSC, the records of operational accounts be shared with the incoming NSC team and personnel held over long enough to ensure continuity of key operational accounts.

### **Why has the NSC grown to its current size and mission?**

1. Perhaps the most important factor is inertia. Beginning under President Clinton, the staff increased in size and scope of mission. This continued under President George W. Bush with the advent of 9/11 and its aftermath and has continued under President Obama. The "institutional inertia" has been unchecked by Congress or successfully resisted by relevant Cabinet Secretaries and Agency heads.
2. There is a general observation that the NSC has become "inbox driven." Increasingly, the president and NSC staff feel that the president should be "involved in" or "up to speed" and "have a position" on a very wide range of issues, many of which are seen as not being of strategic importance.

3. The 24-hour news cycle and social media environment has also led to a growth in the staff, as the White House believes that the challenge of agile and quick response to international news stories is required and attempts to delegate this function to Departments have been unsuccessful.
4. The State Department, accurately or not, is seen as being "too slow" or "too bureaucratic," which in turn leads to the NSC assuming more day-to-day management of important foreign policy issues. While there is considerable discussion of why this problem exists, it needs to be addressed.
5. The emergence of "multidiscipline" threats and opportunities require the creation of task forces comprised of multiple Department and Agency personnel. To date, there has been a tendency for these to be led by the NSC staff, rather than a lead Department, thus, once again, increasing the number of staff.
6. Although hard to quantify, the distrust between the "politically loyal" NSC staff and the professional officers in the Departments has led to the growth of the "loyal" NSC staff and sometimes a dysfunctional gap between Departments and NSC staff.
7. The lack of interest in, or reward for, building institutional capability in the Executive Branch also contributes to the growth of the NSC. The president can "get things done quickly" with the White House staff, which in turn leads to further Department deterioration.

#### **How do you hope the report will be used?**

We have written a good deal on each of the key recommendations. The document moves from General Scowcroft's introduction to the very succinct executive summary to much longer discussions of each key point. We have tried to capture the range of concerns and advice on each of the key recommendations in greater detail as we move through the document.

You will note that each recommendation is not something cast in stone. Presidents are elected to pursue their own policies and organize the White House in ways that work for him or her. Our recommendations are meant to offer guidelines based on decades of historical experience allowing an incoming administration to learn from the past as they consider the future.

#### **What do you hope to accomplish?**

There is a presidential transition coming up. Whoever wins, we hope he or she will pay careful attention to what we have gleaned from these interviews with so many who have led the country in these areas. You ignore history at your peril, and we have tried to capture many years of history in this report.

We also hope that this will help guide a Congressional discussion of relations between these two branches of government who share a responsibility for the management of our foreign and military policies.

If I may, a final observation. This body can lead an effort to restore trust among key players in the management of our foreign policy and military force projection. This intangible imperative is hard to

describe. It cannot be legislated or created by organizational innovations. Trust comes from recognizing that all involved in this effort care deeply for their country.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.