

"Right-Sizing" the National Security Council Staff?

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Currently, the main vehicle through which coordination among different U.S. government agencies on national security matters takes place is the National Security Council (NSC). As part of its defense reform deliberations, Congress is considering whether the modern National Security Council and its staff—established in 1947 to help oversee U.S. global security interests—is optimized to enable the United States to meet current and emerging threats (see CRS Report R44508, [Fact Sheet: FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act \(NDAA\) DOD Reform Proposals](#), by Kathleen J. McInnis).

What is the National Security Council?

The National Security Council is the President's advisory body on matters related to national and international security. Pursuant to Title 50 U.S.C §3021, the NSC's statutory members are the President, Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of Energy. Other senior officials participate in NSC deliberations at the President's request. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of National Intelligence are the NSC's statutory advisers. The NSC is directed by the Presidentially-appointed National Security Advisor (NSA) and supported by a National Security Staff (NSS, or NSC staff) comprising permanent employees of the Executive Office of the President and "detailees" from other government agencies serving temporary assignments. The NSC staff, and the [interagency coordination processes it oversees](#), are the primary Executive Branch vehicles for synchronizing policy and adjudicating policy differences across U.S. government agencies on national security matters.

NSC functions: Theory vs. Practice

The [1947 National Security Act](#) established the NSC in order 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." Presidents have latitude to structure and use the NSC as they see fit. In practice, the NSC staff's activities now extend somewhat beyond providing policy advice. First, [as one former NSC official notes](#), "White House involvement is often needed for precise execution of policy, especially when secrecy is required to perform delicate tasks." Second, the rise in strategic importance of transnational threats such as terrorism and narco-trafficking, along with post-Cold War military campaigns in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan, have increasingly necessitated "whole of government" responses that leverage diplomatic, military, and development tools from a variety of different U.S.

government agencies. The NSC often coordinates such responses, and as the [international security environment has become more complex](#), whole-of-government responses to individual crises have become more frequent, translating into even greater NSC involvement. This is leading many scholars and practitioners to question the appropriate size, scope and role for the NSC.

NSC Reform?

Currently, two primary schools of thought on the nature of the reforms that are necessary are in tension with each other. One view reflects the U.S. experience during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and maintains that interagency coordination issues prevented the United States from consolidating gains after achieving tactical military successes. Greater synchronization and integration of the instruments of national power is required in order to achieve desired campaign effects. According to this view, much of the needed policy synchronization is now occurring at the NSC rather than at lower levels due to insufficient interagency coordination mechanisms. In the absence of meaningful interagency reform, the size of the NSS has grown in order help manage U.S. policy in an era of greater complexity and mitigate policy ["immobilization"](#) in the interagency. Right-sizing and scoping the NSC therefore requires legislation akin to the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reform Act [but for the interagency](#), in order to promote better coordination among Executive Branch departments (see CRS Report R44474, [Goldwater-Nichols at 30: Defense Reform and Issues for Congress](#), by Kathleen J. McInnis).

Others believe that it is the enlarged NSC staff itself that drives the organization to take on "operational" roles that are inappropriate given the NSC's mandate to help the President formulate strategy and monitor its implementation. These observers point to the fact that the NSC staff in the early 1990s under the George H.W. Bush Administration averaged [approximately 50 persons](#); by contrast, the current NSC comprises [between 300-400 people](#), although over the past year, NSA Rice reduced its size by 10%. The comparatively large staff (relative to prior Administrations) has resulted in the ["micromanagement"](#) of the activities of the Departments in the Executive Branch, [often by relatively junior personnel](#). Accordingly, some believe that in order to force the [National Security Staff to focus on its core, strategic responsibilities](#), its size [should be limited](#).

Current legislation

As part of the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act debates, both the Senate and House introduced provisions limiting the size of the NSC staff. [H.R. 4909](#) §921 requires the next President to choose whether he/she would prefer the NSC to continue addressing operational tasks, or whether to focus on more strategic matters. It does so by capping the number of professional staff members, including detailees, at 100. Should the NSC exceed that cap, the appointment of a National Security Advisor would become subject to the advice and consent of the Senate. By contrast, [S. 2943](#) §1089 limits the size of the NSC staff to not more than 150 professional staff members, including detailees.

Critics of these proposals argue that subjecting the NSA to Senate confirmation – and creating the possibility for routine appearances before congressional committees – could undermine the NSA's primary purpose to provide confidential advice to the President. Others counter that, much like the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, if the NSA is overseeing an operationally-oriented staff, congressional oversight is necessary. Further, they contend the proposals do not interfere with the President's ability to appoint other confidential advisors.

The Obama Administration [indicated its opposition](#) to Senate proposals, noting that the NSC staff was increased after a 2009 review identified new strategic challenges such as cybersecurity, and that, "arbitrarily reducing the size of the NSC staff could impede the NSC staff's ability to coordinate interagency policy and advise and assist the President on these important issues."