# Making the NSC Work

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Articles & Testimony

T he need to reform the U.S. national security decision and implementation process is widely acknowledged in Washington. Everyone who has participated in the process at a high enough level understands that whenever a problem spills over the competency boundary of any single bureaucracy (as more and more problems seem to do these days), the policy outcome often ends up reflecting less than the sum of its governmental parts. The U.S. government struggles to integrate its assets and perspectives, frequently failing to achieve the unity of effort, let alone unity of command, needed to manage complex problems. This is not to claim that organizational deficits mark the only way things go wrong in U.S. foreign policy. But it's one way they go wrong, and not a trivial one.

Acknowledging the need for process reform is one thing; actually achieving it something else. At the heart of the challenge is a specific conundrum. As I.M. Destler observed more than a quarter century ago, the problem with the national security process, and the solution to that problem, lie with the President. From a President's style and key personnel flow a cascade of repercussions for the entire national security system. This was true before 1947 as well as since.1 It matters whether a President wants to control foreign policy himself, a la Wilson or Kennedy, whether he delegates that control to a strong Secretary of State, a la Harding or Ford, or whether he partially delegates it to a National Security Advisor (NSA), a la Nixon between 1969 and April 1973. The origins of presidential inclinations in this regard are manifold, ranging from personal experience to a desire to emulate or eschew the qualities of predecessors. These inclinations can lead the national security process at the highest level to be harmonious or disastrous.

Recognizing Destler's paradox, most national security reform proposals in recent decades have at once recognized the central role of the President while struggling to accommodate it. These proposals have generally sought either to guide the President's preferences or the National Security Advisor's approach to his or her duties, or to suggest structural or legislative changes to their offices that would implicitly constrain them. Since both approaches would reduce the historical flexibility inherent in the President's role, neither has gotten very far. Sweeping structural change proposed by outsiders is politically impractical because Presidents come into office with their own ideas about how to manage their duties. Changes occur when a new President himself wants them, and those that endure do so when they prove useful enough to appeal to successors.

This pocket history begs the question: Is there a way to reform the national security process independent of the important but long-range task of perfecting the national security apparatus's constituent parts and their means of interaction? In other words, is it possible to reform the top of the process, lodged mainly in the National Security Council, without reforming the entire interagency? ...

[Read the complete text of this article at American Interest's website.  (http://www.the-american-interest.com/article-bd.cfm?piece=704)](http://www.the-american-interest.com/article-bd.cfm?piece=704) ❖

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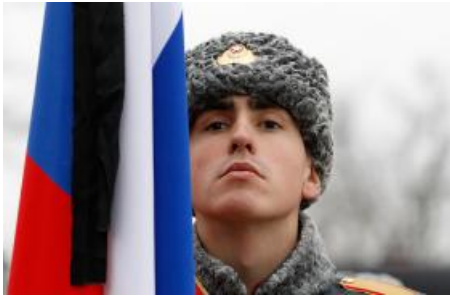
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