

# **National Security Council Committee Guide**

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### **WARNING**

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### **Introduction**

The National Security Council (NSC) is a small but powerful group of high-level advisors in the White House that advises the President of the United States on national security matters and foreign policy questions. Top government officials in diplomacy, intelligence, and defense come together on the NSC to protect America's interests around the world. As a member of this council, you will make high-stakes decisions regarding American policy toward foreign states, terrorist groups, and other potential security threats. You will have direct and personal access to the President of the United States. With this privilege comes the immense responsibility of advising the President on the best course(s) of action for the world's most powerful country.

The role of the NSC is as far-reaching and flexible as its membership, and it is forced to constantly adjust to the changing climates of both America and the world. Assembling the ideas and expertise of the federal agencies concerned with national security, the council recommends possible courses of action to the President, who is ultimately responsible for setting foreign policy goals and making final decisions with regard to national security threats.

### **Inside the NSC**

Established under the National Security Act of 1947, the council serves as the primary body under the Office of the President concerning all matters of national safety and information. Since its inception, the council has been at the center of the president's national security coordination system, changing frequently to conform to the needs and inclinations of each succeeding chief executive. The structure and function of the NSC depends in no small part upon the interpersonal chemistry between the president and his principal advisors and department heads. The council meets at the president's discretion, and over the years presidents have employed the NSC to varying degrees.

By law, the council is composed of the president, the vice president, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of State. These members are advised and assisted by the Director of National Intelligence and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The President may invite other administration officials, as the situation requires. These

discretionary invitations have been extended to the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Intelligence, members of the Army, Air Force, Navy, and several executive officials. The National Security Advisor leads and organizes the experts, analysts, and technicians that comprise the NSC.

Although the NSC is an important advisory body, it has no power to enact law. The agency's focus lies in formulating both short- and long-term perspectives and recommendations on US foreign policy and presenting these visions to the President. President Obama places a great deal of trust in the advice of the NSC, and therefore the quality of its judgments is critical to the well-being of the nation.

## **Defining National Security**

At its most basic level, national security means protecting the interests of the United States: the safety of its citizens, their property, and their ideals. Few deny that protecting American lives is a critical national security goal — though some might question whether protecting citizens' property should be considered a national security issue. Whether military force should be used toward economic ends is a moral issue about which you should come to your own conclusion, but ensuring American commercial interests and macroeconomic stability has traditionally been a goal of security policy. It is easy to define overarching goals of national security but much more challenging to precisely determine how and what to protect and by what means.

Defending ideals may seem like an equally unfamiliar security goal, but since the beginning of recorded history, ideals have influenced security decisions. President Obama believes in a system in which international cooperation fosters peace, and has therefore added UN Ambassador Susan Rice to his NSC team. Be prepared to assess the benefits and drawbacks of seeking international support in security actions and consider when it is appropriate for the US to act unilaterally. You play a crucial role in determining the direction of American security policy under President Obama.

The NSC confronts a variety of threats to American national security, from the military posture of foreign states, to non-state terrorist actors, to the spread of disease and environmental disasters. Traditionally, national security officials have focused on confronting direct military threats, but in the years since the end of the Cold War, non-state actors (i.e. terrorist organizations) have become a high priority, in addition to rogue states such as North Korea and Iran.

Destabilizing factors, such as environmental degradation, might not seem like critical national security issues, but as one US official explained, "The Defense Intelligence Agency recently identified the ecological deterioration of Lake Victoria as a cause of potential instability in East Africa. Thirty million people...[are] at risk of having their livelihoods and their well being compromised by the threat to this huge lake...If the root causes of the problem go unaddressed, our military forces may be called upon to deal with the consequences a few years hence."

The multifaceted threats of the modern age require that you take a holistic view of national security while still maintaining priorities. Terrorism, requiring direct and urgent action, is treated as a more immediate threat than the spread of AIDS, which cannot be solved with immediate movement. Nevertheless, it is critical that you do not lose sight of

the long-term issues when dealing with the time-pressured, high-stakes crises that are bound to occur.

## **NSC Procedure**

You have received three briefings on pressing security issues. Discussion in the NSC will begin by focusing on these issues with the goal of developing a comprehensive policy on the national security issue at hand. The council will formulate a single policy recommendation to submit to the president.

NSC sessions are informal and chaired by the National Security Advisor. With the variety of voices and opinions on the council, compromise is crucial to the resolution of any problem; only by balancing all interests can the NSC succeed in securing American safety. Each member will have a unique perspective—and unique information—to contribute to the debate. The NSC, however, serves at the pleasure of the president, and as such, final decisions rest with the president alone. The president seeks solutions that take each of America's many interests into account.

Discussion will be interrupted and is prone to switch course suddenly as the NSC learns of breaking developments. Developments can come in the form of intelligence briefings via the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), news briefings from around the world, diplomatic communiqués from other governments, or other means of communication.

The council will find the Harvard Model Congress Asia chairs able to answer any general questions relating to procedure or other logistical questions, however all other questions are to be left to the delegates of the NSC to answer.

Each member has access to an off-site staff that can advise him/her on questions relating to his specific role. The staff is able to assist with any reasonable and timely requests for either action or information, but be advised that they are not infallible and if the request is difficult or unclear, the response or action taken may not be correct. NSC members should expect prompt communication from their agencies' personnel and contacts in Washington, DC and abroad. These messages often convey the most up-to-date developments and remind members of their commitments and priorities.

Each staff also has a limited jurisdiction and cannot operate outside that jurisdiction. The most important legal lines exist in the realm of central intelligence. Legally, the Central Intelligence Agency has no authority to operate on United States soil, while the intelligence staff of the Department of Defense has fewer legal barriers. It is up to the NSC to follow (or not follow) established legal and operational precedents in this realm, and the HMCE staff can assist with any clarifications of basic policy.

Additionally, the council should expect to address the president and the press several times daily. The NSC must appear unified and strong in its decisions; opponents will act upon perceived internal strife.

The council will frequently entertain visitors. When the president visits, the council must concisely present its plan and effectively advocate for its approval. International developments will require immediate action—lives may hang in the balance. Belligerent foreign officials will come to the Council and make demands or seek immediate justification for American actions. Members must think and speak on their feet, relying on the strength of the council's analysis to support their positions.

Finally, the NSC must guard its secrets. Although the council's discussions are held in the highest secrecy and take place behind closed doors, spies have appeared on the NSC in the past. Leaks to the press jeopardize American lives and the success of presidential policy. Foreign countries will be made aware of any material printed in the newspapers; unfavorable articles may result in public opposition to even the most well thought-out actions. Public disapproval will likely lead the president to change course. You must remember that with great power comes great responsibility: you have a duty to uphold to the president and the people of the United States, so bear that wisely.

## **Understanding Your Role**

Although all US national security officials have America's best interests in mind, America's interests themselves are up for debate. Each member approaches NSC topics from a different understanding of national security. More precisely, members represent America's interests according to their professional perspective, shaped by the department they head. To fully grasp the complexities of national security issues, all interests must be accounted for and strongly represented. While the council will often need to compromise to make timely decisions, you are to remain loyal to your agency's central priorities. For example, significant differences in perspective will exist between the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of State: State Department officials are expected to seek multilateral, negotiated solutions; whereas military officials have greater trust in the application of military force.

It is expected that the manner in which you approach national security issues will be informed by the perspective of the agency you head or the bureaucratic constituency you represent. The press secretary should be especially concerned with how the council will "spin" its actions to the media, and the Director of National Intelligence should seek to ensure that the safety of his agents and information sources is not compromised by the council's decisions.

Your understanding of history and current events is invaluable and will certainly shape your decisions. You may choose to advocate for solutions that have worked in the past and cite previous examples in the council's discussion or to discuss past failures and be cognizant of mistakes the US has made. When confronted with difficult issues, use these tools to unpack the situation and chart a course forward.

## **The National Security Community**

A few agencies form the core of America's national security community, and they are consulted regarding nearly every security issue on which the NSC deliberates. Members should be acquainted with each of these major departments.

### *State Department*

The State Department bears primary responsibility for American foreign policy. Through its embassies and consulates around the world, the State Department tracks and evaluates foreign policy and conducts day-to-day diplomacy abroad.

Sensitive to international opinion, the State Department seeks to minimize friction with other nations and to cultivate long-term, multi-lateral US diplomatic interests. The department often favors peaceful, negotiated settlements and cooperative, diplomatic discussions among nations. When recommending the deployment of force, however, the Department may have fewer reservations than the Secretary of Defense or the Joint Chiefs of Staff, both of whom directly face criticism when military intervention is ineffective.

Ambassadors to other countries are the face of America to foreign governments. As such, they provide unique insight into our diplomatic relations, and their intimate understanding of US foreign relationships inform State Department policies.

### *The Intelligence Community*

The intelligence community, dominated by the independent Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), is currently in an uncertain position: its institutional organization has been shaken up by the post-9/11 intelligence reforms, and its officials have not yet determined a new *modus operandi*. The intelligence community has foundered in the post-Soviet era, and even with the direction provided by the Bush administration's War on Terror, it has struggled to effectively discern and analyze threats to United States interests around the world. In the Obama era, it is clear that the CIA will have to deal with increased reform and transparency. The CIA formerly coordinated each of the 16 organizationally distinct intelligence services, but as a result of recent reforms, the Director of National Intelligence is now the statutory coordinator of the "United States Intelligence Community," though the post has little budgetary control and thus little bureaucratic influence.

Compounding the confusion hampering the intelligence community, several of the most powerful intelligence services, including the National Security Agency (NSA) and Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), are under the auspices of the Department of Defense, which has further complicated the intelligence community's chain of command. Thus, the intelligence community is divided, lacking decisive leadership, and in a questionable state of effectiveness. It is unclear whether the intelligence community has improved its effectiveness since September 11, 2001.

Members of the intelligence community hold a swing vote on the NSC and thus face particular scrutiny. They seek to gather as much information as possible before making decisions. They also prioritize the protection of American spies and are often sensitive to foreign infiltration and distrustful of other nations. Intelligence officials often decide whether the NSC will pursue military or diplomatic resolutions, depending on the issues at hand.

### *Department of Defense*

Civilians responsible for the preparedness and deployment of the American military head the Department of Defense. The department oversees the administration and operation of the United States Armed Forces and plans military strategy worldwide. Its officials emphasize the threat and use of military force in foreign relations.

Defense Department officials analyze the implications of NSC decisions for American military strength and prestige around the world and for the condition of the Armed Forces themselves. They may be reluctant to use the military out of concern for

its personnel, material, and reputation. They are also sensitive to the Armed Forces' budget. Accommodating budgetary constraints and avoiding costly initiatives are priorities that set the civilian officials in the Department of Defense apart from their military colleagues in the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

### *Joint Chiefs of Staff*

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) are the top officers of the United States Armed Forces: the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the Coast Guard, and the Air Force. Members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff tend to see the military as subject only to partial and occasional control and oversight by the civilian officials from the Defense Department. As highly successful career military officers with personal preferences for the military approach and personal stakes in the success of their respective branches of the Armed Forces, they represent the perspective of the military more reliably than officials in the Department of Defense. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have great confidence in the ability of the United States military—and greater fear of damage to US forces in risky or unusual situations.

### *Department of Homeland Security*

Created in the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is a conglomeration of 22 previously unaffiliated agencies. From customs, to the Secret Service, to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which responds both to natural disasters and potential attacks, the DHS has a wide mandate, diverse elements, and a questionable track record.

Each of the responsibilities of the DHS is an important national security function in its own right, yet juggling all perspectives and prerogatives, and finding an appropriate balance, has been difficult, resulting in little innovation in the DHS. The initial bureaucratic problems caused by merging so many diffuse agencies into one department have not yet been overcome.

The Department's relationship with the broader national security community is still being worked out, and the secretary often approaches the NSC issues with a sense of deep institutionalized ambivalence.

### *White House Officials*

As advisors close to the president, the Press Secretary, Chief of Staff, and other White House officials have an important voice in the decision-making process. With their particular concern for the president's image and public approval, these officials seek to balance national security goals with the larger issue of the president's ability to govern.

Unity and consistency are key goals as these figures prod the council to consider the president's political standing while formulating policy. White House officials are intimately aware that factors such as the president's relationship with Congress, public approval, and media strategy are as important to effective governance as the actual policy; at least, that is the perspective they often glean from their domestic political experience.

## **Conclusion**

The President of the United States charges you, members of the National Security Council, with the defense of the United States: no task is so noble, so intricate, or so imperative. You will serve as a vital advisory resource for the president, bringing together the ideas and research of all federal departments and agencies concerned with national security, foreign policy, and America's national interests abroad. Undertake your position with wisdom, humility, and determination.