



Strategic Planning for the Next President

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Abstract: The next President inevitably will face difficult tradeoffs in U.S. foreign policy. Trying to split the difference between opposing policy positions can present serious risks. The presentation of real choices to the chief executive is central to his or her authority. A President should be made aware of the options. Then it is up to him or her to decide. The author contends that strategic planning can help, and concludes with six specific recommendations for NSC reform.



On January 20, 2017, the next American President will inherit a powerful array of international challenges, capabilities, and opportunities. Apart from the current focus on the election season itself, the presidential campaigns and their leading foreign policy advisors would benefit from thinking through how they plan to tackle these international security challenges, not only country by country, but overall. A genuinely prudent U.S. foreign policy strategy, starting in 2017, would involve a shift toward a different presidential decision-making style

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along with a shift in overall direction. In terms of decision-making style, if a President wanted to impose greater order on U.S. foreign policy strategy, it certainly would be possible to do so. Based on both recent and historical experience, a variety of instruments might be developed. These are laid out in this article. In truth, the precise organizational flowchart adopted is less important than the fact of genuine interest and trust from the top down. No formal arrangement for strategic planning will avail if it does not fit the personality of the President, or if it does not have his or her confidence. On the other hand, any one of several mechanisms could help considerably if a President decided to get serious about conceiving, developing and imposing a successful strategy on U.S. foreign and security policies. Since these are literally matters of life and death, getting serious would seem appropriate.

In this essay, I briefly describe problems with the national security decision-making process under the current President, then consider and rebut the argument that any strategy in U.S. foreign policy is a practical impossibility. I then outline specific recommendations for an improved NSC strategic planning process.

The Current Problem

President Barack Obama's foreign policy leadership style should be viewed as a challenge to conventional academic wisdom. Obama has many of the qualities commonly considered essential by scholars: intelligence, personal self-discipline, tactical flexibility, and a generally deliberate manner.¹ Yet American foreign policy on his watch frequently has been marked by unexpected pushback, failure, and dysfunction. The President's defenders maintain that such frustrations are inevitable, given the complexity of world politics today. But on closer examination, many of these frustrations appear to have been aggravated unnecessarily by Obama's particular way of handling the foreign policy decision-making process.

Most credible reports concur that foreign policymaking under President Obama is highly centralized in the Oval Office. As Robert Gates noted, reflecting on his time as Secretary of Defense up to 2011: "The controlling nature of the Obama White House took micromanagement and operational meddling to a new level."² The President surrounds himself with a tight inner circle of de facto foreign policy advisors based inside the White House. Some within this innermost circle possessed little national security, executive branch, or international expertise before taking on roles as top presidential advisors.³ Moreover, it is clear that foreign policy is monitored closely by the White House in part to minimize domestic political risk.⁴ Under this modus operandi, the National Security Council (NSC) staff has ballooned to something approaching 400 members. NSC meetings are so frequent and time-

¹ For example, Stephen Wayne, "Obama's Personality and Performance," in James Thurber, ed., *Obama in Office* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011), pp. 68-71.

² Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), p. 587.

³ James Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (New York: Penguin, 2012), pp. 66-75.

⁴ Gates, *Duty*, pp. 584-88; Mann, *The Obamians*, p. 69; and Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), p. 2.

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