



FPRI Avoiding Strategic Inertia: Enabling the National Security Council

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By F. G. Hoffman and Ryan Neuhard

Francis G. Hoffman is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at National Defense University and has served twice as a political appointee in the Department of Defense. He is also on the Board of Advisors at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. **Ryan Neuhard** is a student at the College of William and Mary and former research intern at NDU.

Abstract: The next Administration will want to examine the last 15 years of strategic performance to improve sound strategy options and to promote timely re-assessment and adaptation of approved policies and strategies. Building off of two recent studies of U.S. decisionmaking and policy implementation at the strategic level, this article examines proposals to enhance the quality of policy making and implementation oversight mechanisms at the National Security Council. Major recommendations are offered to improve interagency planning and the creation of an inter-agency community of national security professionals.

A 2006 book on the National Security Council (NSC) described the organization as responsible for “running the world.”¹ While that description may sound hubristic, scholars and policymakers have long recognized the importance of the NSC and its supporting system in developing U.S. policy and implementing strategy.² The smooth operation of the NSC and staff, the “*keepers of the keys*,” are critical elements for any Administration’s success.³ Yet, the history of the NSC reflects the challenges involved in integrating America’s diplomatic, military and economic tools into a cohesive strategy.

When George Kennan first assumed his post as the State Department’s initial Director of Policy Planning, he asked former Secretary of State (and retired General of the Army) George Marshall for advice. Marshall’s reply was simple:

¹ David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

² Carnes Lord, “NSC Reform for the Post-Cold War Era,” *Orbis*, Summer 2000, pp. 435–450.

³ John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow, 1991).



NSC in Obama Administration in 2013 (Photo: whitehouse.gov).

“avoid trivia.”⁴ The same is sometimes true at the White House and the NSC where keeping sight of the forest is often sacrificed for trivial trees. However, the major challenge at the NSC is not trivia but *inertia*. Because of the global responsibilities that the United States bears, it has developed bureaucracies of leviathan scale that can be difficult to adapt to the problems at hand. Thus, avoiding inertia is good advice for an incoming team of national security planners after the 2016 elections.

In fact, avoiding infighting and inertia may be a more significant challenge today than in Marshall’s era. The character of the international environment and the challenges faced by a new President and his or her team are daunting. There is a consensus that enhancing the interagency decision-making process, as well as the ability to generate unity of effort in complex contingencies, is a strategic imperative.⁵ Given the array of “wicked problems” we face that require multi-dimensional solutions across interagency seams, more study into the role and processes of the NSC is certainly needed.⁶

While there is much interest today in defense reform, the more critical challenge is transforming the apex of the U.S. national security system. Given U.S. performance over the last 15 years, the NSC warrants serious study. As one of the most insightful students of government observed before Congress:

⁴ Daniel W. Drezner, ed., *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009).

⁵ Gabriel Marcella, “Understanding the Interagency Process,” in Gabriel Marcella, ed., *Affairs of State: The Interagency and National Security* (Carlisle, PA: Army War College, Dec. 2008), pp. 1–51.

⁶ Aaron L. Friedberg, “Strengthening U.S. Strategic Planning,” *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2007/2008, pp. 47–60.

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