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THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL: TOOL OF PRESIDENTIAL CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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This paper critically examines the National Security Council (NSC) with a focus on its role during crisis. The NSC is an essential institutional mechanism for the presidential management of national security crises. The structure and utilization of the NSC must be optimized for both the generation of policy options for the President and for the oversight of policy implementation. This paper examines the elements of such optimization, summarizes them in the analysis section, and then offers recommendations to enhance the NSC's crisis management role. The paper also, in terms of relevance to presidential crisis management, considers the NSC's origins and committee and staff structure, examines several government NSC studies, and offers case studies of NSC performance in crises.

INTRODUCTION: NATIONAL SECURITY AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Numerous authors have studied and analyzed the conduct and coordination of U.S. foreign policy during crises. However, the role of the National Security Council (NSC) in the presidential management of international crises has been exposed to less scrutiny, partly because the NSC's work and structure are subject to executive privilege. This paper will critically examine the NSC with a focus on its role during national security crises.

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What is a crisis? According to Robert Pfaltzgraff (1996), a crisis is a situation that constitutes a threat to the core values or interests of the actors involved, represents a high possibility of military hostilities, has a finite response time, and/or has elements of strategic or tactical surprise. Crises include not only inter-state conflict, but also internal conflict, trans-border ethnic conflict, humanitarian emergencies, non-state actor aggression, or any other event that requires the mobilization of international organizations such as the United Nations or treaty alliances such as NATO. Attempts at the management of international crises constitute opportunities for escalation or de-escalation of conflict; therefore, they represent important potential turning points in the development of international relationships.

The NSC is an essential institutional mechanism for the presidential management of national security crises. Its structure and utilization must be optimized both for the generation of policy options for the President and for the oversight of policy implementation. This paper examines the elements of such optimization and summarizes them in the analysis and recommendations section. The paper also discusses the committee and staff structure of the NSC, including key positions such as that of the National Security Advisor (NSA), in terms of their relevance to crisis management. The origins of the NSC, its current structure, past government studies, and relevant crisis management case studies are examined as well. By way of conclusion, this paper will offer observations and policy recommendations concerning the NSC and its role in the presidential management of national security crises.

ORIGINS, STRUCTURE, AND ISSUES

Origins of the National Security Council

The Call for National Security Coordination

The NSC was created in 1947 to meet a dire need for cooperation among the various departments and agencies with responsibility for U.S. national security matters. Prior to the creation of the NSC, various committees had cooperated through formal and informal channels, such as the 1944 State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee, which focused on diplomatic-military coordination (Lay and Johnson 1960, 2). The need to manage the interrelated efforts of these entities had been recognized towards the end of World War II (McFarlane et al. 1984, 261–273; Jordan, Taylor and Korb 1993, 96). The NSC was the culmination of prior attempts at ad hoc coordination for the management of war-related efforts, as well as a

product of the debate on how to configure the security-related bureaucratic system of the United States, including the role of the President.

The coordination of all actions that pertain to the mission of national defense, including the furtherance of all foreign policy goals that enhance the security and well-being of the country, must be coordinated first at the level of top leadership to insure that they accord with the political purpose they advance. The operational coordination of security measures is especially important in the case of crisis management, when the executive branch needs to be able to draw from the information, experience, insight, and learning that takes place at the various levels and departments of the government.

NSC Structures

This section will analyze the structure and tasks of the National Security Council and draw lessons from the historical attempts at restructuring it while examining their relevance to presidential crisis management. The NSC is not merely a council; rather, it is an institution with three interrelated components: a multilevel committee structure consisting of interdepartmental and interagency groupings, an executive manager/Presidential Advisor (now the NSA), and a full staff organization managed by the NSA.

The Committee Structure

The NSC committee structure consists of groups that are made up of members of the participating departments as well as NSC staffers. Each group varies in rank, size, and purpose, and the groupings descend from cabinet secretary rank to the operational officer rank. The committee members are chiefly concerned with advising the President by identifying security issues, commissioning, analyzing, and evaluating studies, delineating options for policy-making and presidential decision, bringing departmental concerns and perspectives into play, bringing presidential decisions back to the bureaucracy in order to set in motion a decision, overseeing implementation, and reviewing the actions taken.

During a crisis, some of the high level committees have come to play an essential role in decision-making and implementation, depending on the utilization of the committee structure and on the characteristics of the NSA's leadership. A national security crisis usually activates the NSC structure at its upper levels, as will be discussed below. During the Truman and Eisenhower presidencies, the NSC's institutional growth and development were ascendant. When the Council's formality and structure

started to hinder innovative policy-planning, Kennedy began the NSC's de-institutionalization. This led to an emphasis on reactive rather than strategic planning, according to Zbigniew Brzezinski, NSA during the Carter administration (Brzezinski 1988, 57–65).

The more elaborate committee structures of the last six presidential administrations have their origin, ironically, in an effort to limit the role of the NSC after the departure of NSA McGeorge Bundy, who had been responsible for increasing the importance and power of the NSA, even while presiding over the diminishing role of the staff. With the arrival of the Nixon administration, which had campaigned on the restoration of an Eisenhower-style institutionalized NSC structure (Rodman 1997), NSA Henry Kissinger built up NSC committees to create his own national security bureaucracy and power base. After the Nixon administration's first foreign policy crisis, the downing of a U.S. intelligence aircraft over North Korea, Kissinger established the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG) explicitly to manage critical security threats. He activated and relied on WSAG for minute to minute crisis management.

At the same time, numerous other NSC committees assumed policy-making tasks formerly handled by the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and others. In fact, Kissinger frequently operated on his own and/or through the WSAG, at times utilizing the Action Group to bypass the bureaucracy, preferring to manage crises personally and to involve himself directly in operational matters and back-channel negotiations. According to some commentaries, this ultimately led to the neglect of the committee structure that he had established. The work the committees had done to formulate policies lay ignored, and several crises suffered from Kissinger's tendency to personally dominate the NSC (Hall 1975, 112–116).

The Kissinger/Nixon neglect of the NSC's various elements was similar in some respects to the Kennedy/Johnson de-emphasis of the NSC committee structure. Peter Rodman, former Kissinger Special Assistant and NSC staffer under four administrations, also depicts Kissinger as an NSA who would "milk the bureaucracy for ideas and strategies," but ultimately engaged in decision-making elsewhere. He recalls that the WSAG met frequently, up to twice a day, especially during crises (Rodman 1997). President Ford revitalized the NSC to some extent and used it for crisis decision-making during the *Mayaguez* and North Korea "tree" crises (Endicott 1982, 524–525; Head, Short and McFarlane 1978).

Under the Carter administration, two interdepartmental committees replaced all the Kissinger committees (PDD/NSC 2 1977, 2–3). The

Policy Review Committee (PRC) was chaired by the President himself, or the Secretaries of Defense or State, and consisted of the NSC statutory members. Its mandate was to address long-range, strategic matters, including intelligence budgets and economic issues with U.S. national security implications. The Special Coordinating Committee (SCC), chaired by Brzezinski as the NSA, dealt with international crises, arms control evaluation, and oversight of covert intelligence operations. Some sources assert that there was little difference between the two committees aside from the nature of their chairmanship (Iran Hostage Negotiations n.d.). In any case, the SCC was the mechanism that President Carter chose to manage the Iran Hostage Crisis.

The Reagan administration created a Crisis Management Group (CMG), one of several interagency groupings designated to manage various aspects of crises (NSDD 3 1981).² The distinctive feature about the CMG arrangement was that it was chaired by Vice President George Bush, who had responsibility for several of the committees of the NSC that had crisis management relevance. The NSC committees dominated by Vice President Bush managed different aspects of various crises, such as terrorist incidents, hostage taking, and potential threats of force utilization against a foreign country or other actor.

In 1987, after the Tower Commission released its findings, the Reagan administration publicized its modest attempts to tighten up the NSC structure (NSDD 266 1987; NSDD 276 1987). As a consequence of the reforms, the NSA became the chair of the senior committees, major decisions were to be submitted to the President, and the "Policy Review Group" replaced the Crisis Pre-Planning Group, the Terrorist Incident Working Group, and other bodies under Vice President Bush's coordination (NSDD 207 1986; Simpson 1995, 632–633, 656–659).

During the Bush administration, the NSC committee structure was significantly overhauled. The President remained at the top of the national security decision-making system. The Council itself was composed of the statutory members: the President, the Vice President, the Secretaries of State and Defense, and with the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff advising. Underneath this committee followed the Principals Committee and the Deputies Committee. The Principals Committee consisted of the National Security Council without the President and with the NSA as chair, the Secretary of the Treasury, the President's Chief of Staff, and the Attorney General when necessary. It was charged with reviewing, coordinating, and monitoring the development and implementation of national security policy (Kegley and Wittkopf 1991, 352).

The Deputies Committee, however, is the most relevant element of the NSC to the study of current and recent crisis management. Chaired by a Deputy NSA, its membership in the Bush administration included the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, the Deputy DCI, the Vice Chair of the JCS, and the Attorney General in cases that required covert operations. The Deputies Committee appears to have replaced the Reagan administration's three Senior Interagency Groups (SIGs) for Foreign, Intelligence, and Defense Policy. The Deputies Committee convened immediately after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and remained in session for the subsequent three month period, during which armed intervention was contemplated (Woodward 1991, 203–306). Other cases of Deputies Committee involvement included the Panama crisis and the coup against Mikhail Gorbachev, in anticipation of which Deputy NSA Robert Gates had organized a contingency planning sub-group under Condoleezza Rice to consider the potential consequences of a coup (Gates 1996, 521–527).

The Clinton administration adopted most of the Bush nomenclature and structure (PDD 2 1993; White House 1997). The Principals Committee still consists of the Council without the President in attendance; however, it now includes the United Nations Ambassador and the Economic Policy Advisor. The Deputies Committee membership is similar to that under the Bush administration, although it includes the Vice President's National Security Advisor and the Deputy Assistant for Economic Policy, "as needed." The Clinton Deputies Committee "shall serve as the senior sub-Cabinet interagency forum for consideration of policy issues affecting national security . . . [it] shall review and monitor the work of the NSC interagency process."

The National Security Advisor

The pivotal crisis management role of the NSA requires in-depth analysis for a full understanding of the relationship between the NSC's structure and the ability of its staff to manage international crises effectively. The statutes that created the NSC did not provide for the NSA position; rather, the staff was to be overseen by a non-partisan executive secretary (Hunter 1988). However, President Eisenhower began the tradition of naming a partisan appointee as the President's "Special Assistant for National Security Affairs," who oversaw the Executive Secretary and staff of the NSC. Beginning with Henry Kissinger in 1969, the title changed from "Special Assistant" to "Assistant to the President." This paper, following the practice of the current government, uses the most widely known title of "National Security Advisor." Some basic duties of the position have

remained constant, even if the personalities, presidential preferences, and political contexts have changed over time, broadening or shrinking the scope of responsibilities accordingly. The NSA position has been the subject of some governmental and academic scrutiny, especially in the wake of the Kissinger tenure, which was highly activist, and the Admiral Pointdexter tenure, which managed several rogue operations that trespassed dangerously into illegality and contradiction with established national security policy. David Hall wrote in a 1975 governmental study of foreign policy-making that “the central task assigned to the Special Assistant/Executive Secretary from the inception of the National Security Council” is that of a custodian-manager, *overseeing* the process by which national security policies and actions are made (Hall 1975).

The NSA is the “process manager” of the President’s national security policy-making machinery. The NSA plays a pivotal role by serving as the executive director of the NSC staff as well as a key Presidential advisor, providing personal advice while also communicating others’ suggestions. Rather than advocating specific positions or making decisions, the NSA is to be the broker among the various parties that “transact” foreign policy. Being a broker implies a transparent and honest intermediary role. The NSA is responsible for managing the information that flows to the President, balancing the input of the policy-making players, commissioning studies and draft directives from staff, obtaining outside evaluation of advice when required, monitoring the policy-making process in order to prevent/discover dysfunctionalities, chairing the Principals Committee of the NSC, assuring the dissemination of presidential decisions to the implementing agencies, briefing the President, and most critically, performing all of these tasks during foreign policy crises. The position provides almost guaranteed access to the President in order to provide briefings, assist in decision-making, and set the agenda for high level NSC meetings (Kegley and Wittkopf 1991, 337–356). Such duties are essential to a day-to-day crisis manager.

The evolution of the position is such that its scope and power have steadily expanded according to each President’s preferences, the character of the person in the post, and the political context. Other role categories identified by Hall include those of a policy advisor/advocate, a policy spokesman/defender, a political watchdog, an enforcer of policy decisions, and an administrative operator (Hall 1975). Hall notes that some of the roles might be helpful in acquiring the leverage needed for the NSA to grapple with the secretaries and their departments. At the same time, however, Hall also affirms that the same roles can lead to serious conflicts

among the NSA's various custodial duties. For example, a spokesman or advocate might have difficulty overseeing the "objective reevaluation of ongoing policy" that is inherent in the NSC structure (Hall 1975). Serving as the "honest broker" of policy inputs/outputs, the NSA may be compromised by the hedging involved in promoting the President's political influence (Hall 1975). Furthermore, international operational duties, including diplomacy, negotiation, mediation, and fact-finding, could consume the NSA, making it more difficult to manage the flow of information to and from the president. Historically, several NSAs departed from their honest broker role, compromising the integrity of the options they presented to the president (Hall 1975).

Kevin Mulcahy (1992) created a typology of the NSA's roles, according to the interaction of their implementation and policy-making responsibilities, grading each of them from low to high. Mulcahy comes up with four principal NSA roles: administrator, coordinator, counselor and agent, as well as an aberrant, "insurgent" category—an NSA that carries the role of the NSC too far. Administrators can also be too far removed from the President, as Richard Allen was when he had to report to President Reagan through White House Counselor Edwin Meese. The coordinator role involves more implementation than policy-making, while in the counselor role policy-making outweighs implementation responsibility. The agent role combines the strongest tendencies of both policy-making and implementation in a mixture that rivals the State Department for establishing and controlling foreign policy (Mulcahy 1992). Indeed, Kissinger, the very embodiment of this typology, ultimately acquired both titles; he was simultaneously Secretary of State and NSA.

Building upon Mulcahy's concept for a crisis management role, the following is a list of possible NSA crisis management duties:

1. clear and accurate identification of crises;
2. commissioning of comprehensive, objective, and ongoing intelligence gathering;
3. consultation with outside and inside experts;
4. elicitation of policy options and solicitation of all views about proposed policies by all major participants and selected non-participants;
5. clear identification of the implications and consequences of response options using scenario analysis;
6. facilitation of a decision by the President via provision of information, options, and context;

7. rapid and diffuse communication of Presidential decision to all players;
8. observance of all legal restraints upon proposed action;
9. careful monitoring of policy implementation; and
10. immediate and strategic policy evaluation and program review.

Working in crisis mode can have several implications for any NSA. The interagency process may be short-circuited to some extent, while the NSA can espouse a preferred action and neglect the neutral advisory role. Conversely, the NSA has the potential to be a superb crisis manager by virtue of his or her Presidential access, lack of bureaucratic loyalty, and familiarity with crisis issues and their implications. An effective NSA can facilitate the transformation of crisis into tactical and strategic advances, while helping with the de-escalation of conflict and the management of the diverse international players who are party to a conflict.

The Staff Structure

The staff of the NSC is considered the President's "national security and foreign policy staff within the White House" (White House 1997). The staff's mandate lends itself to two potentially contradictory interpretations regarding ultimate accountability (Anonymous 1997a). One interpretation sees the NSC staff as the President's private, confidential staff (not a government agency or department) ready to respond to any inquiry and provide advice that is exempt from public and congressional scrutiny in order to provide a full range of policy and action options. A second interpretation of the mandate implies public and congressional accountability, because the NSC staff also manages the agencies and departments that are subject to oversight.³

The staff's role in crisis management is also analytically relevant because of an inherent dilemma facing the staff. Regarding its interagency process management role, the NSC staff does not have any "bureaucratic equity." Theoretically there is no vested interest in the postures, attitudes, and preferences of the underlying bureaucracies (Anonymous 1997a). The Directors and Senior Directors must "manage the world's largest bureaucracy without any line authority" (Anonymous 1997a). The complexity of this task makes crisis management, as well as day to day policy-making, a negotiated process that the NSC staff manages. In order to manage and negotiate, the NSC staff must exercise leverage through the creation of strategic linkages between policy-makers and their interests. The mandates of Presidential preferences for policy options are conceptually

“above” the NSC staff and have to be linked to lateral negotiations with the NSC staff’s colleagues, the sub-cabinet officers, and others that make the bureaucracy work. The leverage exercised is in the form of “arbitrating political capital” (identifying common interests, key players, and favorable as well as adverse coalitions) and making them work toward the mandate from above (Anonymous 1997a): a crisis decision.

The NSC staff is typically organized into regional and functional directorates which have one or more Senior Directors (roughly equivalent to a departmental Assistant Secretary), several Directors (roughly equivalent to a Deputy Assistant Secretary), and perhaps interns. This horizontal structure allows for greater responsibility, responsiveness, and access to the President for the NSC staff, enabling them to be key players in a crisis, providing information and analyses that go quickly to the President and return with presidential decisions. Above the Senior Directors are two Deputy Assistants to the President. The duality of titles reflects the twin roles mentioned above; that of protecting the President and that of managing the interagency national security process. The directorates are the heart of the NSC professional staff and are administered by the Executive Secretary, who distributes critical information to the appropriate players and serves as the gatekeeper to the NSA and the Deputies. The directorates are currently divided up according to regional and non-regional policy areas, as well as administrative and government/public liaison areas.

Furthermore, the staff prepares briefings and speech content for the President, assists the White House in responding to public and Congressional foreign policy inquiries and “serve[s] as the initial point of contact for departments and agencies that wish to bring a national security issue to the President’s attention” (White House 1997). In other words, the staff draws on the intelligence and analyses of the departments, scrutinizes and synthesizes this information, and determines the imminence of a national security crisis that may require action. The staff prepares the meeting agendas as well as the decision and discussion papers for the Deputies Committee and other bodies. Staff members also participate in the interagency working groups and prepare analyses and recommendations for the Deputy NSAs, the NSA, and the President.

Other elements of NSC staff structure that are relevant to crisis management include the White House Situation Room, staffed around the clock by directors, military duty officers, and communications and intelligence experts. “Its mission is to provide the President, the National Security Advisor and the members of the NSC staff with current intelli-

gence and open-source information in support of the formulation and implementation of national security policy” (White House 1997). Its physical proximity to the President allows unrivaled access to multiple channels of information that no other agency or department can enjoy in a crisis. Additionally, the Vice President may have a small but significant national security affairs staff headed by the Assistant to the Vice President and staffed with military officers and liaisons to the intelligence community (Simpson 1995, 963–976).

Clinton Administration NSC Structure

Under both Clinton administrations, the Deputies and Principals Committee structure has remained the same. The staff Directorates have increased in number and have taken on new areas of international affairs under their scope. With Anthony Lake’s appointment, the NSA position returned to the role of neutral, honest broker, and policy custodian.

Former NSC insiders have explained how the Clinton NSC structure might function in a crisis (Anonymous 1997a, 1997b). First, drawing upon available intelligence and departmental analyses, an individual NSC staff member identifies a potential crisis that may represent a threat to the core values and interests of the United States and requires limited response time and/or possible use of force. The immediate aim is to get this issue “on the radar screen” of deputies, principals, the NSA, and perhaps ultimately the President.

As the next step, a concise message discussing the potential crisis is sent (and supplemented by calls and oral briefings) to the Executive Secretary and the “front office” of the NSA and Deputy NSA. The NSA may decide to bring the issue before a subgroup of the Principals Committee by convening an “ABC lunch,” attended by Secretary of State Madeline Albright, NSA Samuel (Sandy) Berger, and Secretary of Defense William Cohen. Similarly, a lunch meeting of the ABC counterparts in the Deputies Committee may be convened. Live video and phone conference capabilities facilitate the immediate gathering of parties, including relevant staff.

When a foreign policy crisis actually unfolds, emergency meetings at the various committee levels convene in order to carry out “information dumps,” or distribution of available information while intelligence assets are getting into place. Once in place, the NSC structure can deploy these assets through the JCS, the intelligence community, the State Department, any non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations on the ground, ground troops, or any other appropriate channel.

As information accumulates, and “a reliable vision of the next few days” (Anonymous 1997b) begins to unfold, the crisis responses are formulated via the working group structure run by NSC Directors and Deputy Assistant Secretaries (or their equivalents in the respective departments). The normal policy-making process may not function during an acute crisis period; time may not allow commissioning studies, drafting contingency plans, and carrying out elaborate interagency approvals. Response to a crisis starts with the formulation of a short memo that outlines concrete actions. The memo also includes diplomatic, intelligence, military, and economic policy options, as well as potential responses by the United Nations (UN) and other international organizations, approaches to foreign countries and alliances, and approaches to Congress for supplemental funding for the crisis actions.

The action memo is sent “right to the front door,” to the NSA, through the Senior Director. The memo drafter may meet with the NSA as well, outlining considerations such as presidential decisions, negotiating strategies, positions for diplomats, implications, and required follow-up procedures. After being briefed by the NSA, the President will check off on the action memo which options have been approved, which options must be considered further, and which committees will carry out the necessary tasks.

After the President makes his decision, the NSC crisis management role turns to the interagency implementation process. This consists of informing the departments of the given presidential decision, often in the form of a National Security Action Memo, called a “Decision Directive” in the Clinton administration. The interagency implementation process also involves checking in on the work of departmental counterparts to elicit feedback as well as determine what still needs to be carried out and what necessitates reconsideration or new approaches. Results are reported to the NSA and the President, who may use them for further decision-making, drafting of talking points, speeches to Congress, statements to the press, or other purposes. During an intensely dynamic crisis with hourly changes of events, morning briefings for staff occur with senior committee members attending in person or by video conference.

Ad hoc Executive Committees may also be created in the process of crisis management. These committees may cut across Directorate lines and become crisis working groups for the staff on a particular issue. They may further spin off sub-groups to deal with discrete aspects of the crisis management effort. In recent years, the Global Affairs Directorate of the NSC, a standing directorate, has functioned in this way. It has intermediated between the staff and the Deputies Committee and helped the staff,

interagency groups, and committee members to coordinate in terms of their work and their statements.

Another aspect of NSC crisis management is interfacing with individuals appointed to spearhead a crisis management effort. This comes about when the President calls upon an Ambassador-at-Large, Special Envoy, or Special Assistant to be the lead negotiator in a crisis. Recent examples include negotiations conducted by Dennis Ross in the Middle East, Richard Holbrooke in former Yugoslavia, and Robert Gallucci in North Korea. These individuals call upon and participate as needed in the NSC's committee structure, daily briefings, and staff work.

Government Studies of the NSC

The U.S. government has carried out several studies of the NSC under significantly different circumstances. These studies were undertaken with a combination of two purposes—the refinement of the NSC and the imposition of discipline and accountability on the Presidency. Three studies are reviewed here for their relevance to the presidential management of international crises.

The Jackson Subcommittee

In 1959, a time of escalating superpower tension, Senator Henry Jackson undertook a review of the national security policy process. This study initiated “the first full scale review since the discussion and debate preceding the creation of the National Security Council by Act of Congress in 1947” (Jackson 1966, xi). In its conclusion, the report stated:

7. Used properly, the National Security Council can be of great value as an advisory body to the President. The true worth of the Council lies in its being an accustomed place where the President can join with his chief advisors in searching examination and debate of the ‘great choices’ of national security policy. These may be long term strategic alternatives or crisis problems demanding immediate action. The Council provides a means of bringing the full implications of policy alternatives out on the table, and a vehicle through which the President can inform his lieutenants of his decisions and of the chain of reasoning behind them (Jackson 1966, 68).

The report, however, cautioned that:

The pitfalls to be avoided are clearly marked: at one extreme, over-institutionalization of the NSC system—with overly elaborate procedures and over-production of routine papers; at the other extreme, excessive informal-

ity—with Council meetings tending in the direction of official bull sessions (Jackson 1966, 68).

Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy

Under the Foreign Relations Authorization Act (FRAA) of 1972, a Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy (COGCFP) formed with the participation of eminent private sector, congressional, and executive branch leaders. The Commission's task was to review and make recommendations concerning the process and organization involved in the "formulation and implementation of the United States' foreign policy" (FRAA 1972).

The domestic political context for the study was the disintegration of the Nixon administration, the conclusion of the Vietnam War, and the reassessment of President Ford. Additionally, Kissinger's continuing dual stewardship as both Secretary of State and NSA combined crisis management and direct policy-making responsibilities in an unprecedented manner. In contrast to the roles assumed by Kissinger, the Commission insisted that the NSA position be held by an official with no other departmental functions (COGCFP 1975).

The Tower Commission

In December 1986, toward the end of the Cold War but still at a time of high ideological confrontation between the East and the West, the NSC came under the scrutiny of a Special Review Board established by President Reagan. The Board became popularly known as the "Tower Commission" for its Chairperson, former Senator John Tower. Only one month previously, the President's administration had disclosed the sale of U.S. missiles and intelligence to Iran directly and via Israel in the hope of facilitating the release of U.S. hostages held by the Lebanese Shi'a resistance movement Hizballah. The Reagan administration further disclosed that proceeds from the arms transfers had been used to fund the Contras, an armed insurgency created to destabilize the Nicaraguan government.

These practices contradicted official U.S. policies of isolating Iran, non-negotiation with Hizballah, and a Congressional ban on assistance to the Contras. Furthermore, they were part of policy operations initiated and run by NSC staff, cutting out the departments and agencies. The Tower Commission noted that the operations emerged from a policy-making process that had failed to consider all viewpoints and to obtain the

necessary levels of authorization and consensus (Special Review Board 1987). The Reagan NSC and the Reagan presidency were themselves in a crisis. Nevertheless, the Tower Commission ultimately upheld and affirmed the statutory parameters and practical organization of the NSC system. The Commission rejected the call for deep structural change that emerged in the wake of the NSC's "rogue" operations.

Although spanning three decades of political development and practice, the Jackson, COGCFP, and Tower studies all reflected concern about the quality of advice reaching the President, the structures utilized to provide that advice, and the mechanisms for implementing Presidential decisions. None of the studies, however, recommended a deep restructuring of the NSC system or the alteration of its originating statutory authority. Nevertheless, some important points stand out in terms of effective presidential crisis management. These include the importance of the proper utilization of the NSC, the need for the NSA's policy-neutrality, and the NSC staff's exclusion from operations.

CRISIS CASES

This section will examine three illustrative cases in order to highlight some issues relevant to NSC crisis management.

Iran Hostage Crisis, 1979–1981

According to formerly classified studies (Iran Hostage Negotiations n.d.), President Carter's tool for managing this crisis was the actual top level Council. Additionally, special emphasis was placed upon the SCC explicitly designed for the day-to-day management of international crises.

SCC meetings concerning the negotiations and efforts to free the hostages took place daily in the White House. These meetings were chaired by Brzezinski, who was assisted by Captain Gary Sick, SCC notetaker and policy reviewer, and William Quandt, a principal staff person at the Camp David talks. White House meetings gave prominence to the President's role in the management of this crisis and placed crisis management demands on the principals involved. Sick was Brzezinski's liaison to the staff at the Departments of State and Defense and the CIA. In this capacity, Sick played an instrumental role in obtaining analyses from the departments that were ultimately responsible for implementing President Carter's decisions.

Brzezinski backed a strategy including multi-channel negotiations, multilateral diplomatic initiatives, economic sanctions, and development of force options for rescue or reprisal. While he shaped the plans and

oversaw their execution, Brzezinski kept the crisis action implementation work with the responsible agencies and out of the NSC. Intelligence allowed those involved in crisis management to identify channels for negotiations, possibilities and logistics for hostage rescue, and other contingencies. Advice from the internal NSC structure as well as from outside was elicited on an ongoing basis.

An important aspect of the crisis was the military rescue attempt known as Desert I. The Desert I mission was strongly advocated by Brzezinski. It failed due to mechanical difficulties and lives were lost. Communications capabilities were critical for maintaining White House communication with the mission. The JCS Chair recommended aborting the mission, however, Brzezinski challenged this recommendation. The on-site commander repeated the recommendation to abort and the President acquiesced in his judgment. Cyrus Vance also opposed the military option, in contrast to Brzezinski. The latter's advocacy of this course may have impeded the exercise of presidential judgment. Ultimately, the steadfast negotiating efforts of Warren Christopher were instrumental in bringing the hostages out of Iran, although by then public confidence in the Presidency had eroded.

Lebanon Crisis, 1982–1983

Like the Iran crisis, the 1982–83 crisis in Lebanon also consisted of a series of interrelated events: the Lebanese Civil War, the assassination of Bashir Gemayel, the massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps, the joint occupation of Lebanon by Israel and Syria, and the ensuing hostilities among these parties. In response, U.S. Marines were deployed as part of a Multinational Force (MNF) whose mandate was increasingly stretched beyond strategic relevance and operational feasibility. Diplomatic initiatives failed to dislodge either Israel or Syria from Lebanon. Finally, the suicide bombing at the Marine barracks on 23 October 1983 killed 241 U.S. Marines and precipitated a retreat from Lebanon. The French also suffered a similar bombing attack.

In early 1982, diplomatic and other intelligence indicated the possibility of an Israeli invasion of Lebanon. This stimulated U.S. diplomatic and military planning under NSC coordination (Tanter 1990, 68). On 9 February 1982, McFarlane called for a meeting of the Crisis Pre-Planning Group (CPPG), which included his staff, several Special Assistants, and the Vice President's NSA. They in turn activated the Special Situations Group (SSG), the high level grouping of NSC principals, which included among others White House Chief of Staff James Baker, Presidential

Counselor Meese, and chaired by Vice President Bush. There were calls for SSG panels to begin crisis planning at the Assistant Secretary level chaired by NSC staffers, but the State Department created its own interagency grouping called the Contingency Group on Lebanon (Tanter 1990).

The Tower Commission's study revealed some relevant information about the Lebanese crisis (Lebanon—1982–1983 n.d.). In the aftermath of the suicide bombing against the Marine barracks, McFarlane recounted that President Reagan had tasked the intelligence community, including the CIA and the National Security Agency, to find out “who did it” (Pfaltzgraff and Davis 1990, 308–309). Once this was determined to the satisfaction of the President, the National Security Planning Group (NSPG) used this information in its assessment of whether to bomb Hizballah headquarters. The question of civilian deaths required serious consideration, while contingency planning was ordered with the French military.

McFarlane personally directed Secretary of Defense Weinberger to “undertake military-to-military contacts with the French for an attack in the Baalbek area” (Lebanon—1982–1983 n.d.). Despite an NSPG determination and presidential reconfirmation of the reprisal bombing in coordination with the French, McFarlane asserts that Weinberger simply failed to act on the NSC and presidential directives. The French were left to carry out the mission alone, leading to long term negative consequences for U.S. national security cooperation with the French government.

Several of the NSC's failures regarding crisis management in this situation have been attributed to the NSC's poor staffing, diminished clout, and McFarlane's operational role. The NSC's ability to conduct efficient crisis management further decreased due to key disagreements between the Secretaries of State and Defense which might have been resolved by determining a strategy for the policies being pursued. Such fundamental policy disputes provide an opportunity for a policy-neutral NSA to broker agreements and obtain presidential direction.

Some elements of failure in the Lebanon crisis were caused by President Reagan's declared intention to use the State Department rather than the NSC for issues of foreign affairs. The central figure of this crisis was McFarlane, who had been the Deputy NSA to William Clark and later worked as a Special Envoy to the Middle East before becoming the NSA. McFarlane's staff also came under criticism relative to their more experienced departmental counterparts.

Diplomacy was the chief tool in the management of this crisis; however, despite the initial respite provided by the Marine and MNF presence, diplomacy failed to accomplish its main goals. The NSC staff had not

adequately examined the consequences of this failure prior to their response action in this crisis. Furthermore, the NSC did not appropriately perceive the consequent escalating danger to the Marines. Instead, McFarlane became the Special Envoy and lost his incentive to critically examine issues and abandon erroneous policies. His role as Special Envoy conflicted with the need for him to coordinate and investigate various policy options. The President was thus deprived of much-needed objective advice. These political and bureaucratic failures within the Presidency and the NSC compounded the effects of the diplomatic and military failures in the field.

Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

The President was informed of the construction and installation of nuclear missiles in Cuba on 15 October 1962 (Allison 1987). The mechanism that President Kennedy used to manage this crisis was the ExComm, a subset of the National Security Council with the addition of his most trusted advisors. At this time, the NSC's role in crisis planning, policy review, and other activities had been much reduced from its days under Eisenhower. It is interesting to note that in this much-debated classical case of crisis management, secret and unofficial negotiations with the Soviets augmented the decision-making deliberations that took place in the ExComm. The negotiations with the Soviets involved the consideration of concessions regarding the removal of U.S. missiles from Turkey, while the American side made pledges regarding the non-invasion of Cuba (Kagan 1995, 85–86). These elements had not been entirely debated or decided upon even in the ExComm.

At the outset of those two weeks, Kennedy outlined his policy preferences, which included open diplomacy with Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev and Cuban President Fidel Castro, open surveillance coupled with a blockade, and military action that would commence with an air attack on Cuba. Thirty years later, it has been asserted that Soviet commanders in Cuba had the authority to launch their short range tactical nuclear missiles without consulting the Kremlin in the case of a U.S. invasion.

Twenty years after the events, some key members of the ExComm authored their own "Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis" (Rusk et al. 1982, 85–86). These imply that the NSC should have been able to avoid the crisis altogether by having clearer declarations of U.S. intent and policy. In retrospect, the authors also felt that the reluctance to deploy more U-2 overflights of Cuba was a misguided effort to reduce risks. The intelligence provided by such flights permitted "an effective choice of

response . . . only just in time” (Rusk et al. 1982, 85–86). Earlier ExComm decision-making may have tended toward the air strike option with ominous potential results. Kennedy’s reluctance to take actions that would lead to a nuclear confrontation had been lauded in memoirs, histories, and analyses; however, recent interpretations have been more critical of the President’s actions.

The disadvantage and weakness of Kennedy’s ExComm became apparent when the crisis is considered not as a 13 day episode, but as the “culmination of deteriorating relations” between the United States and the U.S.S.R. (Kornbluh and Chang n.d.). CIA and military operations were conducted during the crisis peak. CIA sabotage teams that were dispatched to Cuba without authorization or knowledge of the ExComm could have derailed the negotiations and led to hostilities. Accidental Soviet actions were misinterpreted as intentional signals and intelligence failures contributed to the level of instability during the crisis. These factors challenge the notion that the Cuban Missile Crisis was being controlled by the Presidency via ExComm (Kornbluh and Chang n.d.).

Lessons Learned

The foregoing three cases demonstrate the immense complexity of NSC crisis management. They also point to several lessons whose application to future NSC reforms can enhance the efficiency of the Council significantly.

First, the NSC needs to become a better facilitator of coordination among various government agencies. Inter-agency process management must be strong, for example, so that every department and agency understands its task clearly. Furthermore, diplomatic efforts must be coordinated with military efforts in order to allow the two to operate in an overarching political strategy and not in contradiction to one another.

Second, the NSC must serve as a forum for the discussion of various policy alternatives, not as a policy advocate. All options must be given full consideration by the appropriate levels of the NSC structure. To further the NSC’s efficiency in coordination, the NSA must play a non-advocacy, non-operational role. Optimally, the NSA must give all policy options due consideration and analysis and not be invested in any one course. A neutral but assertive NSA can also ensure that conflicts among departments and cabinet officials are resolved in a timely manner in spite of the complexity of the crisis.

Third, the efficient operation of the NSC requires adequate levels of expertise from its staff who must interface with their departmental and military counterparts. The responsibilities for bureaucratic management

of crises and determination of foreign policy goals must be clear for all the actors involved. Finally, presidential determination of the political strategy must ultimately guide policy-making during crises and the degree of presidential investment in the actions must be sufficiently balanced and defined.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evolution of the President's role in crisis management has had a direct effect on the NSC. In general, crisis management has become more institutionalized in the NSC which has several policy-relevant implications, predicated upon the above review of the origins, structure, studies and cases in this paper. This section begins with comments of an analytical nature and concludes with policy recommendations for NSC crisis management.

Analysis

As the previous sections demonstrate, the NSC can function as the highest decision-making unit of the U.S. government's unique crisis-management structure. It brings all the interested players together in one forum, requiring them to lay aside their bureaucratic loyalties. Currently, the NSC provides the main channel for stimulating the bureaucracy to plan crisis policy through the interagency process at the NSA, staff, and committee levels. The NSC is especially suited to this task, since options formulation, pre-crisis planning, and neutral evaluation are possible only in a group that has no bureaucratic loyalty.

The NSC is the best institution for the consideration, evaluation, and recommendation of plans submitted to the President at times of crisis, primarily at the committee level but also at the interagency working group level (formal and ad hoc). Furthermore, the NSC is the most important channel for controlling, or at least influencing, the implementation of crisis actions and policies by various departments. Only the White House and the NSC can effectively conduct oversight of implementation activities and apply pressure on the departments to come on board with a chosen policy. The Cuban missile crisis as well as numerous other testimonies and cases have shown that in the presence of a weak NSC, the bureaucracies have the potential to conduct their own operations in their own way regardless of the President's decisive leadership and focused attention to operational detail.

The NSA can also be the crisis manager par excellence, directing the President's attention to key decision options as well as to relevant intelligence and other information. The NSA can manage a negotiated

process by which presidential mandates and cabinet responses are harmonized. The significant powers and responsibilities vested in the NSA and NSC have significant drawbacks as well as advantages. The NSC can be utilized, unfortunately, as the “back-channel” to augment, thwart, skirt, or undermine the departments and other branches of government in a crisis, in order to carry out a more closely held White House policy or conduct freelance operations. This role potentially allows the staff of the NSA to trespass into illegality or to reach faster de-escalation.

There are some additional potential dangers and tradeoffs of NSC crisis-management. It can lead to an emphasis on operations, close contact with implementation, and provide undue line authority to the staff at the expense of strategic planning and interagency policy-making. There is a need for the President and staff to be more involved during the management of crises, and for many of their activities to have some operational role, such as the coordination of intelligence activities. Bureaucracies tend to conduct policy-making at the operational level, which can result from a lack of strategic direction from the Presidency. There is a danger that crisis management can lead to such operational policy-making at the expense of organized strategy.

At the same time, the NSC can be used tactically to bring crisis management decisions, responsibility, and accountability closer to the White House. “Crises are policy-forcing events that allow the White House to assume the lead” (Tanter 1990, 227). It is important to remember, however, that this is a two-edged sword, since bringing crisis management closer to the White House, if a crisis is unfolding slowly, carries the risk of a tradeoff between presidential control and sticky accountability. In successful crisis resolutions, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, enhanced presidential control results in accolades to the President. In failed missions, such as the Desert I mission in the Iran Hostage Crisis and the Iran-Contra operations, the criticisms of “cowboy diplomacy” or failure to consult with Congress considerably weakened the President.

The NSC, through the Situation Room, is suited for the monitoring and commissioning of intelligence work and products during a crisis, and it is a central location for crisis decision-making that benefits from all the available information. It is a primary recipient of key intelligence products that monitors such intelligence and analyses, while specifically tasking the intelligence community to provide timely information and analyses for crisis management. Therefore, the NSC should serve as the repository for institutional memory for crisis management having available all the relevant documents, decisions, studies, and analyses that can assist in the management of future crises.

The NSA can help mitigate malfunctions in the advisory process, which can occur regardless of the organizational structure of the NSC. Malfunctions include undue unanimity among advisors, avoidance of unpopular decisions, neglect of the full range of hypotheses, shielding of the President from informative debate, and unwillingness of any single advisor to inform the President of a recommended course of action (George 1980, 121–136). While the NSC structure is no guarantor of mission success, some factors can at least ensure the thoughtful consideration of the implications of various actions. The NSA, as an honest broker and custodian of the advising process, can confront negative organizational tendencies.

Recommendations

Predicated upon the critical dynamics of the interagency process, the conduct of foreign policy, the crafting of policy options, the coordination of crisis information and crisis action, and the key players involved in all of these, this paper formulates policy recommendations regarding the NSC's crisis management role.

- The NSC must be properly configured to respond to presidential strategic leadership, neither circumventing the President nor failing to provide a full range of decision options. Elements of such a configuration include the policy neutrality of the NSA, the interagency management by the NSC staff and committees, and the full airing of views and options at all NSC levels.
- The institutionalization of the NSC, while subject to presidential preference, should not be pared down or bloated. Staffing must meet the needs of crafting policy options and negotiating policy implementation with counterparts, while neither becoming a new bureaucracy nor a powerless appendage in the shadow of the departments.
- The NSC should provide clear and sound advice directly to the President, deriving suggestions from cabinet Secretaries, interagency committees, NSC staff, participating bureaucracies, and outside experts.
- The process of managing the harvest of advice and options should be managed by the NSA, who should be characterized by independence, neutrality and non-advocacy regarding decision-making. In a crisis, the NSA should play a key role, instead of functioning as a Cabinet Secretary, in order to channel the widest range of information to the President and in order to coordinate response activity by the entire bureaucracy.
- It is ultimately the President who must retain control of crisis

decision-making, while departments and cabinet secretaries control implementation and operations. The NSC should manage the interface with the departments, eliciting their inputs, generating options, overseeing implementation, and obtaining consensus and dissent. Freelance policies and operations should never arise.

The applications of these considerations, lessons, and tradeoffs to the future configurations of the NSC can contribute to more effective management of international crises that will arise in an increasingly complex world.

Notes

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²According to Simpson (1995), subsequent names for essentially the same vehicle for vice presidential management of international crises include the Special Situations Group, the Crisis Pre-Planning Group, Planning and Coordination Group, and Policy Review Group. Fifty-five ad hoc interagency groups (IGs) and twenty two additional senior interagency groups (SIGs) were created prior to the Iran-contra affair according to NSDD 276 (9 June 1987). The IGs, in turn, created their own task forces and working groups.

³This tension between the two roles of confidential advising and management of government has given rise to legal disputes about NSC accountability and whether it is subject to legal constraints such as the Freedom of Information Act. In *Armstrong v. Executive Office of the President*, an ongoing federal litigation seeking to resolve the question of the NSC staff's status, the essential issue to be resolved is whether the NSC is an "agency" of the government or not, and consequently whether and to what extent its records are subject to public disclosure. A lower federal court ruling decided in favor of the researchers, journalists, and library associations plaintiffs group, but the decision was

reversed on appeal. *Armstrong v. EOP*, 90 F. 3d 553. [LEXIS 18932].

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