

Trump Administration Changes to the National Security Council: Frequently Asked Questions

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On January 28, 2017, the Trump Administration issued [National Security Presidential Memorandum \(NSPM\) 2: Organization of the National Security Council and the Homeland Security Council](#). The memorandum details how the executive branch intends to manage and coordinate national and homeland security issues among relevant departments and agencies. In keeping with the practices of prior administrations, the White House issued the memorandum early in its tenure. Since the memorandum was signed, some media reports have incorrectly characterized the manner in which the Trump administration appears to be organizing itself to manage national security matters. These FAQs are intended to clarify the terms and structures associated with the National Security Council (NSC).

What is the National Security Council?

Since its inception in 1947, the National Security Council, and the institutions that support it, has evolved from a statutorily-mandated meeting of cabinet-level officials into a complex system of coordination, adjudication, and in some instances formulation (as in the case of Dr. Kissinger's tenure as National Security Advisor) of policies among relevant departments and agencies. As a result, when individuals refer to the "NSC," they variously refer to the decisionmaking body created in statute in the 1947 National Security Act, the staff that supports that decisionmaking body, or the processes used by the White House to discuss and adjudicate decisions across different agencies of the executive branch.

- **The National Security Council** is the President's statutory advisory body on matters related to national and international security. Pursuant to Title 50 U.S.C §3021, the NSC's statutory members are the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of Energy. Other senior officials, including the National Security Advisor, participate in NSC deliberations at the President's request. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of National Intelligence are the NSC's statutory advisers. The National Security Council is chaired by the President.
- **The National Security Council Staff.** The NSC's activities are coordinated and directed by the Presidentially-

appointed National Security Advisor (NSA). They are supported by a National Security Staff (NSS, or NSC staff) comprising permanent employees of the Executive Office of the President and "detailees" from other government agencies serving temporary assignments. It is organized into offices that focus on a variety of long-term strategic issues and ad hoc working groups that address emerging topics. Each President configures the NSC to address risks to U.S. global security interests according to proscribed policy priorities. The size of the NSC staff and ratio of political appointees to detailees has varied with each administration. In [P.L. 114-328](#), the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, [Congress limited the number of policy-focused individuals](#) serving on the NSC staff to 200 persons. During the Obama Administration, the Homeland Security Committee and National Security Council staffs were combined into an organization called the National Security Staff.

- **Decisionmaking committees.** Coordinating and managing U.S. national security affairs requires routine coordination and discussion among relevant departments and agencies. Most administrations have therefore set up a hierarchical system of committees designed to discuss, and when appropriate decide, national security matters. These committees meet as frequently as the White House deems necessary. The design and composition of the committee structure is the prerogative of the President, but the approach has often included some variant of the following:

The Principals Committee (PC) is a level below the NSC, convened by the National Security Advisor. The PC does not need to include all statutory NSC members, but generally includes the heads of departments or agencies involved with the subject matter being discussed at a given meeting.

The Deputies Committee (DC) is convened by the Deputy National Security Advisor, and generally includes the deputy heads of departments (i.e., the Deputy Secretary of Defense or Deputy Secretary of State) involved with the subject matter being discussed at a given meeting.

Policy Coordination Committees (PCC) are established by the Deputies Committee and are responsible for day-to-day management of national security matters on a given region or topic at the Assistant Secretary level from relevant agencies. These are chaired by members of the National Security Staff whose subject matter portfolios are relevant to the issue at hand. Different administrations have used various titles for these committees; under President Obama, this forum was called the Interagency Policy Committee.

Overall, the NSC and its supporting processes and institutions are purposefully designed to be flexible in order to afford the President maximum latitude to create a security advisory body that suits his unique decisionmaking styles. Apart from appropriating its annual budget, Congress has little oversight over the Executive Office of the President, and the National Security Council system in particular, due to the fact that most national security positions within the White House itself (as opposed to the Departments and Agencies) are not currently subject to the advice and consent of the Senate. Some observers over the years have argued that the position should be subject to Senate confirmation and that the National Security Advisor should be available to testify before congressional committees as are officials from other Government departments and agencies. Others argue that a President is entitled to confidential advice from his immediate staff (see CRS Report RL30840, [The National Security Council: An Organizational Assessment](#)).

What is the history and relationship between the NSC and Homeland Security Council (HSC)?

The HSC was created by President George W. Bush soon after the terrorist attacks in the United States with the responsibility of "[ensuring coordination of homeland security-related activities of executive departments and agencies and effective development and implementation of homeland security policies.](#)" Post 9/11 Administrations have undertaken different approaches to the interaction between the NSC and HSC. Under President Bush the NSC and HSC focused separately on international and domestic security issues. Soon after taking office [President Obama merged the NSC and HSC](#) into a National Security Staff with the focus of "support(ing) all White House policy-making activities related to international, transnational, and homeland security matters." The Trump Administration has returned to [two separate entities](#) with the NSC and HSC "responsible for the effective coordination of the security-related activities and functions of the executive departments and agencies."

NSPM-2: What's changed? What's stayed the same?

It is not yet fully clear how the Trump Administration intends to organize itself for national security matters, due to the

fact that the White House indicated on January 30th that it intends to revise NSPM-2 to ensure that the CIA director (D/CIA) [is included "in the NSC."](#) Still, based on the existing documentation, the following key observations can be made:

- **Role of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and the Director of National Intelligence (DNI).** NSPM-2 language on the role of CJCS at NSC and PC meetings is nearly identical to that agreed upon by the George W. Bush Administration. In their roles as statutory advisors to the National Security Council, CJCS and DNI are invited to attend all National Security Council meetings. CJCS and DNI shall also attend meetings of the Principals Committee "where issues pertaining to their responsibilities and expertise are to be discussed." The Obama administration departed from its predecessor by making CJCS and DNI "regular members" of the Principals Committee. It is not clear whether the Trump administration's reversion to the Bush formulation amounts to an actual change to either the Chairman's or DNI's roles and participation in senior national security meetings, although CJCS himself maintains that he will ["remain a full participant"](#) in the national security interagency process. With respect to the White House's intention to add D/CIA to the National Security Council, it is unclear what effect this might have on DNI's role as statutory advisor to the NSC (once they are appointed and confirmed).
- **Inclusion of the Assistant to the President and Chief Strategist as a regular NSC and PC attendee.** While previous Presidents have, upon occasion, requested the attendance of their chief political strategist at NSC meetings, the Trump Administration appears to be the first to include a political advisor as a regular, permanent attendee of such meetings. The law is silent on the inclusion of political advisors as NSC regular attendees.
- **Role of the Secretary of Energy.** The Secretary of Energy is a statutory member of the NSC, and as such, is invited to attend all NSC meetings. In contrast with the Obama Administration (although in keeping with the George W. Bush Administration structures), the Secretary of Energy is not included in PC meetings in the Trump Administration.