

The Obama National Security System and Process: At the Sixth Month Mark

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Assessing developments in the Obama national security system and process over the past six months is a difficult, if not at times a frustrating task. Its core--national security decision making--is, in immediate historical time, an area that is by tradition one more closely guarded given its subject matter. Moreover, internal discipline for this White House—as during the Obama presidential campaign—remains highly valued: leaks do happen, but they seem far less frequent than occurred for Obama’s immediate predecessors. The differences from fellow Democrats Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton are especially noteworthy: internal disagreements spilled out early for both across a range of organizational and policy issues. Less so with the Obama presidency (but see below). Policy making on economic issues, the financial bail-outs, and health care reform have been a bit more transparent and revealing; not so national security. Much remains unknown, yet some glimmers are revelatory.

Organizational Continuity and Change

There was both positive and potentially challenging news in the initial efforts to put in place a national security decision process. As his predecessors had done, the basic structure was presented in a presidential directive, in this case Presidential Policy Directive #1 issued on February 13, 2009 (quite interestingly, the same day--eight years earlier--that Bush had issued his, although for Bush it had a slightly different nomenclature:¹ National Security Presidential Directive #1). Statutory membership had evolved a bit: the director of National Intelligence replaced the CIA director as statutory adviser to the NSC in late 2004, and the secretary of energy was added as a statutory member in 2007.² Designation of non-statutory NSC members and others invited to attend NSC meetings was slightly different than in the Bush years.³ The Bush directive also specified that the vice president shall preside *at NSC meetings* in the president’s absence and at his direction; similar language was not present in the Obama directive.

Beyond membership in the Council, the basic structure of the NSC process was the same as it had been since the introduction of the “Scowcroft Model” in 1989: a principals’ committee chaired by the NSC advisor, a deputies’ committee below that chaired by the deputy NSC advisor, and a variety of working groups (now dubbed “Interagency Policy Committees”--IPCs) as the initial “main day-to-day fora for an interagency coordination of national security policy.”⁴ The Obama directive did not spell out the organization of these IPCs, rather they would be established at the discretion of the deputies’ committee, and would be chaired by a staff member of the NSC (or National Economic Council—NEC--if appropriate).

Although some media commentary saw the Obama directive as a major change (e.g. a “sweeping overhaul of the National Security Council” according to the *Washington Post*⁵), in reality the change in NSC membership was not all that significant or atypical (although, like cabinet membership, it carries with it a certain symbolism). More importantly, formal meetings of the NSC as the president’s chief deliberative forum

for decision making is largely a thing of the past; rather it is the president's meetings with the smaller group of the principals and the meetings of the principals themselves that are now critical. Adoption of this meeting structure plus the rest of the Scowcroft model was the centerpiece of the February 13 directive. Organizational continuity rather than change was the more important order of the day.

What will be interesting is whether the model will work effectively. Effective structure is necessary but not sufficient. People matter, personalities matter, how they define their roles matter, and how they interact with each other within that structure and in those roles matter.

There are several issues here, which raise challenges. Will NSC advisor Gen. James Jones serve as an effective chair of the principals? Will the other principals "buy into" the process (the Rumsfeld problem)? Will backchannels of advice emerge, which can subvert the process and are, at least, a signal of problems and dysfunction? Will deputy NSC advisor Tom Donilon effectively chair the deputies? Will the departmental deputies "buy into" the process (again the Rumsfeld problem, but now at the deputy level)? The IPC working groups will be interesting. The Bush directive spelled them out, Obama's left them unspecified. For the Bush process, their chairs were a mix of departmental representatives and NSC staff. For the Obama process, NSC staff chairmanship (or NEC) is specified. This might lead to greater White House control over the process and perhaps greater effectiveness at this level: avoidance of a departmental representative wearing two hats and greater NSC ability to ride herd on the process, thereby shaping its agenda, controlling the timing and "roll-out" of policy, and guarding any presidential interests.

Based on a two-month long, 38-page study of cybersecurity issues, in late May President Obama publicly announced the creation of a new White House cybersecurity coordinator. The person holding that position was also made a member of the NSC and the NEC apparatus, reporting to both NSC advisor Jones and NEC director Larry Summers.⁶ At issue will be the ability of that person to coordinate the various governmental agencies involved in electronic communications and the security of computer networks. But news of the new post was not welcome in all quarters. According to Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME), "placing a strategy 'czar' in the White House will hinder Congress's ability to effectively oversee cybersecurity activities and will do little to resolve the bureaucratic conflicts, turf battles, and confusing lines of authority that have undermined past cybersecurity efforts."⁷ As of late July, no appointee had been tapped.

Late May also saw another important change. The previously free-standing White House Office of Homeland Security—created by executive order by Bush shortly after 9/11--was folded within the NSC system. The person who was its director (currently John Brennan) now reports organizationally to NSC advisor Jones, but also has direct access to the president. The Homeland Security Council continues in existence (with a more domestic-focused mandate), but it now reports--through Jones--to the National Security Council. The change was the result of an internal study that President Obama had ordered in February 2009. The combined staff will bring NSC personnel to some 240 persons, roughly half the size of the White House Office.⁸ It also raises the issue of whether homeland security matters, especially those of more domestic import, will be adequately addressed within the NSC's national security frame of reference. In President

Obama's view, the changes will "end the artificial divide." But did reorganization adequately factor in differences in organizational mission and geographic area of concern? The new arrangement also puts great emphasis on the need for a strong, positive working relationship between Jones and Brennan: both have direct access to the president, although the latter is organizationally subordinate to the former—a potentially problematic arrangement.

Another important change occurred in mid-June with the transfer of Dennis Ross, the administration's senior advisor on Iran, from the State Department to the NSC. This was less organizationally significant, but it brought important policy implications: it signaled that the White House would likely serve as the directive force on Iran policy, particularly in the aftermath of the discord that ensued over its presidential election. And it may well lead to a larger role for Ross in Middle East policy, especially Israeli-Palestine issues, where he has long and deep experience. Reports also indicated that Ross was unhappy with his position at State. He was not close to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and, despite complicated negotiations when he agreed to serve in February, his broad portfolio may have encountered some resistance from other Middle East advisors at State. Although a longtime and well-known Middle East expert who had served in the Carter, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton presidencies, his initial appointment at State was announced via a press release. This differed from the ceremony—which both the president and Mrs. Clinton attended—announcing the appointment of the administration's two other special envoys—former Sen. George Mitchell for Afghanistan and former Amb. Richard Holbrooke for Pakistan. Moreover, unlike Mitchell and Holbrooke who were designated *presidential* envoys, Ross reported to Clinton. Ross's transfer to the White House may also protect President Obama's flanks: Ross is perceived as generally pro-Israel. Ross's new position also fits with a pattern of policy-making centralization—in the White House—in a number of policy areas such as energy and environmental policy, climate change, health care reform, and urban affairs.

A final point: *New Republic's* Michael Crowley reported in early March 2009 that Clinton balked at an early gambit between Jones and Ross to bring the latter to the NSC staff with wide authority over Middle East policy; her response—in the short run successful—was to bring him to the more confining environs of State.⁹ If that account is true, the effort failed. But to what policy effect?

Gen. Jones as NSC Advisor

Dennis Ross's new presence in the NSC orbit bears watching in relation to Jones as NSC advisor. Will it signal the removal of an important piece of the NSC advisor's portfolio? Or, will it lead to a powerful White House duo—Ross and Jones—ready to take the lead and put the White House's imprint on Iran policy or, even more broadly, Middle East policy. Jones's own foreign policy experience—beyond defense issues or his service as Marine commandant and NATO supreme commander—is Middle East centered: his stint as a Middle East envoy and also as chair of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq.

But there has been a potentially more significant—but elusive—dynamic at work concerning Jones's tenure as NSC advisor. One facet is that Jones has been a relatively low-key NSC advisor. His first television appearance on the Sunday talk shows occurred on May 10, when he was a guest on ABC's "This Week," hosted by George

Stephanopoulos. His first major public speech, titled “U.S National Security: The Obama Approach,” occurred on May 27, 2009 before the Atlantic Council. Another facet is that while Jones had prior experience as an envoy to the Middle East, he did not bring a broader geopolitical vision of national security and foreign affairs to the job--as did Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Jones’s concept of the job, however, should not be seen as negative or somehow lacking compared to that of some of his more activist predecessors--at least not yet. It simply may be a different definition of the role of NSC advisor, one more akin to that of a Brent Scowcroft. In fact, it prompts one to ask whether Jones is hewing more closely to the “honest broker” conception of the role of NSC advisor, leaving the public stage largely to Secretary of State Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates?¹⁰ Is he a source of private counsel to President Obama, but cautious in his broader expression of policy views, lest the views of others be stifled? Is he concerned not just with the substance of policy but with the quality of the process that produces it? The latter is not an inconsiderable contribution to what the present administration--and this president--need for effective national security decision making. The oft-noted “dysfunction” of their predecessor’s deliberations on Iraq serve as a powerful warning of the consequences when the NSC advisor is not attentive to the process through which information, analysis, and policy options ultimately reach the principals and the president.

Or, hypothetically, it could be the case that Jones is too weak as NSC advisor, more a passive coordinator rather than an honest broker. The evidence is not available to reach that judgment. However, it is interesting that a flurry of criticism began to emerge in April and early May, which apparently prompted an administration response that appeared in two articles, both on May 7, in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and both in part based on interviews with Jones (as well as unnamed administration sources critical of him).¹¹ What to make of this?

Some concerns were raised at the 100-day marker. *Time*’s Joel Klein noted that sources indicated that Jones seems to “attend meetings rather than lead them”; that he “needs to drive the agenda”; and with a high powered team--Clinton, Gates, and envoys George Mitchell and Richard Holbrooke-- he needs to establish himself better as “first among equals.”¹² On April 30, I.M. Destler, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, raised the issue of whether Jones would be able to establish the personal relationship to the president of “the most successful national security advisers.” (Although some of those Destler cites--McGeorge Bundy and Kissinger--despite their closeness did not always serve their president well; nor did Condoleezza Rice when it came to Iraq despite her close relationship with George W. Bush).¹³ Two thoughts: first, Brent Scowcroft hardly styled himself as “first among equals”; second, Jones’s caution in taking a position in meetings—particularly in an overbearing or demonstrative manner--*may* reflect a deliberate effort to foster open discussion, an effort to be an “honest broker.” Yet Klein *may* have a point that Jones might be too passive, especially in meetings of the principals, which he chairs.

As for the two articles, Helene Cooper in the *New York Times* noted that Jones is rarely seen at the president’s side in public forums, that other NSC aides often accompany him when he meets with the president, and that he does not seem a “gateway” to Obama in the way Sandy Berger was to Bill Clinton. Yet in response, Jones acknowledged in his interview that “You can be a leader that takes charge of every issue .

... and play a very dominant role.” But “For me that has the effect of muting voices that should be heard.” *New Republic*’s Michael Crowley offers a different take: “he is at the president’s side in nearly every important foreign policy meeting—from his audience with the Pope to his sit-down with Vladimir Putin.” Honest broker or weak coordinator?

As for me, I am perplexed by the merits of the “gateway” analogy: gateways can be guarded by “gatekeepers” who isolate the president—remember the “Bush Bubble”—or to use another metaphor, become “bottlenecks.” In addition, both Colin Powell and Scowcroft often brought along their deputies when they met with the president—a cautious response to Iran-Contra and to make sure they got it right after the meeting. Also as Cooper notes in her report, “The two men see each other every morning, when Obama receives the presidential daily briefing, and talk several times a day, administration officials say. ‘This president is very deliberative,’ Jones said. ‘He [Obama] likes to know that there is a process to teeing up these very big issues, and that process fits his style.’” According to Crowley, based on an interview with Jones, he will sometimes stay behind after a meeting, in Jones’s words, to raise issues, “after everyone else does.”¹⁴

That Jones prefers a “bottom-up” approach to presidential decision making is also not surprising. It fits with the “Scowcroft Model” of the NSC process: working groups, the deputies’ meetings, the principals’ meetings, then on to the president. It is a model put in place under Bush Sr., continued under Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, and embodied once again in Obama’s presidential directive of February 13, 2009. Whether it works as an effective policy-options producer, interagency-coordination process, and final decision mechanism for the principals and the president is another matter. It worked well under Scowcroft (when he chaired the principals in the president’s absence and, especially, with then-deputy NSC advisor Robert Gates chairing the deputies’ committee) but less effectively under Rice and her deputy, Stephen Hadley, once Iraq was on the front burner. Ideally, it represents a good blend of White House/NSC coordination with inter-departmental input. How it works in practice will depend on the behavior and commitment of those involved. Crowley offers a positive assessment:

Under Obama, explains one aide, the NSC makes a deal with the administration personnel who plead their policy cases at the White House. Debates will be transparent and open, with quick and crisp decisions, and—in a new innovation—meeting summaries are distributed widely and within 24 hours to ensure no one is left in the dark. In return, deputies who lose arguments must promise not to pull end-runs around the system.¹⁵

One quibble: “Records of Action” are hardly new. Eisenhower and his NSC advisors also issued them after NSC meetings. But they fell by the wayside under JFK and his NSC advisor McGeorge Bundy. Still the Obama practice is a positive one. Under Carter, according to then-Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, NSC participants were kept in the dark about what had actually been decided, since neither presidential directives nor NSC advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski’s summaries to Carter were circulated back to members. “This meant that the national security adviser,” according to Vance, “had the power to interpret the thrust of discussion or frame the policy recommendations of department principals.” Carter, however, backed Brzezinski and was worried about leaks if documents were widely circulated. He did, however, tell Vance he could come to the White House and look at the drafts if he wanted. “Given the enormous pressure on our time,” Vance reports, “this was not realistic.”¹⁶

Cooper also provides other evidence that Jones might be an honest broker without her quite saying so. During deliberations on Afghanistan in May, (unnamed) “officials in the room” noted that Jones “seldom voiced his own opinion. . . . Instead he preferred to go around the table collecting the views of others.”¹⁷ Left unsaid is what Jones may have privately advised the president. And, again, a reticence in strongly pushing his own views may reflect a legitimate recognition on his part for the need for an open discussion and a need to solicit the full airing of views of others.

Both the *New York Times* article and one in the *Washington Post* by Karen DeYoung emphasized that relations between the NSC staff, on the one hand, and State and Defense, on the other, have avoided some of the turf battles and interpersonal conflicts of prior presidencies. Is this a case of effective collegiality? Or is it a sign of a weak NSC advisor and staff? Bear in mind that internal discipline was a mark of the campaign—“No Drama Obama”—and then of the presidential transition. In Crowley’s account, “process is not simply the poor cousin of strategy.” Obama aides call it “regular order”: “a system that gives the president a diversity of views with minimal infighting and back-channel maneuvering, little leaking to the press, and public airing of dirty laundry.”¹⁸ Let us hope this account is correct.

It is also notable that Jones was operating within a White House staff with a large number of longtime Obama associates (many with prior congressional rather than executive branch experience, a potentially interesting twist) and a State Department heavy with former Clinton administration officials, not the least the secretary of state herself. If indeed there were some adjustment problems, given the personnel environment in which Jones operated, that should come as no surprise. If they persist will be another matter.

Another odd twist is the take on Secretary of State Clinton’s speech on July 15 (widely reported as a “major” foreign policy address); the headline in the *New York Times* was “For Clinton, ’09 Campaign Is for Her Turf.” The article noted that it was “an effort to recapture the limelight after a period in which Mrs. Clinton has nursed both a broken elbow and the perception that the State Department has lost influence to an assertive White House.”¹⁹ If neither State nor Jones and the NSC staff are driving foreign policy, who is? (In Crowley’s view, it is President Obama himself—hence the title of his piece: “The Decider.”²⁰)

Internally, Jones’s own staff is an interesting meld. Jones’s deputy, Tom Donilon, had been Secretary of State Warren Christopher’s chief of staff (he came from Christopher’s longtime Los Angeles-based law firm, O’Melveny & Myers) and then assistant secretary of state for public affairs during the Clinton years. According to Mike Allen of *Politico.com*, “West Wingers say he’s the one you always see in the big meetings. That’s because Donilon has filled the vacuum created by the low-key approach” of Jones.²¹ Jones’s chief of staff, Mark Lippert, and his strategic communications director, Denis McDonough, have long standing ties to Obama. Donilon is long on politics; his ability to perform the now crucial deputy role will be especially important. Jones may also be advantaged by the fact that Hillary Clinton’s chief deputy, James Steinberg, held Donilon’s deputy job under Sandy Berger.

Questions about Jones’s role as NSC advisor continued, however. In early July, *Newsweek* noted that Jones was the least visible NCS advisor in a decade, and that he had ceded dealings with the press to Lippert and McDonough. “They are the gatekeepers,”

according to one member of Congress. However, the article notes, “Jones’s defenders say he’s given his deputies more power so he can oversee the big picture.” On the other hand, his efforts to reduce “backchannels” to the president--making the flow information more efficient—“hasn’t happened, in part because Obama thrives on varied perspectives.”²² Crowley’s account of the emphasis on all participants “buying into” the process, however, offers a different narrative.

The source of the criticisms of Jones is also worth pondering. Historically, neither State nor Defense has objected to a weaker NSC advisor, if that is indeed the case. If the source is from the White House, that is certainly of interest. But here another line of criticism might be raised, one directed not at Jones but at his erstwhile critics: problems should be brought to the president’s attention for remedy, not played out in media leaks and semi-public sniping.

A thought experiment. Let us suppose that Jones *is an effective honest broker*. Could the same narrative--but with the criticisms now recast in more positive light--not still be made but with a different net judgment? (e.g. Kissinger never took aides in when he met the president; yet Colin Powell and Brent Scowcroft did, and it was regarded as positive. Bundy’s public visibility often irritated Lyndon Johnson, as did Kissinger’s for Richard Nixon.) Nor have there been reports of conflicts between the NSC staff and State that were so problematic in some administrations (Kissinger v. William Rogers; Brzezinski v. Cyrus Vance) when the NSC advisor becomes a heavy handed advocate. Still, there may be problems: as Jones noted in his May interview with the *Washington Post*, “When I first went into the Oval Office, I didn’t expect six other people from the NSC to go with me.” Now, “I think the president and I are very comfortable with the fact that I don’t have to be the shadow. I don’t have to be there all the time. I really have great people. I want them to be trusted.”²³

Perhaps the problem is not with Jones, but with those who want an NSC advisor along the lines of a Kissinger or Bundy? But is their conception of the NSC advisor’s role what President Obama wants or even needs? An NSC advisor who is an activist, a strong policy advocate, a visible spokesperson and so on may bring vision, vigor, and decisiveness to the job, but often at the cost of an effective decision making process. But, then again, a weak coordinator is hardly what the president needs either.

1. For whatever reason (largely “territorial” I suspect), these presidential directives and other parts of the memorandum process have different labels from one administration to another.

2. The current statutory members are the president, vice president, secretary of state, secretary of defense, and secretary of energy; the chair of the Joints Chiefs of Staff and the director of National Intelligence serve as statutory advisers.

3. Both presidents included, as non-statutory NSC members, the secretary of the treasury, the secretary of homeland security, the White House chief of staff, and the NSC advisor. Obama also included the UN ambassador and Attorney General (Bush only authorized attendance for the latter when matters of constitutional or legal import arose). Under the Obama directive the White House legal counsel could attend any meetings, as could the deputy NSC advisor, who shall “serve as secretary.” When international economic issues were on the agenda, the secretary of commerce, the U.S. trade representative, the director of the NEC, and the chair of the Council of Economic

Advisers were specified as regular attendees. When matters of homeland security or counter-terrorism were on the agenda, the White House homeland security adviser was invited, as was the president's science adviser when science and technology issues were under discussion. Under Bush, the White House legal counsel was invited to meetings at the discretion of the NSC advisor. The director of the OMB was also invited to attend when budgetary matters were under discussion. Both directives specified that other officials shall be invited to attend when appropriate.

4. Under Bush, these were dubbed "Policy Coordination Committees" (PCCs) and served--note the identical language in the Obama directive-- as the initial, "main day-to-day fora for an interagency coordination of national security policy." Under Bush, six regional PCCs were established by the directive, with each to be chaired by an official at the rank of Under Secretary or Assistant Secretary, as designated by the Secretary of State. Eleven functional PCCs were established, with their chairs determined by the NSC advisor, NEC advisor, State, Treasury, or Defense, depending on the policy area.

5. Karen DeYoung, "Obama's NSC Will Get New Power," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2009.

6. According to one account, "This bifurcated arrangement was reportedly the result of Summers's request, made during internal debates, that the new cyber official *not* have broad policy-making powers over the Internet, for fear it might restrain economic growth and innovation. It remains to be seen how limited the new czar's powers will be, but many in the business community have supported Summers's stance." During the 2008 campaign, the report also noted, Obama stated that the cyber czar would "report directly to me"; that was now changed to that official having "regular access to me" (Shane Harris, "Cyber Conundrum," *National Journal*, June 13, 2009, p. 39, emphasis in original).

7. Ellen Nakashima and Brian Krebs, "Obama Says He Will Name National Cybersecurity Adviser," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2009.

8. Spencer S. Hsu, "Obama Integrates Security Councils, Adds New Offices," *Washington Post*, May 27, 2009.

9. Michael Crowley, "Hillary's State," *New Republic*, March 4, 2009, pp. 18-19.

10. On the NSC advisor as an honest broker, see my most recent book, *Honest Broker? The National Security Advisor and Presidential Decision Making*, (College Sta., TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2009).

11. Helene Cooper, "National Security Adviser Takes Less Visible Approach to His Job," *New York Times*, May 7, 2009; Karen DeYoung, "In Frenetic White House, A Low-Key Outsider," *Washington Post*, May 7, 2009.

12. Joel Klein, "The Rock Builder," *Time*, May 4, 2009, p. 32.

13. I. M. Destler, "Jonestown: Will Obama's National Security Council Be 'Dramatically Different?'" *Foreign Affairs*, April 30, 2009, <http://foreignaffairs.org/node/65077> (accessed May 7, 2009). Other "close" NSC advisors have not been particularly effective (e.g. William Clark under Reagan, perhaps also Walt Rostow under Johnson), while less "close" advisors have sometimes done well--e.g. Frank Carlucci and Colin Powell under Reagan).

14. Michael Crowley, "The Decider: Who Runs U.S. Foreign Policy," *New Republic*, August 12, 2009, p. 25.

15. Crowley, "The Decider," p. 26.

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16. Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), p. 37.
 17. Cooper, "National Security Adviser Takes Less Visible Approach to His Job."
 18. Crowley, "The Decider," p. 25.
 19. Mark Landler, "For Clinton, '09 Campaign Is for Her Turf," *New York Times*, July 16, 2009.
 20. In Crowley's account Obama himself is the architect and driving force of his foreign policy, if not serving as his own national security advisor. But that may be a problematic mix: how long can it all successfully surface at the presidential level, if that is what in fact is going on. Surely the president is the ultimate decider, but will he be able to "reach" into the system to mold effective policy given the range of issues—domestic, economic, *and* foreign policy--on the presidential plate. Presidential "overload," after all, was the prime impetus for FDR's creation of the Brownlow Committee and the subsequent rise of the modern presidency and its staff resources (Crowley, "The Decider," pp. 24-27).
 21. Mike Allen, "Rising Politics," *politico.com*, July 9, 2009, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0709/24586.html> (accessed July 20, 2009).
 22. Holly Bailey, "Has Jim Jones Lost His Clout?" *Newsweek*, July 13, 2009, p. 16.
 23. DeYoung, "In Frenetic White House, A Low-Key Outsider."

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