

National Security Councils (and Related Bodies)

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What are National Security Councils (NSCs)?

How are NSC constituted and composed?

What are the main functions of NSCs?

What are some of the preconditions of an effective NSC?

What are National Security Councils (NSCs)?

Increasingly, governments around the world make use of a central structure to bring together the key actors involved in the development, coordination and implementation of national security policy. This Backgrounder uses the term National Security Council (NSC) to denote such structures while recognising that they can differ significantly in terms of denomination, composition, mandate and authority.

Some of the institutions this Backgrounder refers to carry the designation "National Security Council" – the most prominent example being that of the United States, where the first NSC to coordinate responses to external threats was established in 1947. In the wake of the 11 September attacks in 2001, a parallel body known as the Homeland Security Council (HSC) was created in an effort to ensure coordination of all domestic security-related activities.

Other NSCs go by different names. In parliamentary systems such as those of Canada and Australia, the norm is a cabinet-based committee that draws in senior civil servants and heads of the various security forces. In other parliamentary systems, for example, in Scandinavian countries, the equivalent of an NSC is a special sub-committee of the Cabinet.

Another approach is for the NSC to bring together civil servants and security forces personnel, without the Executive. This is the case of the Belgian Government's Crisis Coordination Centre. Until recently, France's equivalent of an NSC, known as *Secrétariat Général de la Défense Nationale (SGDN)*, took a similar approach. The *SGDN* has now been replaced with a committee structure, called the *Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale* in which both the Prime Minister and President participate.

Many countries do not have a high-level mechanism bringing together key national security actors and institutions. Often, this reflects the desire of the dominant political actors to shield from scrutiny their decision-making authority. In Germany, other factors have been at work. Here, the debate about creating a



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This document is part of the DCAF Backgrounder series, which provides practitioners with concise introductions to a variety of issues in the field of Security Sector Governance and Security Sector Reform.

Table 1. NSC Composition, United States of America

Structure of the United States National Security Council	
Chair	President of the United States
Statutory Attendees	Vice President of the United States Secretary of State Secretary of Defense
Military Advisor	Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
Intelligence Advisor	Director of National Intelligence
Regular Attendees	National Security Advisor Chief of Staff to the President Deputy National Security Advisor
Additional Participants	Attorney General Secretary of Homeland Security Counsel to the President Assistant to the President for Economic Policy Ambassador to the United Nations Director of Office of Management and Budget Secretary of the Treasury

US-style NSC has been held hostage to coalition politics, in particular, the concern that an NSC under the authority of the Chancellor would diminish the role in security policy decision-making of the Foreign Ministry – typically a position under the control of the junior coalition partner.

How are NSCs constituted and composed?

NSCs are brought into being in different ways. In some countries, a government decision suffices to create an NSC. This is usually the case in long-established presidential and parliamentary democracies, although it was an act of Congress that established the US NSC. Another pattern is for an NSC to be foreseen in the constitution, with detailed arrangements addressed in separate legislation. This is typical of young democracies such as those emerging from the former Yugoslavia.

The composition of NSCs varies enormously, both in terms of which actors participate and the nature of their participation. Often, the key executive decision-maker will participate in the NSC as the chair. In countries where the President and the Prime Minister share responsibilities in the area of security, both may be members of the NSC and alternate as chair as a function of the issue at hand. For example, in Kosovo, the President's chairing role is limited to emergency situations.

The next tier of membership comprises the representatives of the ministries that are responsible for the country's security. Traditionally, this has included defence, foreign affairs and the interior, and sometimes departments dealing with finance and budget as well. Increasingly, the trend is to include other ministries in order to address changing security agendas. Some NSCs foresee the participation of the ministries of transport, environment and health as the situation requires in order to deal with such issues as airplane security, natural disasters and pandemics.

Box 1. What is National Security?

Though varying across different contexts, debates over what constitutes national security have seen the focus and scope of NSC decision-making evolve over time. During the Cold War, the main international actors understood security in predominantly military terms as the defence of the state (or the ruling party).

In the period since, the influence of concepts such as "human security" has contributed to a widening of perceived threats to include individual-centred notions of economic, environmental, health, food, cultural and personal security. The last decade has seen the emergence of such notions as "homeland security" or "societal security". These put the emphasis on the protection of the population, vital infrastructure and essential public services in addressing both manmade threats and national disasters where the survival of the state as such is not necessarily in question. Such developments have been accompanied in some countries by an expansion of NSC mandate and membership.

The composition of an NSC at executive level will generally reflect a country's priority security concerns. For example, Canada's NSC, the Cabinet Committee for Foreign Affairs and Security, is chaired by the Minister of Defence, who is seconded by the Minister of Justice. The portfolios of other participating ministers include Veterans' Affairs, International Cooperation, International Trade, Transport and the Americas in addition to Foreign Affairs and Public Safety (as well as the chief government whip). There is also a separate Cabinet Committee devoted to Canadian's involvement in Afghanistan, composed of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation, Veterans' Affairs, National Defence and Public Safety.

A third tier of NSC membership is constituted by representatives of the security forces – police, military, gendarmerie, intelligence, border guards and the like. These actors often have the right to take the floor but usually not to vote.

Box 2. How do NSCs differ?

NSCs can be differentiated by as a function of whether

- their power or influence is substantial or limited
- their composition is dominated by the executive or the bureaucracy and the security forces
- they have an advisory or decision-making mandate.

In a country like the United States where the Chief Executive chairs the proceedings, the NSC has huge resources at its disposal and enjoys great influence. Many NSCs are, however, not at the centre of their country's security decision-making.

In the vast majority of NSCs, members of the executive play a leading role; only in very few NSCs do members of the bureaucracy and the security forces dominate.

As for mandate, most NSCs, including that of the USA, do not have decision-making powers but are advisory in nature. However, the recently created NSC of the UK, which is headed by the Prime Minister, is a decision-making body.

Figure 1. Centre Gouvernemental de Coordination et de Crise/ Coördinatie en Crisiscentrum van de Regering (Belgium)

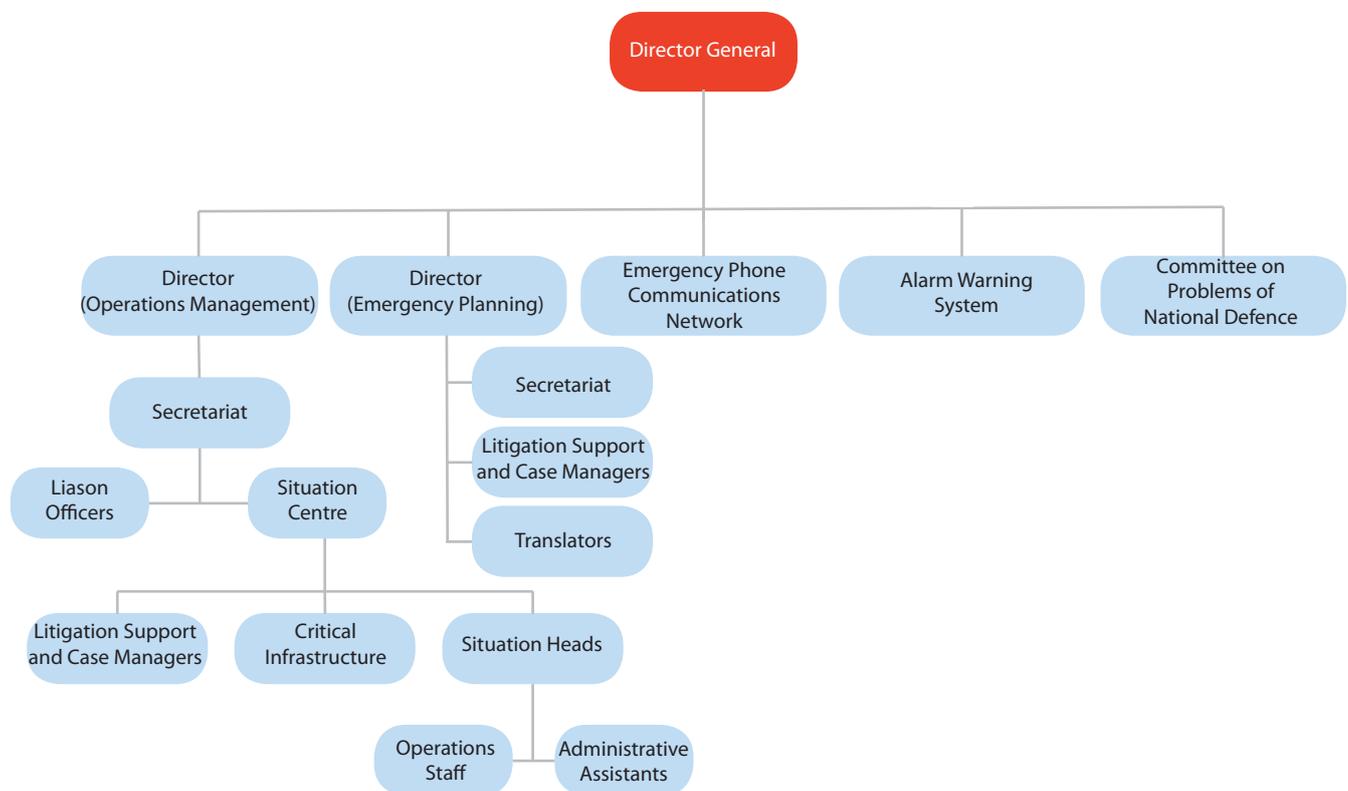
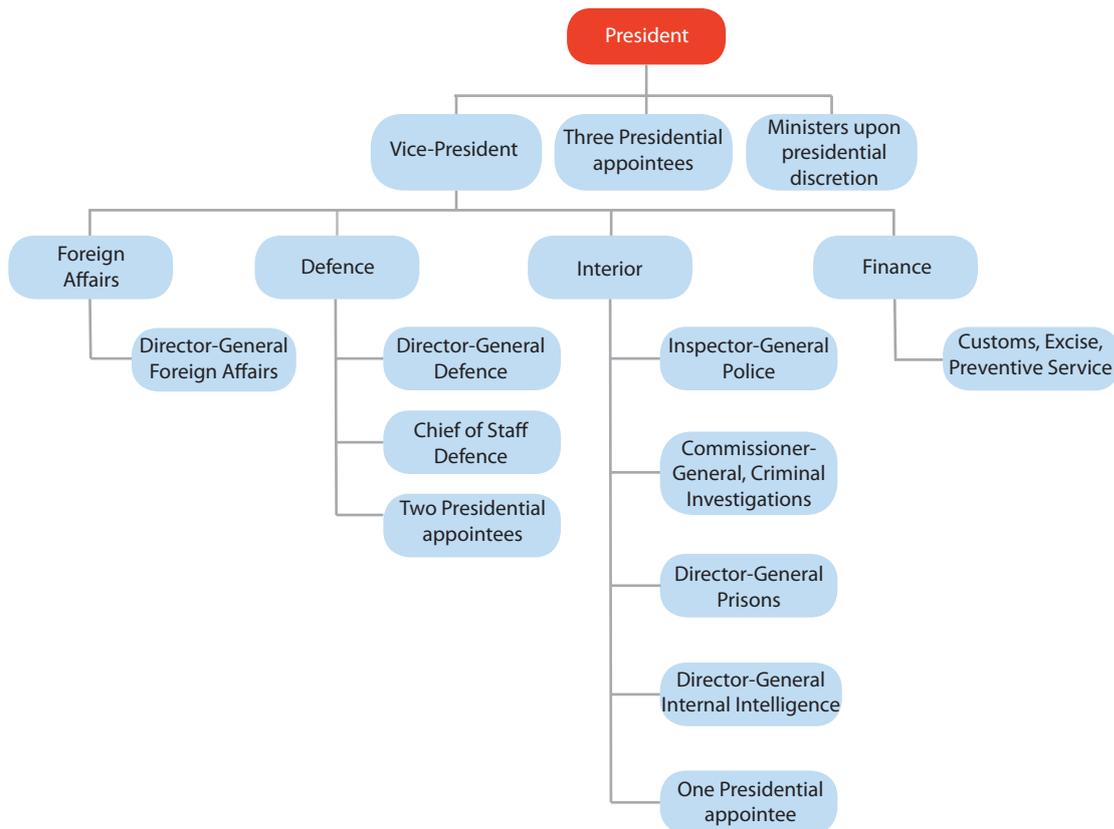


Figure 2. NSC Composition, Sierra Leone



In some countries, there is a fourth tier of membership comprising representatives of parliament – the speaker and/or representatives of the main political parties. Again, approaches vary. In Portugal, for example, two MPs attend NSC sessions when issues pertaining to the deployment of troops abroad are discussed. In Austria, all political parties have a place at the table.

The rules of procedure of some NSCs also foresee the possibility of including external experts in the work of the committee. Such experts are usually non-voting members and their involvement is of limited duration. Nevertheless, there are instances where the chief executive will use his prerogative of appointing voting members to the NSC to strengthen his support in the body on a permanent basis.

What are the main functions of NSCs?

Whether an NSC performs a decision-making or advisory role, it tends to be involved in the following activities.

- acting as a body for ventilating different views on security issues and developing consensus positions
- elaborating a strategic framework for dealing with current and emerging risks and threats, and structuring longer-term planning, including resource allocation.
- devising policy options and recommendations for government on specific matters
- coordinating the activity of government ministries and departments with a security role
- taking the lead for the government in a state of emergency
- selecting individuals for high-level appointments in the security sector.

Box 3. How is the work of an NSC supported?

There are basically two approaches. In parliamentary systems, the NSC or its equivalent tends to rely on analyses and recommendations produced elsewhere - within security agencies and ministries. In presidential systems, the NSC can be supported by a secretariat that produces its own analyses and recommendations, although it may also use externally produced material. The recent decision by the UK to have a national security advisor to support the NSC may point to a new, more mixed, approach.

In the United States, the NSC is supported by a staff of over 100 individuals assigned to some 25 thematic, geographical and administrative units. Most other countries must work with considerably fewer resources. This can reflect the relatively marginal role of the NSC in the overall system of government decision-making in the area of security, or simply a general lack of resources for government institutions.

What are some of the preconditions of an effective NSC?

To be effective, an NSC needs

Substantial authority. For an NSC to enjoy authority and legitimacy, it should have high-level political support, a strong mandate, be accountable for its decisions or recommendations, and have a record of accomplishment.

Adequate resources. When an NSC lacks personnel and financial resources, its deliberations can end up being infrequent; when they do take place they are likely to be poorly prepared and

their overall usefulness suffers, with the result that informal consultations tend to take over.

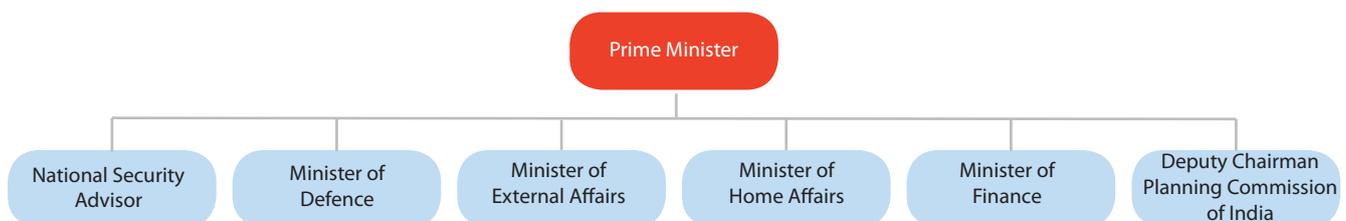
Sufficient expertise. Even where resources are available, NSCs may suffer from a lack of expertise for dealing with security issues. New and post-conflict countries can be particularly disadvantaged in this respect: new countries because there is little or no tradition in this area, post-conflict countries because elites may have been decimated or discredited during the conflict, or may have relocated in its wake.

Effective coordination. A number of negative implications can flow from poor 'whole-of-government' coordination, including – most crucially – inadequate or non-existent information-sharing between NSC members and other government players central to developing and overseeing national security policy.

Significant consensus. NSCs that degenerate into a forum where key security actors fight out their ideological differences and one or the other actor seeks to cement its leading position are invariably ineffectual. It may take years for an NSC to develop a culture of consensus.

Reasonable confidentiality. NSC members need to be able to deliberate on security issues without being concerned that ideas advanced in the course of discussion will end up in the media. This appears to be a particular problem for NSCs where representatives of political parties sit.

Figure 3. NSC Composition, India



Box 4. How is an NSC in a parliamentary system structured?

The Indian NSC structure is typical of the approach taken in a parliamentary system. Here, the NSC is backed up by a three-tiered structure, consisting of a,

- Strategic Policy Group made up of Secretary-level civil servants, Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces intelligence agency Heads and the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India
- Joint Intelligence Committee, which analyses intelligence gathered from the two main governmental intelligence agencies (R&AW and IB), and the intelligence directorates of the three wings of the Armed Forces
- National Security Advisory Board, comprising policy experts, scientists, intellectuals and military/political analysts from outside the field of government.

Meaningful accountability. Few NSCs are effectively accountable to their country's legislature and the media. Accountability provisions are often weak or non-existent. Far too often, the need for rigorous oversight is dismissed with trumped-up arguments about the need to protect national security.

Balanced composition. It is critical for an NSC to have an appropriate balance between civilians and uniformed actors with clear mechanisms for civilian control. In countries under military rule or where the influence of the military has traditionally been very strong, NSCs have sometimes been established as a vehicle for protecting or enhancing the role of the military in security decision-making. This is the case of the Pakistani NSC, created in 2004, and that of the Turkish NSC prior to a reform in that same year. In dictatorial regimes, leaders sometimes establish an NSC as a mechanism to help them dominate the security establishment.

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