How U.S. National Security Decisions Are Made

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Abstract: Donald Trump’s unexpected victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election will bring to the Oval Office a person with no past political experience. Having run on a foreign policy platform that, at times, challenged the established bipartisan orthodoxy in Washington, he must also deal with a Congress which, although nominally dominated by his own political party, is more likely to wish to exercise a close check on the new administration. Given the chill between the Republican party’s foreign policy establishment and the President-elect and with the proviso that the new Chief Executive will need to get Senatorial confirmation for his nominees to the top echelons of the executive branch departments, it raises the possibility that the new team will continue with trends already noticeable in the last three presidential administrations: to shift the focal point of decision-making away from the national security bureaucracy and the Cabinet in favor of the “palace” of advisors and White House staff surrounding the president.

Most Americans believe that they have an understanding of how the President makes important national security decisions, influenced by the depictions they see in Hollywood movies, from Dr. Strangelove to Independence Day. Experts send information and options upward, and the President convenes Cabinet officials and senior military officers who cluster in the Oval Office or the Situation Room to thrash out appropriate solutions, which are then transmitted to the responsible agencies of the U.S. government for implementation. This perspective aligns with what Robert Cutler, President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s first National Security Advisor, dubbed “Policy Hill”—that in making policy, “recommendations travel upward […] where they are thrashed out and submitted to the President. When the President has approved a policy recommendation, it travels down the other side of Policy Hill to the departments and agencies responsible for its execution.”


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The “Policy Hill” analogy, however, rests on two unstated assumptions: first, that the President is personally interested and involved in the decision-making; and second, that the key advisors surrounding the President happen to be the heads of the relevant agencies and departments. Over the last several administrations, these assumptions have been challenged increasingly by the actual realities of how policy is made.

Even though all U.S. government decisions are made in the name of the President, in actuality, however, the President only has time and energy to make a fraction of the national security decisions in a personal capacity. As Ben Heineman points out, “a President can have only five to 10 top priorities on which he makes virtually all decisions. He can set general direction for perhaps 25 secondary priorities.” Yet, the Constitution makes no provision for a collective Presidency or for presidential deputies to share the burden of Executive authority. At the same time, as another former National Security Advisor, Robert C. “Bud” McFarlane, has noted, there is a strong preference not to have to bring “minor matters”—especially the whole host of day-to-day, routine issues—to the President for resolution and authorization. The challenge, as yet a third former National Security Advisor, Jim Jones, has observed, is that there must also be a way to determine whether a matter needs to be brought personally to the President for his or her intervention, since “not everything has to go to the President for a decision,” while, at the same time, ensuring a high degree of fidelity “with the President’s wishes” in terms of policy outcomes.

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