

## How National Security Advisers See Their Role

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Over the past few decades, the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (as the national security adviser is formally known) has emerged as the most important foreign policy aide to the president. Whether the job is performed largely outside of public view (as by Brent Scowcroft—1975-77; 1989-93 and Stephen Hadley—2005- ), or in a more publicly prominent manner (as was true for Henry Kissinger—1969-75, Zbigniew Brzezinski—1977-81, and Condoleezza Rice—2001-05), almost every national security adviser since McGeorge Bundy (1961-66) ultimately emerged as a principal player in the foreign policy arena.

Yet, despite the enormous power they have wielded, there has been insufficient attention to the role these advisers play in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. Unlike the jobs of their Cabinet counterparts, their position is neither rooted in law nor accountable to Congress. As the White House point person on foreign policy, the national security adviser serves at the pleasure of the president. Moreover, while the adviser heads a small (albeit growing) staff, his/her managerial duties are small compared to the huge departmental responsibilities of the Secretaries of State, Defense, Treasury, and other principal foreign policymakers. And though some advisers have not shunned the limelight, their public responsibilities are far more limited than those of, say, the Secretary of State, who is the president's principal foreign policy spokesperson at home (and abroad).

Nonetheless, the national security adviser and the NSC staff have become central foreign policy players. Indeed, over the years the NSC staff has expanded from a small group of less than fifteen policy people in the early 1960s to what is today a fully ensconced, agency-like organization of 200 people, including about 75 substantive professionals. This organization has its own perspective on the myriad of national security issues confronting the government. It has become less like a staff and more like an operating agency. With its own press, legislative, communication, and speechmaking offices, the NSC conducts ongoing relations with the media, Congress, the American public, and foreign governments.

The reasons for this expansion are many. The foundation, of course, has been presidents' need for close-in foreign policy support, and advisers' success in meeting this need. Beyond this, three developments stand out. First, as can be expected of any organization that has operated for decades, the NSC has become institutionalized and even bureaucratized. The White House Situation Room, established under Kennedy, has become the focal point for crisis management. The NSC communications system, also inaugurated under Kennedy, has grown in sophistication with the advance of technology. It allows staff to monitor the overseas messages sent to and from

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the State Department, to have access to major intelligence material, and to communicate directly and secretly with foreign governments. Over time, these capacities, together with continuing presidential need, have built the NSC into a strong, entrenched, and legitimate presidential institution.

Second, the kinds of foreign policy issues that need to be addressed have both expanded in number and become more complex in nature. With the end of the Cold War, national security issues now involve more dimensions, each of which has proponents somewhere in the executive branch. The traditional and long-recognized dividing lines—between foreign and domestic policy, and between the high-politics issues of war and peace and the low-politics issues of social and economic advancement—have blurred. As a result, the number and type of players concerned with each issue have grown as well—placing a premium on effective organization and integration of different interests. Of all the players in the Executive Branch, only the White House has the recognized power necessary to manage these disparate interests effectively. And within the White House, only the NSC has the demonstrated capacity to do so.

Third, U.S. politics no longer ends at the water's edge—it continues right on into the mainstream of foreign affairs. Aside from extraordinary events like the war against Al Qaeda in response to September 11, few issues are easily separated from domestic political turmoil—not military intervention, not diplomatic relations, and certainly not trade and economic interactions with the outside world. The necessity to provide political oversight of executive action—to ensure not only that policy is executed in the best manner possible, but that the political consequences of doing so have been considered—naturally falls to the White House, and to the NSC acting as its surrogate.

Yet, while the national security adviser and the NSC staff have grown in importance, their specific roles and significance remain unclear not only to the American public, but even to many of the most avid followers of foreign policy in Congress, the media, and academia. Two roundtables with former national security advisers help elucidate their roles.<sup>1</sup> In freewheeling discussions, which ranged historically from the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s to the new Bush administration in the new century, the former advisers recounted their experiences, debated their responsibilities, and reflected on the proper role of the national security adviser under present circumstances. The discussions centered on three issues: the adviser's role in managing the foreign policy decision-making process, the adviser's operational role and responsibility, and the adviser's public responsibilities, especially with respect to Congress.

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<sup>1</sup> One roundtable, convened by the Brookings-Maryland project on the National Security Council on October 25, 1999, featured Richard Allen (1981-82), Frank Carlucci (1986-87), Walt Rostow (1966-69), Anthony Lake (1993-97), and Brent Scowcroft. The other, convened by the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars and the Baker Institute at Rice University on April 12, 2001, featured Samuel Berger (1997-2001), Zbigniew Brzezinski, Frank Carlucci, Robert McFarlane (1983-85), Walt Rostow, and Andrew Goodpaster (who was staff secretary to President Dwight Eisenhower (1954-61), and as such performed most of the tasks of day-to-day national security policy management carried out by national security advisers from the Kennedy administration onward.). A transcript of the Brookings-Maryland Roundtable is available at <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/research/projects/nsc/transcripts/19991025.htm>, which also includes transcripts of interviews with Samuel Berger (1997-2001), Robert McFarlane, Colin Powell (1987-89) and John Poindexter (1985-87). A transcript of the Wilson Center/Rice is available at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/news/docs/nsa.pdf>. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are drawn from these transcripts.

## **Managing the Decision-Making Process**

Aside from staffing the president in his personal foreign policy role—by making sure he gets the necessary information and is briefed prior to meetings, visits, and negotiations—the most important role of the national security adviser is to manage the decision-making process effectively. This involves three steps. First is guiding the policymaking process on major foreign and national security issues to ensure both that those with strong stakes in the issue are involved in the process and that all realistic policy options are fully considered—including options not favored by any agency—before these issues reach the president and his senior advisers for decision. Second is driving this process to make real choices in a timely manner. Third is overseeing the implementation of the decisions made by the president and his advisers.

Managing this process effectively is demanding in a number of ways. There is, first of all, the inherent tension between the need of the national security adviser to be an effective and trustworthy honest broker among the different players in the decision-making process and the desire of the president to have the best possible policy advice, including advice from his closest foreign policy aide. The roles are inherently in conflict. Balancing them is tricky and possible only if the adviser has earned the trust of the other key players. As Sandy Berger argued, “You have to be perceived by your colleagues as an honest representative of their viewpoint, or the system breaks down.” Walt Rostow agreed: “The national security advisor ought to be able to state the point of view of each member the president consults, with sympathy. He may disagree with it, but if a Cabinet member ever looks at what is in the summary paper, nothing is more gratifying to a national security adviser than to have him say, ‘The State Department couldn’t have done any better itself.’” And Zbigniew Brzezinski suggested that:

One would have to be awfully stupid to misrepresent the views of one’s colleagues to the president, because you know that if the issue is important, there will be a discussion. The president will go back and discuss it, in your presence or even your absence, with his principal advisers, be they secretary of state or secretary of defense. And it would very quickly be evident that you distorted their views if you did. So you have to be absolutely precise and present as persuasively as you can the arguments that they have mustered in favor of their position.

Brent Scowcroft aptly summarized the matter in the Brookings-Maryland roundtable:

. . . it’s always more exciting to be the adviser, but if you are not the honest broker, you don’t have the confidence of the NSC. If you don’t have their confidence, then the system doesn’t work, because they will go around you to get to the president. . . . So in order for the system to work, you first have to establish yourself in the confidence of your colleagues to convince them you are not going to pull fast ones on them. That means when you are in there with the president alone, which you are more than anybody else, that you will represent them fairly. . . . And after you have done that, then you are free to be an adviser.

Once the national security adviser has gained the trust of his colleagues, it is also important that the president receive his unvarnished advice. And while a good White House staff person would do well to follow “empirical rule number one” of the Eisenhower administration, (which Goodpaster recalled as, “The president is always right!”) at least in public, it is equally important to tell the president when he is wrong. As Berger maintained, “I think the national security advisor often has to be the one that says the president’s wrong. I always felt it was my particular obligation to give the president the downsides of a particular step he was about to take or to simply state to

him—there may be a consensus among his decision-makers, but this consensus does not reflect another serious point of view that he should consider.”

In short, the national security adviser must balance the role of adviser and honest broker by both earning the trust of colleagues in presenting their views fully, fairly, and faithfully to the president and giving the president his or her best advice on every issue (even—indeed, especially—if it has not been asked for), in order to ensure the president is aware of all possible points of view. Such advice, however, should be given privately in person or by memo; in public, the national security adviser must stand with the president at all times. As Brzezinski recalls,

while I do agree that the president's always right in public—whenever there's a group, he's right, because the national security adviser is helping him—in private, you have the obligation to tell him that he's wrong. And I did that repeatedly, and the president wanted me to. There was only one time that he finally sent me a little note saying, “Zbig, don't you know when to stop?” when I went back several times, trying to argue that this was not right.

Of course, even in providing the president with unvarnished advice—including advice he may not like to hear—the national security adviser also must make sure that the president's own perspective and preferences are brought into the decision-making process at an early stage. After all, the president is the only person in the Executive Branch actually elected by the people—every one else serves at his pleasure alone. Condoleezza Rice emphasized this role in an interview with the *New York Times*, saying of President George W. Bush, “This president has a very strong anchor and compass about the direction of policy, about not just what's right and what's wrong, but what might work and what might not work.”<sup>2</sup> Her job, she maintained, was to translate these presidential instincts into policy.

A second balancing requirement concerns making demands on the president's time—his most precious commodity. There are many, many demands—meetings with aides, meetings with members of Congress, public ceremonies, issues other than foreign policy, etc., etc.—and only 24 hours in a day. A key responsibility of the national security adviser is therefore to try to minimize imposition on the president's time. Of course, many issues require his involvement and attention—but not all. Deciding where and when the president should be involved is an issue that must preoccupy any national security adviser.

To minimize imposing on the president's time, the adviser will often seek to forge a consensus on policy among the different players and interests. As Berger suggests, the objective is often to “try to bring the secretary of defense, the secretary of state and others to what I used to call the highest common denominator. If there was not a consensus at a fairly high level, it was better to bring the president two starkly different points of view. But some of this is a function of trying to clear the underbrush of decisions before they get to the president.” Frank Carlucci recalls a similar process, in which, when he was secretary of defense, he met with his successor, Colin Powell, and the secretary of state, George Shultz, every morning at seven o'clock, without substitutes or agendas “to lay out the day's events and see if we could reach agreement. And invariably, we reached agreement. And the number of decisions that had to go to the president was greatly reduced by that process.”

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Elisabeth Bumiller, “A Partner in Shaping Foreign Policy,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2004.

Of course, while it is important to try to preserve the president's time, it is also important not to create a policy process that presents the president with *faits accomplis* on important policy issues. A decision-making process that is geared towards consensus will often lead to the lowest, rather than highest, common denominator policies, which invariably lack boldness or even clear direction. Equally pernicious, a consensus process can result in delay in decision-making in order to allow time for disagreements to be resolved—enhancing the prospect for ad-hoc and reactive policymaking and needlessly limiting the options that could logically be considered if decisions were made at an earlier stage. Finally, a consensus process increases the likelihood that mistakes will go uncorrected, as the need for maintaining bureaucratic comity outweighs the requirement to reexamine policy.

What can complicate matters is a head-strong president, certain in his convictions about the right course to follow. Because a president's advisers serve at his pleasure and can be effective only if they retain his confidence, it is often very difficult for any of them to go against a consensus that has formed around the president's policy preference. This appears to have been the case with President Bush and Iraq. Not long after the September 11 attacks and the subsequent rapid ouster of the Taliban from Afghanistan, the president concluded that Saddam Hussein had to be ousted from power—most likely through the use of force. There never was a formal debate, or even a process by which to assess the pros and cons of such a far-reaching action. Instead, the president decided this was necessary and a consensus to that effect guided policymaking from that point onward. By the time the downsides of this decision had become clear, it was too late to shift course.

To avoid consensus leading to costly inaction, it may be necessary for the national security adviser to act more forcefully to challenge the consensus that exists, even when the President doesn't want such a challenge. At the Brookings-Maryland roundtable, Anthony Lake recalled his early "mistake the first six months when I tried too much to be just an honest broker. I remember Colin Powell coming to me and saying that I needed to give my own views more push, . . . you have to drive the process, and you have to understand that only the NSC can do that." At the same time, when consensus is achieved rapidly and with little debate, the adviser needs to be skeptical of the outcome, to make sure all aspects of a policy have been thought through and, furthermore, to be ready to be the devil's advocate to ensure the consensus reflects the best course. As the tapes of the Cuban Missile Crisis meetings have revealed, McGeorge Bundy saw it as his role to challenge any emerging consensus, no matter whether hawkish or dovish, to ensure all the consequences of a particular action had been considered. By all accounts, Condoleezza Rice failed to play a similarly constructive role with respect to Iraq—not just on the decision to go to war, but on plans to bring stability and stable governance after the invasion was completed.

One final consideration in managing the decision-making process concerns the kinds of issues that should fall within the NSC's coordination purview. The NSC exists for the purpose of integrating a government organized among large stovepipes, among which there is insufficient interaction. The national security adviser will have to decide which issues will have to be coordinated among these different stovepipes, how, and at what level. Too little coordination, confined to too high a level, will likely result in the exclusion of relevant issues. Too much coordination at too low a level will invariably involve the NSC in micromanaging the policy process in ways that will soon overwhelm the capacity of the staff. For that reason, Brzezinski suggested that "coordination has to take place at the presidential level. That is to say, when the decisions are of a presidential-level type decisions, then NSC coordination is necessary."

Berger disagreed, insisting that among the “important functions of the National Security Council staff is to coordinate decision-making, particularly at the working level, between the various agencies.” Citing the case of Bosnia, Berger asserted, “There were day-to-day decisions that needed to be made, that were not at the presidential level, but were critically important, generally made at the assistant secretary level or above... In those issues that are high priority and fast-moving, it is often useful, although I think you can’t generalize, for the NSC to be convening the Defense Department, the State Department and others because the institutional tensions between State and Defense often are such that without a third party in the chair, things fall back on bureaucratic instinct.”

The difference between Brzezinski and Berger probably cannot be resolved except on a case-by-case basis. On those issues that require presidential input or decision, NSC involvement is, of course, a must. But not all others can be left solely to the departments to resolve, for they typically have neither the incentive nor the mechanisms necessary to do so. Bureaucratic stalemate or, possibly worse, pursuit of conflicting policies that reflect departmental rather than presidential preferences, can often result. Conversely, however, an NSC staff that insists on coordinating each and every issue will soon become mired in details and incapable of concentrating on the big picture. Moreover, the temptation for the adviser or an NSC staff member will often be to seize control of an issue, even to the point of becoming responsible for policy implementation. That, as history tells us, can sometimes be highly effective—and also exceedingly dangerous.

The other major question with regard to the issues that need to be covered by the NSC and the adviser concerns the breadth of issue competence. The NSC was originally founded to concern itself with foreign policy and defense issues — whence the restriction of its membership to the secretaries of state and defense as well as the president and vice president. However, over time, and especially in the last two decades, the issues affecting foreign policy have grown in number and complexity, and so has the need for effective policy coordination. By the end of the Clinton Administration, the national security adviser not only had to deal with traditional issues of defense and regional diplomacy, but also with energy, the environment, international finance, terrorism, drug trafficking, human rights and disaster relief, and even, if was felt, Gulf War illnesses. The policy coordinating task therefore not only included the traditional NSC agencies of State, Defense, the military and intelligence communities, but Treasury, Justice, Transportation, and even Health and Human Services.

The Bush administration entered office in 2001 with the view that the NSC competence had been stretched too far and too thin. Rice cut the NSC staff by more than 30 percent, and she ordered her staff to cease coordinating policy with the domestic government agencies, including Justice and the FBI. The National Security Council would once again focus on the hard power issues of defense and diplomacy involving the great powers. The September 11 attacks underscored that in an age of transnational threat, dividing the world and policymaking neatly between foreign and domestic policy is increasingly difficult. Yet, the Bush administration has tried just that—assigning the NSC the role of coordinating counter-terrorism abroad while setting up a new structure (the Office of Homeland Security) to coordinate anti-terrorism policy at home.

## **How Operational Should the NSC Be?**

A perennial issue for every national security adviser is the question of the NSC's operational involvement in executing policy. The consensus view, especially after the Iran-Contra affair, is that the NSC performs a coordinating and oversight and advisory function but should never become operational. That was the view expressed in 1987 by the Tower Commission, established to review the causes of that fiasco, and it has been faithfully repeated since. Yet, the national security adviser and staff have repeatedly been operationally involved in the 15 years since the Iran-Contra affair became public. Advisers have traveled on solo missions abroad. They have met with foreign diplomats and ministers on an almost daily basis. As Scowcroft recalled, "Somebody from the NSC always traveled with the secretary of state or the secretary of defense," and NSC staff members often serve as members of negotiating delegations abroad. So the question is not really whether the NSC should have an operational role, but, rather, what kind and to what extent.

It is important to understand why the president might wish the national security adviser to be operationally involved. On one level, it is the result of a basic degree of confidence, comfort, and trust. Presidents know their national security advisers well and have confidence in the advisers' staffs. The same is not always true for the secretary of state and certainly not for the State Department generally, which is largely staffed by career officials. Some presidents come to power—or develop—a distinct distrust of the State Department (Kennedy, Nixon and the younger Bush come to mind); others want to run foreign policy out of the White House to secure a central personal role for themselves (Carter and Bush Sr., as well as Kennedy and Nixon). In either case, the NSC is the bureaucratic beneficiary of the president's desires. As Brzezinski puts it,

if you have a president who comes to office intent on making foreign policy himself, on a daily basis, you have a different role than if the president comes to office, let's say, more interested in domestic affairs and more inclined to delegate foreign policy authority to his principal advisors. In the first instance, the national security advisor is the inevitable bureaucratic beneficiary of deep presidential involvement.

In addition, as Anthony Lake noted, an operational NSC role is "necessary because of the way other governments are structured. For the same reasons it's happening here, other governments more and more are revolving around presidencies, prime ministers, etc., and the international contacts between them. As Brent knows, I inherited his phone with the direct lines to our counterparts all around the world who simply had to be engaged."

Aside from presidential intent and international governmental evolution, the normal ebb and flow of events will also tend to influence the nature and extent of the NSC's operational involvement. One major factor propelling such involvement is the lack of bureaucratic responsiveness to presidential direction. As Bud McFarlane recalled in an oblique reference to Iran-Contra, there is the "frustration a president can experience as someone who is there for four years wanting to get something done, to be able to demonstrate leadership in X or Y area, and with the frustration of not seeing that the Department of State or others in his administration moving in that direction." The temptation in these situations is for the national security adviser or even the president to force the issue by having the NSC implement the policy as the president wants it implemented. It is a temptation that McFarlane warns the national security adviser to resist. It should not "lead the National Security Council or the adviser to go beyond the line and take on an operational role. You simply don't have the resources, and you don't have the mandate in law to do that. So that's a big mistake."

A further reason why the national security adviser may become operationally involved is to effect a fundamental shift in policy that, if left to the State Department to implement, would risk being derailed in bureaucratic entanglement. This, of course, was the cited reason for the most famous and productive operational engagement by a national security assistant: Henry Kissinger's secret diplomacy with China (over opening relations), North Vietnam (to negotiate a peace agreement), and the Soviet Union (over arms control and détente). There also may be other occasions when it is logical for the president to send his national security adviser on a quiet diplomatic mission—both to keep the actual mission out of public view and to underscore the president's own commitment to the issue in question. Zbig Brzezinski recalled four such missions during his time in office: to normalize relations with China, address a particular Middle East peace issue with Egypt, to reassure the Europeans over the Euromissile question, and to organize a regional response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (the first of these did not prove to be very secret). Brent Scowcroft traveled twice to Beijing in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacres. Tony Lake undertook two trips to Europe in connection with Bosnia, and a trip to China to help repair badly-frayed relations in 1996. Sandy Berger traveled to Moscow to gauge Russia's interest in an arms control deal. Rice also went to Moscow, arriving there even before the Secretary of State had visited. And Stephen Hadley has traveled to Iraq as well as to India and Pakistan. In each case, however, the actual trip was coordinated within the U.S. government. Unlike in Kissinger's diplomacy, carried out largely without the knowledge of Secretary of State William P. Rogers, the secretary of state was kept fully informed of these missions and often a senior state department representative would travel along with the president's own adviser.

Clearly, then, the national security adviser has a unique operational role to play under certain circumstances. What makes them unique, however, is not just the issue at hand, but the fact that such engagement is exceptional rather than routine.

### **The Public Role of the National Security Adviser**

In recent years, the national security adviser has emerged as a prominent public spokesperson on foreign policy. Whereas Brent Scowcroft once counseled that the national security adviser "should be seen occasionally and heard even less," the reverse is increasingly the case. Now, a Sandy Berger and a Condoleezza Rice seem to be everywhere—giving speeches of major import, being quoted in newspapers and newsmagazines as a result of frequent press briefings and even more frequent media interviews, appearing on the Sunday-morning talk show circuit.

The reason for the public emergence of the national security adviser appears to be two-fold. First, the increasing politicization of foreign policy has made defense of the president's policies by the person most directly associated with the president politically more important. It is not coincidental, therefore, that the four most recent national security advisers (Tony Lake, Sandy Berger, Condoleezza Rice, and Stephen Hadley) were all key advisers to the president during their campaigns for office. In contrast, with the exception of Zbigniew Brzezinski and Richard Allen, prior national security advisers were not politically associated with the incoming president. The second reason for the greater public exposure of the national security adviser in recent years is changes in the media—especially proliferation in the number of media outlets. The need to cover all the bases requires a larger number of spokespeople to engage, including, by extension, the national security adviser. As Berger argues, "The pace of the news cycle is now almost continuous, and the



breadth of the media tends to pull the national security adviser out more as part of a team of people who goes out, but always with the secretary of state at the lead.”

One of the consequences of the public emergence of the national security adviser is the demand for increased accountability, especially on Capitol Hill, where congressmen and senators get to ask questions of the department heads but are unable to demand answers from the president’s closest foreign policy adviser. As former Congressman Lee Hamilton put it to the panel of former national security assistants, “I think the national security advisor occupies a very special place. He is, if not the principal advisor, among the two or three principal advisors to the president on foreign policy. You’re perfectly willing to go before all of the TV networks anytime they give you a ring, if you want to go. Why should you discriminate against the Congress?” Told by a number of the former advisers that they always were willing to meet with members in their offices, Hamilton continued: “But it is not the same thing for a national security advisor to come into the private office and meet behind closed doors with members of Congress. That’s not the same thing as going into a public body and answering questions, in my judgment. They’re two different things.”

The absence of congressional accountability sometimes leads to the suggestion that the national security adviser should be confirmed—a suggestion reviewed, and rejected, by the Tower Commission. The former advisers all rejected that possibility. They offered a variety of reasons:

- It would prove a major diversion, because with confirmation comes the requirement to testify on the Hill. Brzezinski: “If you get confirmed you also have to testify a lot, you have to go down to the Hill a lot. The schedule demands on you are so enormous already that that would be an additional burden. Moreover, it would greatly complicate the issue we talked about earlier, namely, who speaks for foreign policy in the government besides the president? The answer should be the secretary of state. If you are confirmed, that would become fuzzed and confused.”
- It would compromise the ability of the national security adviser to provide confidential advice to the president. Berger: “One benefit of not having confirmation is that you can say no to a congressional committee. In fact, most presidents have taken the view that under executive privilege their national security advisor, just like their chief of staff, can’t be compelled to go up on the Hill.”
- It would have a negative impact on the policy formation process. Carlucci: “If you make the national security advisor subject to Senate confirmation, you’re going to degrade the process significantly. The president will have a very difficult time implementing a coherent foreign policy. I think the president would simply name another staff person to do what the national security advisor does and let this confirmed official run around on the Hill.”
- It is unnecessary because there is accountability in the system. Carlucci: “These are staff people to the president. And we had a case where the president was almost brought down because of the actions of National Security Council staff—Ronald Reagan. So there is an accountability system, and the president should be free to pick whomever he wants to give him advice.”

The modern national security adviser has been a staple of the American foreign policy-making process for more than 40 years. Although the role will evolve with each president and with the growing complexity of the world, the fundamental tasks are unlikely to change all that much—to staff the president and manage the foreign policy formulation and implementation process. The demands and dilemmas each occupant has faced in meeting these tasks will also surely continue. It

is in reflecting on how others have handled these challenges in the past that future occupants may prove able to do a job that, by any standard, has become difficult indeed..