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President Should Merge Homeland Security Council with NSC

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On February 13, President Obama issued a directive requiring a review of whether the Homeland Security Council (HSC) should be integrated with the National Security Council (NSC). In addition, the directive looked to increasing the capacity of the White House to manage issues during a crisis.

The directive asks the right questions, and the right answer should strengthen the government's ability to respond holistically to national security matters without adding bureaucracy and over-centralization, which would hamstring Washington's capacity to respond during a crisis.

President Obama should fold the HSC into the NSC. Doing so would improve interagency policy planning and eliminate gaps between efforts to address transnational security threats at home and overseas. However, the President should not make major changes at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) until the Quadrennial Homeland Security Review (QHSR) is released in December.

In addition, the President should resist the impulse to further centralize decision-making and turn the White House into a command post in time of crisis. Such an effort would likely make the government less, not more, responsive to global challenges.

Time for Change. Created in 1947, the NSC serves as the principal forum for security issues, advising the President on pressing national security and foreign policy matters. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the White House created the HSC for "coordination of all homeland security-related activities

among executive departments and agencies and [to] promote the effective development and implementation of all homeland security policies."

An independent HSC played an important role as the federal government reorganized its efforts to confront global terrorism and other transnational security challenges that did not fit neatly into categories of foreign threats or domestic concerns. Today, however, policy-planning for homeland security has matured to the point that a separate council is no longer essential.

The Administration would be better served by a single council with carefully created portfolios to ensure that national security issues are addressed in a balanced and integrated manner. The national security advisor should have a deputy with oversight of homeland security and disaster preparedness response. Where possible, offices in the NSC in matters such as counterterrorism should have transnational responsibility for overseeing policy coordination for both domestic and foreign affairs.

Change We Can't Live With. Reforming the NSC should not lead the President to conclude that major reorganizations are also necessary at DHS. It is premature to consider further reorganization of

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the department or its missions without a comprehensive review of what has been accomplished the last six years, the impact of the numerous changes already on the department by Congress, and the challenges ahead.

Any additional reforms should not be considered until after completion of the QHSR, a mandatory assessment of the national homeland security enterprise directed by Congress. The QHSR is to be conducted by the DHS and its recommendations provided to Congress by the end of 2009. The QHSR should serve as the basis for discussing the efficacy of further reforms, including the role of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the organization of national responsibilities for preparing and responding to disasters.

The White House should also demonstrate prudence and restraint in expanding the authority and responsibility of the President's staff. The NSC should remain focused on its primary task: Policy coordination and providing staff advice to the President. The Administration should resist the effort to "operationalize" the White House by expanding its capacity to conduct crisis management and planning day-to-day operations.

Usurping the roles and responsibilities of federal agencies will only complicate the process of governing, obfuscate effective congressional oversight, blur lines of authority and responsibility, and increasingly bog the White House down in the day-to-day affairs of managing homeland security.

Additionally, even with expanded authority and directive control, a White House staff will be unable to deal with the rapid changing pace and broad scope of global affairs. Rather than streamline and integrate government activities, an operational White House will likely become a bottleneck that hampers innovation, imagination, and effective decentralized execution.

Instead of expanding the authority of the White House staff, the President should be looking for solutions to make government work better. The core of effective "whole of government" responses lies in decentralized execution, coordinated integrated planning, and information sharing. The focus of the White House interagency reform effort should be in strengthening the education, training, planning, exercising, and capacity of federal agencies to work in an effective manner—not beefing up the White House bureaucracy.

Responding to the President. The right answers to the President's questions on national security reform in the White House should be clear. The President should:

- Merge the HSC and NSC, ensuring that the homeland security matters are adequately represented in the reorganized staff,
- Resist the temptation to tinker with the national homeland security enterprise or the organization and missions of DHS, and
- Reject proposals to "operationalize" the White House and shift the NSC role from policy coordination to planning and implementation.

These steps will ensure that the President has the advice and counsel he requires to effectively address the national security challenges of today and tomorrow.

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