**The Obama Administration’s National Security Council, 2009-2017**

**Prologue**

On Tuesday, January 20, 2009, Chief Justice John Roberts gave Barack Obama the oath of office at the United States Capital. With that, Obama became the 44th President of the United States. This was a historic occasion—not simply because of the inauguration of a new president generally, but also because the country elected its first non-white President.

Obama entered office with an ambitious policy agenda. During the campaign, he promised to bring change to Washington—a break with the policies of the past (e.g., shutting down the prison used in the ‘war on terror’ in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; winding down operations in Iraq; and a renewed focus on the environment and alternative energy), as well as groundbreaking new ventures (e.g., a national healthcare initiative). In addition to these, he inherited the need to address other issues discussed less frequently on the campaign trail, like what the US policy in cyberspace should be.

President Obama has appointed you to a political position—one that sits on his National Security Council (NSC). In the days, weeks, months, and years ahead, he will turn to the NSC for policy advice. You, in collaboration with your classmates, will research and recommend policies to him (as he directs). You will also need to be mindful of your institutional interests. Will the proposed policies place your institution at the center of future decision-making, thereby increasing its political standing and budget? Or alternatively, will other institutions gain political clout and financial support at your expense? Finally, each President relies on a wide circle of advisers, but more heavily on a select few who have the President’s ear. Through your work on the NSC, will you distinguish yourself as a valuable adviser, or will you fade into the background? To advance your preferred policies, you want to be a part of the inner circle.

**The President**

President Obama will not be present during the NSC policy deliberations. Not only does his intense schedule and numerous policy agendas preclude him from attending the deliberations that design any single policy in full, but he also does not want the NSC to defer repeatedly to his wishes as those deliberations unfold. Instead, he will send a policy memorandum to all members of the NSC, and ask them to convene under the leadership of his National Security Adviser. The Game Master will distribute these memoranda at the appropriate times.

Should you—individually, as a faction, or as the entire NSC—need to communicate with President Obama, please do so *in writing* through the Gamemaster. As an illustration, if you want to know the President’s larger foreign policy toward China, you would write him a memorandum asking that specific question (or any other you want addressed). The Gamemaster will then give you President Obama’s response, which will vary from a detailed answer (e.g., “Three large principles govern our foreign policy toward China…) to an action item for you (e.g., “Please check with the Secretary of State on this matter.”). The Gamemaster may also supply the President’s feedback to your policy recommendations (e.g., “I do not understand what *this* means. Please elaborate.” -or- “Have you considered *this*?). You can request the President’s feedback in writing as you design policy, but do not do so lightly or prematurely. If he wanted to design the entire policy himself, he would do so; he wants the NSC to research and propose a ‘best path’ forward.

**The National Security Council**

The National Security Council’s (NSC) statutory constitution and authority derives from the National Security Act 1947. Its purpose, according to this act, is “to advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security so as to enable the military services and the other departments and agencies of the Government to cooperate more effectively in matters involving the national security.” The exact members of the NSC depend on the wishes of the President—in consultation with, and consent from, the Senate.

Prior to the start of the game, you may wish to familiarize yourself with the NSC. The resources below will **get you started (Assignment #0)**:

* The National Security Act of 1947 (available in Repository A).
* “History” (of the National Security Council). President Obama White House. Archived webpage (available in Repository A).
* Destler, I.M., and Ivo H. Daalder. (2000) “A New NSC for a New Administration.” Washington, DC: Brookings. (available in Repository A).
* Rothkopf, David J. (2006) Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power. New York: Public Affairs, pp. 3-21.
* “An Introduction to the National Security Council” | Model Diplomacy | Council on Foreign Relations. Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xt9_l4Im7CE>.
* “The National Security Council Interagency Process” | Model Diplomacy | Council on Foreign Relations. Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBaNiup-qFY&t=8s>.

*Decisions:*

The NSC makes decisions through voting. A majority of the Council participants present must approve any policy recommendation(s). These votes can happen either piecemeal, as the NSC constructs a given document (e.g., a vote on option one, a vote on option two, and so on), or in aggregate, once the NSC completes the entire document (e.g., the final product). We leave that decision to the NSC Acting Chair.

*Selecting a Chair:*

Before Game Session 1, the NSC will need an acting chairperson (i.e., someone to run the Council’s proceedings in the President’s absence). The Gamemaster will tell you more about this before Game Session 1.

**The Game**

The game follows the Reacting to the Past format, in which students inhabit character roles at key historical moments. Three features of this format will be critical to understand as the game unfolds:

* *The Time Rule:* The game plays out during the entire Obama Administration (2009-2017). It begins in Spring 2009, and moves forward in time during subsequent NSC meetings. The President will issue memoranda that give the NSC specific issues to address during its meetings. Pay careful attention to the dates of these memoranda. You will need to research, write, and speak on the issues the President brings to your attention, but only research dated *before* the memoranda date to which the NSC responds will be permissible. As an example, imagine that President Obama asks the NSC for advice about pandemics. Any research on COVID-19, which had not happened yet, cannot be used in these deliberations. Similarly, the Department of Defense (DoD) might have a position on pandemics in 2018 that it did *not* have during the Obama era. You will therefore need to do careful historical research. Note: The instructor will supply repositories of time-appropriate research to get you started.
* *The Podium Rule:* You will need to present your (various) position(s) to the NSC. The National Security Adviser will structure and run these meetings. S/he cannot, however, prevent members from presenting their positions. If you approach the pre-designated speaking podium, the NSC will hear you. If the NSC attempts to ignore you, contact the Gamemaster.   
    
  (Note: The Gamemaster will also be watching for this behavior and intervene accordingly. Individuals (and factions) will not be permitted to emerge victorious if they engage in this behavior. That said, debate cannot continue forever, so don’t hold back!)
* *The ‘Everyone Else’ Rule:* If you need to speak to a character that another student represents, go talk to them. If you need to speak to a character that *no* student represents, talk to the Gamemaster. Note that the Gamemaster may ask you to write any unrepresented character a letter or inter-agency memo, to which the Gamemaster will reply on that character’s behalf.