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National Security Council of Nepal: Reform or Restructuring

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Abstract

The National Security Council (NSC) plays a critical role in addressing national security and foreign policy through a holistic lens. Established first in United States in response to the coordination challenges faced during World War II, similar councils emerged in the United Kingdom, India, Israel, and Mongolia, aimed at ensuring comprehensive national security. In Nepal, the NSC was created to bring the military under civilian oversight and has since evolved, with its role significantly expanded following constitutional reforms in 2015. This study conducts a comparative analysis of the NSCs in the aforementioned countries alongside Nepal's NSC, utilizing insights from key informant interviews with former officials. The findings reveal notable structural and functional gaps within Nepal's NSC in comparison to its counterparts. It advocates for critical reforms, including the appointment of a National Security Adviser, an increase in membership as necessary, an enhanced secretariat with specialized expertise, and a broadening of the NSC's mandate to encompass foreign policy and economic decision-making. The proposed changes emphasize the need for initial reforms followed by comprehensive restructuring, including constitutional amendments to ensure efficacy and adaptability in an evolving security landscape. These improvements are essential for strengthening governance and resilience within Nepal's national security framework.

Keywords

Foreign Policy, Key Informant Interview, National Security Adviser, National Security Council, President/PM, Reform, Restructuring

Introduction

National Security Council (hereinafter NSC), a senior-level organization provides the head of state advice on all facets of both domestic and international security. It

provides a platform for the president or prime minister (hereinafter PM) and important cabinet members to coordinate and integrate military, international, foreign and domestic policies in order to counter threats and accomplish strategic objectives. The council is the main body responsible for coordinating policies among government agencies and making sure that different departments and viewpoints are included in security decisions. In most nations, the NSC's daily operations are carried out by the NSC secretariat headed by National Security Adviser (hereinafter NSA), which provides the council members with the information they need to make decisions on matters pertaining to national security, foreign policy, and in some countries employment of country's resources.

The dictionary meaning of the term NSC is, “A committee in the executive branch of government that advises the president on foreign and military and national security; supervises the Central Intelligence Agency” (“NSC,” n.d.). The role of NSC is, “analyzing a variety of international and domestic factors-diplomatic, economic, intelligence, military, and morale-is essential to developing successful policies, from this, leaders select the best tools for policy, which may involve a mix of economic, diplomatic, or military” (Best Jr, 2009). The word "NSC" is quite recent, having only gained popularity following World War II. United States was the first country to establish NSC (Hoxie, 1982).

In Nepal NSC, was established during the transition to democracy in 1990, as, “National Defense Council (NDC) in accordance with the provisions of Article 118 of the constitution of 1990, which were pertaining to the Royal Nepal Army” ... “the role was to operate and use the army” (Nepal Const., Art. 118, 1990) members were added but the role and the name was the same in the Interim Constitution of 2007 (Nepal Interim Const. Art. 145, 2007). The name was changed to NSC in the 2015 constitution with broadened role and addition of members in the council (Government of Nepal, Art. 266, 2015).

Now let us see what are national security issues of Nepal. As per Silwal (2021), “as a comparably small, landlocked, and diverse nation, Nepal’s national security encompasses safeguarding the state (independence, sovereignty, and territory), national cohesion, economic well-being, political stability, upholding law and order, human security, safeguarding transit rights, and environmental conservation” (p 25). Key internal security issues, Silwal (2021) further inscribes are, “insurgency, terrorism, and separatist movements” (p 25). From the above information, we can discern the threats to Nepal's national security. In addition to those threats, Nepal needs to be ready to address other security threats such as the 2015 earthquake, the COVID-19 pandemic, and also consider

the protection of its migrant workers during emergencies. On top of that, the geo-strategic location of Nepal between two rising powers – India and China – Nepal faces an array of both traditional and non-traditional security concerns, including border management, environmental threats, food and energy crises, population growth and migration (Ghimire, 2014). Apart from our rising neighbors, the United States, sees, “Nepal’s allegiance pivotal for countering China’s rise. This interest is part of a larger Indo-Pacific strategy to support a balanced regional order” (Lama, 2022).

To deal with the security issues mentioned in the above paragraph, Nepal needs to have a strong and capable NSC which can take appropriate decision in national security issues and foreign policy concerns. But the news that, “the 36th Council meeting (in 34 years) presided over by the PM ..., ... on Tuesday, November 20, 2024, ...” (Rashtriya Samachar Samiti [RSS], 2024), makes us wonder if the NSC has been fully utilized in Nepal as in other countries. During the Korean War, United States had 71 NSC meeting between June 1950 and January 1953 (Hoxie, 1982). This shows the importance of NSC’s role in the United States as compared to Nepal.

Taking into account the aforementioned aspects, the paper examines the historical backdrop of the NSC and the reasons behind its establishment in nations like the US, UK, India, Israel, Mongolia, and Nepal, among others. The next section for discussion is the structure and role of the NSC in the countries mentioned above. The article further examines the need of NSA and role to act as adviser to the president/PM and head the NSC secretariat, and, whether the NSC needs to undergo reform, or restructuring, and, also assess whether the NSC should decide on issues related to foreign policy and nations wealth.

Review of Literature

Current research on NSCs has thoroughly recorded the structural developments and functional roles of established systems in the United States, United Kingdom, India, Israel, and Mongolia. These studies emphasize a worldwide tendency towards multi-disciplinary, "whole-of-government" advisory groups headed by a centralized National Security Adviser (NSA). Nonetheless, as highlighted in recent studies by Khanal (2025), there exists a notable "lack of investigation" concerning the efficacy of these models in relation to the distinct geostrategic sensitivities of Nepal.

Although current national literature examines the historical development of Nepal’s NSC’s role in the Constitutions (1990, 2007, and 2015), it typically emphasizes legal structures over institutional effectiveness. A significant gap persists: there is almost no

existing academic research offering a direct comparative study between Nepal's NSC and its international counterparts. This research fills that gap. This research creates a dialogue between global best practices and Nepal's security forces-oriented "status quo" by combining primary data from Key Informant Interviews (KII) with previous Defense Secretaries and NSC staff, along with a comparative analysis of the Mongolian, Israeli, Indian, British, and the American models.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative methodology to explore the National Security Council (NSC) of Nepal, focusing on necessary reforms or restructuring. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of complex dynamics and insights, addressing limitations in existing data or theoretical frameworks. The research employs a multi-method data collection strategy, utilizing secondary data from scholarly literature, including books, articles, and reports on national security councils, for comparative analysis. Additionally, primary data will be collected through Key Informant Interviews with past NSC secretaries, current and former personnel to gain insights into NSC Nepal's operations. A purposive sampling strategy will identify key informants with specific knowledge of NSC Nepal's functions, ensuring the collected data effectively addresses the study's core research questions. Qualitative data analysis will include reading, coding, and interpreting empirical data to identify themes and insights, cross-referencing scholarly literature and interviews, comparing international practices with the NSC Nepal context for reform or restructuring discussion

Reform or Restructuring in NSC of Nepal

Findings and Analysis

This section offers a comparative historical and structural analysis of NSCs in the United States, United Kingdom, India, Israel, Mongolia, and Nepal, highlighting the distinct factors that led to their establishment and the changes in their operational roles. Although international frameworks-like the U.S. National Security Act of 1947 and the UK's coalition reforms of 2010-arose from a demand for inter-agency coordination, transparency, and strategic vision, Nepal's NSC was traditionally confined to military mobilization. This analysis sheds light on a critical gap by exploring the different levels of influence and the essential function of the NSA within global systems, such as India's three-tier framework.

The History of NSC

Since the United States was the first nation to create the NSC, it would be beneficial to our comprehension of the organization to understand why it was founded there. During World War II, the United States had separate Army and Navy departments with no common oversight structures (Ries, 2016, p. 11). To continue with, Ries (2016) further inscribes, “following the war, the Truman administration and Congress streamlined the U.S. national security strategy and oversight process The National Security Act of 1947 established the Department of Defense, CIA, and NSC” (p. 11).” From the above, it can be inferred that the need to address future security challenges and the lessons learned from the coordination struggles of the security system during World War II motivated the United States to create the NSC.

The establishment of NSC in United Kingdom, as per Devanny (2024): “One of the first institutions established by the coalition administration in May 2010 was the NSC. A century of advancements in national security coordination led to the establishment of the NSC and its growth since 2010. The NSC is titled National Security at the Center of Government.” Devanny (2024) further inscribes, “following criticism of the ‘Status of Force Agreement, the new NSC attempted to increase the transparency and collegiality of national security decision-making.” From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the United Kingdom formed the NSC to improve national security coordination following security affairs advancements and to provide transparency in national security decision-making.

Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee established India’s NSC on 19 November 1998 (Unacademy, n.d.). The reasons for establishment as per Babu (2003), “In 1998, India formed the NSC to address higher security management gaps and respond to criticism about its long-term security perspective, reflecting its nuclear power status” (p. 217). The above words indicate the NSC was founded in India to fill a perceived void in the country's upper echelons of defense management and nuclear status.

The NSC of Israel was established by prime minister Netanyahu in in 1999 as an institution that is affiliated to the office of the Prime Minister (Silawal, 2014). The NSC of Mongolia was established as a state consultative body which orchestrates the creation of a single state policy to guarantee national security and oversees its execution (The National Security Council [NSC] of Mongolia, 2024).

As mentioned earlier, the 1990 constitution created the NDC of Nepal, and it was continued in the 2007 interim constitution. An analysis of the NSC's roles in 1990 and

2007 indicates that its primary objective was the management of the Nepal Army. The 2015 constitution designated NDC as NSC and broadened its membership and function. The NDC's placement under "Army provisions" in the constitution exposed legislators' lack of understanding on national security in 1990 and 2007.

The examination of various nations' NSCs reveals the rationale behind their establishment. In order to prevent a recurrence of the coordination challenges confronted during World War II and to prepare for future security situations, the United States was the first country to establish NSC in 1947. NSC was established in the United Kingdom in 2010 as a result of a century of progress in national security cooperation. In order to fill a perceived void in the country's upper echelons of defense management, and to deal with its nuclear status, NSC was founded in India in 1998. In the same way, Israel, and Mongolia established the NSC as they thought it would create an organization to assess future security issues comprehensively. The main goal of the NSC's founding in Nepal in 1990 and 2006 was to mobilize the army and place it under elected government's control.

Organization and Role of NSC of Various Countries including Nepal

The history of NSC was reflected in the last heading, here let us discuss the structure and role of the NSCs of the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Israel, Mongolia, and Nepal.

NSC United States

The NSC, chaired by the President, includes key officials like the Vice President, Secretaries of State, Treasury, Defense, and, Assistant for National Security Affairs, Joint Chief of Staff military and intelligence as advisors, and others invited as needed (The White House, n.d.). As per Congressional Research Service (CRS), (2022). "The NSC was expressly established to facilitate collaboration between the military services and other government departments and agencies on national security issues, as well as to integrate military, foreign, and domestic policy pertaining to national security." The President holds executive "branch decision-making authority, but the NSC and NSA significantly influence policy formulation and implementation, highlighting the NSC's evolution from its inception" CRS (2022),

As per CRS (2022), "the NSC, led by the NSA, addresses strategic issues, with staff size and ratios fluctuating by administration, limited by legislation, which was 200 personnel in 2017". The four main role of the NSC are to "advise the President on national security, assesses military power, recommend policies, and coordinate responses to foreign influence" under Title 50 (CRS, 2022).

The NSC holds significant importance in U.S. security and foreign policy decisions, including army mobilization, and is supported by numerous staff and experts. Staffing increases with each presidency, demonstrating the NSA's vital role in influencing presidential policymaking.

NSC United Kingdom

As per Devanny (2014), “the NSC coordinates foreign policy, defense, and civil contingencies, meeting weekly under the PM’s chairmanship. It includes senior ministers and security agencies, and Chief of Defense Staff supported by a NSA.” The NSA is the central government advisor on security, intelligence, defense, and foreign policy matters, working across departments to develop a coherent strategy, supported by a large staff (Devanny, 2014).

The UK's NSC, led by the PM, decides on foreign policy, defense, and civil emergencies while facilitating communication between the public and security experts. The permanent NSA advises the PM on defense, security, and foreign policy issues. The NSA is assisted by a sizable national security secretariat.

NSC India

NSC of India advises the Prime Minister on national security, foreign policy, and defense strategy. It has three tiers: Strategic Policy Group, National Security Advisory Board, and NSC Secretariat, overseeing critical issues (Vajiram & Ravi, 2025). Unacademy (n.d.) states, “the Prime Minister chairs India's NSC. The NSA acts as the main consultant to the Prime Minister regarding national security and foreign policy issues. The members consist of: NSA, Minister of Defense, Home, External, Finance, and Deputy Chairman of the NITI Aayog”. NSC guarantees departmental and ministry coordination to promote policymaking convergence, through its secretariat, which advises its members, it also has access to outside government expertise (Unacademy, n.d.).

In India, the NSC is headed by the PM and comprises the ministers of Defense, Home, Finance, and External Affairs in the council. The council involves providing the PM with advice on issues of strategic significance and national safety. The NSC consists of a policy-making team made up of secretaries from various departments. India has a NSA, who supported by his team advises the PM on security and foreign policy issues.

NSC Israel

As per National Security Council of Israel (2023), “the NSC manages foreign policy and national security matters for the PM and cabinet, operating under NSC Law with experts and retired senior officials”. The NSC headed by NSA oversees Israel's security policy, recommending strategies and promoting inter-ministerial integration to optimize capabilities (National Security Council, 2023)

In Israel, the NSA oversees Israel's NSC, which includes various experts and former senior officials from the Israeli security establishment. The NSC addresses matters concerning national security and foreign policy, providing guidance to the PM on these topics.

NSC Mongolia

The NSC of Mongolia, established in 1992, comprises the president, speaker of the National Assembly, and Prime Minister. President appoints the secretary. Advisory members include key political and security figures... The council has advisers, speakers and experts (NSC of Mongolia, 2024)., NSC of Mongolia (2024) further states, “the NSC of Mongolia oversees national security policy development and implementation, monitors progress, makes key foreign relations decisions aligned with the country’s foreign policy, ensuring proper execution of departmental decisions and actions, and takes key decision on nations wealth.”

The NSC is headed by the president of Mongolia, who also designates its secretary, serving as the president’s advisor on national security matters and managing the NSC secretariat. The NSC organizes state policy, decides on defense, foreign relations, and economic issues tied to Mongolia's resources. The NSC consists of consultants and experts from various professional fields.

NSC Nepal

The NSC of Nepal includes: Prime Minister (Chairperson), Ministers for Defense, Home, Foreign Affairs, Finance, Chief Secretary, Commander-in-Chief of Nepal Army, with the Ministry of Defense's secretary as member secretary (Government of Nepal, Art. 266, 2015). The role of the NSC as per Government of Nepal, Art. 266 (2015) is to “advise the Government of Nepal and Council of Ministers on national interest, security, defense policy, and mobilization and control of Nepal Army”.

NSC currently facilitates army mobilization for elections, oversees arms procurement, conducts regular meetings on national issues, reviews National Security

Policy quarterly, and provides integrated intelligence assessments to the PM and relevant ministries (Key Informant Interview (KII) with NSC staff, personal communication, March 7, 2025). “NSC improved operations through meetings, seminars, and briefings, identifying 8 ministries and 22 stakeholders across 13 areas of national interest, and implements Integrated National Intelligence Mechanisms” (KII with ex-deputy-coordinator, personal communication, March 9, 2025). On other NSC affairs it was stated, NSA appointment significantly improved NSC effectiveness; Ministry of Foreign Affairs needs to accept NSP as "Mother Policy" (KII with ex-deputy-coordinator, personal communication, March 9, 2025).”

Recommendations include, “adding Joint Secretaries, appointing NSA, engaging advisors and experts for targeted security insights, and including tech-savvy staff in intelligence gathering and dissemination processes” (KII with past NSC staff, personal communication, March 7, 2025). The ex-deputy-coordinator recommended the following for the NSC, “appointment of an NSA, the need for qualified joint secretaries from the relevant ministry as staff along with permanent or semi-permanent advisers/experts, and ensuring consistency in the unpredictable transfers of uniformed officers and bureaucrats” (KII with ex-deputy-coordinator, personal communication, March 9, 2025). To improve the NSC, appoint a qualified NSA, include joint secretaries from the concerned ministries, and ensure NSC approval for megaprojects (KII with ex-defense secretaries, personal communication, March 12, 2025).

The NSC of Nepal advises on national interest, national security and defense, oversees army mobilization, and conducts regular policy reviews. Recommendations include appointing a qualified NSA and adding joint secretaries and advisers/experts to enhance effectiveness and intelligence gathering for informed decision-making.

A comparative analysis of Nepal's NSC and other states

When comparing Nepal's NSC to those of the US, UK, India, Israel, and Mongolia, we note these points: All NSCs, apart from the United States, were founded after Nepal's NSC; NSC structures are largely alike, typically headed by the president/PM, except in Israel, where it is steered by the NSA and serves in an advisory role to the PM. Concerning the role of NSCs, each country's NSC determines national security and foreign policy issues, aside from Nepal, which does not engage in foreign policy decisions, whereas Mongolia’s NSC also addresses the decision on nation’s wealth. All nations’ NSCs, except for Nepal and Mongolia, possess a NSA that advises the president/PM on matters concerning security, intelligence, defense, and foreign policy, and in some countries,

works with different agencies to create a cohesive strategy. Though Mongolia lacks a NSA, the NSC secretary of Mongolia serves as the president's adviser on national security matters, which differs from the situation in Nepal, where the NSC secretary does not act as the PM's national security adviser. All NSC secretariat is made up of uniformed personnel, officials, and advisors along with specialists except for Nepal, which comprises solely uniformed staff and lower-level bureaucrats.

Status Quo, Reform, or Restructure of Nepal's NSC?

Before addressing whether status quo, reform or restructure would be appropriate for Nepal's NSC, let us discuss some decision or non-decision on some major issues by the Government of Nepal. An unofficial blockade lasting four and a half months was enforced in Nepal following the promulgation of the 2015 constitution, disrupting supplies and oil transportation (Karki, 2022). This high-priority matter was not regarded as a national security issue and was not discussed at the NSC; At the UN General Assembly, Nepal backed a resolution condemning Russia's effort to gain four Ukrainian regions via a referendum conducted in Ukraine ("Nepal Votes in Favor" 2022), politicians and academics criticized the decision's legitimacy. Had the NSC made the decision, it would not have encountered opposition. Matters such as the MCC, BRI, and major hydro-projects would be more in harmony with decisions from the NSC.

NSC of Nepal: Status quo

The examination of the comparative analysis of NSC in Nepal alongside other nations, interviews with current and former defense secretaries, NSC former deputy coordinator, and NSC secretariat staff, and the preceding discussion on important issues related to national security and foreign policy indicate that maintaining the status quo is inadequate for ensuring the security of Nepal and its citizens and, due to its geostrategic vulnerabilities and sensitivity.

NSC of Nepal: Reform or Restructure

The comparative analysis of Nepal's NSC and interviews indicate a need for immediate reform. The changes mentioned in the paragraphs below will help transform NSC into a vibrant organization better prepared to ensure the nation's security and protect its people.

Regarding the organization: a) Appoint NSA as NSC member, secretary, and adviser to the PM on national security, intelligence, and foreign policy; b) Include provisions for inviting relevant ministers and persons to meetings when required; c) Post necessary joint

secretaries and bureaucrats; d) Hire advisers and experts; and e) Ensure qualified officers from Nepal Army, Nepal Police, Armed Police Force Nepal, and National Investigation Department are assigned to the secretariat for at least one year.

On the role side include: f) Making decisions regarding foreign policy matters; g) Making decisions concerning national wealth and mega projects; h) At a minimum, one monthly NSC meeting, which should feature updates on matters related to national security, foreign policy, and national interests. Here, some might contend that the proposed roles are encapsulated within the NSC's responsibilities, which entail “formulating a policy on overall national interest, security, and defense of Nepal” (Government of Nepal, Art. 266, 2015). However, these must be explicit and mandatory, since our politicians often behave in ways that serve their own personal interests and that of their parties.

The first phase should be reform which includes a) Appointing the NSA as head of the NSC Secretariat, b) Posting joint secretaries and officers, c) Hiring advisers and experts, f) Deciding on foreign policy g) Managing national wealth and mega projects, and h) Holding at least one monthly NSC meeting with briefings.

Through the aforementioned reform, the Nepal government can reap the advantages of the NSC, as this reform will enhance the NSC of Nepal's ability to tackle emerging challenges that go beyond bureaucratic limitations, seize opportunities arising from the global security landscape, and strengthen the government's existing capabilities. This situation may be temporary, given the behavior of most past PMs in the country; hence, the aforementioned reform needs to be made permanent through constitutional restructuring by amending Article 266 of the Constitution of Nepal, 2015 at the earliest.

Discussion

The comparative analysis indicates that Nepal's NSC is a structural anomaly, adhering to a security only-focused "status quo" that is becoming less suitable for its geostrategic challenges. In contrast to the Indian, US, and UK NSC or the Israeli system, Nepal does not have a NSA to act as a strategic link among intelligence, security, diplomacy, and executive decision-making.

Structural and Functional Shortcomings

A notable disparity is present in the secretariat's structure; whereas international counterparts employ diverse teams of specialists and civilian administrators, Nepal depends exclusively on uniformed officers. Additionally, Nepal stands out by omitting

foreign policy and "national wealth" (mega-projects) from the official scope of the NSC. Considering the wide yet ambiguous wording of Article 266 of the Constitution of Nepal (2015), it is essential to clarify these duties to ensure that political leaders do not place partisan interests above national security.

The Path Forward

The research suggests a two-stage development. Early reforms-designating an NSA, broadening the secretariat, and requiring at least one monthly meetings-will enable prompt professional development. To prevent these advancements from being undone by changing political whims, a permanent constitutional change through an amendment to Article 266 is crucial. This would formalize the NSC as a dynamic, multi-agency organization able to safeguard Nepal's sovereignty amid a complicated global environment

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of National Security Councils in various geopolitical contexts indicates that Nepal's existing NSC system is both historically and structurally unique. Although the US, UK, India, and Israel have established advanced, civilian-inclusive advisory organizations headed by a NSA, Nepal has preserved a limiting, uniformed officers-focused "status quo." This research determines that the existing setup-defined by an absence of specialized civilian knowledge and the omission of foreign policy and economic security from its responsibilities-renders Nepal perilously unready for its distinct geostrategic risks.

To change the NSC from an inactive bureaucratic body into a dynamic cornerstone of national sovereignty, urgent institutional reform is necessary. The selection of a specialized NSA and the advancement of the secretariat with a blend of uniformed, administrative, and scholarly professionals are now crucial for knowledgeable executive decision-making. Moreover, clearly broadening the NSC's responsibilities to encompass foreign policy and the management of national resources is essential to protect vital interests from the fluctuating currents of partisan politics.

In the end, although administrative reforms may yield short-term benefits, Nepal's lasting security relies on constitutional restructuring. Revising Article 266 of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) is the sole feasible way to embed these changes. By enhancing the NSC's standing and defining its essential functions through constitutional law, Nepal can achieve a steady, proactive, and thorough strategy for safeguarding its national interests in a more complex global security environment.

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