cussion by reviewing the role and structure of the National Security Council (NSC) in the United States, which is considered the prototypical example of such a body under a democratic system. While security is the council's area of concern, the three key features of the US NSC are its restrictive role as an advisory body, its focus on external, not internal, issues, and its mechanism to assert civilian control over security affairs in a democracy.

A purely advisory role

In the United States, the chief executive authority in the government rests with an elected president. The president is also the commander-in-chief of all armed forces of the United States and is responsible for executing the national security policy of the country. To facilitate the president's decision making, an advisory group called the National Security Council was created in 1947 by a law passed by the US Congress. The law, known as the National Security Act of 1947, was a consequence of lessons learned during the military campaigns of World War II and an anticipated need to coordinate the different "hard" and "soft" dimensions of security during the Cold War. According to the act, the NSC was created 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."

Like its economic counterpart (the National Economic Council), the NSC is part of the Executive Office of the President. Its meetings are chaired by the president, or a person designated by the president, and attended regularly by the vice president and key members of the cabinet, including the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, and the secretary of treasury. Heads



of other departments are often invited to attend NSC meetings when appropriate. To help coordinate national security policy and response among the different departments of the government, the president appoints a national security advisor, who acts as White House's top analyst and focal point on security-related issues.

A focus on external security

In the United States, a strong system of checks and balances keeps foreign and domestic security apart and civilian command firm. There has also been a legal and political tradition of keeping the military out of domestic policy and domestic deployment. James Madison, one of the founders of the American political system, wrote powerfully in 1788: "A standing force, therefore, is a dangerous, at the same time that it may be a necessary, provision. On the smallest scale it has its inconveniences. On an extensive scale its consequences may be fatal. On any scale it is an object of laudable circumspection and precaution. A wise nation will combine all these considerations; and, whilst it does not rashly preclude itself from any resource which may become essential to its safety, will exert all its prudence in diminishing both the necessity and the danger of resorting to one which may be inauspicious to its liberties." The Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 and its update of 1956 formally limited government authority of using the military for enforcing domestic law and order.

This tradition of separating foreign and domestic security has influenced the design of the NSC. The NSC deals mostly with external threats to national security, such as the Soviet threat during the Cold War or the threat of terrorism now. During the Clinton administration, the NSC's main concerns were the Balkan Wars, Somalia, consequences of the first Gulf War, and the expansion of Nato. In the current administration, the War on Terror is the main concern and the Middle East the primary focus, with secondary concerns around North Korea, China, Pakistan, and an increasingly assertive Russia. In all this, the NSC advises the president and the cabinet on external security -- and it is the president who ultimately makes policy decisions to the extent permitted by the Congress.