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The 2010 QDR and US grand strategy

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Introduction

The latest installment of the much anticipated Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) has recently been released by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. This Congressionally mandated report has, as the name suggests, been issued approximately every four years since 1997. The year-long QDR review process consumes hundreds of hours and involves a broad swath of the security community both inside and outside of the Pentagon. Its purpose is to examine “defense strategy, force structure, force modernization plans, infrastructure, budget plan and other elements of the defense program and policies”, looking 20 years into the future. Paradoxically, the QDR is both highly discussed and anticipated among defense analysts, while consistently derided after each release for its irrelevance and failure to prioritize. It is true that each of the three previous QDRs have generally failed to outline the specific military means required to achieve the nation’s strategic goals within the Defense Department’s budgetary constraints. It can by no means be considered a true “strategy” document.

Rather, the value of the QDR is as a concept document. Because the process incorporates such a broad group of American (and for this QDR, also foreign) security and defense actors, it offers a snapshot of how the US views the international security environment, its national interests, threat analysis, how the US conceptualizes conflict and under what circumstances policymakers anticipate the future application of American military force. The integration of these QDR themes together with other strategic documents – such as the National Security Strategy, the Nuclear Posture Review, the Joint Forces Command’s *Joint Operating Environment* document and the latest National Defense and Military strategies – presents a good picture of the long range trends in US strategic thinking. This analysis focuses primarily on grand strategic thinking and therefore skips over both the detailed force structure and equipment discussions, as well as new and much-heralded sections about “taking care of our people” and a risk management framework. This is not intended as a comprehensive summary, although summaries of some sections are included.

Bottom line: Continuity from the Bush administration

While some analysts touted this QDR as a ‘no news’ document, the fact that much of this QDR could have been predicted prior to its release is, arguably, news in and of itself. While many questioned the perceived ideological and strategic excesses of the Bush administration, exemplified by its 2003 invasion of Iraq, a heavy reliance on democracy promotion rhetoric and a sense that the US was overreaching, many expected the incoming Obama administration to lower its strategic ambitions and pursue a more ‘realist’ (a la Kissinger) foreign policy. Some predicted the gradual return of 19th century multipolarity and expected the US would adjust course accordingly, perhaps even seeking some sort of international security ‘concert of nations’ structure with its allies and partners.

The broad contours of the 2010 QDR suggest that US policymakers seek to extend the US hegemonic role within the international system, a role built primarily upon the continued global projection of American military power. Michèle Flournoy suggested that the ‘bumper sticker’ for this QDR would be ‘rebalancing’. Rather than rebalancing the strategies and policies that many saw as an overextension of national power, however, this QDR instead strives to institutionalize the ‘lessons learned’ from the previous administration and has calibrated US military planning and force structures to attempt to conduct the

missions identified by the Bush administration in a more sustainable – and less ideologically charged – manner. Key elements of this include continued dominance of the global commons and increased emphasis on anti-access/area denial capabilities (A2/AD), a renewed focus on regional deterrence, continued attention to and institutionalization of counterinsurgency (COIN), counterterrorism (CT) and security and stability operations, and increased attention to regional partnerships – in particular, Security Force Assistance. The military role foreseen by the QDR authors continues to be an interventionist one, characterized by the continued reliance on ground forces to conduct COIN, CT and stability operations, while increasing the burden on naval and air forces to secure the global commons and counter A2/AD threats.

In sum, US military leaders and policymakers anticipate the continued active engagement of US forces abroad in much the same capacity (if not the same level of intensity) as during the past eight years. Rather than seeking to reduce the ambitions of US strategic goals to more sustainable levels, the QDR reflects a consensus view that the military should instead recalibrate and adapt to better perform the broader roles assigned to it. The lack of debate over these conclusions – domestic public debate over national security has largely focused on the military’s ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy and proper interrogation procedures for terrorist suspects¹ – serves to illustrate the continued strong bipartisan support for US primacy, especially as the American public focuses inward on its flailing economy and a heated national health care debate.²

Strategic environment and threat analysis

Similar to other analyses (the National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends 2025*, the *Joint Operating Environment*, and the 2008 National Defense Strategy), the QDR anticipates an especially unstable and less structured international security environment over the next several decades. Uncertainty surrounds the rise of China and India and their integration into the global system, concern over the combination of extremist non-state actors and globalization trends that reduce barriers to advanced technologies, WMD proliferation and the possibility of the destabilization or collapse of a nuclear weapon state (such as Pakistan), and a host of other destabilizing trends such as increased demand for resources, rapid urbanization, climate change impacts, and cultural and demographic

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- 1 That a political debate over Obama’s failure to employ the term “war” with regard to terrorism coincides with the release of document that requires several pages to describe the complexity of current and future conflicts – conflict scenarios in which the word ‘war’ is as misplaced as the politically-charged term “victory” – simply highlights how unconstructive and unrelated such debate – however useful to tactical domestic politics – is to overall US security policy.
 - 2 As an aside, the most recent budget proposal reflects a slight increase in defense spending, although experts predict stagnating defense expenditures over the medium to long term due to increasing budget pressures from domestic entitlement programs. The close relationships between the defense industry, the Pentagon, and Congress – expressed in district and state political maneuvering over the retention or addition of defense jobs as well as in the recent increased emphasis on sustaining the industrial defense infrastructure during the impending downturn – may serve to reduce the severity of defense cuts. The longstanding robust public support for the US military and the political popularity of a strong national defense (especially during wartime), may also lessen the impact of federal budgetary belt-tightening on defense spending.

tensions. For the US military, the operating environment will be exceptionally challenging as US conventional dominance causes adversaries to employ asymmetric methods or a mix of asymmetric and conventional tactics termed ‘hybrid warfare’. American interests in – and access to – the global commons (sea, air, space and cyberspace) will be increasingly important as anti-access capabilities are employed to deny US power projection.

A section near the end of the QDR acknowledges the likely geopolitical impacts of climate change, including exacerbating food and water shortages, poverty, environmental degradation, weakening fragile governments, increasing the risk of spreading disease and mass migration. These second order effects will worsen the destabilizing international security trends that already concern US policymakers. In addition, climate change will likely threaten the physical security of a number of US military installations. In the maritime commons of the Arctic, melting ice will allow seasonal commerce and transit. The QDR presents the challenges in the Arctic less as security threats and more in terms of practical commercial considerations: communications gaps, search and rescue capacities and situational awareness.

Role of military power

The QDR espouses a “whole of government” approach that integrates all elements of national power to protect US national interests, which are quite generally and perfunctorily listed as security, prosperity, broad respect for universal values and international order that promotes cooperative action. It is noted that as the US is the only nation with global power projection, it has an obligation to be a responsible steward of that power. Similar to past documents, this QDR also expresses a desire for strong alliances and a preference for diplomacy, but notes that the US retains its ability to act unilaterally and decisively when appropriate. The QDR also contains a type of Powell/Weinberger doctrine formulation for determining when US military force will be considered: taking into account US and allied interests, treaty commitments, and likely costs and expected risks of military action.

Statements regarding multilateral cooperative efforts are similar to past QDR documents, though this edition places particular emphasis on enabling security partners and building partner capacity. The QDR notes that such measures may reduce the need for long term US deployments. It may be worthwhile to note, however, that later sections of the document seem to emphasize bilateral relationships and regional security structure that will, in practical terms, rely heavily on US military cooperation and presence. While the language of the QDR may be seen as an admission that the US can no longer afford to ‘go it alone’, the practical implementation of regional security partnerships may likely most resemble those in Asia (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan), the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Israel) or South Asia (India, Pakistan, Australia, Thailand, Singapore), where the regional states function more as a facilitator and the US provides the military muscle.

Defense objectives

The QDR lists four main sets of objectives. First, the US seeks to *prevail in today’s wars* through a responsible drawdown in Iraq and denying, disrupting and degrading the Taliban in Afghanistan, while building Afghanistan’s military and governmental capacity. Absent from this QDR is the strategic rationale for the

continued presence in Afghanistan. While the document states that the “outcome of today’s conflicts will directly shape the global security environment for decades to come”, it remains largely silent on exactly how regional instability and failed states present an existential security threat to the US. As this connection – ostensibly grounded in concerns over terrorist safe havens – represents the principle argument for a successful outcome in Afghanistan (and Obama’s determination to increase US and allied efforts there) as well as the continued building of US COIN, CT and stability operations capabilities, US policymakers have yet to clearly spell out the linkages. If this is indeed among the most pressing US national security interests then the US military will likely be heavily engaged around the globe for decades to come, given the host of destabilizing trends predicted to unfold over the next decades.

Second, the US seeks to *prevent and deter conflict* by, inter alia, building partner capacity through US military-to-military training, advising and assistance to partners, contributing to coalition and peacekeeping operations, support US diplomatic efforts to improve governance and counter extremism, extend global defense posture of forward stationed forces and prepositioned equipment. These are highly ambitious and force-intensive endeavors that combined with the emphasis on failing states and regional insecurity almost guarantees the substantial continued forward deployment of US military capabilities.

The Obama administration, with its stated goal of working towards the elimination of nuclear weapons, has reportedly struggled in its ongoing (and delayed) Nuclear Posture Review to reconcile the dream of Global Zero with the need to reaffirm US extended deterrence commitments. Deterrence, particularly tailored regional deterrence, has re-emerged as an important element of US security policy after President Bush questioned its continued relevance during his first term (tailored deterrence emerged in the 2006 QDR). Ballistic missile defenses are seen as a key component of regional deterrence structures, along with deployed US forces and extended deterrent guarantees. In both the QDR and the BMDR, there appears to be allusion toward an eventual replacement of US nuclear forces in Europe with BMD capabilities, something that has also been suggested by several academics and in a recent *New York Times* article (28 February 2010).

Third, the US will *prepare to defeat adversaries and succeed in a wide range of contingencies*, including terrorist attacks, domestic natural disasters, state aggression (including A2/AD capable or nuclear armed states), locating and securing WMD, supporting and stabilizing fragile states, protecting US citizens abroad, conducting cyberspace operations and preventing human suffering due to mass atrocities or natural disasters abroad. Finally, the defense department seeks to *preserve and enhance the All Volunteer force*.

Rebalancing the Force – Six key mission areas

The QDR lists six missions that should determine US force structures. First and most fundamentally, the US military will *defend the US and support civil authorities at home*. Second, the force will need to *succeed in COIN, CT and stability operations* within varied operating environments. The US may need to help strengthen weak states and states that:

Moreover, there are few cases in which the US Armed Forces would engage in sustained large-scale combat operations without the associated need to assist in the transition to just and stable governance. Accordingly, the US armed forces will

continue to require capabilities to create a secure environment in fragile states in support of local authorities and, if necessary, to support civil authorities in providing essential government services, restoring emergency infrastructure, and supplying humanitarian relief (p. 20).

This seems to acknowledge that future major combat operations will likely entail nation-building, either as a result of forcible regime change or intensive stability operations due to state failure. The QDR authors view the ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan not as “transitory or anomalous phenomenon in the security landscape”, but as the operational status quo for the “indefinite future”. This is not a point to be taken lightly. While forcible regime change may not be in the offing, current military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are seen as the rule, rather than the exception. As the anticipated international political, social and demographic trends portend an increasingly unstable global security environment, the perceived role of the United States as a security provider will only increase. The ideological component of US policy remains implicit: while democracy promotion and good governance are not central themes of the Obama administration, it is clear from this QDR that the use of US military forces to carry out democratic nation-building is anticipated to continue.

In a third and related mission, the US will *build the security capacity of partner states* through security cooperation (bilateral and multilateral training, foreign military sales and financing (FMS and FMF) and military-to-military exchanges. This Security Force Assistance (SFA) is considered to be especially important in the coming years. The Bush administration also emphasized building partner capacity as a means of preventing instability and promoting good governance, especially in countries like the Philippines, Colombia and throughout Africa under the auspices of the newly established Africa Command. In this mission role, supporting UN peacekeeping efforts is also mentioned.

Fourthly, the US military will *deter and defeat aggression in anti-access environments* by potentially hostile nation-states. Once again, US freedom of strategic movement, threats to US power projection capabilities and securing access to the global commons is emphasized. Notably, China is emphasized as an A2/AD capable threat, along with Iran and North Korea. The BMDR emphasizes the use of missile defenses to assist in countering the A2/AD capabilities of these three states. While some analysts felt that strategic threat posed by China was not adequately addressed in this QDR, US concerns over China’s ability to deny access (especially in the Taiwan Strait and in Southeast Asia) are evident. To deter and defeat aggression, the US plans to emphasize counterproliferation efforts, develop a joint air-sea battle concept, continue discussions about a long range strike option, strengthen US forward posture, deployed forces and improve base infrastructure, and enhance command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities. Fifth, and related to A2/AD, the US military will *prevent proliferation and counter WMDs* by expanding counterproliferation capabilities; including interdiction and cooperative threat reduction efforts as well as preparing to contain WMD threats from fragile states and ungoverned areas. Sixth and finally, the US military will increasingly be required to *operate in cyberspace*.

Sizing and Shaping of the Force

Much has been made of the 2010 QDR omission of the two Major Regional Conflicts (MRCs) force planning construct, but the previous QDR also expressed reservations about the relevance of the 2 MRCs guideline, given the complexities of modern warfare.³ The 2010 document considers the 2 MRC construct outdated simply because today's contingencies are much more complex than 'regional conflicts', but nevertheless is unwilling to discard it completely and assumes that US military forces should be able to field a robust force able to protect the US against two capable nation-state aggressors. Interestingly, the QDR authors assume that the eventual drawdown of forces from both Iraq and Afghanistan (prevailing in today's conflicts) will allow greater forces available for the other three strategic objectives (prevent and deter conflict, prepare to defeat adversaries, preserve and enhance the force). The "transition into less intensive sustained operations" will allow greater numbers of forward deployed forces, and while current operations have stressed land forces disproportionately, future operations may entail long duration air and maritime campaigns. Again, this relates directly to an anticipated need to counter A2/AD capabilities and maintain operational freedom of movement within the global commons.

Strengthening Relationships

The QDR states plainly that NATO is the cornerstone of the transatlantic relationship, critical to security and stability in Europe, and able to address a broad range of issues both inside and outside of NATO's treaty area. The document observes the closer cooperation between the EU, NATO and the US, though the focus remains on threats elsewhere (missile threat from Iran, conflict in Afghanistan) Some common ground with Russia is noted, particularly on terrorism, proliferation and the expectation of a new START treaty, but points to meaningless cooperative efforts on missile defense as a positive (suggesting that Russia could provide technical data that would be helpful, but not necessary to missile defense capabilities). The QDR pointedly rejects a Russian sphere of influence, observing that it will "continue to engage with Russia's neighbors as fully independent and sovereign states", a phrase repeated in the BMDR.

The most dynamic region for the US is Asia, with established allies such as ROK and Japan in East Asia, along with Thailand and the Philippines in

3 *From page 36 of the 2006 QDR:* In the post-September 11 world, irregular warfare has emerged as the dominant form of warfare confronting the United States, its allies and its partners; accordingly, guidance must account for distributed, long duration operations, including unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and stabilization and reconstruction operations. For the foreseeable future, steady-state operations, including operations as part of a long war against terrorist networks, and associated rotation base and sustainment requirements, will be the main determinant for sizing U.S. forces. Consistent with the QDR's emphasis on prevention, guidance must place greater emphasis on forces and capabilities needed for deterrence and other peacetime shaping activities. Finally, operational end-states defined in terms of "swiftly defeating" or "winning decisively" against adversaries may be less useful for some types of operations U.S. forces may be directed to conduct, such as supporting civil authorities to manage the consequences of catastrophic, mass casualty events at home, or conducting a long-duration, irregular warfare campaign against enemies employing asymmetric tactics.

Southeast Asia. New partnerships in SE Asia with Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Singapore, are being developed under the guise of counterterrorism, counternarcotics and humanitarian assistance. However, it is difficult not to see these developments, as China does, as an evolving ring of allies around China's eastern and southern flank. The US seeks to increase its forward presence in the Asia/Pacific region, singling out the geostrategically significant Singapore as a host nation destined for a greater role in US regional defense posture. Current developments in the Middle East, including substantial arms sales and intensifying missile defense cooperation, illustrate the development of regional security architectures there. Surprisingly, Africa is afforded little attention in this section given that the general description of the global threats facing the US (instability, weak states, extremism, and dangerous social, political and demographic trends) are well represented on that continent.

Role of US defense Posture

The role of US global posture, as defined by the QDR, serves to reinforce the conclusions presented earlier. The US anticipates substantial continued – even increased – forward stationed and rotationally deployed forces, capabilities and equipment. This long term, tailored forward presence will be dictated by the need to (1) assure allies and partners (2) balance the need for assurance with flexibility to respond to contingencies, (3) balance the need to assure access in support of ongoing operations with frailty in lines of communication (4) provide a stabilizing influence and promote regional security and (5) adapt to the changing strategic environment. The ‘whole of government’ approach touted in the document continues to be wishful thinking, as the QDR authors readily admit that civilian capacity is unlikely to materialize over the short term, leaving the military as the primary security actors. The QDR acknowledges that while civilian capacity to perform some of the functions now delegated to the military is highly desirable, such capabilities are not presently available or well-funded (here one might think of the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS)). There have been concerns both within and outside the Defense Department about the militarization of foreign policy due to the fact that DoD remains the most competent, best equipped and most well funded instrument of US power to take on stabilization, reconstruction and humanitarian missions. While the US military may not wish to have these types of missions in their portfolio, as Secretary Gates has indicated on several occasions, there is little other option over the medium term.

Conclusions

Rather than Flournoy's assertion that this QDR signals a ‘rebalancing’ of the force, it appears that the main thrust of the document is to recalibrate the US military to better perform the tasks it had been assigned during the Bush administration. Rather than exploring means by which the role of US forces could be contracted and thereby setting the US defense posture on a more politically and economically sustainable course, the QDR clearly accepts most of the ambitious strategic precepts of the Bush administration and strives simply to perform them more efficiently. While the QDR is neither a strategy nor a blueprint for US security policy, it does reflect how defense strategists expect the US military to be engaged over the course of the next twenty years. From this document, it appears that the future will look very much like the present.

Further Reading

John T. Correll, *In the Wake of the QDR* (2006) <http://www.afa.org/mitchell/reports/0906qdr.pdf>

Travis Sharp, *Vision Meets Reality, 2010 QDR and the 2011 Defense Budget*, Center for a New American Security (2010) <http://www.cnas.org/node/4054>

Robert Haddick, “No News QDR kicks some cans down the road” *Small Wars Journal* (2010)
<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/02/no-news-qdr-kicks-some-cans-do/>

Center for Strategic and International Studies, *2010 QDR Resources Page*
<http://csis.org/programs/special-initiatives/resource-pages/resources-2010-qdr>

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