The Quadrennial Defense Review

Transforming to Meet Tomorrow's Security Challenges

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Introduction

Twenty years from now, we should be able to look back and find that the recent QDR represented the most important and far-reaching review of our military posture since the early days of the Cold War. The reasons for this are clear. Consider that since the last QDR in 2001, the United States has:

- Seen New York and Washington attacked by radical Islamists;
- Invaded and occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, and waged an ongoing counterinsurgency in both of those countries;
- Undertaken a long war against the forces of radical Islam;
- Witnessed the continued drift toward a "Nuclearized Asia," with the prospect that, by decade's end, America will confront a 5,000-mile "Atomic Arc of Instability" stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Sea of Japan; and
- Observed the continued growth of Chinese military capabilities along disturbing lines.

To meet the demands of its charter, the QDR must address four main issues:

- Does it clearly present the major challenges that may plausibly confront the United States over the next 20 years?
- Does it present a strategy for meeting these challenges?
- Given the resources requested by the Bush Administration, is the strategy adequately funded?
- Are the force structure and defense program proposed by the Defense Department consistent with the diagnosis of the threat and the strategy proposed for addressing it?

The balance of this paper offers a brief examination of these issues.

I. Did the QDR identify the major existing and emerging challenges to America's security?

The report gets high marks here. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld has concluded that no current or prospective enemy is foolhardy enough to take on the US military directly—tank against tank, fighter jet against fighter jet. Rather, he argues, the threat is assuming different forms. Radical Islamist movements employ terror and subversion, and seek weapons of mass destruction to cause widespread damage. Hostile and potentially unstable countries like North Korea and Iran seek nuclear arsenals to intimidate America's allies and threaten its military's ability to protect vital national interests. While China is not an enemy, it is developing a set of military capabilities it calls the "assassin's mace"—emphasizing ballistic missiles, information warfare, anti-satellite weaponry, submarines and high-speed cruise missiles—capabilities clearly designed to threaten US access to the "global commons" of space, the infosphere and the oceans, and intimidate America's allies and friends in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

Radical Islamists

The most obvious long-term challenge is posed by radical Islamists. Today the United States does not confront a war against terrorism. Rather, the United States is at war with radical Islam, and the Defense Department's adoption of the term "Long War" represents an improvement over "Global War on Terrorism." Radical Islamists are employing terrorism as it is the only form of warfare available to them at the moment, just as an insurgent movement employs terrorism as its principal means of war while it seeks to gain strength for more ambitious forms of military operations. Radical Islamists constitute a transnational, theologically based insurgent movement seeking to overthrow regimes in the Islamic world that are friendly toward the United States, and to evict US presence from parts of the world viewed as vital to America's interests.

Aside from its transnational character and theological roots, this insurgency differs from most in that its leaders seek to employ advanced technology—in the form of telecommunications for coordination, and weapons of mass destruction—to wreak maximum damage. The radical Islamists' global network, their lack of respect for the laws of war and the lives of innocents, combined with their apparent willingness to employ weapons of mass destruction and disruption,

should they acquire them, makes this insurgency especially threatening. The QDR correctly concludes that this war will not be won quickly, and that the price of victory will not come cheap. As with most insurgencies, victory rests less in military action than in the successful treatment of political, economic and social ills, and in winning the "war of ideas" against those advancing a perverse and dangerous distortion of the Islamic faith. But victory will take years and perhaps decades to achieve. In the interim, the military's job is to buy the time needed for these other elements of counterinsurgency to succeed.

Nuclear Proliferation

The second major, enduring challenge to US security is the spread of nuclear weapons to unstable and/or hostile states in Asia. Since 1998, India and Pakistan have tested nuclear weapons and created nuclear arsenals. North Korea apparently has nuclear weapons and is producing the fissile material necessary to fabricate more of these devices. Iran, no doubt aware of the very different treatment accorded North Korea by the United States relative to a non-nuclear Iraq, is pressing forward vigorously with its nuclear weapons program. It is conceivable that before the decade is out, a solid front of nuclear armed states will stretch from the Persian Gulf to the Sea of Japan, running through Iran, Pakistan, India, China and North Korea, with Russia looming from above—a five-thousand mile "atomic arc of instability" in a part of the world which has become increasingly important to US security and economic well-being.

The acquisition of nuclear weapons by hostile rogue regimes also threatens to disrupt the military balance. All things being equal, the United States' willingness to project power would likely be much more constrained when confronted by rogue states armed with nuclear weapons. This seems to be a principal motive for North Korea and Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. It may also make it far more difficult to deal effectively with ambiguous forms of aggression, such as Iran's support for terrorism and for the insurgency in Iraq, or potential North Korean trafficking in fissile materials. Looking out twenty years (as the QDR is instructed to do), in the case of Iran and North Korea, and Pakistan and Russia as well, there also exists the possibility that the regimes in power will, at some point, either collapse or be overthrown. Should this occur, a period of chaos may ensue. If so, the security of those countries' nuclear arsenals could be at risk.

To put it bluntly, the United States is now in an era that might be characterized as a "Second Nuclear Regime," with the First Regime, which began in 1945 with the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, having passed into history. That earlier regime was defined by two principal elements: first, a few, "mature" great powers possessing nuclear weapons, with all but China having a common European cultural orientation; second, there developed a strong tradition of non-use of these weapons. Now the former characteristic no longer holds, and the latter is open to debate. The new nuclear powers may not view these weapons in the same way that the United States' political leadership has come to view them over the years; i.e., as weapons of last resort, to be used only under the most extreme circumstances.

We might expand the Second Nuclear regime's definition to include state and nonstate actors possessing biological weapons. By all accounts, biological weapons are becoming progressively easier to fabricate—certainly far easier than nuclear weapons—and, under the right conditions, can produce the mass casualties, economic disruption and terror associated with a nuclear strike. Yet little has been done to restrict the knowledge associated with developing biological weapons, and the infrastructure costs for producing them are quite modest when compared to those associated with nuclear weapons. For nonstate entities, this combination of comparatively low cost and high destructive potential may make the pursuit of biological weapons irresistible.

China

The third enduring challenge the United States confronts is the rise of China to great regional power status and, perhaps, over time to global power status. To date, discussions about the disposition of China often describe it as either a threat that must be addressed along the lines of the Soviet Union, or as a state that simply needs to be engaged and brought more fully into the global economy to ensure it will remain a member in good standing of the international community.

The truth probably lies somewhere in between these gloomy and rosy poles. China does not represent the type of threat posed by the Soviet Union. For example, unlike Soviet Russia, China is not wedded to an aggressive, expansionist ideology. Whereas the United States had no significant commercial relationship with the Soviet Union, it has an enormous economic

relationship (and trade deficit) with China. Moreover, both the United States and China may have important common security interests in the area of limiting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and combating radical Islamists.

On the other hand, China could emerge as a major threat to US security. China is a rapidly rising power. It is also beset by ongoing questions of political legitimacy; growing ecological problems; a booming economy that may be entering a more mature period characterized by slower growth; disturbing demographic trends that could induce societal instability; a rapidly growing dependence on foreign energy supplies; and outstanding security issues in the form of Taiwan, the Spratley Islands, Tibet, and perhaps portions of the Russian Far East. These trends could lead to friction between Washington and Beijing, unless they come to see radical Islamism and WMD proliferation as greater threats to their than security than each other.

If China does challenge the United States, the QDR notes that it likely will do so in different forms, and employing different means, than are characteristic of traditional warfare. Put another way, China will present problems for US forces that are, in many respects, quite different from those posed by US adversaries in other post-Cold War conflicts. There is also some evidence that China seeks to displace the United States as the principal military power in East Asia, and to establish itself as the region's hegemonic power. For example, China's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities are far more mature than any current US rival. The QDR correctly notes that China's enormous size (it is the world's fourth largest country) also provides it with great strategic depth, a problem US defense planners have not had to address since the Cold War.

The challenge, then, for the United States is to encourage China to cooperate in areas where the two states have common security interests, and to convince Beijing that the resolution of its outstanding geopolitical issues should be accomplished within accepted international legal norms. This means creating and maintaining a military balance in East Asia that is favorable to the United States and its allies. Since, for a variety of reasons, China is unlikely to challenge the US military symmetrically, the QDR's challenge was to adapt the US defense posture to confront more novel forms of Chinese military power.

II. Did the QDR present a strategy for meeting these challenges?

Here the QDR's record is mixed.

The QDR offers a reasonably clear picture of how the Department of Defense intends to prosecute the war in which it is now engaged—the war against radical Islamists. The approach is generally proactive and aggressive, reflecting a belief that the defense in depth of the US homeland is best assured by engaging the enemy as far from US shores as possible, and keeping up the pressure on radical Islamist groups so they have little time to organize and plan future attacks, let alone carry them out.

The military strategy envisions US forces, in combination with those of friends and allies, working to break down radical Islamist terrorist cells within friendly states. The US military will also endeavor to maintain surveillance over failed and ungovernable areas, along with the capability to act quickly in the event that terrorist cells are identified. Hence the QDR places emphasis on highly distributed special operations forces, either working in tandem with similar indigenous or allied forces to defeat terrorist groups, or prepared to act quickly on their own if such help is not available. It also emphasizes building and leveraging partner capacity as a way of expanding the capability needed to defeat radical Islamists, especially those waging insurgencies, such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The QDR is somewhat less clear how it plans to deal with China, which is euphemistically described as a country at a "strategic crossroads." The report notes that China is developing a worrisome set of military capabilities.

> China is likely to continue making large investments in high-end, asymmetric military capabilities, emphasizing electronic and cyber-warfare; counter-space operations; ballistic and cruise missiles; advanced integrated air defense systems; next generation torpedoes; advanced submarines; strategic nuclear strike from modern, sophisticated land- and sea-based systems; and theater unmanned aerial vehicles for employment by the Chinese military and for global export.[1]

The QDR asserts that the Defense Department will pursue investments that "preserve US freedom of action" and "provide future Presidents with an expanded set of options" for

[1] Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 6, 2006, pp. 29-30. Hereafter cited as "QDR."

addressing the potential Chinese threat.[2] But the QDR is all but silent on two key questions: How might China use these capabilities? and How will US investments enable the military to dissuade, deter or defend against such efforts? For example, it seems likely that the Defense Department's decision to accelerate the development of a new long-range strike aircraft is intended to convince the Chinese that they cannot use their country's strategic depth to create a sanctuary of sorts for key military capabilities (e.g., ballistic missiles, land-based anti-satellite systems, command and control centers, etc.). But this is speculation. It would be useful to have the Pentagon's perspective as to how the interaction of the Chinese and US capabilities discussed will preserve stability in the Far East. This would be extremely useful in evaluating the Defense Department's force posture and investment priorities.

The QDR is even less clear as to how the United States will address the problem associated with nuclear rogue states, or the failure of nuclear-armed states. For example, the QDR states that

> [T]he United States must be prepared to deter attacks; located, tag and track WMD materials; act in cases where a state that possesses WMD loses control of its weapons, especially nuclear devices; detect WMD across all domains . . . and eliminate WMD materials in peacetime, during combat, and after conflicts.[3]

> [T]he United States must be prepared to respond . . . [and] employ force if necessary, ... [to include] WMD elimination operations that locate, characterize, secure, disable and/or destroy a state or non-state actor's WMD capabilities and programs in a hostile or uncertain environment.[4]

As in the case of China, it is unclear as to *how* the US military will accomplish these missions, which are not hypothetical problems that may arise at some point in the distant future. They are *today's* challenges. Consider, for example, that the QDR candidly concedes that detecting fissile materials and rendering safe WMD devices (e.g., a nuclear weapon) are "particularly difficult operational and technical challenges."[5] Even collecting reliable intelligence on WMD programs

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[2] QDR, p. 31.

[3] QDR, pp. 33-34.

[4] QDR, p. 34.

[5] QDR, p. 34.

and activities is judged "extremely difficult."[6] But the QDR offers little insight as to how the US will address the WMD problem if these challenges cannot (as seems likely) be overcome in the foreseeable future. Nor does the QDR invest much in the way of resources to address this problem.

Indeed, at present there appears to be little confidence that the United States can conduct preventive attacks to disarm North Korea or Iran of their nuclear materials production facilities, or that it can quickly identify and secure the weapons in the event of a nuclear state failure (e.g., Pakistan). Given the difficulties associated with taking preventive action against a country developing nuclear weapons, or of detecting, tracking and intercepting those weapons in transit, the US military may have to default to the unsatisfactory option of attempting to deter enemies from using WMD. However, this may be risky, as the United States has little understanding of the cost-benefit calculus of states like Iran and North Korea, let alone nonstate entities like al Qaeda, which seeks to acquire such weapons. In the end, the QDR fails to provide a sense of how the Defense Department will address this admittedly difficult challenge.

III. Is the defense program adequately funded?

It is not. The QDR calls for a large-scale modernization effort in the coming years, the first in over two decades. Yet it also proposes to reduce defense spending toward the end of this decade, in part by holding down spending on personnel, even though recent increases in benefits have failed to stem the decline in the quality of recruits entering the Army. To be sure, some personnel cuts are planned, and a few small programs will be cancelled, but the tough choices were deferred, raising doubts whether the existing defense program could be executed, let alone one including initiatives to address the new and emerging challenges to US security. Independent estimates conclude that over the long term the defense program may be short some $50 billion a year, a shortfall that will prove difficult to erase given the administration's plans to cut the deficit in half by 2009.

[6] QDR, p. 33.

IV. How well does the proposed defense program address the existing and emerging threats to national security?

Not nearly as well as it could, or should. The saying "Show me your budget priorities and I'll show you your strategy" may be somewhat hyperbolic, but it contains a strong element of truth. Given the magnitude of the changes witnessed over the last four years, and with the prospect of more to come, one would expect major changes in our military forces and equipment. Yet despite Secretary Rumsfeld's guidance, the QDR leaves US forces equipped primarily for traditional warfare. Among its top priorities:

- The Army's Future Combat System, projected to cost nearly $150 billion, was conceived to exploit information technologies to defeat traditional challenges—an area of declining competition.

- The Navy's DD(X) destroyer, at roughly $4 billion for the first ship in the class, is a firepower platform. Yet it would be irrelevant in addressing an undersea challenge from China.

- The Pentagon's F-35 fighter, the most expensive program in the defense budget at over $250 billion, is designed to be both a fighter and ground attack aircraft. But the most worrisome rival strike systems being fielded are ballistic and cruise missiles, not fighters.

- The Marine Corps' V-22 aircraft, designed to hover like a helicopter and fly like a plane, has become so expensive that it cannot be built in large numbers.

The Pentagon's unwillingness to scale back these programs, or in some cases terminate them, will allow them to generate "program momentum." Their constituencies in the military, Congress and the defense industry will grow, and other QDR initiatives that might enable our military to meet better new threats risk being starved of funding. Among the most promising:

- A one-third increase in the number of Special Forces battalions, America's most heavily deployed units in the war against radical Islamists.

- A new long-range strike aircraft designed to loiter for protracted periods over the battlefield, whether searching for terrorists targets in remote areas or missile launchers deep inside Iran or China.

- Programs and forces to cope with the problem of detecting, tracking and disabling weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons that enemies might attempt to smuggle into the United States.

- Medical countermeasures against bio-terror threats.

- Modernizing the Air Force's tanker refueling fleet to replace aging aircraft that date back to the 1950s.

- Increasing submarine production to send a clear signal to China, and America's allies, that Beijing cannot expect to threaten US freedom of action or coerce US allies in an area of vital interest.

Which set of capabilities best reflects the QDR's assessment of the principal challenges before us? Which would be most useful in tracking terrorists in remote areas of Africa and Central Asia? Dealing with a destabilized Pakistan or Saudi Arabia—al Qaeda's two principal targets? Thwarting radical Islamist attempts to smuggle a nuclear weapon into the United States? Conducting persistent extended searches for North Korean nuclear-tipped missiles emerging from their caves to launch an attack? Deflecting the efforts of China's submarines, ten years hence, to threaten our Navy's ability to defend Taiwan from coercion or aggression? Clearly it is the infant initiatives spawned by the QDR, which cost but a fraction of the legacy programs whose principal focus is on traditional forms of warfare that the QDR rightly notes are of progressively less relevance.

Conclusion

The QDR performs a great service in identifying security challenges that in some cases are very different from those that shaped much of the defense program since the Cold War's end. In so doing, the QDR enables some first-order decisions about main elements of US defense posture:

- The Army and Marine Corps need to reorient themselves on *irregular challenges* to our security, with principal emphasis on capabilities associated with foreign military assistance, special operations, counterinsurgency, counter-terror "manhunting," and human intelligence.

- The Air Force and Navy need to reorient themselves on existing and prospective *disruptive challenges*, placing primary emphasis on countering emerging anti-access/area-denial capabilities, and threats to the global commons.

- It seems likely that the four Services have important roles to play in addressing direct, *catastrophic threats* to the American homeland. These include defense against ballistic and cruise missile attack; border control; defense against delivery of WMD through nontraditional means; and consequence management.

- Military operations over the past 15 years have demonstrated that when our enemies challenge us in *traditional warfare*, air power can play an increasingly important role. While all four Services should maintain a significant residual capability for traditional warfare, the Army and Marine Corps should be able to migrate more of their capabilities into other challenge areas than either the Air Force or the Navy.

In addition to rebalancing Service forces and capabilities to address irregular, catastrophic and disruptive challenges to U.S. security, the military needs to undertake key institutional changes. Among them are:

- Refocusing the professional military education (PME) system to emphasize the study of Islam (to include its radical formulations) and key Asian cultures (e.g., Arab, Chinese, Indian, Persian, etc.), to include their political and strategic cultures. Irregular warfare is also in need of increased emphasis. Additionally, as officers needed to become "physics

literate" after the advent of nuclear weapons, today they need to become "bio literate" owing to the prospect of biological weapons becoming increasingly available.

- Expanding and enhancing the foreign area officer (FAO) program and placing far greater emphasis on HUMINT.

- Transforming the training infrastructure to better account for irregular, catastrophic and disruptive challenges to US security.

- Restructuring the force to sustain sufficient forces engaged in a protracted conflict. The Navy and Marine Corps long ago established a rotation base for their forces. The Air Force and the Army have made progress in this area more recently. Much more effort will be needed in areas where the QDR has only made a down payment, such as increasing the Special Operations Forces, expanding the Army's psychological warfare and civil affairs capabilities. At a minimum, strong consideration should be given to creating a robust Advisory Corps to build partner capacity in the Long War on radical Islamism.

- Developing a strategy for the defense industrial base that fosters innovation while addressing the possibility that, in future conflicts, US forces may suffer equipment attrition on a level not seen since the Vietnam War.

- Reviewing the nation's alliance portfolio. With the rise of new national security challenges, the United States needs capable allies and partners more than at any time since the Cold War—but for different missions, and in different parts of the world.

- Engaging relevant departments and agencies of the Executive Branch with the goal of developing more effective interagency relationships and relevant capabilities for dealing effectively with irregular and catastrophic challenges to US security.

It is critically important that the Defense Department seize the opportunity presented by the QDR to craft a strategy and force posture that can sustain the nation for what is likely to be a long struggle with the three challenges outlined above. Failure here runs the risk that defense planners

will invest increasingly scarce resources in capabilities optimized for the "wrong" future. Tragically, the Defense Department's unwillingness to reduce or clear away the big-ticket programs that represent strategic "dead wood" will see these programs consume ever greater levels of funding in the coming years. The result will be that many of the QDR's worthy infant initiatives will be stillborn, starved of funding by far less relevant programs kept on life support at a cost of hundreds of billions of dollars.

Having provided an accurate diagnosis of the new challenges confronting the nation, and made a modest down payment on addressing them, the Pentagon's leadership has passed on making the tough decisions needed to reorient the military. But tough choices must be made, for as Sir Francis Bacon noted: "He who will not apply new remedies must expect new evils."