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The Quadrennial Defense Review: Some Guiding Principles

Dov S. Zakheim

The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) was originally mandated by Congress to address a perceived mismatch between the stated defense strategy and the forces and resources that were being made available to implement it. The first such review took place in 1997 in an atmosphere of such distrust that Congress had also legislated a parallel review to be conducted by an outside panel of experts—the National Defense Panel. However, in 2001 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld employed the QDR as a vehicle for outlining his vision of transforming the way the Department of Defense (DOD) would conduct operations. His basic proposition, as he indicated in his preface to the QDR, was that “a new strategy for America’s defense...would embrace uncertainty and contend with surprise, a strategy premised on the idea that to be effective abroad, America must be safe at home.”¹

The Parameters of the QDR

The QDR did indeed set out some new parameters for strategy and military operations. For decades prior to 2001, America had asserted that it would conduct two simultaneous operations, both of which would result in regime change. That assertion became increasingly less credible because the resources and forces necessary to accomplish such a task were simply not available to military planners, even as the notion of limiting contingencies to two did not match the realities of potential threats to the United States. The QDR, on the other hand, identified *four* potential contingencies, two of which required major combat forces to defeat an enemy

Talking Points

- The next Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) should be a forward-looking document. It should mandate a greater emphasis on security assistance, which requires close cooperation between the Department of Defense (DOD) and the State Department.
- The QDR should not limit its discussion of interagency and international cooperation to combat zones. DOD rightly has not claimed an inordinate role in protection of the homeland, but the QDR should further elaborate on that role and should emphasize that homeland defense includes anti-ballistic and anti-cruise missile capabilities.
- Most of all, the Defense Department urgently requires a Chief Management Officer, who could ensure that the most efficient business management processes are adopted and employed to husband precious defense resources.

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swiftly, and only one of which might be presumed—if the President so decreed—to attempt regime change.

The QDR also focused on threats to the American homeland: Drafts to that effect were produced well before September 11. Finally, the QDR emphasized flexibility by stressing the role of Special Operations Forces (SOF) and calling for systems and organizations that would promote greater responsiveness coupled with increased lethality.

The QDR also stressed the importance of balancing risk: Investments to deal with current threats had to be weighed against future risks and force management risks had to be weighed against institutional risks. All had to claim some share of the defense budget—none could be excluded.

Time for Change

The last four years have seen the realization of many of the previous QDR's objectives. Now it is time to consolidate those changes, review where they have fallen short or require revision, and plot new directions in light of recent events. It has been widely reported that the new QDR will stress the importance of unconventional, asymmetric threats to our nation, our forces, and our interests. These are being termed "irregular," "catastrophic," and "disruptive" threats.

"Irregular" threats involve terrorism, insurgency, civil war, and warfare that ignores the norms of international law. "Catastrophic" threats, which are seen as far less likely but far more dangerous to our way of life, would involve 9/11-type attacks, terrorist uses of weapons of mass destruction, or rogue state missile attacks on the American homeland. "Disruptive" threats would attempt to undermine American military superiority through the employment of breakthrough technologies and capabilities—notably in the realms of sensors, biotechnology, cyber operations, directed energy, and space.

All of these threats, which reportedly will be modeled in scenarios alongside models of more

conventional warfare, will call for a rather different investment pattern than one that seeks to further leverage our superiority over any potential peer competitor. On the one hand, our forces themselves will need to be more responsive to the most likely threat—that of irregular warfare. On the other hand, our technologies—and indeed the way we organize our defenses—must be attuned to more destabilizing catastrophic and disruptive threats. The events of 9/11 demonstrated that such threats, however unlikely they might appear, no longer could be ruled out as some paranoiac's pipedream. They must be taken seriously and appropriately accounted for.

A New Investment Pattern

The impact of a new investment pattern arising from the varied approach that is being mooted for the QDR will be greatest with respect to land and air forces. In particular, such an investment pattern would justify the changes that the Army Chief of Staff is undertaking to convert his division-centric force into one that is brigade-centric. A force of this type will embody increased firepower buttressed by enhanced command, control, and communications capabilities that are key to supporting rapid decision making in the field.

One could perhaps go even further in the direction of Army force structure reform and question the need for larger Corps-sized units, with their cumbersome bureaucratic infrastructures. Corps are geared to fighting along broad fronts; in other words, to fighting a major European land war—a contingency that is not likely to materialize for the foreseeable future. Perhaps two years ago, one might have argued that Corps were also necessary for a major land war in the Gulf. Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) demonstrated that this was not the case at all. Those who are preparing the QDR might well wish to give such a proposal serious consideration.

Of course, OIF has provided many other important lessons to be learned, and the QDR is likely to reflect them. One lesson is that the total force con-

1. U.S. Department of Defense, "Quadrennial Defense Review Report," September 30, 2001, at www.defenselink.mil/pubs/qdr2001.pdf (January 10, 2005), p. iii.

cept, as it applied in the past two decades, may no longer be relevant to the nature of military operations in the years ahead.

Reserves should not be the sole repositories of certain support and service support specialties, for example, military police, or civil affairs experts, which instead must revert in large part to active units. Reserve units should be altered to reflect more balance among those being deployed: There is no reason why some reserve units, for example, artillery units, rarely if ever get deployed, while others find themselves redeployed to the same theater virtually on an annual basis. The new QDR should be the source of a major reconsideration of the total force concept.

There is one other major Army force structure issue that the QDR is likely to—and must—confront, namely, the need for increased Army end-strength. It is currently the fashion to argue that the Army is stretched too thin, that it will be unable to take on new missions in addition to those to which it is already committed. Yet radical changes in current structure, including elimination of Corps-sized units and a shift in the mix of active and reserve missions, could well mitigate the need for increasing force structure. Then too, the plan to revise America's overseas military presence, which will affect the Army more than the other services and which was already foreshadowed in QDR 2001, could also serve as a tool for mitigating pressures to increase force structure. The new QDR should have much to say about the new overseas posture plan and how it will affect worldwide force posture.

Lessons from the Gulf Wars

If OIF (and to a lesser extent Operation Enduring Freedom [OEF]) have prompted changes in Army structure, they have also demonstrated the critical importance of Special Operations Forces. The previous QDR already highlighted the importance of these forces. OEF and then OIF proved that the thrust of QDR 2001 was absolutely on target. In fact, because the Special Operations Forces—no longer merely supporting forces, but *supported* forces—operated in significantly different ways in Afghanistan and Iraq, they demon-

strated both the versatility and flexibility that are the *sine qua non* of America's future force posture.

While it is not clear that the size of the SOF needs to be increased much beyond its current levels, modernization efforts should proceed apace. Moreover, SOF may prove to be the vehicle for resolving one of the thorniest difficulties that the United States encounters when seeking to operate with its allies and partners: the inability of the latter to match U.S. technology and capabilities on a sufficient scale to permit true interoperability. Special Forces are, by their nature, small, yet versatile, and the systems they employ, while individually expensive, do not consume large sums in aggregate. These forces could, therefore, be fielded by allies and friends with budgets a fraction the size of the DOD's. Yet they could acquit themselves well in the field, working harmoniously with our own SOF. This has already been the case with respect to several countries operating as part of the OEF and/or OIF coalitions.

A focus on non-traditional competitors and threats should also prompt a very different approach to tactical aviation, particularly within the Air Force. That service is under tremendous budgetary pressure and its future resources simply cannot sustain its stated needs. A costly space program, an anticipated need to modernize lift, a requirement for more tanker support, and programs to expand the capabilities and numbers of unmanned aerial vehicles are all competing for resources with two major tactical aviation programs, the F-22 and the JSF. Something will have to give, and among all these competing programs, the case for maintaining those two programs at currently projected acquisition rates seems the weakest. The QDR need not specify which of these two programs might be altered or what alterations should take place—but it could set the direction for the Air Force in a manner that will force the service to face up to the budgetary realities that confront it. This is especially important given a current and projected threat environment radically different from that which generated these programs.

In contrast to the Army, with its pressures for increasing end-strength, the Navy has promoted

efficiencies that are prompting end-strength reductions. Similarly, in contrast to the Air Force, the Navy, together with the Marine Corps, provides the ultimate initial hedge against the emergence of conflict against potential, or unexpected, adversaries. The Navy's challenge is to maintain that hedge even as it constrains the size of the fleet. The QDR should challenge the Navy to demonstrate the need for more large and costly submarines, for amphibious lift, and for larger surface ships. Aircraft carriers, on the other hand, proved their worth even in the war in landlocked Afghanistan, while the need for littoral combat ships is reinforced daily by events in the Gulf. Finally, the sea-basing concept is one that deserves serious support: It embodies both the flexibility required to support operations against irregular threats and buttresses the hedge against more conventional aggression.

Requirements for the Next QDR

Traditionally, planning documents such as the QDR have paid lip service to interagency cooperation, as well as to military cooperation with allies. In practical terms, neither the potential contributions of other departments, nor those of allies, have been a factor in calculating requirements and the resources to meet them. The spiraling costs of defense budgets, and both the external constraints upon budget growth—of which the deficit is but one—and internal constraints such as the growth in health care costs, mandate that the QDR be explicit about the impact of projected interagency and alliance cooperation on force requirements.

For example, it is arguable that the DOD should not plan to be the overwhelmingly preponderant large-scale contributor to so-called "Phase IV" nation-building operations as it is currently in Iraq. Rather, force and resource planning should posit circumstances akin to the Balkan and Afghan models, which involve a significantly larger proportion of allied and coalition partner force contributions and do not call for DOD civilian management of an occupied country.

In addition, the QDR should mandate a greater emphasis on security assistance, which of course

requires close cooperation with the State Department. In the eighteenth century Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder argued that, "[O]ur troops cost more to maintain than those of any other country. Our money, therefore, will be of most service to our allies, because it will enable them to raise and support a greater number of troops than those we can supply them with for the same sum."² His dictum holds true for America today. Helping our allies develop small but capable forces of their own—including, but not limited to, Special Forces as noted above—will ultimately result in both human and material benefits to the United States.

The QDR should not limit its discussion of interagency and international cooperation to combat zones. DOD rightly has not claimed an inordinate role in protection of the homeland, but the QDR should further elaborate on that role and should emphasize that homeland defense includes anti-ballistic and anti-cruise missile capabilities. On the other hand, many aspects of the global War on Terrorism—notably, methods for combating Islamic extremism—involve expertise that resides outside the Department of Defense. The QDR should require a level of cooperation with other agencies that heretofore often has simply not materialized.

No one can doubt that this QDR, like its predecessor, will emphasize the importance of transforming aspects of DOD operations, including (indeed, especially) "back-office" operations. Business management modernization, re-capitalization of facilities, and acquisition reform must remain priority concerns for the next four years. The recent creation of a Joint Rapid Action Cell to hurry urgently required developmental systems into the field at the behest of commanders should be a prototype for a new approach to acquisition. To the extent that current regulations stand in the way, DOD should seek their modification. The Defense Department, and the nation, cannot afford any more quarter-century scandals such as the Comanche helicopter—which never made it to the field at all.

2. Cited in William Hague, *William Pitt the Younger* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 10.

Most of all, the Defense Department urgently requires a Chief Management Officer, who could ensure that the most efficient business management processes are adopted and employed to husband precious defense resources.

Conclusion

The foregoing observations by no means exhaust the gamut of principles that should guide the formulation of the new QDR. More than anything else, the QDR should be a forward-looking document. The tendency to project current challenges one or two decades into the future is as natural to planners as it is unsatisfactory. Hopefully, our planners have learned not to view the future through the lenses of past wars. They should also be careful not to view it through the lenses of current wars.

Of one thing we can be sure: Just as no one could predict in mid-2001 that we would be at war in Afghanistan—and with our forces operating not only high technology systems, but doing so on horseback—so we can be certain that the nature of the next conflict that awaits us will be one that will take us by surprise. Our best hope is to provide for the most flexible and creative means possible so as to afford us the capability to react decisively and successfully against whatever surprise awaits us in the future.

—Dov S. Zakheim is Vice President at Booz Allen Hamilton, Inc. He was formerly Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) and Chief Financial Officer (2001–2004) and Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Planning and Resources (1985–1987).