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Independent Panel Needed for Alternative Views to the Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review

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Over the course of the next several months, senior Department of Defense officials will conduct the congressionally-mandated Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). This broad examination of national defense strategy, modernization, and force structure will establish a defense planning program that will direct how the Pentagon allocates its significant resources for the next 20 years. This strategy guides the planning and programming for service budgets—and, by extension, what the military purchases, including vehicles, tanks, ships, aircraft, and other essential equipment.

Since becoming law in 1996, QDRs have been conducted in 1997, 2001, and 2006. The next Quadrennial Defense Review will be the second review conducted and published since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. A new Administration and shifting international strategic and economic dynamics make this review just as important, if not more relevant, than previous reviews. It is, therefore, vital that a comprehensive validation of its findings and an independent assessment of U.S. defense policy be conducted through the establishment of a National Defense Panel (NDP) as was first mandated by Congress in the 1996 QDR legislation.¹ Congress should establish and fund this senior panel in the forthcoming defense authorization bill to be signed into law later this year.

Independent Panel Needed to “Stress Test” the Pentagon Assessment. Title 10, Section 118 of the U.S. Code requires the Secretary of Defense to conduct the QDR. As mandated by law—and because

defense policy is subordinate to foreign policy—the Pentagon's QDR is to be conducted *after* the White House issues a National Security Strategy. Due to the breadth of the impact the QDR stands to have on defense planning and budgeting, Congress also chose to insert subsection (f) of section 118, which directs the defense secretary to “establish a panel to conduct an assessment of the quadrennial defense review...including the recommendations of the review, the stated and implied assumptions incorporated in the review, and the vulnerabilities of the strategy and force structure underlying the review.” The panel is also required by law to analyze “the trends, asymmetries, and concepts of operations that characterize the military balance with potential adversaries, focusing on the strategic approaches of possible opposing forces.”

During the development of the 1997 QDR, an independent National Defense Panel was convened to study the strategy's findings. The NDP consisted of eight analysts, including its Chairman Phillip A. Odeen. In December 1997, the panel released a 94-page report entitled “Transforming Defense: National Security in the 21st Century.”² The report challenged some of the core principles underpinning defense strategy at the time, fulfilling its mandate

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of complementing the QDR and contributing to a larger debate on the issues. In the cover letter of the NDP, Chairman Odeen captured the true intention of the exercise: “We have not attempted to provide all the answers. Rather, our intention is to stimulate a wider debate on our defense priorities.”³

The belief in the importance of the National Defense Panel was shared by Democrats and Republicans alike. For instance, President Clinton’s Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, expressed his strong support for NDP’s findings while Senator Dan Coats (R-IN), who cosponsored the QDR legislation in 1996, also endorsed it, saying that the purpose of the panel’s report was “not based on distrust or suspicion of the Pentagon, but on the recognition that we need bold and innovative thinking from a variety of sources in this time of rapid change.”⁴

During the 2001 QDR process, Congress did not mandate a National Defense Panel, but the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff did direct his own independent panel, led by Michelle Flournoy, to conduct a defense strategy assessment. The result was a report entitled “QDR 2001 Strategy-Driven Choices for America’s Security” that was released by the National Defense University in April 2001. Unfortunately, the QDR of 2001 was largely overshadowed by the events of September 11, which heavily influenced the strategy published just weeks after the attacks. As a result, QDR 2001 inevitably received less public attention than *Transforming Defense* did in 1997. Unlike *Transforming Defense* in 1997, however, QDR 2001 was an edited work that contained a collection of many views instead of a cohesive, consensus position. During the 2006 QDR process, no formal defense review panel was established. Perhaps due in part to the lack of alternate viewpoints, the most recent QDR was generally shelved upon release and subsequently ignored by Capitol Hill.

Hedging Against the Status Quo. After the release of the National Defense Panel report in 1997, Senator Coats argued that the “NDP served two vital functions: as a hedge against the status quo and an independent validation of innovative recommendations proposed by the Quadrennial Defense Review.”⁵ Ensuring a proper check on the prevailing strategic views and assumptions within the Pentagon—the same views that promise to drive the QDR process in the coming year—is a step Congress must initiate to help verify or reject the Pentagon strategy findings.

During his initial FY 2010 budget proposal announcement on April 6, 2009, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates promised to “profoundly reform how this department does business.” The Secretary went on to announce that he planned to not only reform how the Pentagon purchases weapons and equipment, but what it purchases as well. In areas where he believes the U.S. has a qualitative or quantitative advantage—such as the F-22 fighter, the C-17, or the long-range bomber program—he chose to propose cuts and program delays now. Gates then announced that decisions related to how the Pentagon should shift and manage additional risk will be conducted as part of the QDR process.

Considering the broad procurement shifts Secretary Gates has proposed—and his indication of more dramatic weapons systems cuts, delays, or cancellations next year in the 2011 budget request—Congress must look beyond the Pentagon leadership for strategic assessments to stimulate a broader discussion. Given the number of major defense programs Secretary Gates is seeking to cut—and the fate of other programs he will leave to the QDR process to decide—it is absolutely vital that Congress establish an independent National Defense Panel to draw its own assessments and offer its own separate conclusions on the U.S. defense posture.

1. 10 United States Code § 118, at http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/uscode10/usc_sec_10_00000118——000-.html (May 5, 2009).
2. “Transforming Defense: National Security in the 21st Century,” Report of the National Defense Panel, December 1997, at <http://www.dtic.mil/ndp/FullDoc2.pdf> (May 5, 2009).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Press Release, “Coats Comments on Future of Military Following Today’s Release of National Defense Panel Report,” Office of Senator Dan Coats, December 1, 1997, at <http://www.dtic.mil/ndp/press/dcoats.pdf> (May 5, 2009).
5. *Ibid.*

In keeping with the original intention of the National Defense Panel, no one individual or group should be able to direct major future defense planning decisions absent a separate mechanism to test their analytical assumptions. As in the past, this panel should consist of a range of defense analysts with opposing views. It should be written as a complete report that will require the consensus of the entire group like the original panel in 1997. It should also be convened during the QDR process and scheduled to be released after the Quadrennial Defense Review so that it may address the major findings of this strategy.

Ensuring Transparency in the Defense Strategy Process. The Obama Administration has reputedly talked about transparency in government. A congressionally-mandated National Defense Panel offers a pragmatic vehicle to ensure transparency in the defense strategy process by creating a hedge against the prevailing opinions in the Pentagon through an alternative and independent evaluation.

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