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Congress Wisely Acts to Bring Greater Independence to Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review Process

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Earlier this year, The Heritage Foundation urged Congress to mandate a truly independent panel to critique the analysis underpinning the Pentagon's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and draw its own conclusions and recommendations regarding the future defense strategy, modernization, and force structure of the U.S. military.¹ This independent examination is necessary given the numerous programmatic and force structure decisions Defense Secretary Robert Gates and his QDR stand to influence—particularly those manifest within the fiscal year (FY) 2011 President's defense budget request due in February. Furthermore, the new strategy will have a profound effect on the future composition of the U.S. military and its ability to meet international responsibilities over the next two decades and beyond.

Fortunately, Congress agreed that no one person should have unilateral input and unquestioned authority to make such fundamental and permanent shifts in defense investment priorities. Building on the original language requiring that an independent panel be established to review the QDR, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010 expanded the authorization that Congress have a large say in the composition and direction of the new panel. While Secretary Gates will still play a prominent role in its formation, the provisions guiding the expanded independent panel promise to inject a new level of critical analysis into the QDR process. This additional scrutiny with supplemental "outsiders" will help strengthen the analytical

assumptions informing future defense budget decisions. Congress should be applauded for providing robust oversight of the executive branch and retaining an independent panel with congressional appointees—one that will serve as a reality check on the prevailing strategic views and assumptions within the Pentagon.

Expanded Panel with Congressional Appointees Is the Right Decision. America remains a global power with worldwide responsibilities. Yet the breadth of defense cuts in the President's FY 2010 budget and the limited debate surrounding these decisions has been as unprecedented as it is disconcerting. Members of Congress have been rightly concerned about the deterministic views of the future held by Pentagon officials conducting the QDR.

Indeed, the QDR's recommendations will be used to justify significant investment decisions in a military Secretary Gates believes is sufficient to meet future requirements. But as previous strategies have shown, the review process can have the unintended consequence of becoming a tool for policymakers to justify budget decisions—decisions made without consideration of their present or future impact. In other words, defense strategies often become bud-

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get-driven exercises that drive force structure decisions. Furthermore, Secretary Gates has said publicly that this QDR operated under a zero-growth assumption, a position that only amplifies the importance of an outside perspective.

The 2010 panel, much like the similar 1997 National Defense Panel, should remedy this dilemma by challenging the major QDR assumptions and recommendations. Although some minor disagreements—regarding the composition and mandate of the panel that originally separated the House and Senate—the final conference report recognized that “an analysis of different force structure options suitable to meet the national security challenges identified in the review is essential for Congress to make informed decisions as it raises and sustains the Nation’s military forces.”² The independent panel promises to raise the level of debate and increase consideration for alternative viewpoints that might otherwise have been disregarded in the process.

Enhanced Independence. The panel should generate a focused report that is devoid of political considerations and capable of playing a direct role in (at least) the 2011 and 2012 defense budget cycle debates. Perhaps most significant, the size and composition of the panel has been changed dramatically from the original guidelines released in 2006.

Instead of a 12-member panel chosen directly by the Secretary of Defense, the revised panel will have an additional eight members appointed by Congress. Congress also demanded that the secretary’s appointees be “comprised of members equally selected on a bipartisan basis.” These changes will increase the panel’s independence and generate a more balanced final product.

Panel members must work to ensure that the sheer size of the group does not diminish the quality

of its final report. While Heritage argued that the report would benefit from being written as a complete document that would require the consensus of the entire group, a panel of 20 appointees may reduce the overall value of the report by diluting opposing viewpoints in a quest for consensus. Therefore, Congress should not consider a consensus report mandatory.

As stated in the fiscal year 2010 defense authorization bill conference report, members of the House and Senate Armed Service Committees plan to monitor the processes, outcomes, and lessons associated with both the QDR and the independent panel. Along with the methods by which appointments are chosen in the future and the consequences this has on the true independence of the panel, the impact the size of the panel has on its overall value should be considered when reviewing options for potential changes during the next QDR process.

Panel Should Focus on Risk of New Force Sizing Construct. The House’s strong guidelines for the panel are encouraging. The bill directs the panel to not just “conduct an assessment of the assumptions, strategy, findings, and risks in the report of the Secretary of Defense on the QDR” but to do so “with particular attention paid to the risks described in that report” (emphasis added).

Such a broad mandate should also guard against QDR decisions designed to justify force structure cuts for budgetary—rather than security—reasons. Additionally, the bill directs the panel to “conduct an independent assessment of a variety of possible force structures for the Armed Forces,” including the QDR. It also requires a review and comparison of resource requirements.

Reviewing resource requirements from both the QDR and other theoretical force structures could be a unique and valuable contribution to the ongoing

1. See Mackenzie M. Eaglen and Eric Sayers, “Independent Panel Needed for Alternative Views to the Pentagon’s Quadrennial Defense Review,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2425, May 5, 2009 at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/wm2425.cfm>; Mackenzie M. Eaglen and Eric Sayers, “Create a National Defense Panel to Independently Judge Pentagon’s Quadrennial Defense Review,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2500, June 23, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/wm2500.cfm>.
2. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010: Conference Report to Accompany H.R. 2647, H. Rep. 111–288, October 7, 2009, at http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111_cong_reports&docid=hr288.111.pdf (November 2, 2009).

discussion about military transformation, much in the same way the previous NDP enriched a similar debate.

Once the panel is appointed and at work, Congress should pay particular attention to its review concerning the inherent risks described in the QDR.

1. The independent panel should analyze the level of risk associated with the likely abandonment of the military's longstanding requirement to be sized and shaped to fight two major regional conflicts simultaneously. What impact this reorientation will have on America's ability to meet its global security commitments and treaty obligations must be seriously and publicly deliberated.
2. The findings of the QDR's "High-End Asymmetric Team" should be examined carefully in light of the near and long-term trajectory of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) modernization program and its development of anti-access/area-denial capabilities. Does the answer to the dilemma of how to respond to the PLA lie with discrete procurement decisions and operational shifts, as some involved in the QDR process have claimed, or does it rest with greater consideration for force structure in the Pacific?

An independent panel will not only be able to challenge the QDR's assumptions and recommenda-

tions in these two areas, but it may also prove effective at teasing out new and innovative ways of thinking about these and other challenges.

2010 and Beyond. The bipartisan expansion of the independent panel to review the 2010 QDR is an encouraging development in a budget year marked by a number of questionable high-level programmatic decisions. Whatever the outcome of the QDR, the panel will raise the level of national security debate and provide new metrics for weighing strategic, modernization, and force structure decisions.

The Armed Services Committees must now do their due diligence in promptly appointing their designated panel members, and Congress must ensure that the panel's findings are thoroughly and publicly deliberated during the first half of 2010.

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