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The Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review: Simply an Extension of the President's 2010 Defense Budget Plans

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Yesterday, the President issued his Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 defense budget request to Congress, and the Pentagon provided the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) to Capitol Hill. The request builds upon last year's defense budget that began to chip away at core defense capabilities. These capabilities should be the mainstays of strategic planning, and include: strategic defense; control of the seas; air superiority; space control; projecting power to distant regions; and information dominance throughout cyberspace.

The QDR is intended as a major defense strategy that looks forward 20 years and delineates how the U.S. will structure its armed forces. The QDR is supposed to outline threat assessments, military strategy, force structure, and budgetary plans, and it should establish a road map for defense programs that will prepare for an uncertain future.

The QDR lacks long-term vision and serves largely as an analytical justification for current defense plans and programs—including the scaling back of modernization for next-generation systems. Congress should carefully review the QDR to ensure it balances today's requirements with a robust investment in future capabilities. Where strategy-mismatch shortfalls exist, Congress should seek to restore these defense capabilities in this year's defense legislation.

QDR Observations

The Pentagon Strategy Was Issued in the Absence of White House Foreign Policy Guidance. While the 2010 QDR references the forthcoming *National Security Strategy* expected from the White House, there is still no official, published foreign policy guidance by the President to inform the Pentagon's review. Critical foreign policy guidance from the Administration is supposed to include the delineation of U.S. vital national interests, America's role in the world, and how to meet these priorities. Defense strategy is supposed to be subordinate to foreign policy.

The QDR Fails to Meet Statutory Requirements or Provide a 20-Year Defense Road Map. Congress intended the QDR to be a comprehensive, far-sighted, and strategy-based assessment of future military requirements. Current law outlines the 15 primary tasks the QDR is supposed to achieve. Chief among these guidelines is for Pentagon leaders to examine the "effect on force structure of the use by the armed forces of technologies anticipated to be available for the ensuing 20 years." By proposing to only study many future challenges and focusing

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largely on present operations, the QDR falls short of its overall responsibilities and usefulness.

The QDR Claims to Be Both Strategy-Driven and Resource-Constrained. Both cannot be true. The document claims to be driven by strategy and then states resource constraints will “not allow our government to fully address all of the potential challenges that present themselves. Choices must be made. Some initiatives can be taken right away; others must be postponed.” Given how the strategy largely supports defense initiatives and investment shifts that began over one year ago, the QDR is clearly informed by the President’s defense budget plans of a no-real-growth defense budget over the long-term. Therefore, the logical conclusion remains that the analysis was primarily budget-driven.

The Strategy Is Largely an Analytical Justification of the President’s FY 2010 Defense Budget Request. Last year’s watershed defense budget, which dramatically reshaped the composition of defense investment, was an extension of the 2008 *National Defense Strategy*—issued by the previous Administration. The fiscal year 2010 defense budget was approved by Congress without a detailed five-year budget plan and lacking 30-year shipbuilding or aviation plans. The decisions to decrease some long-standing capabilities happened in the absence of any careful reevaluation of America’s global mission. The QDR and President’s budget request for FY 2011 basically continue down the path articulated last year. The QDR should have preceded these major budget changes instead of seeking to justify them afterward.

The QDR Understates Requirements and Overestimates the Capabilities of the Force Defense Officials Are Willing to Sustain. The strategy clearly outlines certain future threats but then offers inadequate solutions based largely upon extending today’s legacy force structure indefinitely. There is scant proposed investment in high-end, next generation platforms. The majority of force structure recommendations are those either currently underway or others that were already on the books as planned programs. Many programmatic solutions rely on more of the same: simply upgrading legacy systems. The problem is the legacy fleets of major systems

average in age from 20 to 40 years old and cannot be extended forever.

Many of the Strategy’s Solutions Demand U.S. Forces Manage and Assume Additional Risk. The answer to many shortfalls identified as a result of QDR analysis is to demand U.S. forces manage and assume additional risk. Current law describes the primary tasks of the QDR, including the recommended force structure best suited to implement the national defense strategy at a “low-to-moderate level of risk.” The current QDR does not specify:

- How much risk and under what precise scenarios;
- How to actually manage future risk better;
- Which service will assume more risk and when;
- The implications of additional risk on the force, including longer duration conflict, higher casualties, slower mobilization rates, decreased domestic readiness, etc.; or
- The foreign policy ramifications as a result of increased military risk.

The QDR Is Wise to Retain and Institutionalize Critical Counterinsurgency Capabilities the U.S. Shed After Vietnam. Following the Vietnam War, the U.S. military became a “hollow force” that was given insufficient resources for adequate training, new weapons and equipment, and ongoing operations. After consciously ignoring lessons learned from the Philippine conflict, the U.S. Army was then devoid of a baseline doctrine for the many counterinsurgencies that would punctuate the next century.

After Vietnam, the Army similarly divested itself of counterinsurgency experience in order to focus on conventional combat. The QDR smartly reiterates where the services are already going, particularly the U.S. Army, to ensure essential counterinsurgency skills, training, and doctrine are not lost after operations in Iraq and Afghanistan conclude.

The Strategy Adequately Addresses Today’s Conflicts and the Health of the Force but Does Not Address Current Risks Posed by Existing Funding and Capability Shortfalls. The QDR should have begun by addressing funding and capability shortfalls that exist in today’s force. The annual defense

budget request regularly proposes to underfund the Pentagon's own plans and programs, but the risks are overlooked and left unexplained.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, simply executing current Pentagon plans would require "sustaining annual defense funding over the long term at higher real (inflation-adjusted) levels than those that occurred at the peak of the buildup in the mid-1980s."

By not openly discussing any existing shortfalls—including underinvestment—the QDR begins its assessment behind the curve of reality. Many recommendations to maintain the legacy fleets of ships, planes, and vehicles will only keep military plans on a static, linear path forward.

The dilemma is that the legacy fleet is in urgent need of modernization for high-end systems, most of which were built in the 1980s with technology from the 1970s. Given the procurement cycles and timelines of next-generation systems, this could easily result in a decade-long setback of investment in modernization.

Defense Officials Are Relying Heavily on International Agreements, Partners, and New Policies to Address Problems Without the Requisite Hard Power Investments. Many of the strategy recommendations leave portions of U.S. national security in the hands of others by assuring Congress of agreements that may never come to fruition. The QDR relies on consultations with U.S. friends and allies to help deter aggression "under new circumstances." The strategy states the Pentagon will broaden and deepen relationships with other nations and private firms to create partnerships to share space capabilities and systems.

While employing all elements of national power is important, the QDR does not adequately outline investment in next-generation systems oftentimes

beyond the research and development stages. Some recommendations also change defense doctrine without a plan to modernize the relevant platforms that military forces will use in accomplishing their mission.

The Force Sizing Construct Grows Yet Again Without Robust New Investment. No serious defense planner would deny that the United States might need to fight two wars at approximately the same time, particularly given the U.S. troop disposition around the globe, including in Korea, Europe, and the Middle East. Retaining the crucial two-war construct is important, but throwing in the kitchen sink of every other conceivable mission while not proposing a larger force defies reality and requirements that are already under-met.

An Informed Debate Is Critical. In the absence of significant information last year that should have informed the 2010 defense budget debate, Congress wisely established an independent panel to draw its own assessments and conclusions about the QDR. A transparent public debate regarding how America's military should be organized for the future is overdue.

Congress should encourage the independent panel to immediately begin testing the assumptions and recommendations of the QDR and identifying the strategy's shortfalls vis-à-vis the QDR statute. Congress must strictly hold the panel to its March deadline for the submission of an interim report—a critical first step that will help inform the posture hearings and markup of defense legislation later this spring.

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