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Quadrennial Defense Review's Homeland Defense Realignment Leaves U.S. Less Prepared

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The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) is intended to be a delineation of long-term defense strategy and force structure for the U.S. military. In this year's review, the Pentagon recommended cutting the number of military forces prepared to respond to a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) attack by downsizing U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) forces and shifting remaining personnel to the 10 regions of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). This recommendation, however, would leave the U.S. shortchanged in the event of a high-impact disaster. Given current threat realities—including a high-risk of a catastrophic chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or high-yield explosive (CBRNE) attack on U.S. soil—leaving the U.S. unprepared for such an attack is unacceptable.

An appropriate long-term strategy for homeland defense would focus on maintaining three fully resourced CBRNE Consequence Management Response Forces (CCMRFs) under U.S. Northern Command trained for emergency response to catastrophic attacks. These personnel investments would leave a sufficient force in place to reach the site of a small- or large-scale attack in a flexible fashion while maintaining troop levels sufficient to respond to a catastrophic disaster.

Not a Minor Policy Shift. NORTHCOM is tasked with providing homeland defense and supporting civilian authorities inside the United States in the event of a catastrophic disaster. If mobilized by the President, NORTHCOM would be tasked

with responding to an attack on U.S. soil. Specifically, NORTHCOM oversees three brigade-sized CBRNE CCMRFs that remain equipped and ready to respond when disaster strikes.

Certainly, there are some “smaller” missions in which the support of these NORTHCOM forces may be necessary. In the case of a catastrophic disaster, however, the need for such military response forces—performing such functions as assisting in search and rescue efforts and providing air and sealift support, communications, and emergency response—is critical, particularly where a disaster has overwhelmed state and local authorities. Consequently, NORTHCOM must have an assigned force structure that can easily and efficiently carry out such a mission.

The Pentagon, however, in its 2010 QDR, has pushed forward with plans to realign forces by decreasing the number of CCMRF teams from three to one and moving personnel from the other two CCMRF teams to 10 smaller Homeland Response Forces in each of the FEMA districts. This may seem like a slight structural realignment, but such an organizational change and personnel decrease would have a major impact on the ability of the U.S. to respond to

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such a large-scale disaster by reducing the sheer number of dedicated forces to such a response.

The likelihood of such an attack on U.S. soil should not be minimized. In fact, the possibility of such a CBRNE attack was characterized as “extraordinarily likely” by current Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense Paul Stockton. Without proper capabilities within NORTHCOM, significantly more lives could be lost in the aftermath of such an attack.

Responding to the Catastrophic. A regional approach to homeland defense, whether catastrophic or otherwise, is not a bad idea. In fact, decentralizing homeland security/homeland defense response can yield increased response times. However, shrinking the number of personnel dedicated to CBRNE response equates to an overall decrease in resources—resulting in forces being more easily overwhelmed in situations that require intensive manpower. Contrast this approach to the original plan for NORTHCOM, which was to increase troops from 13,000 to 16,000 in order to make NORTHCOM ready to respond to a homeland security crisis.

Simply put, three full-size CCMRFs are necessary for NORTHCOM to fulfill the missions it is tasked to accomplish. A long-term strategy for defense should be about finding the right mix of resources and personnel to accomplish all of the missions under the Pentagon’s purview. In order to effectively respond to both catastrophic attacks on U.S. soil and smaller disasters where appropriate, the Pentagon should pursue a long-term plan that would:

- **Maintain the three CCMRFs.** Three brigade-size forces are needed to have enough personnel available to handle truly catastrophic disasters.
- **Invest in the Coast Guard.** The Coast Guard has a significant role in homeland defense—playing a

role similar to that of NORTHCOM in search and rescue missions, as well as other efforts in the event of a major disaster. However, for too long, Congress and the Administration have underfunded the Coast Guard despite its increased responsibilities. Making the right investments in the Coast Guard would help to ensure the security of the homeland.

- **Examine the utility of State Defense Forces.** State Defense Forces, authorized under the Constitution and under the command of state governors, can play a vital role in supplementing the National Guard during catastrophic disasters. These volunteer forces can provide immediate aid and security in the initial hours after an attack. Congress and the Administration should encourage states to organize, train and, equip these volunteers as a means of complementing NORTHCOM missions.
- **Improve the QDR.** For too long, the QDR has been driven by budget decisions and short-term political priorities. Congress should review the QDR to ensure that it continues to plan for current threat realities, current commitments, and tomorrow’s capabilities.

Threat Realities. Effective recommendations for homeland defense in the QDR should take into account the long-term threat realities facing the United States. Warping that account for the sake of budget issues or other political priorities will not make Americans safer, nor will it help when they are most in need. The Pentagon should support fully resourced NORTHCOM forces.

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