Much ink has been spilled in the aftermath of the Pentagon’s new Quadrennial Defense Review since its release in February 2006. Overall, many consider the document a mixed bag. Depending upon one’s views, it either gets some things right and other things wrong or else it gets many things wrong and few things right. The purpose here is to address what a quadrennial defense review is supposed to accomplish, how QDR 2005 differs from QDR 2001, its relative strengths, and what questions it leaves unanswered.

What Is the QDR and What Does It Do?

Congress established the QDR process in 1996 to ensure that the Pentagon was conducting long-range planning in regards to the nation’s defense policy. QDR 2005 is the third such review. By statute, the secretary of defense, in consultation with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, will conduct a comprehensive review every four years “with a view toward determining and expressing the defense strategy of the United States and establishing a defense program for the next 20 years.” Conducting the review requires a defined National Defense Strategy that is consistent with the...
president’s National Security Strategy; defining the force-structure levels, modernization plans, infrastructure, and budgets necessary to provide for the common defense across a full range of missions called for in the National Defense Strategy; and identifying a budget plan and any additional resources needed to carry out such missions at a “low-to-moderate level of risk.”

The report, which must be submitted to the Armed Services Committees of both the Senate and House of Representatives, is required to incorporate fifteen specific areas, including defined or assumed U.S. national security interests and threats to those interests, and force structure and global force posture assumptions. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff must assess whether there is any unnecessary duplication of effort among the services and what changes in technology “can be applied effectively to warfare.” This is no small order. As chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Peter Pace, USMC, states in the current report, “Any attempt to predict the future security environment of 2025 is inherently difficult.”

**QDR 2001 and QDR 2005**

The assumptions and recommendations of QDR 2001, released shortly after 9/11, were poorly suited for the new realities. The four strategic priorities of QDR 2001 were to assure allies and friends, dissuade future military competition, deter threats and coercion against U.S. interests, and, if deterrence failed, decisively defeat any adversary. QDR 2005 is heavily shaped by the ongoing war on terrorism—which it also calls the “long war”—that began in fall 2001. The current strategy seeks to defeat terrorist networks, defend the homeland, shape the choices of countries at strategic crossroads, and prevent the acquisition or use of WMD. The emphasis throughout the document extends beyond traditional, state-on-state military affairs.

The new force-planning guidance is of particular interest. Perhaps the most memorable portion of QDR 2001 was the “1-4-2-1” planning construct, under which the United States would organize, train, and equip sufficient forces to defend the homeland and to operate in and from four prescribed areas (Europe, Northeast Asia, the Asian littoral, and the Middle East/Southwest Asia); be able to “swiftly defeat” two adversaries in near simultaneous campaigns while being able to “win decisively” in one of those campaigns; and conduct a limited number of “smaller-scale contingency operations.”

QDR 2005 has three pillars of force planning: (1) defend the homeland, (2) prevail in the war on terror and conduct irregular operations, and (3) conduct and win conventional campaigns. It makes a useful distinction between “steady-state” (continuous) and “surge” (episodic) activities. In the steady state, the military must be able to detect, deter, and, if necessary, defeat external threats to the homeland; deter and defend against external
transnational terror threats; enable partners; conduct “multiple, globally distributed irregular operations of varying duration”; and deter interstate coercion or aggression through forward-deployed forces, facilitate theater security cooperation activities, and conduct presence missions.

In surge mode, the military must be able to contribute to the response to natural disasters or manmade catastrophes and, if directed, raise the level of defense responsiveness in all domains (air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace); conduct a large-scale, potentially protracted irregular-warfare campaign including counterinsurgency and security, stability, transition, and reconstruction operations; and conduct two near simultaneous conventional campaigns (or one if engaged in a large-scale, protracted irregular campaign) while selectively reinforcing deterrence against opportunistic acts of aggression. In one of those conventional campaigns the military should also be prepared for regime change and transition to or restoration of civil society.

QDR 2005 continues QDR 2001’s emphasis on a capabilities-based rather than a threat-based approach toward forces. It also embraces the transformation of the Department’s operations across the board—i.e., from improving military technology and systems to changing organizational structures to improving business practices. But many changes have been made since 2001 to improve the expeditionary capabilities and ethos of the services and also to align the global force posture with the evolving international environment and the realities of the war on terror. A small but significant change from 2001 to 2005 deals with the concept of the Total Force. In 2001, “Total Force” referred to active and reserve component forces; in 2005, it refers to the active and reserve components, DoD civilians, and contractors. As with this more holistic conception of the force, QDR 2005 also takes a more broad-based approach toward operations.

QDR 2005 Strengths

As a wartime document, QDR 2005 highlights some valuable operational lessons learned from the past several years, particularly from the experience of the war in Iraq. Thus, the Department is charged to:

- Build partnership capacity. DoD will work domestically and internationally to enable other actors to perform key tasks, roles, and missions. DoD’s response to the Hurricane Katrina recovery, with command-and-control platforms, troops, and transportation assets,

3 "The essence of capabilities-based planning is to identify capabilities that adversaries could employ and capabilities that could be available to the U.S., then evaluate their interaction, rather than over-optimize the joint force for a limited set of threat scenarios.” QDR 2005, p. 4.

serves as a domestic example. Internationally, endeavors such as sending advisory training missions to the Pan Sahel region well illustrate this imperative.5

- Take early preventive measures. DoD must consider acting earlier in order to prevent problems from becoming crises and then conflicts. The operations of the Djibouti-based Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa perfectly illustrate the intent of preventive measures. CJTF-HOA’s forces conduct myriad operations along the littoral of east Africa in order to gather intelligence, conduct civic action projects, and undertake other activities to combat the spread and consequences of jihadist militancy. (As Djibouti is for all practical purposes a quasi-French protectorate, this also illustrates U.S.-French security cooperation in the war on terror.)

- Increase U.S. freedom of action. It proposes measures “to increase both strategic and operational freedom of action by combining a more indirect approach, stealth, persistence, flexible basing and strategic reach.” This is very similar to Robert Kaplan’s ideas on “supremacy by stealth.”6 DoD will work with other agencies and allies in many regions of the world with less visible, “small-footprint” force packages.

- Shift the “cost balances” to our adversaries.

These ideas feed into the notion that the U.S. military must break away from past practices—particularly from a Cold War mentality.7 In this vein, perhaps the most important contribution of this QDR is that it cements into place the elevation of stability operations8 to the same level of importance as warfighting. This reflects the lessons learned from the sorry experience of planning for the “post-major combat operations” phase (“Phase IV” in military parlance) in Iraq.

The Review rightly points out that our current capability portfolio is too focused on “traditional challenges.” Therefore, all forces, both “conventional” (which it refers to as general-purpose) and special operations, would be used for such missions and be trained and prepared for irregular warfare contingencies such as counterinsurgency. This is comforting, because it seems to say that the Department will not create a bifurcated force of warfighters and

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5 On the Pan Sahel Initiative see, e.g., www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/pan-sahel.htm.
7 Early on, the document states that, “Still encumbered with a Cold War organization and mentality in many aspects of Department operations, the Department will seek new and more flexible authorities in budget, finance, acquisition and personnel. Now is the time to institute still further changes necessary for the 21st century.” QDR 2005, p. ix.
political-military oriented constabulary forces. Such a force would be very expensive to maintain and would diminish the overall number of troops available and options for the president and the regional combatant commanders. Increased emphasis must be placed on language and cultural training in order to better operate against both irregular threats and disruptive traditional threats.

The report’s mention of an increased emphasis on distributed operations (using dispersed but networked forces across geographic spaces) is promising, as is its recognition that indirect approaches must be more widely used. As Michael Vickers of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment has pointed out, if Al Qaeda and aligned jihadi groups are a global insurgency operating in 60-some countries, then we need to confront it globally. Economy of force as enabled by concepts such as distributed operations and indirect approaches will facilitate such engagement, particularly when teamed with other interagency partners and allies. Finally, the report should receive high marks for calling on the military to seek a model of continuous change and adaptation. As the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere have shown us, we are dealing with a highly adaptive enemy and thus must be similarly adaptive ourselves. The diffusion of tactics, techniques, and procedures from the insurgency in Iraq to locales as far off as southern Thailand indicate the resilience of our foes. Thankfully, initiatives such as Ft. Leavenworth’s Red Team Leader Class are preparing our service members to handle such threats.

Troubling Questions

The 2005 QDR strives to keep a balance between near-term (winning the war on terrorism) and long-term (China) threats. On the one hand, this approach seems appropriate, but on the other, focusing on the long term may not provide the right capabilities for either the present or future. In particular, three potentially troubling questions surround the Review.

First, are there sufficient forces to carry out the surge portions of the force planning guidance? The report reflects the Pentagon’s conclusion that, while the size of today’s forces “is appropriate to meet current and projected operational demands . . . [we] need to continue rebalancing the mix of joint capabilities and forces.” But is that the case? Currently, the Army, for instance,
even as it is heavily engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, is undergoing a modularity-conversion process to transform itself from a division-based force to one built around brigade combat teams. Furthermore, by 2011 the QDR calls for the elimination of the 30,000 temporary personnel increase in active-duty Army end strength that has been in place over the past years. The reserve-component forces of the National Guard and Army Reserve have also been used in numbers not seen since World War II. Many of those forces are rapidly reaching their limit on cumulative mobilization time (24 months) under the current presidential call-up authorization. The Marine Corps is similarly stretched. In addition, recent events in Iraq suggest that deep cuts in U.S. troop presence perhaps might not be as feasible as once thought. Another crisis contingency could place further drastic strains on our ground forces.

Surprisingly, QDR 2005 calls for 70 Army brigade combat teams (42 active and 28 in the National Guard), roughly 7 less than previous plans. The president and Congress almost immediately said that that kind of reduction would not happen. Still, there is much debate over whether the new, modular force design will provide enough infantry forces—“boots on the ground”—to cope with an international strategic environment rife with irregular threats. While improved technology and other efficiencies may prove this to be an adequate number, one can imagine scenarios that would severely stress our ability to defend the homeland, fight terrorism, conduct a large-scale irregular or traditional war, take down a foreign regime, and help with a transition to civil society. Of course, the Marine Corps (175,000 active and roughly 40,000 reserve) would be crucial both in land campaigns and for other contingencies, as would our sailors and airmen of the Navy and Air Force, and force and capability contributions from friends and allies. Adversaries, real or potential, however, might see such stretched forces as an invitation for mischief.

Second, are there sufficient means to apply toward the QDR’s strategic ends? As noted above, the review process is supposed to address this fundamental question, but the current document seems to sidestep this issue. It states that it “is not a programmatic or budget document.” More than a few analysts are concerned with the QDR’s seeming failure to make tough choices: allocating resources to more troops and other capabilities needed for irregular warfare vs. high-tech systems such as the F-22 Raptor fighter aircraft, which appears best suited to fight high-end traditional threats. Surely arguments can be made about keeping the industrial base exercised, hedging against traditional or disruptive threats, and Congressional wants. Still, QDR 2005 seems to sketch out a defense future that appears to placate everyone while

minimizing any discussion of what the Department would like cut in order to finance other priorities. In short, these decisions are left for the “out years.” Kicking the can down the road is a traditional DoD budgeting dodge—no transformation here.

Last, will the refocus on irregular, disruptive, and catastrophic threats survive Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s tenure at DoD? Clearly much of this will depend on the geostrategic environment, but one can imagine some segments of the senior officer community transferring their disdain for the Secretary’s transformation agenda and other decisions onto what they feel should be the organizational focus of the Department. If a post-Vietnam-like “never again” mentality emerged in response to irregular wars such as Iraq and Afghanistan and any remaining such focus was restricted to the Special Operations Forces community, then the nation’s common defense could be left woefully unprepared for future adversaries, even nation-state adversaries. This may seem unimaginable today, but events since 9/11 should have stretched our imaginations.

Conclusions

QDR 2005 certainly says many of the right things in terms of moving the Department and its Total Force towards the current and emergent realities of the twenty-first century, particularly in the realms of irregular warfare, indirect approaches, cultural training, and interagency and coalition operations. However, it remains to be seen whether this orientation will be resourced and ingrained across the U.S. military forces in the face of other program priorities, especially in the aerospace and ship construction fields. As Brigadier General Charles Dunlap, USAF, has pointed out, certain elements within the military today question whether our involvement in places like Iraq and Afghanistan is the “last war” and if there might be other, more important challengers on the horizon.15 Many observers agree that few adversaries appear willing to challenge traditional American military dominance. Therefore, future threats will likely take place in increasingly urban environments, blur the lines between combatants and noncombatants, use extensive information operations, and rely on irregular means. Adversaries will likely rely upon hybrid or combination warfare approaches that exploit disruptive technologies, or at least use disruptive techniques to magnify the effects of existing technologies. We can at least expect them to blend all of the elements of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power in ways that seek to keep the United States and it partners unbalanced or overmatched.16

QDR 2005 seems to accept this, but delays the decisions that might flow from this logic.

Thomas Donnelly, who was involved in drafting the original QDR legislation, has recently called for the end of future reviews.\textsuperscript{17} Former DoD official Michèle Flournoy has proposed that perhaps QDRs should take place only once per presidency.\textsuperscript{18} They may be right. Another alternative, however, might be to empower an independent panel drawn from current, former, and future DoD and other governmental and allied actors to come up with various future defense strategies with differing assumptions on resources and threat-based vs. capability-based approaches, and then make DoD choose from, in whole or part, the alternatives. Such an effort would “reverse engineer” the current “rock drill” process where individuals are dispatched with marching orders to protect institutional turfs and priorities. While this might not be the full or even the largest part of the solution, it would at least be better than the current system.

\textsuperscript{17} Tom Donnelly, “Kill the QDR,” \textit{Armed Forces Journal}, February 2006.
\textsuperscript{18} Flournoy, “Did the Pentagon Get the Quadrennial Defense Review Right?”