

QDR 2006: Do the forces match the missions? DOD gives little reason to believe

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As originally conceived the Quadrennial Defense Review was meant to help ensure the internal consistency of mid- and longer-term US defense planning. By “internal consistency” I here mean a concordance of strategy, assets, and budgets. As critics often put it in the past: the point is to show how the force fits the strategy and the budget fits the force. The exercise is supposed to “connect” our military strategy with our force development plans and, in turn, connect these with current and future budgets. In this regard, the 2006 QDR is long on assertion and short on quantification – “short” as in utterly lacking.

Secretary Rumsfeld’s second QDR confidently assures us that all the variables align, but gives us no reason to believe. Quite the contrary: the new iteration of the Pentagon’s “force sizing construct” should leave all Americans wondering where the Secretary and his staff have been these past few years.

Reasonable people can disagree about the value of the Iraq war and whether it is being won. But no one can reasonably contest that it has turned out to be a hard slog, as the Secretary belatedly has observed. While we can disagree about whether or not the effort is driving the Army and the Reserves into the ground, no one can honestly deny that the war and other post-9/11 operations have significantly “stressed” our armed forces. And no amount of “stop loss” orders, tour-of-duty extensions, or Reserve call-ups has yet allowed us to assemble a presence in Iraq able to stabilize the country.

In brief: the pedal is to the metal, but we are still not up to speed.

The QDR’s authors admit as much when they allow that “operational end-states defined in terms of ‘swiftly defeating’ or ‘winning decisively’ against adversaries may be less useful for some types of operations...such as...conducting a long-duration, irregular warfare campaign” – a remarkable (but welcome) retreat from the over-confidence of previous QDRs. This concession to reality has not led the Secretary to prescribe fewer such adventures for the future, however. Quite the contrary: the QDR foresees increasing the demands on our armed forces in this domain (irregular warfare and nation-building) as well as in almost every other. Are planned force enhancements sufficient to support another quantum leap in activity? For that matter: Are they sufficient to close the existing gap between missions and capabilities apparent in Iraq? Based on the information provided in the QDR, it is anyone’s guess. But the experience of the past few years should, at minimum, dent any tendency toward passive faith in the Secretary’s assurances.

Other observers and critics have addressed the correspondence (or lack of it) between the proposed force and the budget meant to support it. Likewise, others have addressed the broader and mounting fiscal constraints bearing on the DOD budget. (See references below). This essay focuses on the match between future missions and assets (people, structures, and

things). The following sections summarize the key missions outlined in the QDR, the major force enhancements it proposes, and how we might assess the correspondence between the two.

Future missions

Looking to the future, the QDR usefully divides military missions and activities into “steady-state” and “surge” categories.

Steady-state activities include:

- Conducting multiple, irregular operations of varying duration. These would encompass counter-terror and stability operations as well as smaller-scale counter insurgency operations and nation-building activities (such as in Afghanistan and Colombia).
- In addition, the armed forces would maintain a presence in more places than currently with the aim of deterring threats to the US homeland, US allies, and US overseas assets. They also would seek, more generally, to deter and spoil transnational terrorist attacks and inter-state aggression in regions of concern.
- And they would regularly pay special attention to detecting and interdicting WMD proliferation as well as deterring and defending against WMD attack.
- Our general purpose and special forces would continuously interact with partners of various sorts in order to reassure them, build their capabilities in areas of mutual interest, and create closer working relationships. More than that, they would take a bigger hand in defense sector reform.
- Finally, the services would undertake routine efforts to generate, train, and sustain the nation’s armed forces – an imperative that encompasses not only the reproduction of ready forces but also their transformation.

In sum, as a matter of routine activity, the QDR foresees an increase in stability and nation-building operations, more long-term counterinsurgency operations, an increased frequency of offensive counter-proliferation activities, and US force presence in more places involving a greater variety of “partnership” activities.

Regarding transformation, it prescribes continuing the process of global reorientation, an increased focus on developing capacities for irregular warfare, and continuing the efforts to advance inter-service cooperation and build “netcentric” armed forces. The Army will have to train to a new tactical structure and all the services will have to integrate new generations of “big ticket” platforms. This is a bit like combining the modernization wave of the 1980s with the transformation wave of the late-1990s in the context of conducting major operations reminiscent of the Vietnam era while reorienting the force as was done in the post-Vietnam war period.

While carrying out its steady-state, routine, and transformation duties, the armed forces must also be prepared for *surge activities* of several types, notably:

- Helping to manage the consequences of a domestic WMD attack or catastrophic event;
- Conducting large-scale counterinsurgency and security, stability, transition and reconstruction operations; and,
- Waging two nearly simultaneous conventional campaigns (or one plus a large-scale irregular campaign) with the aim of “regime change” in one of the campaigns.

Of course, the addition of a large-scale counter-insurgency war to the big war mix increases requirements even though DOD has retained the two war limit.

The two wars to which the QDR refers may be either two conventional conflicts or one each conventional and irregular. Many assets would be at least partially applicable to both two war scenarios – but not all. So from where is the additional irregular warfare capability to come? Perhaps DOD has downgraded the requirements for one of the conventional wars in order to allow greater investment in irregular warfare capabilities? If so, this trade-off presumably is occurring within the ground forces, rather than between the ground and other forces – because no ground troops are being added to the US arsenal overall. This implies that the two imagined conventional wars will be more air power dependent than previously planned. Either that or DOD proposes to make our ground forces’ conventional and irregular capabilities fully fungible – that is: one force fights all. This option is not fantastic – but it demands some explication.

Future capabilities

Turning to planned force enhancements and reductions, the QDR carries forward or newly proposes a variety of initiatives. It directs the armed forces to:

- Reduce active-duty end strength from current levels by about 75,000 – 40,000 of these being USAF personnel, the rest Army and Marine Corps – thus bringing the overall size down to the level set by the previous administration: approximately 1.35 million active-component personnel.
- Through reprogramming, add 13,000+ personnel to the current roster of 52,000 SOF personnel;
- Increase the irregular warfare capacities of regular ground forces;
- Complete conversion of the active-component Army from 33 to 42 Brigade Combat Groups – each with two maneuver battalions and one reconnaissance battalion;
- Proceed with measures already underway to improve efficiency in the use of military personnel. These measures include global realignment, which will free 60,000-70,000

personnel from their current stations in Europe and Asia, and altering the division of skills between the active and reserve components, which by 2010 will affect 125,000 positions;

- Accelerate the retirement of the F-117 fighter and the U-2 reconnaissance aircraft;
- Add 322 Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) by 2011;
- Reduce the number of B-52H bombers from 95 to 56, modernize the remainder of the bomber fleet, and begin development of a new long-range strike system, two decades early;
- Reduce the arsenal of deployed Minuteman III ballistic missiles from 500 to 450;
- Convert four Trident submarines for use in conventional strikes and develop conventional warheads for the Trident missile;
- Continue procurement of most previously-planned major weapon systems. During the next two decades this will marginally increase deployment capabilities, substantially increase air power capabilities for longer-range precision strike, and add littoral and riverine naval capabilities. As before, traditional platform-centric programs gobble up the largest chunks of modernization funding. In the three-way budget battle between counter-insurgency advocates, info-tech networkers, and platform jockeys, the latter are the clear winners.

Whither transformation?

Least impressive is the progress achieved or planned for the 2001-2010 time period in the areas of networking the armed forces and improving joint cooperation. Here, only “pockets” or “flashes” of real transformation are substantiated. Likewise, planned and achieved progress is modest in the 2001-2010 time frame with regard to the goal of assembling a global intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance network that fuses existing capabilities, enables persistent surveillance of the battlespace, and rapidly distributes intelligence across services and down to the tactical level.

Where is the real beef of transformation – that is, the reliable and significant enhancements – available to the armed forces within the next five or so years? In several areas: precision strike capabilities, more special operations personnel, and a few hundred more UAVs.

The proposal to train regular soldiers to take on more of the tasks performed by today's special operations forces, although potentially significant, is too poorly specified to evaluate, which does not bode well. Other planned changes in the Army – including the modularity and Stryker initiatives – are also putatively significant. But the net benefits of both these programs are hotly contested – as is the value and feasibility of the longer-term Army Future Combat System. (See references below).

While increasing the number of active Army brigades will significantly reduce the deployment demands placed on each one, their capabilities also will be significantly less – at least until new technologies and fighting techniques are developed, integrated, and proven. Effective information networking of tactical ground units with each other and with other force elements is proceeding slowly (on the whole). And the challenge of learning to fight effectively with two equivalent maneuver battalions rather than the traditional three or four is no small thing. Concerns such as these has led one trenchant critic, the Army reformer Col. Douglas Macgregor (ret.) to conclude:

The concept looks like an attempt to equate a near-term requirement to rotate smaller formations through occupation duty in Iraq or Afghanistan with the transformation of the Army into a new warfighting structure... (Macgregor, 2004)

Conclusion

So where does this leave us regarding the concordance between proposed missions and the QDR's force development plans? In the dark, mostly – and sure of only one thing: the Pentagon will spend \$2.5 trillion during the next five years, not counting the incremental cost of operations (which by current standards could add as much as another \$500 billion to the five-year price tag).

Meaningful assessment and refinement of DOD's plans require that Secretary Rumsfeld and the Chiefs say more about how they intend to spend the nation's treasure. Several steps of clarification are essential:

First, DOD should illustrate in broad terms how the armed forces might allocate assets to fulfill their "steady state" duties under various conditions. How many troops of what types will go where? These "snap shots" should include typical rotations and also take into account the demands of sustaining, training, equipping, and transforming the force.

Second, DOD should illustrate how the force might handle several types of "surge" situations – especially complex ones involving multiple conflicts. What force packages might it deploy, how fast, and under what rotation scheme? How would the illustrative scenarios affect routine and "steady state" activities? And how would the services handle the need to reset the force?

Obviously a few "snap shots" of the proposed force "in action" would not exhaust the many scenarios that might arise. But DOD might and should choose illustrative complex scenarios that show how different circumstances might pull the force in very different, but equally demanding directions. This would indicate the strength, pliability, and resilience of the force that Secretary Rumsfeld proposes. Only then could we affirm the match between strategy and structure. And should the risks inherent to the plan prove unacceptable, we might then turn to consider different goals, a different strategy, different forces, or a different budget.

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