

U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review Reveals a Strategy Void

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On February 3, 2006, the U.S. Defense Department released its third Quadrennial Defense Review (Q.D.R.) and held a flurry of press briefings about it led by senior officials, including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Mandated by Congress, the Q.D.R. functions as a defense white paper defining Washington's defense strategy and projecting a twenty year program for implementing it. Analysts had expected the Q.D.R. -- the first one to be crafted exclusively under Rumsfeld's guidance -- to mark significant revisions in U.S. policy by shifting resources away from expensive weapons systems geared to fighting major conventional wars to the requirements for the more flexible and mobile forces needed -- in Rumsfeld's often stated opinion -- to meet the challenges posed by international Islamic revolutionary networks, failed states and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to smaller powers hostile to Washington's interests. The analysts' expectations had been based on signals from Washington throughout 2005 that the U.S. military establishment had placed the "long war" against Islamic revolutionaries at the top of its list of priorities and was repositioning itself to fight it. [See: ["Washington's Long War and its Strategy in the Horn of Africa"](#)]

Rather than registering a shift that would reallocate resources and acknowledge the existence of a multipolar configuration of world power -- as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice did for U.S. diplomatic strategy in January 2006 -- the Q.D.R. preserved every major weapons system that had been in the works and simply added projects to deal with the new challenges without calling for an increase in the number of troops.

Independent analysts writing for defense publications and the general media, and opposition analysts from think tanks favorable to the Democratic Party, shared a consensus that the document lacked focus and credibility, representing a failure to prioritize that resulted in a wish list, all of which could not be satisfied in a period of ballooning federal budget deficits. They also were at one in concluding that the Q.D.R. revealed the failure of Rumsfeld to turn around the Pentagon bureaucracy and the senior officer corps, and direct them toward commitment to his vision of a flexible force structure. In consequence, the analysts concluded that the Q.D.R. had not accomplished its mission and could not serve as a reliable guide to Washington's defense strategy.

Strategic Irresolution

Although the analysts were correct that the Q.D.R. lacks focus and is probably unrealistic, they did not address the reasons for the document's irresolution beyond noting that it had resulted from a compromise between contending interests in the defense community in which conflict was avoided and choices deferred by giving every party what it wanted. That explanation is also correct, but it does not cut deeply enough to get at the underlying problem -- strategic irresolution.

It is surely naive to think that the entrenched interests of the defense industry, Pentagon agencies, the military services and their Congressional allies in expensive weapons systems would yield to a policy change that would jeopardize them; however, a sharply focused strategy would have gone a long way toward effecting an agreement on the reallocation of resources. That such an agreement was not reached reflects the continued existence of a policy void. This void opened up after the unilateralist vision of Washington's 2002 National Security Strategy

was discredited by the limitations of U.S. power revealed during the Iraq intervention.

The policy void is indicated most decisively in the press briefing given by Principal Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Ryan Henry, where he defined the broad contemporary security environment as "uncertain and unpredictable." Henry predicted that U.S. forces would be engaged in violent conflict somewhere in the world during the coming decade, but he could not say when that engagement would happen or where it would be. Failure to identify specific threats and to attempt to gauge their probabilities led directly to the idea that governed the Q.D.R. -- U.S. military presence must be capable of being everywhere and doing everything.

In place of prioritization of threats, the Q.D.R. and all the briefers presented a dizzying array of dangers, including traditional threats from "near-peer powers" (explicitly China), "disruptive catastrophic threats" (natural disasters and release of weapons of mass destruction), humanitarian crises, terrorist actions, proliferation of W.M.D.'s to hostile states, prolonged "irregular" conflicts following regime change (Iraq), and failed states. In addressing these unranked challenges, the drafters of the Q.D.R., who had input from throughout the Pentagon, generated their wish list, including a new generation of fighter planes, naval destroyers, nuclear submarines, a high-tech combat system for the army, an increase in special operations forces and civil affairs capability, new coastal and riverine capability for the navy, an undefined long-range strategic strike capability, a program to meet the threat of bioterrorism, capacity for sustained operations, and seabasing of expeditionary forces to replace bases outside the U.S., among many others. Each of these desiderata was presented as equally essential as the others.

The high concept of the Q.D.R. that unites the pile-up of programs is that U.S. military strategy must be "capabilities-driven" rather than "threat-driven." That is the only conclusion that can follow from the judgment that the threat environment is inherently uncertain and unpredictable; any imaginable threat must be prepared for if its probability of presenting itself is unknown.

Although the failure to prioritize is based politically on a deadlock of interests within the defense community and conceptually on the scenario of uncertainty, an even deeper cause of the Q.D.R.'s lack of focus is the absence of a resolute strategy. Whereas the State Department under Rice has moved forthrightly to an acknowledgment of a multipolar configuration of world power, the Defense Department is caught between the persistence of the unipolar vision that makes Washington the guarantor of a global stability favorable to its perceived interests and a dawning acceptance of a multipolar world. [See: ["Condoleezza Rice Completes Washington's Geostrategic Shift"](#)]

The coexistence of the unipolar and multipolar visions appears throughout the Q.D.R. and is most prominent in the twin judgments that the U.S. must have the military capability of "dissuading" any state -- especially a near-peer power -- from threatening its interests anywhere in the world and that Washington must rely on "indirect" projection of power through "partnering" with other regional power centers, which is a concession that it cannot take care of its security alone.

The strategic irresolution between the unipolar and multipolar visions is at the root of the Q.D.R.'s lack of focus, and reflects a failure to undertake a reassessment of what Washington's interests are in the different regions of the world. Such a reassessment would presumably have resulted in an acknowledgment of multipolarity and the beginning of a readjustment to the regional redistribution of world power that Rice has recognized and upon which she has acted.

Persistence of the unipolar vision is what accounts for the pile-up of unranked desiderata in the Q.D.R. Had the defense planners embraced multipolarity, they might have taken the steps that analysts thought they would in the direction of reallocating resources from expensive conventional weapons systems, which would take up the lion's share of Pentagon spending in the Q.D.R.'s projection, to the requirements of meeting threats that do not originate from near-peer powers. It is, therefore, not surprising that of all the sections of the Q.D.R., the one that provoked the most comment and the only international criticism was the designation of China as a potential threat and the country with the "greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States."

A China-Driven Document

The core of the Q.D.R. is not its definition of the emerging nontraditional threats to U.S. security and the programs that it puts forward as "down payments" to counter them, but its section on shaping "the choices of regions and countries who find themselves at strategic crossroads" -- the regional powers that have the potential to become the near-peer competitors of the U.S.: India, Russia and China.

Of the three rising military power centers, the Q.D.R. names India as a key strategic partner; Russia as a potential threat if it moves in an authoritarian and nationalistic direction, but not in the coming decade; and China as a genuine potential rival if it moves to gain hegemony in East, Southeast and Central Asia. Indeed, it is the perceived threat from Beijing that is used to justify continued expenditures on new generations of conventional weapons systems.

The Q.D.R.'s approach to China combines the wish to cooperate with Beijing in managing its successful rise to great power status and to "dissuade" it from taking any military action to alter the balance of power in its region. The dissuasion is to operate geopolitically by strengthening Washington's alliances in the region with Japan, South Korea and Australia, and -- most importantly -- forging an alliance, formal or de facto, with India, thereby encircling China. Militarily, the dissuasion is to be effected by increasing naval force levels in the region and adding coastal capabilities, and developing long-range means of strategic penetration. Taken together, geopolitical and military dissuasion set up a scenario similar to the one that characterized Washington's stance toward Moscow during the Cold War era, with the high probability of an attendant arms race.

Predictably, the Q.D.R.'s release met with a vigorous critical response from Beijing, with the Chinese Foreign Ministry lodging a "serious representation" to Washington condemning the document's position on China. In their analyses of the Q.D.R., Chinese defense officials argued that Washington had not backed away from its insistence on trying to maintain "an absolute advantage in weapons," preserving its option to wage preemptive warfare and keeping its global reach.

They stood by Beijing's 2005 defense white paper and its commitment to a "defensive defense policy" based on "peaceful development," noting that China has no military bases outside its borders and that the U.S. has more than 100 foreign bases and 100,000 troops in Asia. A Xinhua press agency report quoted General Peng Guanghian as saying that the Q.D.R. functioned primarily to help the U.S. arms industry "fish for profits."

Conclusion

The Q.D.R.'s lack of focus and failure to prioritize threats and responses to them indicates that the U.S. defense planners have yet to make the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar understanding of the configuration of world power, and are caught between the two visions,

attempting to satisfy the demands of both. Their irresolution led them to produce a document that independent and opposition analysts agree is unrealistic in light of impending budgetary restraints, leaving the difficult task of prioritization to Congress and the jockeying among interest groups, and further down the road to the next U.S. president.

If the consensus of specialized analysts is to be credited, hard choices will be imposed on decision makers. If Washington is to respond effectively to nontraditional threats, it will have to sacrifice some of its ability to counter traditional threats and accept the diminution of some of its power in favor of the rising regional power centers, particularly China.

The direction that U.S. defense policy takes will be determined by the domestic balance of power among concerned interests and international events beyond Washington's control. It is nearly certain that the maximalist position presented in the Q.D.R. will not hold and that some of its elements will be sacrificed.

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