Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and Director of DOD Force Structure brief press on QDR and Ballistic Missile Defense Review

DOD (Cherie Cullen)

A QDR for All Seasons?

The Pentagon Is Not Preparing for the Most Likely Conflicts

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The end of the Cold War and the massive changes in the conflict environment that ensued launched the United States on a transformational path in military force planning. In 1996, the first Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) set out a vision of the two regional contingencies model, with the Nation equipped and able to dominate in two major conventional wars at the same time. But the outlines of a different kind of conflict setting began to emerge as the United States attempted to protect its interests in several different regions. The first decade of the 21st century has shown clearly that the way the Nation thought about and prepared for war in most of the 20th century requires a major overhaul. But change comes slowly.

The years following the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq were filled with adversity and indecision among the

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military leadership about how to overcome a different type of foe. The 2006 QDR appeared to be an attempt to refocus the Pentagon's warfighting approach to meet the challenge. In that assessment, the Department of Defense (DOD) acknowledged that a serious gap existed between the changed nature of conflict and the doctrine and means it had available for fighting it. DOD stipulated that irregular warfare (IW) had become a vital mission area for which the Services needed to prepare. Post-9/11 combat was depicted as "irregular in its nature." Enemies in those fights were "not conventional military forces." Rather, they employed indirect and asymmetric means. Adaptation was the way forward.

The 2006 QDR also set in motion IW initiatives inside DOD leading up to the December 2008 release of DOD Directive 3000.07, "Irregular Warfare." That directive was unambiguous about 21st-century conflict, declaring: "Irregular warfare is as strategically important as traditional warfare," and it is essential to "maintain capabilities . . . so that the DOD is as effective in IW as it is in traditional [conventional] warfare." Moreover, according to Directive 3000.07, the capabilities required for each type of fight were different.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates had been among the most vociferous advocates, reinforcing the message in numerous statements, lectures, congressional testimony, and popular articles. Gates was by no means alone in the Pentagon and administration. But despite direction at the top, consensus was elusive. Many within the Joint Chiefs organization, Defense bureaucracy and industry, and Services viewed post-9/11 irregular fights as anomalies—ephemeral trends generated by particular circumstances. Furthermore, they held that conventional or general purpose forces could handle them.

And those who saw the future that way pushed back. The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review contains no reference to irregular warfare as a central organizing concept, shedding the focus of the preceding 4 years. Rather, the 2010 QDR postulates an uncertain, fluid conflict environment posing a plethora of threats—all of which must be prepared for simultaneously. In some ways, it should not be surprising that DOD, one of the most centralized organizations in the world, has difficulty realigning itself to counter inherently decentralized nonstate actors and coalitions. The result is indeed a "QDR for all seasons," one that directs attention—and defense dollars—to less likely contingencies and the most expensive capabilities to deal with them.

This approach has already raised congressional eyebrows on both sides of the aisle. House Armed Services Committee (HASC) Chairman Ike Skelton (D–MO) hoisted a subtle red flag by questioning how the QDR could "advocate for a force that is capable of being all things to all contingencies." The HASC ranking minority member, Howard McKeon (R–CA), was not so delicate. "It's tough to determine what the priority is," he complained, "what the most likely risks we face may be, and what may be the most dangerous."

Adaptation and Prioritization

The Pentagon needs to refocus how it assesses the predominant sources of conflict in the 21st century, the primary missions to manage and counter them, and the forces to accomplish those missions.

U.S. Air Force (Bradley Lail)

Soldier takes cover during firefight in Mosul, Iraq, during large-scale operations to rid surrounding areas of insurgency

The "diverse threat scenarios" conceptualized in the QDR give short shrift to the real-world irregular conflicts and the major actors—state and nonstate—that will challenge U.S. security for decades to come. Rather than this "all threats should be treated equally" approach of the QDR, first priority should be given to those prevalent and enduring irregular conflicts that are occurring now and will persist for many years. While these challenges are indeed wide-ranging, there is a discernable pattern in the irregular strategies and tactics employed by armed groups, superempowered nonstate actors, and states—and they often act in concert.

The complexity, seriousness, and multiplicity of threats emanating from weak states facing insurgencies, transnational terrorists, or criminal networks are missing in the QDR. Instead, it presents the mission to meet these challenges—counterinsurgency, stability, and counterterrorism operations—as just one of six mission areas. The interconnections between this mission and the others, particularly building the security capacity of partner states, are overlooked. So too are the capabilities for irregular conflicts. A creative, relatively inexpensive security agenda of key skill sets housed within dedicated units to manage this enduring irregular security landscape could greatly strengthen U.S. capabilities. But this is not recognized in the 2010 QDR.

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Conversely, the 2010 QDR elevates the need to prepare to deter and defeat hostile state aggressors utilizing antiaccess strategies. This leads the Pentagon to call for the military to be ready to fight two major regional conflicts against "two capable nation-state aggressors," who will utilize

Route clearance patrol team prepares to convoy to Combat Outpost Carwile in Jaghato, Afghanistan

U.S. Army (De'Yonte Mosley)

U.S. Navy (Steve Smith)

conventional military forces enhanced by antiaccess capabilities.[1] To be sure, competent authoritarian states—China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia—may well constitute future conventional security challenges for the United States, and attention to their long-term maturation is essential. However, this should not take priority over preparing for the most likely security threats and predominant conflicts.

Pattern of Instability

What might the future security environment look like? The 2010 QDR states that the United States will face a complex, uncertain, and fluid 21st-century security environment. Fast-paced and accelerating change driven by globalization and technological innovations will make continuity in the sources of conflict problematic.

New major state competitors to the United States—most immediately China—will emerge. And empowered nonstate actors will also have a growing impact on world affairs. Yet the only empowered nonstate actor that the 2010 QDR gives attention to is "al Qaeda's terrorist network." Other than al Qaeda, there are only passing references to insurgents and criminals.

As a result of a "shifting operational landscape," the new QDR warns that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and other "antiaccess weapons" will spread, particularly to states seeking to dominate their region of the world. That might curtail America's capacity to project power into those regions to protect friends, manage crises, and counter emerging threats. Nonstate actors, adds the QDR, may also acquire these weapons.

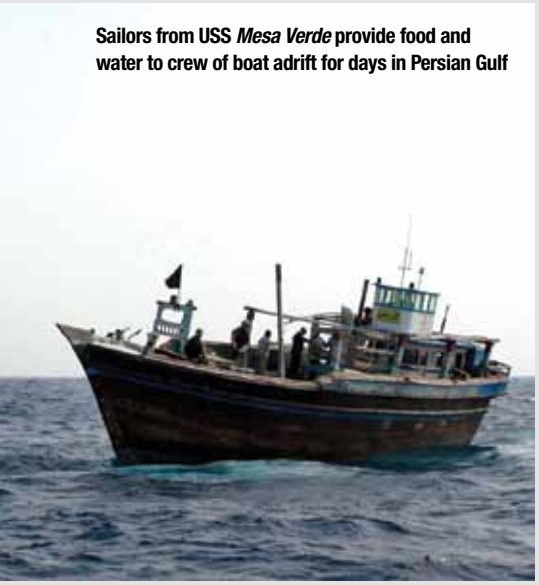
The QDR states, "Other powerful trends are likely to add complexity to the security environment. Rising demand for resources, rapid urbanization of littoral regions, the effects of climate change, emergence of new strains of disease, and profound cultural and demographic tensions in several regions are just some of the trends whose complex interplay may spark or exacerbate future conflicts." In addition, "The changing international environment will continue to put pressure on the modern state system, likely increasing the frequency and severity of the challenges associated with chronically fragile states."

The QDR's forecast is flawed on several counts. Rather than uncertainty and a multiplicity of different conflict possibilities, trends that can be observed and gauged reveal a prevalent and enduring pattern of irregular conflict that will persist. This is occurring in many regions. An irregular conflict framework can help to connect the dots and make sense of it.

Why will the pattern persist? Because over half of the world's approximately 195 states are weak, failing, or failed. They will generate a significant number of future conflicts. These states are vulnerable to scores of decentralized armed groups—terrorists, criminals, insurgents, and militias—within their territories. De facto coalitions and loose associations comprised of states, armed groups, and other nonstate actors will exploit these conditions through violence and other means.

This violence will manifest itself in continued insurgent attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan; atrocities in Darfur; terrorist plots; weapons dealing by rogue individuals; the use of the Internet to instill fear, influence politics, and recruit operatives; proxy wars; and criminal armies threatening major actors in our geopolitical back yard. These are not isolated incidents but examples of the new norm for conflict in far-flung corners of the world. Nor are they a temporary disruption of world affairs. They are symptoms of a new security environment, and they will be—in one form or another—major threats in the first part of the 21st century.

But the QDR is concerned about major authoritarian states. It proposes that conflict in the years ahead will result from such states exercising conventional power to achieve regional dominance. To deter this, the Pentagon contends that the United States must be prepared to fight two major regional conventional conflicts against "two capable nation-state aggressors." This echoes the 1996 QDR. Of course, the Nation must prepare for such possible contingencies by maintaining superior conventional might. But those states identified in the QDR will not be able to take on the full conventional might of today's U.S. military for at least a decade. And to prevent that from ever happening, we must maintain robust deterrent and conventional forces. Still, this is a less likely scenario and should not take priority.



Sailors from USS *Mesa Verde* provide food and water to crew of boat adrift for days in Persian Gulf

F/A–18F Super Hornet launches from USS *Nimitz* in Persian Gulf

U.S. Navy (John Phillip Wagner, Jr.)

Interconnected Missions

The 2010 QDR proposes to take a "strategic approach that can evolve and adapt in response to a changing security environment." Six primary mission areas are deduced from "diverse scenarios of *plausible* challenges that the U.S. needs to be prepared for":

- Providing support and assistance to civil agencies that have primary responsibility for responding to major catastrophic events on the home front.
- Retaining capabilities to "succeed in today's large scale counterinsurgency, stability, and counterterrorism operations"; preparing for "diverse geographical settings in the future involving weak states facing insurgencies, transnational terrorists, or criminal networks where the U.S. has interests at stake."
- Building security capacity of partner states. Critical to achieving that is an adjunct mission (although the QDR does not make the connection or see synergy between this and the other missions). Expanding *security force assistance* to weak states so they can protect their populations, resources, and territory is essential.
- Deterring and defeating aggression by hostile nation-states in key regions that "may use anti-access strategies . . . to deny the U.S. the ability to project power into [those] regions." This mission is critical for maintaining the "integrity of U.S. alliances and security partnerships." Robust forces that can "protect U.S. interests against . . . two capable nation-state aggressors" utilizing conventional military forces enhanced by antiaccess capabilities are needed.
- Preventing and countering WMD proliferation are "top national priorities." As the capacity to produce and/or acquire WMD spreads to both state and nonstate actors, the U.S. capacity to "deter, interdict, and contain the effects of these weapons" must grow accordingly.
- Operating effectively in cyberspace. American military forces require the means to actively defend their information and communications networks against emerging threats from cyberspace.

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Preparing for all contingencies means taking our eye off the most significant challenges. Rather than planning for "diverse scenarios" deduced from "plausible challenges," priority should be focused on challenges that predominate now and will continue to do so in the years ahead. By focusing on "diverse scenarios," the Pentagon misses the opportunity to capitalize on real-world experiences and hard-won expertise.

The QDR does say (in one sentence) that the United States needs to develop the means to respond to threats "involving weak states facing insurgencies, transnational terrorists, or criminal networks." But there is no analysis or diagnosis of these instances or how to counter them. And the QDR evinces no understanding of how complex, dangerous, and pervasive they are.

Since the late 1980s, armed groups have burgeoned in number and in the harm they can inflict. They have become more diverse in terms of subtypes—terrorists, insurgents, criminals, and militias—and they have evolved from local to regional to global players. Many of these actors are capable of causing major geopolitical damage in their own states, to various regions, or to the United States itself. Their challenge is magnified because they often act in association with other armed groups, authoritarian states, and other superempowered nonstate actors. These associations can be found at the local, regional, and global levels.

Greater emphasis on these irregular conflicts could have sharpened the QDR's assessment of the major actors—state and nonstate—who will challenge U.S. security in the 21st century, the visions and cultures that shape the goals and policies of those actors, the diverse means they will employ, and the linkages and decentralized relationships that increasingly exist among these state and nonstate actors.

That assessment would have provided the details—the "known knowns"—about those actors, their strategies, the means they employ, and the associations forged among them. That would provide insight into the key irregular missions DOD needs to prepare for in the near term, as well as for the long haul.

Key Skill Sets and Dedicated Units

The QDR proposes rebalancing America's Armed Forces to prepare to execute the six mission areas noted above "over the near-term, midterm, and long-term." The specific capabilities to do so, it states, were selected "by examining [today's] ongoing conflicts," as well as through "scenarios" envisioned by the QDR staff. These scenarios are said to represent the spectrum of "plausible future challenges that might call for a response by U.S. military forces."

This "all contingencies" approach does not make sense at a time when the Pentagon's budget is under pressure. Will the Nation have the luxury of buying capabilities for all "plausible future challenges"? Not likely. Some of the missions proposed in the QDR do address real-world threats, and resources must be allocated to ensure their successful execution. But other contingencies are less likely, and resourcing on those should be more stretched out. To follow the recommendations of the QDR will result in insufficient capabilities and attention for those persistent irregular fights the United States cannot avoid and cannot fight effectively with general purpose forces.

A more optimal approach is to prioritize the acquisition of capabilities, beginning with those needed for irregular contingencies—counterinsurgency; counterterrorism; unconventional warfare; local intelligence dominance; security, stability, reconstruction, and rule of law operations; and foreign security force assistance. This would allow the United States to focus on configuring new units and force packages with the appropriate tools and skill sets for these operations. It should not take another crisis or commission of inquiry investigating a conflict gone wrong to tell us we need to take these steps.

What follows is an agenda of capabilities to meet these irregular challenges. These capabilities either are in short supply or do not exist at all in the U.S. inventory:[2]

■ Selected Army Brigade Combat Teams and Marine Corps Regimental Combat Teams adapted, reoriented, and retrained for irregular conflict as their primary mission. The answer is not to add more manpower or firepower, but to make different and better use of the existing forces to execute irregular missions.

■ Intelligence focused on the local level. Such intelligence can be acquired if the United States develops new units able to train frontline foreign police, military and security collectors, analysts, and others to operate at the local level to complement the formidable capabilities of the Nation and its allies.

■ Security, Stability, Reconstruction, and Rule of Law/Culture of Lawfulness Teams that are professionalized in greater numbers to prevent the outbreak of irregular conflict and to strengthen weak governments and civil society.

■ Enhanced strategic communication management. Senior U.S. leaders, national security managers, and local implementers must have the skill sets to understand and manage their words and actions so they resonate with and influence the perceptions and behavior of foreign audiences.

■ Creation of a dedicated corps of professional skilled personnel—military and civilian—capable of building local, national, and regional coalitions of foreign state and nonstate actors to prevent or prevail in 21st-century irregular conflicts.

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Of course, the specific configuration and deployment of these capabilities will be determined by the political and security context or conflict zone in which the United States is engaged. These will range from *small advisory missions* to those involving *limited U.S. presence "on the ground"*—such as in Pakistan and Colombia—to *war zones* where the U.S. military is or was the main security force, as in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The first—small advisory missions—is mainly preventative in scope and has as its objective assisting or building local capacity, particularly in fragile democracies. These missions aim to address the origins of weaknesses before they generate violent instability that might spread from local to regional levels. They should receive a high priority. However, the capabilities identified above are also needed for larger missions, to include those where U.S. military forces—adapted and reoriented combat brigades—are engaged in major population-centric security operations against robust armed groups.

Unlike the QDR, which proposes capabilities for all possible contingencies, those recommended here are prioritized for irregular missions that predominate today and will do so tomorrow. If developed, meshed, and deployed, they will substantially enhance the ability and capacity of the United States to manage these challenges.

Building up these capabilities will not entail major additional budget commitments. In national security terms, they are not "big-ticket items." But it will require an adaptation in thinking within U.S. security institutions, which will have to make a paradigm shift in how they understand security threats, the capabilities needed to protect and defend against security challenges, and how best to organize, recruit, train, and educate to develop defense capabilities. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] The 2010 QDR focuses on air and sea antiaccess weapons. The former include rapidly deployable, highly mobile radars, surface-to-air missiles, counterstealth radars, passive geolocation sensors, and advanced digital air command, control, communications, and computers systems. In the maritime domain, these technologies consist of supersonic antiship cruise missiles, terminally guided antiship ballistic missiles, and quiet submarines armed with digital torpedoes. These weapons, notes the QDR, will seriously challenge the ability of the United States to conduct military interventions in key regions of the world in the near future. A nation that is so equipped in the future would be able to hold U.S. forces at serious risk.

[2] For a detailed elaboration of what each of these capabilities entails, see Roy Godson and Richard H. Shultz, Jr., *Adapting America's Security Paradigm and Security Agenda* (Washington, DC: National Strategy Information Center, 2010). This report is based on extensive research and analysis that benefited from the assistance of a working group of leading security practitioners from democracies around the world. Those individuals shared their first-hand experiences and insights about the contemporary conflict environment—all having held senior-level positions in their nation's military, diplomatic, or intelligence services. They also reviewed and helped refine the report's major findings and recommendations. The report is available at <www.strategycenter.org/files/adapting_the_paradigm.pdf>.