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Research Report

Quadrennial Defense Review Report: A mixed picture

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Quadrennial Defense Review Report

A mixed picture

Benjamin Schreer

The Pentagon's new Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) is a comprehensive review of U.S. defense strategy, force structure, transformation plans, and budget. From a European perspective two main points are of particular interest. First, U.S. forces are focusing on worldwide deployments in the long war against international terrorism. Second, an ever greater shift towards the Asia-Pacific region is taking place in the emergence of a rising China. As a consequence, non-European allies and partners are of increasing importance in a new U.S. concept of "global partnerships." Europe needs to adapt to this strategic reality.

Every four years, the Department of Defense is required by law to provide the Congress with a QDR. The most recent one, issued in February 2006, raised great expectations prior to its publication. Unlike its predecessor of 2001, it could take full account of the paradigm-shifting events of September 11, 2001. Not only did the United States confront a fundamentally different security environment, with the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the hands of global terrorists looming large. It did also conduct two major military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus, the 2006 QDR was expected to provide the basis for some tough choices necessary to transform the U.S. military, particularly given mounting budget pressure. Intentionally, the document was submitted simultaneously with the FY 2007 defense budget request. Has

the QDR delivered? What are likely implications for European defense?

A new set of challenges

The new QDR acknowledges that the U.S. military has unsurpassed military capabilities to meet traditional challenges, e.g. defeating any adversary in a conventional war. At the same time, it faces severe constraints in dealing with the full range of nontraditional challenges and threats. These are likely to be the defining elements of the future security environment. The QDR identifies four major challenges for the U.S. military:

- ▶ *Irregular challenges*, such as terrorist networks and insurgency;
- ▶ *Catastrophic challenges*, such as the use of WMD by non-state actors;
- ▶ *Disruptive challenges*, such as an adver-

sary's use of breakthrough technologies; and

- *Traditional challenges*, such as conventional military operations against state actors.

To address these challenges, the 2006 QDR determines four main tasks for the U.S. forces. First, defeating terrorist networks. Second, defending the homeland in depth. Third, shaping the choices of countries at strategic crossroads. Fourth, preventing the acquisition or use of WMD. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of them in detail. Nevertheless, certain aspects can be emphasized.

Increased importance of Special Forces

The new focus on fighting the long war against terrorist networks is reflected in a new force-planning construct that puts more attention to strengthening the Special Operations Forces (SOF). The goal is to remain in the offensive in order to deny the adversary the possibility of launching further attacks. In doing so, the QDR plans for worldwide operations even in countries the United States "is not at war with" and even in so-called denied areas. Consequently, one of the key programmatic decisions in the new QDR is an increase in the number of SOF battalions by one third. Additionally, the special forces of the other services will also be strengthened. Particularly, the Army and the Marine Corps will therefore be subject to changing their traditional focus on high-intensity war fighting towards more irregular challenges.

The increased importance of the SOF in U.S. defense strategy is also underlined by the draft defense budget FY 2007. An additional 5.1 billion US dollars are requested to increase the SOF, currently numbered at approximately 52,000, by 4,000 men in 2007. By 2011, a total increase in the SOF by 14,000 men should be completed with estimated costs of 28 billion US dollars. For the first time, the new force-planning construct, therefore, puts

irregular challenges on an equal footing with conventional warfare. Moreover, the role of the military within in a strategy of preventive defense against international terrorism as an element of U.S. foreign and security policy is reconfirmed by the 2006 QDR.

Iraq—an Anomaly?

Despite the new emphasis on unconventional challenges, the QDR stops short of fully incorporating the lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq into the force-planning construct. For one, it only slightly modifies the old requirement that the U.S. military should be able to fight two major regional wars (e.g. Iran and North Korea) simultaneously. It is now asserted, that the United States should be able to conduct one conventional campaign and one major protracted conflict at the same time. In a welcoming departure from past "transformation documents", the QDR recognizes that the previous concept of a swift defeat of the adversary is no longer applicable—particularly before the backdrop of experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, it stresses that the force structure needs to better address the requirements for stability and reconstruction missions. Finally it seeks to enhance the cultural awareness of the regions "where the enemy will operate."

Given this, however, it is striking that missions to stabilize a country like Iraq appear to be regarded as an anomaly. Despite the fact that the U.S. ground forces are already severely stretched, the QDR does not recommend an increase in end strength of the active force. On the contrary, it aims at reducing the active U.S. Army from 491,000 at present to 482,000 by 2011. Thus it proposes to reduce the active duty Army from 43 planned Brigade Combat Teams to 42 and the Army National Guard from 34 to 28. The lesson from Iraq that irregular campaigns require a large and sustainable number of ground troops seems to have fallen victim to budgetary

constraints and the desire for continued investment in big ticket weapon systems; and the risky assumption that allies and partners will pay most of the burden in stabilizing a country after the intervention has taken place.

Strategic shift to Asia

A second main theme of the QDR is the strategic shift of the U.S. forces towards Asia, evident in a strong emphasis on the Chinese challenge in the region. While the 2001 QDR never once mentioned the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), it is now identified as the “potentially” greatest challenger to American supremacy in the greater region. Indeed, the report does not rule out a constructive role for China in maintaining regional stability, but its advancing military modernization program is viewed with increasing skepticism in face of the Taiwan conflict. The Chinese challenge should be met on a military level, among other means, with further strengthening of military base structure in the Pacific, intensified relations with the allied partners of Japan, Australia and South Korea and an expansion of the maritime presence in the region.

The extensive discussion of the Chinese challenge in the new QDR does not only serve to justify a continuation of a force transformation process based primarily upon high-technology and expensive weapons systems. It also reflects Washington’s view that the Chinese-American race for influence in the Asian-Pacific region is in full swing. Thus, the QDR states the further deepening of defense cooperation with the “key strategic partner” of India as a goal. In classical geopolitical thinking, New Delhi could play a leading part as a possible counterbalance to Beijing. Altogether, the QDR emphasizes the central importance of Asia in American security and defense policy.

A new concept of allies

Notably absent in the European discussion, the 2006 QDR contains a clear message for its allies. In an obvious reference to NATO it sets the goal to transform “static alliances” into “dynamic partnerships.” More than ever, allies will be measured by their ability and political will to make forces available for operations worldwide. The QDR suggests categorizing allies according to these two criteria. Thus, the document emphasizes the central importance of the “unique” relationship to Great Britain and Australia. This can be seen not only in the fact that these two countries were directly involved in the process of discussing the document in detail. The QDR also gives a positive assessment of the alliance with Japan. The shift of focus towards the Asian-Pacific region ensures that allies in the area will gain in importance. Additionally, the increase in worldwide anti-terror deployments using Special Forces requires that flexible security arrangements be established with a large number of non-European states.

In contrast, Europe is losing ground. To be fair, the QDR continues to identify NATO as the cornerstone of transatlantic security and praises the transformation process taking place within the Alliance. But at the same time the report notes that many European states are not capable of obtaining the military capacities which would enable them to participate in joint deployments with US forces. While it is not impossible that in addition to Great Britain other European NATO member states will participate alongside U.S. forces in the future by providing niche capabilities, such as special forces or mine-clearing units, NATO as a whole hardly comes into question for larger joint military operations, particularly in the field of high-intensity war fighting. Instead, European allies are predominantly seen as troop providers for long-term stabilization missions. Accordingly, the QDR welcomes the development of a NATO stabilization and reconstruction capability as well as a

European constabulary force. This is a clear proof of Washington's preference for "coalitions of the willing and capable". Whether this strategy of a division of labor in transatlantic defense relations is politically sustainable remains to be seen.

Opportunities lost

Despite progress being made in terms of shifting priorities towards irregular challenges, the new QDR is to a very large extent a budget-driven document. The opportunity to link strategy and actual implementation was missed. It does not recommend any major cuts in expensive weapons platforms, geared primarily for conventional force-on-force conflicts. Systems such as the F/A-22 Stealth fighter or the new Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) continue to receive full funding. The draft defense budget FY 2007 submitted to Congress also reveals the lack of courage on the part of the Pentagon planners to put the money where their mouth is. It requests an after-inflation 4.4 percent increase in defense spending culminating in 439 billion US dollars. With supplemental bills to cover the costs of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the total funding for defense in 2007 will again be just over 500 billion US dollars. The draft defense budget continues to invest in heavy platforms, such as the multi-billion Future Combat System (FCS) for the Army or the DD (X) destroyer for the US Navy. Experts continue to warn of a serious mismatch between these transformation programs and the funding available in the coming years. Nevertheless, these warnings will most likely fail to catch hold due to the triangle of interests formed by the White House, the Pentagon and Congress; particularly since Congress is also facing elections this year.

In sum, the 2006 QDR fails to establish a clear vision that links challenges, capabilities, and implementation. Great expectations were only partly met.

Implications for Europe

Nevertheless, the QDR has several important implications for European security and defense policy. The strategic shift to the Asia-Pacific region and a new U.S. concept of alliances laid out in the QDR should ring the bells in European capitals. Both will translate into practical politics. In NATO, the U.S. will very likely step up the pressure to add substance to the concept of "Global Partnerships," which is already being debated in Brussels. It contains new ways of cooperation between the Alliance and the American allies in Asia-Pacific—most notably Japan, Australia and South Korea. From a U.S. perspective, this would be an important step in the direction of a more flexible and globalized NATO.

Additionally, the QDR leaves no room for doubt that despite the current revitalization of transatlantic relations, the "static" alliance has lost much of its military value in American defense policy. European partners must be prepared for an American NATO policy which chooses the appropriate cooperation partners in the war against international terrorism *à la carte*. Consequently, European NATO members should on the one hand accept and actively promote the flexibility of NATO in order to prepare it for the 21st century security environment. This includes thinking carefully about stronger defense ties with countries such as Australia, Japan and South Korea. On the other hand, it should invest more strongly in the development of autonomous military capacities within the framework of the European Defense and Security Policy (ESDP), such as the EU battle groups. In the light of a changing U.S. concept of alliances, Europe also needs to develop a flexible »tool box« approach that makes use of its complementary military instruments NATO and ESDP in a non-exclusive way. This will help to foster a more pragmatic but also more solid transatlantic security and defense relationship.

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