
The QDR Process— An Alternative View

By JIM COURTER and ALVIN H. BERNSTEIN

These are hard times for those entrusted with crafting our national security strategy. The international environment has undergone the kind of profound transformation which ordinarily takes decades if not generations to unfold.¹ Strategists have had to adjust to a baffling number of challenges. In Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Rwanda, and the Straits of Taiwan events did not fit neatly into familiar categories of demands on military power. Since 1989 circumstances that we thought could be ignored instead demanded attention, thus compelling the Nation to reassess its foreign and defense policies. Those charged with formulating policy have had to adjust quickly: from the Base Force and the Bottom-Up Review to the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). They still have a long way to go and so has the United States as a whole.

Until its final months, the Bush administration based security policy on the possibility that the disintegration of the Soviet Union might be reversed. To meet such a prospect, military leaders under the aegis of General Colin Powell developed the Base Force which was duly blessed by the Pentagon's civilian leadership.² The first Clinton administration, recognizing the Soviet collapse and watching Russia's fragmenting periphery, abandoned the notion of "reversibility" and with the Bottom-Up Review shifted focus. Instead of war on the plains of Europe, they envisaged a recurrence of conflict either in a still unsettled Persian Gulf or on the Korean peninsula. These are the two implicit major regional conflicts

(MRCs) at the core of the Bottom-Up Review. Persian Gulf volatility and North Korean militarism make both conflicts plausible. Plausible too was the first Clinton administration's assumption that either conflict might trigger the other, especially if American forces appeared thinly spread. The possibility of war in Korea and the Gulf occurring simultaneously dictated the size and shape of our forces and in part still does.

Yet while this large-scale planning was going on the U.S. military became embroiled in one crisis after another which entailed deploying troops and spending money, not always to applause from an inward-looking Congress. During these years the Armed Forces were called upon to protect Iraqi Kurds who had fled to the Turkish border by enforcing a northern no-fly zone. In southern Iraq they had to enforce another zone to protect Iraqi Shiites. In 1992, in the face of feuding warlords, U.S. forces participated in an effort to feed starving Somalis. In Bosnia they enforced another no-fly zone, then conducted punitive strikes against Serb targets, and finally joined Implementation Force for Joint Endeavor to maintain peace on the ground. After flying tens of thousands of flights over Bosnia, however, the Air Force is still there as other forces remain on the ground. These are only the most conspicuous accomplishments, the "smaller-scale contingency operations" as the QDR report refers to them. These deployments, however, have compromised our ability to respond to two simultaneous MRCs.

Splitting the Difference

Six months into President Clinton's second term the Pentagon is once again trying to adapt strategic theory to reality. Under the guidance of Secretary of Defense William Cohen it has issued

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the much-anticipated QDR report. This comprehensive study, reflecting lessons learned since the fall of the Berlin Wall, has provoked an intense public debate over the shape of our foreign and defense policy.³ Its greatest strength is its thorough and insightful analysis of likely future threats and of the capabilities the Armed Forces will need to meet them. The report's greatest weakness is apparent when it attempts to match the extensive obligations anticipated in the post-Cold War world with the diminished resources it recommends be allocated.

In addition to the Gulf and Korean peninsula scenarios inherited from the Bottom-Up Review, the QDR report lists asymmetric attacks by nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, information warfare, terrorist acts, and environmental

Given this environment and the enormous cost of preparing for every eventuality at once, the report established priorities. Its authors considered three options, although the report gives the impression that the first and second were framed to lead ineluctably to the third. First, they considered devoting limited defense funds largely to the development of a capability to counter residual short-term and mid-term post-Cold War threats. This approach has the significant drawback of mortgaging long-term security when rapid political change and, more importantly, accelerated technological development could introduce new security challenges within a decade or so. That alternative, therefore, could not stand. The second option emphasized preparing for the hazards of the long-term future at the price of reduced present security and of consequent high risk if the worst of foreseeable crises occurred. Since proximate threats are real, that alternative proved unacceptable as well. In the event the QDR report chose to split the difference between the two. This third option trades a limited reduction in both current defense capabilities and the ability to respond to short-term threats for the opportunity to invest in technology—the revolution in military affairs (RMA)—that would transform the Armed Forces over the long term to meet the challenge of an uncertain future.

Eventual Proliferation, Diminished Value

The authors of the QDR report are convinced that the United States must preserve its near monopoly of state-of-the-art technology and prepare for an RMA. Are they correct in view of the cost? Surely yes, because this is our forte. It served us well in Desert Storm, and we do not need to accept all the extravagant claims of what the new technologies will do to believe that nations which acquire key technologies and incorporate them in a coherent system—rather than use them to enhance their current capabilities—will enjoy advantages on tomorrow's battlefield.

The authors of the QDR report want to give the Armed Forces the technology that will discourage the re-emergence of a peer competitor such as China (if it learns to turn wealth into military power) or, failing that, to prepare for any challenges a competitor might present. While there is no such threat on the horizon, the dizzying rate at which defense technology is developing and the accessibility of commercial technology which has military implications will mean that potential enemies will be able to modernize their forces ever more quickly.

Whether a state or a coalition, a technological peer that shared our doctrinal sophistication and incorporated new technology in appropriate



Secretary Cohen briefing QDR report, May 19, 1997.

DOD (Helene C. Stikkel)

sabotage. In light of recent experience, it also sees the need to retain the capability to field forces for smaller-scale contingencies that threaten chaos and that our elected leaders have required—such as peace operations and a panoply of humanitarian assistance operations.

RAH-66 Comanche.



DOD



Combat Camera Imagery (Marvin Lynchard)

F-117 stealth fighter.

operational capabilities would especially challenge our Armed Forces. Since the Mexican War the United States has had to project significant forces over great distances, maintain them abroad, and maneuver them effectively for extended periods to protect our interests and allies. The ability to do this may decline in the immediate future to the extent that forward basing shrinks for economic and political reasons. In the long run, an enemy that masters and integrates many new technologies could threaten this capacity. Improvements in target illumination, information management, and precision guided munitions will all be used to greatest effect in the open areas our forces must traverse to reach remote theaters of operations

and against platforms—surface ships and manned aircraft—that get us there. That is why the Nation must for the foreseeable future maintain the ability to do what it does so well now: minimize the signatures of platforms as stealth technology does for B-2s and F-117s and amplify enemy platform signatures as do the data fusion capabilities of Aegis naval systems. Application of low-observables technology to new weapon systems is not solely the province of jet-aircraft designers: the Army is developing its first truly stealthy combat helicopter, the Comanche, and the new attack submarine is expected to be the stealthiest under-sea warship in history.

The eventual proliferation of such technology will diminish its value to the Armed Forces. The report correctly aims at maintaining a lead in some of the most crucial areas while investing in developing counters to the technologies most likely to be used to our detriment. The revolution in military affairs, the report also reasons, will enable the military to rely even less on manpower and thus reduce casualties.

To maintain that lead, we must invest in certain key technologies. Exploitation of space, management of information systems, target illumination for both strategic and operational defense, and precision will confer decisive advantages. The possibility of low-tech responses to high-tech capabilities and the gradual evolution

F/A-18F Super Hornet.



U.S. Navy (Adam Plantz)

the QDR report has it right: national security demands that we remain on the cutting edge of technology

of technologies and their incorporation in a coherent system with appropriate doctrine suggest that it is time to begin investing in long-term capabilities. We cannot reject technology, and a core research and development strategy should focus on electronics (sensors, emitters, and microprocessors), nanotechnologies (microscopic mechanical and chemical devices), energy (photovoltaic, compact storage, and beam delivery systems), software (with an emphasis on software integration), and finally, as the report recommends, an industrial technology that will mass produce weapon components efficiently by working more closely with commercial industry so we can accommodate a production surge in an emergency.

Investing a Shrinking Budget

The QDR report has it right: national security demands that we remain on the cutting edge of developments in military technology. Budget limitations, however, also enter into the equation. The authors of the report have difficulty in reconciling defense priorities with the money they assume will become available. They should have tackled the risk of investing a large part of a

shrinking budget in technology for the long term thereby shortchanging operational capabilities in the near term. Instead, they adopt a budget figure that seems appropriately modest and fudge on the dangers. The defense budget has declined by some 38 percent since 1985 and the report assumes it will stabilize at about \$250 billion a year (in FY97 dollars) or 3.2 percent of GNP. Although such an allocation seems unlikely to meet the threats the report's authors foresee, they accept the figure passively, stating that they settled on it because "the Nation is unlikely to support significantly more resources for national defense. Indeed, we may yet face pressures to lower the DOD share of Federal expenditures. Under these circumstances, it would be unrealistic to build a defense program on an assumption that current resource challenges could be solved by increases in the DOD budget."⁴ This may sound reasonable, but if the anticipated funding is inadequate for the tasks which the report assumes the military will perform, shouldn't the report say so? Shouldn't it explain which parts of the strategic vision can be implemented and which can't? One should expect the Pentagon to make tough choices, but DOD also owes an assessment of how much security \$250 billion will buy and what



U.S. Navy (FE. Zimmerman)

Port quarter view
of USS Alexandria.

level of global leadership or participation it will support. The QDR report bows quietly to the budgetary limits it envisions, taking as an article of faith that the public will support only that designated level of expenditure. But on occasion the public has proved persuadable when the President and Congress presented the case compellingly along with the exigencies of the situation. Public willingness to make sacrifices in order to reduce the deficit demonstrates that Americans still have the discipline to choose long-term over short-term benefits. At present, however, no one in authority is making that case on defense.

The QDR report correctly notes that significant savings can be achieved within the existing defense budget through outsourcing, reengineering, and acquisition reform. Several groups have contended that over \$10 billion could be saved annually by outsourcing support functions. Such savings will only materialize over the years as old structures and processes are dismantled, and so

the adequacy of current defense spending must still be addressed.

The same is true of a QDR proposal for two additional rounds of the base closure process. After four such rounds between 1988 and 1995, about a fifth of our former Cold-War base structure has been designated for closure or consolidation. The QDR report proposes continuing the base closure process while extending it to realigning research and test facilities. Experience indicates, however, that it often takes years for the full savings potential of closures to be realized. Thus while savings from earlier rounds will continue to accrue it is improbable that new rounds would yield significant savings any time soon. Even if Congress reverses its recent decision and authorizes further closures, they would not be a panacea for present budgetary concerns.

Wielding the Axe

Assuming the Pentagon puts the provisions of the QDR report into effect, how much will come out of the current operational hide of the Armed Forces to pay for future technology? The Army will lose an added 15,000 active duty personnel and 45,000 Reservists. Because the number of divisions will remain at ten, these already hollowing units will become more hollow unless there is a plan, unaddressed in the report, for a massive reorganization of the Army such as is described in a recent controversial book.⁵ The Navy will go from 128 to 116 surface combatants, lose 23 of its 73 submarines, and have procurement of F/A-18E/Fs reduced from 1,000 to 548. It will also have to give up 18,000 active personnel and 4,100 Reservists. Overall, the Marine Corps loses the least. It will take a modest reduction in personnel but retain its three expeditionary force capability and receive slightly fewer new MV-22 tiltrotor aircraft.

Even the Army and Navy should consider themselves blest, however. The Air Force will lose a whopping 27,000 active duty personnel, shift one active fighter wing into the Reserves, and get only 339 new F-22s instead of 438. In addition, it will acquire 13 joint surveillance and target attack radar system (JSTARS) aircraft instead of 19. Most disturbingly, the QDR report calls for no further production of the B-2 bomber, despite the findings of the deep-attack weapons mix study that additional B-2s could be decisive in halting aggression overseas. That the review's axe should fall most heavily on the Air Force is surprising given that service's performance in the Gulf War. Certainly the strategies for both MRCs are likely to be fought with variants of the strategy used in Desert Storm where airpower played a key role in winning if not ending the war. The low number of casualties in the air and on the ground was largely

due to rapid destruction of the enemy air defense system and infrastructure and to crippling its ability to sustain ground forces in the south. This is the kind of strategy Americans will most readily accept in conflicts where the Nation's interests are at stake but not its survival. Accordingly, airpower generally and stealthy aircraft in particular should continue to receive the highest priority, not only for MRCs but also to discourage regional aggression by a rogue state bent on dominating its neighbors. It is difficult to imagine any future deployment of U.S. forces—whether for peace operations such as Iraq, Bosnia, and Rwanda, or for a full scale conventional war—where the Air Force will not play a dominant role.

Taking QDR reductions together with others made since the end of the Cold War, active duty personnel will be cut by 36 percent, Reserve components by 29 percent, and DOD civilians by 42 percent. At the same time the national missile defense will remain on an accelerated research and development track because of executive and legislative branch decisions, with the objective of deploying a limited system as early as fiscal year 2000—perhaps an overly ambitious target date.

The review, then, sacrifices size for modernization. This choice may have been the least of all possible evils, but unfortunate consequences will follow. Reducing our forces still further will make it all the more difficult to reconstitute them in time to face an unforeseen emergency or peer competitor. It is hard to think of precedents for a democracy rapidly rebuilding its forces.

Furthermore, personnel reductions, no matter how well staged, emit an unmistakable signal. Talented young men and women will almost certainly shy away from careers in an enterprise that is steadily shrinking in size and, therefore, in opportunities for advancement. The report notes explicitly that these cuts may not be the final ones: future pressures may lead to further budget reductions. That makes choosing the military as a future a risky prospect.

More Than Mere Cuts

There are also operational consequences to these cuts. As the review acknowledges, the conventional conflicts we can envisage for the next decade will probably arise with as little warning as those of the last ten years. They will be, in the review's words, "come as you are" wars, which we will fight with forces already in uniform—that is to say with fewer than in the past.

Even the theoretical total available may well not be the actual number we can count on for combat. According to recent studies by the Rand Corporation, both smaller scale contingencies or military operations other than war (MOOTW) seriously detract from the ability of standing forces to cover MRCs or counter unexpected aggression by a rogue state.⁶ Some 90 percent of all such smaller contingencies involve peacekeeping or peace enforcement, which often demands equipment, skills, training, and doctrine that differ fundamentally from those needed for conventional operations. Peace operations now require about 10 percent of Air Force flight hours (between 1991 and 1995, 800,000 hours were dedicated to operations such as protecting Somalis from starvation, Rwandans from tribal massacre, Iraqi Kurds and Shiites from Saddam Hussein, and various Bosnian ethnic groups from each other).

These operations place asymmetrical demands on subcommunities within the Air Force. While F-16s spend many hours patrolling no-fly zones, for example, there are many more F-16s available than E-3s, KC-10s, EF-111s, AC-130s, and EC-130s which in 1995 averaged between 88 and 280 hours per aircraft in support of peacekeeping while an F-16 spent 21 hours. RC-135s, in particular, gave 65 percent of their 1995 flight hours to peace support reconnaissance. Aircraft such as E-3s and EF-111s are actually more heavily committed to flying operational missions now than during the Cold War. They devoted 40 and 60 percent of their 1995 flight hours respectively to peace operations.

Pilots patrolling the skies over Iraq and Bosnia get less time to hone their combat skills as peacekeeping operations provide few chances for air-to-air combat maneuver or placing ordnance on target. The deterioration of combat skills of some of our pilots is already measurable. Add the cost and the wear and tear on aircraft, and the sometimes unprogrammed expense of these smaller scale contingencies becomes more apparent and troubling.

The Army is also increasingly committed to such tasks, which similarly hurts its combat skills and creates other problems. In addition to involvement in Iraq and Bosnia, for example, the service has become heavily committed in counternarcotics activities in both Mexico and Colombia and in controlling refugee flows from Haiti—when not actually reinstalling Haiti's democratically-elected government to power. It has also put troops on the ground for peacekeeping in Macedonia and Bosnia and worked with the United Nations to support elections in Cambodia. Because the many peace enforcement missions in a chaotic international scene increasingly

MOOTW detract from the ability to cover MRCs or counter unexpected aggression by a rogue state

strain combat skills, they are likely to stir new debates within the Army and DOD generally. These will focus on issues such as the appropriate ratio of active to Reserve components, the distribution of light, heavy, and special operations forces, and the needs of maneuver versus fire support.

Peace operations will demand more restrictive rules of engagement and closer civil-military communications and cooperation than the individual services are likely to find congenial. Most of these operations do not play to strengths of the Armed Forces and demand a degree of doctrinal flexibility at odds with post-Vietnam military thinking as articulated first in the Weinberger doctrine and later in the Powell doctrine of overwhelming force which was validated in the Persian Gulf. The conventional mind is uncomfortable with scenarios that call for tighter civil-military links on the operational level, but that communication becomes necessary when political guidance cannot be stable or consistent because of rapidly shifting conditions on the ground. One need only remember Lebanon and Somalia to imagine what may lie ahead. We ought thus to reckon with the possibility of another round of strained civil-military relations.

The debate has, in fact, been institutionalized by the Military Force Structure Review Act of 1996 which established the National Defense Panel (NDP), a review group of formidable experts. In a thoughtful preliminary letter to Secretary Cohen, NDP Chairman Philip Odeen wrote that this group intends to examine, among other things, "whether there is insufficient connectivity between strategy, on the one hand, and force structure, operational concepts, and procurement decisions on the other." It suggests that the review's program decisions and priorities would benefit greatly if they were more tightly linked to a new comprehensive strategy and also that deepening strategic concepts warrant "a more aggressive redesigning of [DOD] infrastructure," presumably something beyond mere cuts in the services. The panel also faulted the review for not taking a sufficiently joint and combined view of the future and for preserving the dated service perspective on force structure. It believes the QDR report overemphasizes traditional force-on-force challenges at the expense of the potential danger posed by subnational entities.

The National Defense Panel has until the end of the year to shape its verdicts on the specifics of the latest Pentagon game plan into an official critique. The process will be crucial since the final DOD plan will guide security policy into the next century. Inevitably the panel will have to conduct its business against the charges leveled by well-intentioned critics or self-interested kibitzers since a

spate of pre-QDR articles argued that current force structure cannot even support missions required by the Bottom-Up Review.⁷

The outcome of this effort ought to be precisely what the panel asserts: a much tighter link between strategy and the ability to implement it. Everything must be placed on the table—not just hackneyed allegations of waste but some of the pet projects of the Pentagon and Congress—even if that means treading on some VITs (very important toes). Not only the time but the opportunity has come as we determine how to maintain the most benign security environment that we have enjoyed since the outbreak of World War I. JFQ

NOTES

¹ Charles H. Fairbanks, "Introduction," *The National Interest*, no. 31 (Spring 1993), pp. 5–8.

² Sharon K. Weiner, "The Politics of Resource Allocation in the Post-Cold War Pentagon," *Security Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Summer 1996), pp. 125–42.

³ See, for example, the press release by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, May 19, 1997, and John Hillen, "Kicking the Can Down the Road," *The Washington Times*, May 29, 1997, p. A–16.

⁴ William S. Cohen, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, May 1997, p. 19.

⁵ Douglas A. Macgregor, *Breaking the Phalanx: New Design for Landpower in the 21st Century* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997).

⁶ Jennifer Morrison Taw and John E. Peters, *Operations Other Than War: Implications for the U.S. Army* (Santa Monica, Calif.: The Rand Corporation, 1995); Alan Vick et al., *Preparing the U.S. Air Force for Military Operations Other Than War* (Santa Monica, Calif.: The Rand Corporation, 1997).

⁷ Dov S. Zakheim, "Tough Choices in Defense," *The National Interest*, no. 47 (Spring 1997), pp. 32–43; Frederick W. Kagan and David T. Fautua, "Could We Fight a War if We Had To?" *Commentary*, vol. 103, no. 5 (May 1997), pp. 25–29; Zalmay Khalilzad and David Ochmanek, "An Affordable Two-War Strategy," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 1997.