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The Dog That Didn't Bark? The 2010 Quadrennial Defence Review

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The Department of Defence's long-awaited Quadrennial Defence Review offers little new when it comes to discussing the future direction of the US military. More notably, it hardly mentions the "transformation" of the US military, or the likely future challenges of a Chinese "peer competitor".

THE UNITED STATES Department of Defence (DoD) released its long-awaited Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) for 2010 on February 1. For anyone expecting a major shift in defence policy on the part of the Obama administration, he or she was probably sadly disappointed – or greatly relieved.

In fact, the QDR, mandated by the US Congress to be issued every four years, had little that was new or unexpected. It kept in place the DoD's focus on fighting two major conflicts simultaneously. In particular, and to no one's surprise, it reaffirmed President Obama's paramount commitment to defeating Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and continuing the security handover in Iraq. And the QDR said all the usual things about countering weapons of mass destruction, strengthening allies, reforming the defence acquisition process, and keeping the overall US military robust and capable of "full-spectrum operations".

In fact, Dr. Gordon Adams, who oversaw defence budgeting for the Clinton administration, alluded in a recent interview in *Defence News* that George W. Bush would probably not have any serious qualms with the strategies laid out in the 2010 QDR.

In particular, the document reaffirms the overall force structure laid out earlier by the Bush administration, including the creation of 73 Army combat brigade teams, maintaining ten to eleven aircraft carriers (but only ten carrier air wings), and acquiring several hundred fifth-generation Joint Strike Fighters (JSF). So will the QDR turn out to be a proverbial damp squib of a defence policy document? As with many official documents, this one may be more important for what it did *not* say.

Today's Wars or Future War?

Traditionally, the QDR is the DoD's opportunity to "think big" about the future. At the same time, the US has its hands full with two ongoing conflicts – along with numerous other operations, such as counter-piracy, counter-terrorism, and humanitarian relief (e.g., Haiti) – that it has to deal with *now*. It is no wonder, then, that Secretary of Defence Gates has frequently criticised the US military for "next-war-itis," that is, of ignoring current "muddy-boots" challenges for more lofty visions of an (often high-tech and antiseptic) future battlefield. Consequently, this QDR explicitly reaffirms, time and again, the Obama policy that America's armed forces need to prevail in today's wars and not tomorrow's.

At the same time, there is a remarkable lack of discussion in the QDR of how the US military may have to deal with future wars with more traditional state-centered adversaries, such as Iran or North Korea, and especially with potential "peer competitors" like China. Little attention is given in this document to fighting well-equipped state actors – particularly if they are armed with unconventional or asymmetric capabilities – in conflicts beyond the next ten years or so. Perhaps it is wise to concentrate on the here and now, but the QDR seems to have missed an opportunity to lay out Obama's vision for a transformed force – providing, of course, that he has one.

Whatever Happened to Transformation?

This leads to another observation about what is missing from this QDR: the lack of any discussion of how the revolution in military affairs (RMA) is affecting the restructuring of the US military. To be sure, the document speaks of fielding new "enabling systems," such as improved intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, more resilient communications, and, above all, enhanced capabilities in cyberspace, both defensive and offensive.

But the language of force transformation that gave a grander, more soaring vision to past QDRs, especially its 2006 predecessor, is eerily absent in this document, to its detriment ultimately. Perhaps Donald Rumsfeld's vision of a transformed force à la the RMA was overly ambitious, excessive, and unrealistic, but the extreme pragmatism and prosaic nature of the 2010 QDR seems almost demoralising in comparison.

The Strange Case of China

Finally, the QDR says very little about what many are increasingly arguing will be the US military's growing conventional challenge in the mid-term: China.

In fact, China rates hardly a mention, other than the usual bromides about its role in continuing to "shape an international system that is no longer easily defined," or that the US "welcomes a strong, prosperous, and successful China that plays a greater global role". In fact, many of the more alarmist passages about China's military buildup were deliberately stripped from an earlier draft version.

That said, it is important to note that the QDR specifically argues about the need to fight in "anti-access environments" – almost certainly a reference to China, which other Pentagon documents claim is modernising its forces so as to be able to prosecute an "area denial/anti-access" (AD/AA) strategy. In other words, China would seek to prevent US forces from being able to operate too closely to Chinese territory or insert themselves into spaces where Chinese forces are militarily active (such as a blockade or an invasion of Taiwan). So China continues to occupy a shadowy middle ground -- between a desired global partner and a feared potential peer competitor.

A Soon and Quietly Ignored Document?

It is very likely that this QDR, for all its anticipation, will be quickly shoved to the bottom of most in-boxes. It may reassure those who fear that Obama might plan to gut the military or turn it into a glorified international peacekeeping outfit (while at the same time, his administration released its 2011 defence budget request that increases US military expenditures to US\$726 billion, or 4.7 percent of GDP). It is nonetheless a rather mundane paper that seems to avoid *any* new ideas. If, as someone once said, that policy decisionmaking is about setting priorities and making sacrifices, then the 2010 QDR is hardly a policymaking document.

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