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## The QDR — Good for Nothing

In practice, the QDR is squarely aimed at defending the Pentagon's current direction.

By Jim Lacey

**I**t is time to kill the congressionally mandated Quadrennial Defense Review — or radically revamp it.

Congress's original intent, in the National Defense Authorization Act of 1997, was wise: to initiate a process that would force the Pentagon to take a fresh look at our national strategy every four years and recommend changes. It was designed as an azimuth check, looking out 15 to 20 years, that would keep our military strategy aligned with global realities.

Unfortunately, it has never achieved its stated goal. In fact, I have never come across a single person who puts any faith in any of the QDR's findings. Typically, the final product of this multi-million-dollar effort is ignored, except by a bunch of pundits who want to write mean little articles about its more inane ideas.

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How did such a good idea go so terribly wrong? The main reason is that money — a lot of money — is at stake. So, instead of producing a wide-ranging study of the long-term threats facing the nation, the QDR has morphed into a politically and bureaucratically driven mess. QDRs are now squarely aimed at defending present budgets and ongoing activities. Worse, they often cannot resist throwing support behind the political hot item of the day. For instance, the

last QDR spent a half-dozen of its approximately 100 pages dealing with climate change. In fact, climate change gets three times more mentions than China and six times more than Russia.

Congress places so little faith in the final QDR product that it ordered the formation of an independent review panel to grade the Pentagon's work. What that panel said of the QDR

process is interesting: “Instead of unconstrained, long term analysis by planners who were encouraged to challenge preexisting thinking, the QDRs became explanations and justifications, often with marginal changes, of established decisions and plans. . . . It is not the kind of long-term planning document which the statute envisions.”

As I write this, every service is putting together its own QDR office, each of which will be led by a general or admiral. Each of these offices is charged with protecting as much of that service’s equities and budget as possible. No one expects to conduct an actual probing strategic analysis, particularly anything looking out more than a couple of years into the future. And yet, hundreds of military officers and senior civilian defense officials are coming together to spend months on a cynical effort wherein they pretend they are doing something that will guide the military for a generation.

The especially unfortunate part of all this is that if there was ever a time the Pentagon needed a serious review of its strategic direction, it is now. The challenges this nation will face two decades hence are many and varied. Already some of them are becoming visible, and no one is giving them the attention they deserve. The QDR effort does not even possess a formal Joint Staff–approved look at this future environment on which to base its proposals. In the past, the Pentagon at least had the Joint Forces Command produce the *Joint Operational Environment*, which was designed to look 25 to 30 years into the future. The last one was done in 2010, and given the pace of global change it is no longer worth the paper it is printed on. Since the Joint Forces Command was dissolved in 2011, no organization has picked up the task.

Worse, very few observers have much doubt about what the next QDR is going to say. Anyone who is paying attention to what the Pentagon and the White House have been saying for the past couple of years could probably write it in a weekend. Climate change will survive, with maybe half as many pages as in 2010. The pivot toward Asia will be big, and therefore worthy of twice the space given over to the Arab Spring. Proliferation of WMDs will get between 15 and 20 mentions, while Special Operations Forces will vie with Air-Sea Battle (probably with a new name) for pride of place. The poor Marines and Army will try to get a few words in to justify their existence, despite the fact that the QDR is counting on someone’s waving over the world a magic wand that will do away with the kinds of conflicts that require land forces. I could go on, but you get the point.

How will we know if the QDR has gotten serious? For one thing, it will take a long hard look at how much longer we can base our naval strategy on carrier battle groups. While their

utility will probably persist for the rest of this decade, they are rapidly becoming giant floating targets. Most of a carrier group's combat power is already dedicated to defending itself rather than striking at an enemy. Before too long, carriers will be expending all their power fending off attacks, and even that is not likely to be sufficient.

A serious QDR effort will also start weaning the Air Force off manned strike fighters. I understand that there are some circumstances still requiring a pilot to make decisions on the spot. But those instances are rarer than they were yesterday, and will be far rarer in a decade. A drone can fly farther, stay around longer, and strike with similar power at far less cost than a manned strike fighter. It is time to decide whether we need 2,000 F-35s for a trillion dollars, or 10,000 drones at half the price.

Finally, a *real* QDR will take a hard look at the world of 2035 and then base our strategy and recommended force structure on a realistic appraisal of what is coming at us. It will not depict the world it would prefer to operate in, so as to justify the Department of Defense's current direction.

This kind of work cannot be done by a cast of thousands or even hundreds. This is a job for a dozen or so strategic thinkers, who are locked away for a couple of months far from Washington. Now we just have to discover the dozen folks willing to do the work, and suffer the slings and arrows a first-rate effort will surely attract.

*— Jim Lacey is professor of strategic studies at the Marine Corps War College. He is the author, most recently, of the forthcoming Moment of Battle. The opinions in this article are entirely his own and do not represent those of the Department of Defense or any of its members.*