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Learning from Experience: Lessons from the QDR for the QDDR

POLICY BRIEF



By Brian M. Burton

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the emergence of transnational issues from climate change to nuclear proliferation, reveal the limits of military power and the need for all three legs of U.S. foreign and national security policy – diplomacy, development, and defense – to work together more effectively. They also require the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to play a more significant role in responding to crises and shaping U.S. foreign policy.

However, State and USAID are not yet prepared to take on the demands of that role. They are not appropriately organized or sufficiently resourced; they lack not only a strong tradition of tying their operations to long-term strategic planning, but also the organizational structures and cultures necessary to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. In response, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has initiated the State Department's first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR). This exercise will prove complex and difficult. Fortunately, the State Department can learn a great deal about what to do, and what not to do, from the Pentagon's experience with such reviews.

It is no coincidence that the QDDR evokes the Department of Defense (DOD)'s Quadrennial Defense

Review (QDR), the congressionally mandated study intended to outline defense priorities and strategy and to relate them to the military's force structure, modernization plans, and budget. As Secretary Clinton noted, the QDR process imposes "the discipline necessary to make the hard decisions to set forth the priorities" while providing a framework to convince Congress "that there was a plan, people knew where they were headed, and they had the priorities requested aligned with the budget."¹ She intends for the QDDR to drive the State Department and USAID to prepare more effectively for the future and to present the link between desired ends and required means more directly.

Despite substantial differences in mission, personnel, resources, and culture between the DOD and civilian agencies, a QDR-type process is an effective way of tackling serious questions about State and USAID's strategies going forward and the institutional changes they need to make to better execute their missions. State and USAID, for example, can be thought of as related but distinct services with the capabilities for joint operations; the challenge that the QDDR must address is orienting these organizations around a shared strategic vision, much as the QDR provides the overarching direction to harness the distinct capabilities of the respective armed services toward a desired end. The State Department and USAID can take advantage of the DOD's experience to maximize the effectiveness of the process while avoiding its common pitfalls.

SIX LESSONS FROM THE QDR PROCESS FOR THE QDDR:

1. Establish clear strategic priorities.

The QDR is intended to set defense priorities consistent with U.S. national security strategy. This requires identifying the most important functions and missions of the armed forces. For example, the 2001 QDR set four primary missions for the armed forces: protect the homeland; deter aggression in Europe, Northeast Asia, the East Asian littoral, and the Middle East/Southwest Asia; wage two major combat operations nearly simultaneously; and achieve decisive victory in one of the two major operations, including regime change if required.² While the strategic priorities the department sets can be challenged, they provide a critical baseline for assessing the rest of the review's content.

In the QDDR, the State Department and USAID should identify strategic priorities and assess how they fit into the administration's broader national strategy. A first step is defining how State and USAID see the shifting international environment and their role in that environment – the key missions they must fulfill and how they will go about achieving them.³ Prioritizing the vast array of functions of the State Department and USAID – everything from maintaining consulates to engaging in post-conflict reconstruction – will be a major challenge, but it is essential to identify a framework for how to utilize limited resources to best advance U.S. interests in the changing world order. The review is also an opportunity to elevate functional areas or regions of growing importance and to ensure they are well represented institutionally.

2. Ensure that strategic priorities become budget priorities.

The QDR seeks to identify current or potential missions that existing defense capabilities cannot adequately address. The 2006 QDR, for example, focused on irregular warfare, particularly the need to build partner capacity as a means to counter violent Islamist extremist terrorists and insurgents. It specifically identified special operations forces (SOF) as a capability in high demand but insufficiently available.⁴ The 1997 QDR based the size of U.S. military forces upon a baseline requirement of waging two near-simultaneous major theater wars.⁵ The DOD's strategic priorities inform a broad, force-planning construct that quantifies the resources required to address these challenges and provides guidelines for the military's size and structure. However, a key problem with past QDRs, and one that the current Pentagon team is striving to ameliorate, has been the failure to link force-planning priorities to clear budget tradeoffs. QDRs have shied away from tackling serious budget and program issues, even if the program of record is poorly suited for the strategic environment the review describes. For example, though the 2006 QDR emphasized irregular warfare and called for a strategy to combat global terrorism by building partner capacity, it did not recommend significant changes to preexisting force structure and modernization plans beyond a proposed expansion of SOF.⁶ To catalyze broader changes that later appear in the QDR, it takes a prior demonstrated commitment to shift budgetary priorities, such as Secretary Gates' April 2009 budget announcement that included significant program terminations and reassessments.

After prioritizing missions, the QDDR should recommend "force-planning" guidelines that identify the size and nature of the capabilities portfolio they will need to meet future challenges. It should clearly define the tradeoffs of different strategic and budgetary decisions, something that previous State reviews

have not done. The QDDR will be more credible if it derives requirements through a transparent process that explains why State and USAID must be a certain size and have certain funding levels to execute their specific missions of national importance. From strategic planning to post-conflict reconstruction, there is no shortage of areas where the State Department and USAID suffer from a lack of personnel, resources, and procedures. For the first QDDR, however, the review should focus on ameliorating one or two key areas of capability shortfalls.

3. Look to the future but keep an eye on the present.

Past QDRs focused too much on hypothetical future scenarios rather than on addressing the realities of the contemporary security environment. The 2006 QDR, while noting the importance of irregular warfare, did not substantively address the large-scale U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷ The “two major theater war” construct adhered to in the 1997 QDR, on the other hand, seemed to ignore the fact that U.S. military forces increasingly performed stability operations and “operations other than war.”⁸ While a review is meant to be forward-looking, its depiction of the strategic environment and mission priorities must bear some relevance to the present or it will lack credibility among key constituencies in the executive branch and the Congress.

The QDDR should avoid this pitfall by balancing strategic planning for the future with the need to meet urgent demands of the present. It must reflect careful consideration of the changing nature of the international environment, but it cannot be simply a futurist think-piece divorced from present challenges. In particular, this QDDR should address the President’s call for a “civilian surge” in Afghanistan, involving State and AID personnel to help develop local governance and economic capacity, and the challenges of meeting that call.

4. Engage at the top.

Lack of guidance and participation by the DOD’s top leadership, particularly the Secretary of Defense, in previous QDRs prevented those reviews from driving true institutional change, especially with regard to linking budget considerations more directly with strategy. In order to give “teeth” to the review and to enable it to effectively tackle difficult issues with entrenched bureaucratic constituencies, such as budget allocations, the Secretary must devote personal attention to the process. Secretary of Defense Gates has embraced this role and has been an active participant in the current QDR.

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Secretary of State Clinton must play a similar role throughout the QDDR process, particularly because it is the first such process. Encouragingly, she provided the impetus for launching the QDDR and by all accounts, remains significantly engaged. Deputy Secretary of State Jacob Lew and Policy-Planning Director Anne-Marie Slaughter manage the process, while senior officials at the Assistant Secretary level serve as the chairs of the QDDR’s working groups.⁹ But primary responsibility for the QDDR cannot be entirely delegated away from Secretary Clinton. It is crucial that she continue to drive the process, especially when it encounters bureaucratic resistance. The Secretary will have to choose her battles over the QDDR carefully, but she will need to keep the document focused on her key priorities and ensure that the review is conducted in an open, rigorous fashion. Without strong involvement by the Secretary, both during and after the review, the QDDR is unlikely to become a priority within the Department or to produce the necessary institutional changes.

5. Secure buy-in from Congress, interagency partners, and the broader foreign policy community.

In successive iterations of the QDR, the DOD has engaged increasing levels of outside involvement to review and comment on both the process and its outcomes. As a congressionally mandated review, the QDR has an automatic audience on Capitol Hill, and the DOD has a clear interest in ensuring congressional support for its review. Additionally, it is now common practice for representatives of other executive branch departments like State and think tank experts to receive briefings on the QDR's progress and opportunities to offer input. This type of engagement provides an opportunity for the DOD not only to improve the final product but also to explain the review's conclusions and to gain buy-in from key constituencies before the QDR's formal release.

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Similarly, the QDDR should also seek input and support from Congress, interagency partners, and outside experts. The QDDR can mark the path toward securing additional funding resources for State and USAID, but only if the review process is transparent and inclusive. For State and USAID, demonstrating that they are capable of conducting a critical analysis of current and future challenges and of their organizational structures and cultures would go a long way toward enhancing their credibility

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Interagency and outside buy-in can also facilitate this cause. Other government agencies and outside organizations could become powerful allies as State and USAID seek more funding support from Congress. For instance, Secretary Gates has already spoken forcefully about the need for renewed emphasis on diplomacy and development to reduce the burden on America's military.¹⁰ Such endorsements, from objective or even unexpected voices, sway Capitol Hill more than any glossy review document ever could. Additionally, outside development and foreign policy experts can help disseminate the QDDR's findings in advance and make a public case for them in ways that State and USAID cannot. But first State and USAID must commit to a review process that will proactively engage others, not one that occurs behind closed doors and merely justifies preexisting organizational plans.

6. The process is as important as the product.

The QDR is burdened with high expectations that are never completely fulfilled. Indeed, a single review simply cannot address every issue facing an institution on the scale of the DOD. A key indicator of success is how well the review establishes an enduring strategic planning process. The reviews themselves are useful in providing a periodic fresh look at defense challenges, priorities, and capabilities and in proposing changes that would enhance DOD effectiveness. But the institutionalization of an effective planning process matters most over the long run.

Similarly, the QDDR should not be the last word on State Department and USAID priorities and reforms. And if the first QDDR is also the last, the whole enterprise will be a failure, regardless of how good the actual document is. Institutional change at State and USAID will not be completed through one

QDDR – it is the beginning of a long-term process. This review can have an immediate impact by driving State and USAID to set clear strategic priorities and to think coherently about which missions and capabilities are the most important for the future. Perhaps the most significant contribution the first QDDR can make is in laying the groundwork for an institutionalized review process that will continue to compel clear-eyed examinations of the State Department and USAID's ability to execute the roles required of them in U.S. foreign policy.

SUMMARY

If executed properly, the QDDR should help the State Department and USAID build their capacity to conduct strategic planning, adapt to the rapidly changing international environment, and better integrate themselves into national security policy-making. The key challenges for the leadership of State and USAID will be ensuring institutional follow-through on its recommendations and gaining the buy-in from Congress and other departments required to obtain additional resources. Navigating this process will be challenging, but ultimately worthwhile, if it can serve as the first step toward revitalizing the diplomatic and development instruments America needs.

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Endnotes

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