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QDR DOES LITTLE TO IMPROVE AFFORDABILITY OF LONG-TERM DEFENSE PLANS

By Steven M. Kosiak

The Bush Administration today released the results of the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). The QDR is a congressionally-mandated review of defense strategy, programs and policies, conducted by the Department of Defense (DoD) every four years.

The QDR includes a substantially revised diagnosis of the challenges facing the United States, and the US military in particular (compared to the 2001 QDR and earlier reviews).¹ Among other things, it argues for placing a greater emphasis on irregular warfare and the dissuasion of major power competitors. Consistent with these new priorities, the QDR also proposes a number of potentially important programmatic changes. These changes include, for example, increasing the size of US Special Operations Forces (SOF) and accelerating the fielding of a new deep strike aircraft from 2037 to 2018.

Plans-Funding Mismatch

DoD faces a significant mismatch between its long-term force structure and modernization plans, and projected funding levels for defense. According to a recent analysis by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO),² assuming DoD's weapons programs and operations and support (O&S) activities experience cost growth in line with past experience, funding for defense would have to be increased by \$75 billion a year, or more, beyond the level projected in the February 2005 defense plan.³ The defense budget is already high by historical standards, and further increases may be difficult to sustain in the face of growing concerns about the federal deficit. Unfortunately, the latest QDR would do little to improve the affordability of DoD's long-term plans.

Modernization Programs

The QDR recommended scaling back or terminating a number of weapons programs, including the J-UCAS unmanned combat aircraft, the E-10 surveillance aircraft and the B-52H standoff jammer. But these are relatively small programs. The largest weapons

¹ This revised diagnosis was previewed in *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2005), pp. 12-16.

² *The Long-Term Implications of Current Defense Plans and Alternatives* (Washington, DC: CBO, January 2006), pp. 2.

³ At press time, the administration had not yet submitted its FY 2007 budget request or released its latest FY 2007-11 Future Years Defense Program (FYDP).

programs, such as the F-22 and F-35 fighter programs, the Army's Future Combat System (FCS), and the Navy's DD(X) destroyer survived essentially untouched.

Moreover, some of the proposed shifts in priorities—such as the accelerated fielding of a new long-range strike aircraft—are likely to be dependent, for their implementation, on the willingness and ability of a future administration to make offsetting cuts in other DoD priorities. The QDR has, for the most part, deferred these difficult choices.

End Strength and Force Structure

The QDR has proposed some potentially more significant reductions in end strength and force structure. In particular, the QDR recommends cutting about 40,000 full-time equivalent military personnel from the Air Force, reducing the number of B-52H bombers from 95 to 56, retiring 50 Minuteman ICBMs, and accelerating the retirement of the F-117 fighter and the U-2 reconnaissance aircraft. Whether these are the right areas of force structure to cut is debatable, but some such reductions are probably appropriate.

Historically, the US military has frequently cut end strength and force structure in order to find sufficient funding to pay for its modernization efforts. In many cases, the acquisition of new, much more capable (and typically far more costly) weapons systems mean that less than one-for-one replacement is necessary. This approach probably makes sense for the Air Force, as well as the Navy.

However, the personnel and force structure cuts included in the QDR are, by themselves, too modest to both substantially alleviate DoD's plans-funding mismatch and offset the additional costs associated with the new programs and initiatives included in the QDR.

Conclusion

Transforming the US military to meet irregular, catastrophic and disruptive challenges to US security (as recommended in the QDR) is as much about divesting from traditional weapons programs and force structure as it is about investing in new technologies and forces. The good news is that the QDR includes some potentially significant and positive new programs and initiatives. The bad news is that it fails to recommend the level of divestment in more traditional areas that is likely to be necessary to make these new initiatives affordable over the long run.

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