

The QDR: a future of hybrid warfare? by Ron Huisken

55

9 February 2010

ASPI
AUSTRALIAN
STRATEGIC
POLICY
INSTITUTE

The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)—a congressionally-mandated statement from each administration on its defence strategy and priorities—is perhaps the most prominent of a family of statements on military strategy, defence policy, and national security strategy produced regularly by the US government. These statements vary in scope and specificity but all essentially engage in taking the world's pulse, anticipate the challenges to American interests and responsibilities and devise strategies to marshal US resources, not least its armed forces, to best defend those interests.

The Pentagon disposes of about US\$600 billion a year. It is a massive enterprise and it takes a long time to change its course. Still, shifts in thinking about how to allocate these funds—to yield military capabilities adequate to address those anticipated challenges—send important, and immediate, political signals and have a significant cumulative effect on America's military posture. In 2001, for example, the George W Bush administration's first QDR was notable in particular because, for the first time in decades, it placed Asia ahead of Europe and the Middle East as the area of primary interest for the Pentagon, and discreetly made it clear that China was the principal reason for this re-ordering. That document was also notable because it was shaped by neo-conservative views developed a decade earlier on what the condition of unipolarity could and should mean for the United States, especially the Pentagon. All of this was swept away by September 11, a watershed with major strategic consequences of its own. Some of these have still fully to take shape while others have become the major preoccupation of current policy.

The new QDR is distinctive in a number of interesting ways. It is unmistakably a further signal from the Obama administration that it is intent upon recalibrating America's approach to its aspirations and responsibilities in the world, to repair the damage from the Bush era but also to respond to new realities. It plays down sweeping ambitions to place as much focus as possible on the tasks at hand—Iraq and, above all, Afghanistan—together with preserving the integrity of an all-volunteer force ravaged by nearly ten years of high-intensity operations. It records and accommodates the administration's position on nuclear disarmament and the Geneva Protocols (torture). It directs the US military to protect the option of unilateral action but signals that resort to this option is improbable. It suggests the US will rely more on allies and partners for substantive cooperation and assistance. The treatment of China is understated. All the strands of US concern are there but they are dispersed throughout the narrative rather than assembled and

highlighted. China is mentioned just once in the Executive Summary, alongside India as rising powers that are transforming the international system.

That said, it is not a modest document. America is not stepping back from global leadership. The QDR acknowledges that, in an international system transformed by a strong China and a rising India, the US will have to 'increasingly rely on key allies and partners if it is to sustain stability and peace'. Elsewhere, however, the QDR records that America's interests and its role in the world 'require armed forces with unmatched capabilities', that 'in the absence of dominant US power projection capabilities, the integrity of its alliances and security partnerships could be called into question', and that America's 'unique position generates an obligation to be responsible stewards of the power and influence that history, determination and circumstance have provided'.

The new buzz word is 'hybrid' warfare, a term which tries to capture the idea that future warfare is likely to involve a diversity of actors and to blur the traditional distinction between state-on-state conflict with conventional forces and the protracted operations characteristic of counter-terrorist and counter-insurgent campaigns. In a sense, hybrid warfare is an open-ended vision, justifying a wide range of capabilities, from an aircraft carrier to a sensor that detects improvised explosive devices. It could be construed as an intellectual cop-out, since it seemingly allows all the constituent bits of the Pentagon to pursue their pet capabilities and claim compliance with prevailing doctrine. But in fact, the QDR offers clearer guidance on the directions it wants the US armed forces to move in. It does so, in particular, by giving unambiguous priority to rebalancing the force to prevail in today's wars, not least because of the judgement that the outcome of these wars 'will directly shape the global strategic environment for decades to come'.

The fact that the Pentagon has already made several politically difficult choices in favour of releasing resources for Afghanistan-style conflicts—notably to terminate production of the F-22 stealth fighter at a fraction of the number originally envisaged—adds force to this strategic guidance. Some have already detected (and criticised) an implicit judgement here that future wars are much more likely to resemble Afghanistan than, say, Operation Desert Storm in 1991, or the invasion phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. This would be profoundly controversial but it is countered by the intention to retain dominant force projection capabilities (noted above) and the capability to prevail against two capable nation-state aggressors in overlapping time frames (which has been the Pentagon's bedrock mission since the end of the Cold War).

As an intellectual exercise, trying to imagine how things could get worse and organising limited resources to prevent, deter or cope with these possibilities, easily outpoints economics as the dismal science. The QDR identifies and prioritises five principal challenges to US security interests: the ongoing threat of terrorist attacks in the continental US (the US intelligence chief recently elevated the likelihood of another major al-Qaeda strike); experiencing major setbacks in Afghanistan and Iraq; aggressive behaviour by regional powers that possess challenging anti-access capabilities (Iran, North Korea and China are discussed in this context); the further proliferation of nuclear weapons and/or the failure of governance in a state with nuclear weapons (Pakistan and North Korea come to mind for the latter risk, although the QDR is not specific); and the sharp escalation in testing the capacity of cyber attacks to achieve military gains.

Australia's strategic and policy community will be reassured by the QDR's message of political resolve to remain comprehensively engaged and is unlikely to have fundamental difficulties with the key challenges to order and stability that it identifies or with the priority order assigned to them. True, our own White Paper lists our strategic priorities differently, without the same emphasis on the counter-terrorist

mission. But the differences are likely to be more abstract than real in terms of our ongoing patterns of cooperation. We should take note of messages like increasing reliance on allies and friends and the assessment that the Indian Ocean will become more important to the global economy. It also seems abundantly clear that, in terms of capabilities, the US armed forces will remain a fast-moving target and a formidable challenge for allies like Australia that aspire to interoperability with them.

About the author

Ron Huisken is a senior fellow with the Strategic & Defence Studies Centre, ANU and formerly worked in the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade and the Department of Defence.

About Policy Analysis

Generally written by ASPI experts, POLICY ANALYSIS is provided online to give readers timely, insightful opinion pieces on current strategic issues, with clear policy recommendations when appropriate. They reflect the personal views of the author and do not in any way express or reflect the views of the Australian Government or represent the formal position of ASPI on any particular issue.

ASPI
Tel + 61 2 6270 5100
Fax + 61 2 6273 9566
Email enquiries@aspi.org.au
Web www.aspi.org.au

© The Australian Strategic Policy Institute Limited 2010

This publication is subject to copyright. Except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of it may in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, microcopying, photocopying, recording or otherwise) be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted without prior written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the publishers.