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MAKING SENSE OF THE 2006 QUADRENNIAL DEFENCE REVIEW

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THE 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR06) may have been one of the most highly anticipated documents to come out of the Pentagon, but it remains a mixed bag. While there is much in the document to cheer, there are also several potential inconsistencies and problems that will need to be ironed out when put in practice.

The Strategic Challenges

QDR06 identifies the terrorist threat as the single most important strategic challenge to the US and proposes measures to make the US military more capable of meeting and defeating this challenge. Stemming from this, the next strategic challenge is the political obstacles to the strategy of prevention: While the US military has great operational and tactical agility, the politics necessary to authorise any preventive action remains a lengthy process.

The next priority is to secure the US from direct attack. This requires a deterrent posture based primarily on the threat of overwhelming response. Here, military forces will play a leading, supporting or enabling role, depending on the nature of the threat. Its leading role comes in the event of a direct military attack from another country. The military will support civil authorities in consequence management in the event of terrorist attack or natural disaster. The military will also seek to facilitate standard protocols that will allow for smooth inter-agency cooperation and intelligence sharing.

QDR06 identifies three countries that will fundamentally shape the global security environment in the 21st Century. The budding US-India strategic partnership is a positive influence. However, Russia and China are potential concerns: specifically, the threats to Russian democracy, and Chinese military modernisation. The US military needs a flexible global defence posture – one that presents any adversary with complex multidimensional challenges to maintain a positive global security environment.

Underpinning these challenges is the spectre of WMD proliferation, in particular the potential diffusion of WMD technologies to non-state actors. Meeting this challenge requires a multi-pronged approach such as credible deterrence, as well as measures that locate, track and detect WMD materials in all domains in the unlikely event of WMD attack.

Transforming the US Military

These varied demands mandate that the current process of military transformation remains

essentially a work-in-progress. Several characteristics of the current transformation agenda remain in place – smaller, lighter but extremely lethal forces with great operational flexibility and agility; ‘places, not bases’; and an emphasis on irregular rather than conventional military operations. The document also stresses the need to rebalance the mix of joint capabilities and forces.

On the ground, modularised brigade-sized forces will form the basic component force, providing a plug-and-play capacity that allows the military to adapt its force packages to the specific mission requirements. Special operations forces (SOF) will be expanded across the services by a third. Furthermore, regular forces will require multiple skill sets, including low-end SOF skill sets in psychological operations and civil affairs to cope with the increasing diversification of missions. The strategic bomber fleet will be fully modernised while a new strategic bomber platform is to be developed. Increased attention will also be placed on unmanned platforms. The Navy will maintain eleven Carrier Strike Groups. Littoral combat remains a top priority, while riverine capabilities, reflecting the prioritisation on counter-insurgency operations, will need to be re-introduced. Attack submarine production will be stabilised on two platforms a year.

What all this will translate into is a new deterrent posture, one that is flexible and easily tailored to meet the specific security challenge. QDR06 argues that the old Cold War one-size-fits-all deterrence posture has to be abandoned in favour of a new Triad – tapping into nuclear, conventional and emerging non-lethal weapons technologies – that tailors the deterrent to the specific threat. Another key element of the deterrence posture will be the continuing emphasis on international alliances and partnerships, of which NATO remains the cornerstone. Indeed, as has been evident lately, QDR06 envisages the expansion of NATO both in terms of its membership as well as its theatres of operations.

Assessing the QDR06

There are encouraging signs that the US military is beginning to fully appreciate the extent of the challenges it faces as well as the responses necessary to meet these challenges. Repeated references to the need to add language and cultural skills to the existing portfolio of skill sets in the US military are encouraging. Without these skill sets, the US military can never hope to defeat any enemy, as long as the enemy feels, thinks and perceives the world in fundamentally different ways from the US. That is, after all, Sun Zi’s signal lesson – to know oneself as well as the enemy is the necessary prerequisite for success in war.

Furthermore, increasing the SOF capacity of the US military will, in the long run, give the US military the necessary combat skills to prevail in the struggle against terrorist groups. Conventional military skill sets are of little use to a counter-terror campaign and QDR06 at least points the US military towards the right direction. What the US military will need to remember is that these skill sets are difficult to acquire, entailing a great deal of investment in time especially. This course of action requires political stamina, one able to outlast the regular changes the US political process undergoes.

Nevertheless, the document does possess some potential problems. Firstly, it does not escape the legacy of Cold War thinking as there is a continued emphasis on maintaining nuclear forces as a key element of deterrence. This emphasis is questionable as it is difficult to imagine a direct attack, at least from another country, on the US, owing to the current absence of peer competitors. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how the nuclear element of the

Triad would deter terrorist groups from launching a WMD attack against the US inasmuch as this is at all a feasible scenario.

Second, while the idea of flexible and agile forces may have its benefits, the “plug-and-play” concept of modularised ground forces might prove to be counter-productive. Military history has always highlighted the pitfalls of such essentially makeshift force packages. Cobbled together units may lack familiarity with each other at all levels; they may have slight, but nevertheless important, differences in terms of operational styles and ethos. All of which may contribute towards an eventual force package that may prove to be strategically ineffective.

Third, a smaller and more agile US military might be able to respond more quickly to global contingencies, but this ability is based on the supposition that there are not too many contingencies happening concurrently which would lead to over-stretch. Signs of over-stretch are already present – deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq have left the military woefully inadequate to cope with the consequence management operations in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Relying on its alliance structures and strategic partnerships appears to mitigate this problem but that is only if its allies and strategic partners have the military capacities to carry the strategic load.

Finally, while an SOF-heavy armed forces might be a truly awesome military instrument, its small and light yet lethal nature might become a strategic problem in the long run. Napoleon famously remarked that God is on the side of the big battalions. Though size may not always matter in a fight, size always presents, at least at face value, a more daunting prospect for potential opponents. How this will eventually affect the deterrent capability of the US military remains to be seen.

All in all, the changes suggested by QDR06 might eventually result in a more combat effective armed forces when put to the fight. However, its first test may not be actual combat. Instead, QDR06’s first hurdle may be the twin issues of internal problems inherent in the document as well as the transformation of theory into practise.

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