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Son of QDR: Prospects for the Army

by John Kreul

The Department of Defense's 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) is remembered as an indecisive, bare-knuckled interservice scuffle over defense resources. Yet hope springs quadrennially when roles and funding are on the line; the Army, and the other services, are already gearing up for the next QDR. The new Secretary of Defense will deliver the report to Congress in September 2001.

Congress mandated the first QDR with the Armed Forces Force Structure Review Act of 1996 (part of Public Law 104-201). It intended to provoke a fundamental reassessment of defense strategy and force structure. Skeptical of DoD's ability to do this, Congress also created a National Defense Panel (NDP) to critique the QDR and offer its own recommendations. This fear was borne out as the QDR was driven by budgetary constraints that effectively rubber-stamped the status quo, skimming off a thin layer of cuts from each service.

This faint-hearted and political approach perpetuated the faults of the 1993 Bottom-Up Review (BUR). It did little to challenge the force structure largely held over from the Cold War and it entrenched a severe strategy-resources mismatch. The QDR force is not even close to affordable at anywhere near the \$250 billion ceiling (in 1997 dollars) set by Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen. One recent study concludes it is being underfunded by up to \$100 billion a year.

There are reasons to believe this second go-round will be more fruitful. Recent publicity about the military's chronically underfunded budgets and the existence of a federal surplus have warmed the climate for increased defense spending. Last year saw the administration request a real increase in the defense budget for the first time since 1985, and this year's request looks to build on that. With defense a potential issue in the upcoming presidential campaign, the next administration may feel empowered to shake things up. It is more likely to find its hands tied.

An Opportunity for the Army . . .

Army supporters are hoping to take advantage of this opportunity. Like the other services, the Army avoided taking too heavy a hit from the first QDR. But the reserve components suffered the vast majority of the endstrength cuts, fueling an embarrassing feud between the active and reserve components. Since then, however, 25,000 of the proposed 45,000 cuts from the reserve components were rescinded and the Army—active, Army National Guard and Army Reserve—has pledged to improve coordination and work together as a team.

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The Army heads into this QDR with momentum. Chief of Staff General Eric K. Shinseki's vision for the service promises to transform the Army into a force that possesses strategic dominance across the entire spectrum of operations.

The vision will be realized through a transformation of some brigades into a more responsive force. Heavy units will become more mobile, while light units will become more lethal and survivable. Shinseki is establishing an "Interim Force" initially consisting of two medium brigades at Fort Lewis, Washington. These "Interim Brigade Combat Teams" will be comprised of off-the-shelf Interim Armored Vehicles (IAVs)—possibly a mix of wheeled and tracked systems—that are light enough to be transported aboard C-130 aircraft.

Such a force will enhance the Army's strategic responsiveness. Having learned from Operation Desert Shield's slow buildup and the negative publicity surrounding Task Force Hawk, the Army is determined to be a key player in future operations. The vision calls for the ability to deploy a brigade anywhere within 96 hours, a division within 120 hours, and five divisions within 30 days.

Once in place, a force containing medium-weight units will have a legitimate warfighting capability—it will not be deployed merely as a speedbump or a tripwire. It also will operate more effectively in urban terrain and offer more protection to units undertaking peacekeeping operations. The Interim Force will fill these operational requirements until the "Objective Force," built around the Future Combat System (FCS), is fielded sometime in the following decade.

The Army faces the challenge of balancing these goals with current commitments. It is stretched thin around the world in support of the expanding number of new post-Cold War missions and overseas operations. The average frequency of Army contingency deployments has increased from one every four years in 1989 to one every 14 weeks today. In addition to peacekeeping, the nation also is asking the Army to do more in areas such as homeland defense and counternarcotics. All of these missions are placing increasing demands on soldiers from the Army National Guard and Army Reserve as well as the active component, suggesting a need for increases in endstrength and full-time manning. Meanwhile, aging equipment demands intensive recapitalization and modernization efforts.

Transformation, proceeding alongside these other commitments, will not come cheap. General Shinseki and Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera estimate the Army has only half of the roughly \$70 billion needed for this program over the next ten years. The Army recently decided to go ahead with a full buy of the Comanche helicopter, even though the purchase is not compatible with transformation in the long run without significantly greater funding. As a result, the Army has its eye on an increase in funding and a larger share of the defense budget. The hope is that the QDR can make this happen by validating the transformation concept and acknowledging that modernization and other ongoing demands have left the Army disproportionately underresourced.

. . . Or More of the Same?

This would be no small feat. While the Army's purchasing power has declined more than 34 percent since 1989, this is mostly the result of defense budget cuts that have hit all the services and of increases for assorted defense agencies. Much of these funds have gone to ballistic missile defense and military health care, two areas likely to see more increases in the years ahead. However, the Army's share relative to the other services has held fairly steady, dropping less than 1 percent. The Army budget for the next fiscal year is about \$71 billion, or 24 percent of the service share. Representative Curt Weldon (R-PA), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee's research and development subcommittee, calculates that relative to the other services, Army modernization is being shortchanged \$11 billion a year.¹ Yet it would be a major political undertaking to achieve significant change to these time-honored, if largely arbitrary, service budget shares.

The Army isn't the only service salivating for a larger piece of the pie. And the pie itself is unlikely to be much bigger this time around. Despite increasing recognition of defense spending shortfalls, there simply won't be much additional funding forthcoming. Congress and both presidential candidates already have committed most of the budget surplus to other areas, such as tax cuts, health care and social security. Furthermore, the trend of shifting programs (most recently transportation) to entitlement or trust-fund status leaves defense competing with popular programs such as education for scarce discretionary funds.

A major realignment of defense spending priorities also will be difficult to achieve. The Department of Defense has allocated to current programs virtually all of the funds likely to be available—and many of the programs already are underfunded. Quality-of-life accounts such as pay and health care are hot topics sure to attract a good share of any increase to DoD's budget. Already this year, both Senator John Warner (R-VA), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and then-Deputy Secretary of Defense John Hamre warned the Army that additional funds won't be forthcoming and that the Army will have to transform itself out of hide.

Even if the upcoming QDR is driven more by strategy than by budget constraints, significant change will be elusive. The new QDR will have the ability to establish a defense program for the next 20 years, whereas the previous review was limited by a horizon of 2005. But as with the first QDR—and the BUR and the 1991 Base Force Plan before it—there exists no consensus on the relevant threats and how to prioritize defense capabilities. There is greater agreement on the importance of broadly-defined asymmetric threats—ranging from homeland defense and infowar, to weapons of mass destruction, to keep-out, area-denial and antiaccess strategies.

Yet the implications of the new threat environment remain contentious: Will future warfare be characterized more by chaotic urban operations or by sanitary precision strikes? Is it necessary to drop the two-major-theater-war (MTW) strategy? Should resources be focused more on shaping the current environment or on modernizing to meet future threats? Just how critical is homeland defense?

Challenges for the Army . . .

The Air Force, still smarting over perceived slights during the last QDR, will trumpet its dubious achievements in the air war over Kosovo and continue to pitch its "halt phase" theme. Navy Secretary Richard Danzig recently unveiled the new "Power and Influence . . . From the Sea" strategy, which, not surprisingly, describes a more central role for maritime forces. Both services are calling for expensive, high-profile platforms, such as new classes of destroyers, aircraft carriers and submarines, and aircraft such as the F-22, the F/A-18E/F and the Joint Strike Fighter. These programs, and the life-or-death implications for defense contractors—not to mention the representatives elected by their employees—will give those services an edge in the struggle for resources.

Airpower advocates, seeking to gain a bigger advantage in the QDR process, aim to discount the Army's relevance to the National Military Strategy. They push the argument that technological advances in stealth and precision-guided munitions have made ground forces virtually obsolete except as peacekeepers. The Air Force in particular is attempting to rewrite the history of the Kosovo conflict as a triumph for airpower alone, when in fact Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic stood firm throughout more than two months of air attacks. It wasn't until NATO got serious about victory and mounted a credible threat of ground invasion that he backed down.

Airpower advocates also characterize the Army as too slow and heavy to be relevant while neglecting the fact that the Air Force fails to provide sufficient lift assets. In fact, the Air Force currently consumes about 70 percent of that scarce airlift capacity in the first ten days of a crisis-response deployment. The Air Force is determined to sacrifice procurement of lift assets and any other program in order to protect

its extravagant F-22 fighter. The F-22 weighs in at a whopping \$181 million per copy yet provides only marginal advantages over the proven and economical F-15.

The Army also must be attentive to the debate over the two-MTW strategy. This strategy, which dates back to the BUR, decreed that the United States should build its forces to be able to fight two nearly simultaneous wars. It has come under attack (famously, by the NDP) for failing to adapt to the now routine demands of small-scale contingencies and stability and support operations.

One solution, recently endorsed by the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century (also known as the Hart-Rudman Commission), is to designate some units as “constabulary” forces. Such an approach not only fails to consider the robust requirements of an effective peacekeeping force, but also threatens to strain further the Army’s ability to respond to a more traditional warfighting scenario.

The Army should take some responsibility for this situation. The Air Force makes its claims of omnipotence based on the fantasy of fighting the next war against the Iraq of 1991. For its own part, the Army has had too narrow a focus on “fighting and winning the nation’s wars” at the expense of other missions. The nation needs the Army to maintain this capability as its core competency. Yet the unavoidable fact is that the nation also is looking to the Army to further the national interest by undertaking a variety of stability and support operations including important but less glamorous peacekeeping missions.

Kosovo, with its ethnic rivalries, complex terrain, intermingling of civilians and combatants, and requirement for follow-on peacekeeping can’t be seen as an aberration. More likely, it will prove to be typical of the contingencies the U.S. military will face in the coming years. The Army doesn’t choose its missions, so it must ensure that it can respond to the missions the nation gives to it. Otherwise, the Army will undermine its own relevancy. The Army’s transformation vision acknowledges this reality and is moving in the right direction: a truly full-spectrum force.

... and the American Way of War

Underlying many of these challenges to the Army’s relevancy is the perception that the American people are unwilling to tolerate even moderate casualties in the course of military operations. Yet numerous studies and surveys conclusively show that Americans possess the determination to accept perhaps surprisingly high losses in defense of national interests.

Not only has this myth taken hold among political leaders, it has had a chilling effect on military leadership as well. The consequences of this attitude reach deep into the Army itself, fostering a “zero defects” mentality and making force protection the highest priority. America witnessed this phenomenon in the reluctance to employ Task Force Hawk in Operation Allied Force and in the exceptionally cautious approach to peacekeeping in Kosovo. The myth of casualty aversion is blunting the Army’s ability to aggressively carry out the nation’s missions.

This misperception plays into the hands of airpower advocates who preach that technology can buy bloodless wars. They fail to point out the fine print, which explains that the United States will lose any war for which it’s unwilling to sacrifice. This hamstringing U.S. diplomacy and undercuts American credibility. Technology will continue to make great contributions to the survivability of U.S. forces—including ground forces—but it would be irresponsible to expect technology to deliver a sanitized and successful form of warfare. Asymmetric strategies and countermeasures, both low- and high-tech, are widely available to potential adversaries. NATO’s difficulty in hitting targets in Kosovo from the air is only the latest example of airpower’s inability to get the job done on its own. Expectations of immaculate warfare only embolden potential adversaries with the conviction that the United States can be deterred by the specter of even a small number of body bags.

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What is at stake in the larger debate over force structure is the American way of war. Airpower advocates' belief that bombing "strategic" (read: civilian) targets can have the kind of psychological impact that can impose America's will on an adversary is simply misplaced. It is historically inaccurate, morally questionable, and downright dangerous in that it sets American military operations up for failure.

Deploying ground forces to a conflict not only delivers unique and necessary landpower capabilities, it also sends a signal of America's intent and resolve that cannot be achieved with "smart" bombs. Because the Army is "the chain mail fist of American diplomacy,"² ground forces must never be taken off the table of U.S. military options.

Conclusion

The Army must not pin its hopes on a windfall from this QDR. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a new version of the Joint Vision and will release a new version of the National Military Strategy in the months leading up to the start of the QDR. The Hart-Rudman Commission hopes to release the last of its three reports in time for the November election.

These documents may shape the debate, but the most critical factor will be the election of a new administration and Congress. While the new government may come into office energized next January, the QDR's September 2001 deadline will likely prove unreasonably demanding. Without a clear presidential vision and strong, sustained leadership, this QDR is likely to follow in its predecessor's footsteps.

The Army will try to make the case that as the strategically relevant force it deserves a higher level of funding. It will not be enough to extol the very real virtues of the transformation effort. Landpower advocates will have to counter the dangerous assertion that the Army is losing its relevancy. The Army's case is a strong one, and it must back up the reasoning by embracing the full spectrum of operations required of it by the nation. Even in a best-case scenario, all of this is unlikely to translate into a budgetary windfall.

A lack of consensus on strategy and limited budgetary flexibility suggest at most a series of token increases across most major programs. The bottom line is not encouraging. When the dust settles from next year's QDR, the Army may have to reassess its priorities and make some difficult decisions concerning its limited budget.

Endnotes

1. Curt Weldon, "Army Underfunded," *Defense News*, April 24, 2000, p. 28.
2. Gen. Charles C. Krulak, Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps, in George C. Wilson, *This War Really Matters: Inside the Fight for Defense Dollars* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2000), p. 65.

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