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The 2010 QDR and Asia: Messages for the Region

BY MICHAEL A. McDEVITT

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates officially released the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) on February 1, 2010. The QDR is legally required of every new administration, and is intended to outline U.S. defense strategy while also specifically addressing the resource and budgetary implications of that strategy. Historically, QDRs have done a good job in outlining U.S. strategic objectives and providing a clear understanding of U.S. short term (1-4 years) strategic intentions.

This QDR is unique for one very important reason: the Secretary of Defense began “shaping” and publicly signaling its content over a year before it was completed. The intellectual framework of what subsequently became the QDR was made public in a speech by Secretary Gates at the National Defense University in September 2008. These views were more widely publicized in his January 2009 article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled “A Balanced Strategy.”

Gates argued throughout 2009, and the QDR subsequently affirms, that it is important to balance strategy and requirements between current wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and against al-Qaeda and its allies around the world, while preparing for security challenges “on the horizon,” such as preventing and deterring conflict, and preparing to defeat aggression in a wide range of possible contingencies. In Asia, these possible contingencies cover Korea and China-Taiwan.

In fact, Secretary Gates’ basic message of 2009 was that “on the horizon” issues received too much priority, and today’s wars did not receive enough Department of Defense (DoD) focus. This QDR illustrates that Gates has fixed the “imbalance” by insisting that the Pentagon’s requirements and budgetary processes must not ignore the near term and only focus on the future. But, this focus on “the wars we have” should not be interpreted as somehow downplaying conflicts the United States wants to prevent. The QDR does not suggest that deterring conflict in Asia, for example, is a lower priority because of on-going wars. To the contrary, the QDR explains that the notion of balance also means that the United States must be able to cope with problems in more than one region of the world at a time. In Asia that means deterring or preventing state-on-state conflict.

Asia does have a role in today’s conflicts—dealing with al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The QDR calls this the “broader war,” which is apparently the latest attempt to rebrand the war on terrorism. For Asia, the U.S. relationship with Pakistan is now considered of “enduring” importance, as is the generally successful collaboration in dealing with terrorists in Southeast Asia.

U.S. friends and allies in Asia should be reassured that although prevailing in today’s conflicts is central to U.S. strategy, the QDR is also at pains to recognize the central importance of the “...system of alliances, partnerships, and multinational institutions that our country has helped build and sustain for more than sixty years.” The QDR is quite explicit in stating that the U.S. possesses the military capability to “...deter, defend against, and defeat aggression by potentially hostile nation-states. This capability is fundamental to the nation’s ability to protect its interests and provide security in key regions.”

This very explicit endorsement of the importance of U.S. military presence in East Asia is a significant signal to Asia that the U.S. has no intention of withdrawing from Asia in the face of growing Chinese military capability. Over the last 18 months or so, there have been a number of

Michael A. McDevitt, Rear Admiral USN (Ret.), Vice President and Director of Strategic Studies at the Center for Naval Analyses, explains that “[Secretary] Gates argued throughout 2009, and the QDR subsequently affirms, that it is important to balance strategy and requirements between current wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and against al-Qaeda and its allies around the world, while preparing for security challenges ‘on the horizon,’ such as preventing and deterring conflict, and preparing to defeat aggression in a wide range of possible contingencies.”

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commentaries regarding China’s offshore military strategy for dealing with Taiwan or defending itself from attack by the sea. Termed “anti-access” or “area-denial,” the basic idea is for China to have adequate military capability to defeat U.S. military power in East Asia and keep reinforcements at arms length—in other words, to deny the U.S. access to East Asia in the case of conflict.

The QDR addresses the anti-access problem head-on. It makes the point that America’s ability to deter conflict is directly related to its ability to be able to fight both “...limited and large-scale conflicts in environments where anti-access weaponry and tactics are used.” In other words, the DoD recognizes America’s credibility as a force for stability is directly related to its ability to convincingly deal with attempts to deny the U.S. military access.

More specifically, the QDR explicitly requires that U.S. Naval forces continue “...to be capable of robust forward presence and power projection operations, even as they add capabilities and capacity for working with partner navies.” In terms of airpower it says, “Land-based and carrier-based aircraft will need greater average range, flexibility, and multi-mission versatility in order to deter and defeat adversaries that are fielding more potent anti-access capabilities.” These QDR requirements are intended to guide the evolution of the U.S. military, and to this analyst, are clear recognition that the U.S. and China are engaged in a capabilities competition in East Asia. Quite simply, the region should understand that as China’s anti-access capabilities improve, the U.S. has every intention of maintaining its current advantages by staying ahead in the capabilities race.

Among the initiatives the QDR announces for dealing with this emerging problem is U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force collaboration on something called a “joint air-sea battle concept.” One objective of this concept is to defeat “adversaries equipped with sophisticated anti-access and area denial capabilities. The idea is to integrate capabilities in all the domains—air, sea, land, space and cyberspace—to counter growing challenges to U.S. freedom of action.” Again, this should be seen as a reassuring signal to the region that America intends to maintain a viable presence for the long term, and commentaries regarding the eclipse of U.S. power in the region are misguided.

Like previous QDRs, the 2010 version is relatively circumspect in speaking specifically about other countries. It mentions the ongoing realignment of the U.S. posture in Japan and Korea, and the desire to “deepen” the alliance with Australia, “enhance” long standing alliances with Thailand and the Philippines, “deepen” the partnership with Singapore and “...develop new strategic relationships with Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.” India’s importance as a “...net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond” is highlighted, as is America’s growing interest in that region. Surprisingly absent however was any reference to the official INDO-US “New Framework for the Defense Relationship”, which was signed by both defense establishments in 2005. Perhaps this omission was meant to avoid offending Pakistan, and would be understandable given the centrality of Pakistan to success in the wars in Afghanistan and against al-Qaeda. Pakistan’s importance in U.S. security thinking is also addressed in some detail.

Not surprisingly China receives the most ink. The QDR is frank in acknowledging that “China’s growing presence and influence in regional global economic and security affairs is one of the most consequential aspects of the evolving security landscape in the Asia-Pacific region and globally.” It goes on with the now familiar refrain that America welcomes a strong, prosperous and successful China, but decries the “...lack of transparency and nature of China’s military development and decision-making processes.” It repeats the frequently aired concern by Washington about long-term questions regarding China’s intentions and future conduct in Asia.

Finally, it is important to note that this QDR calls for “Crafting a Strategic Approach to Climate and Energy.” While much of the discussion is focused on internal Defense Department processes and objectives, energy security and climate change are also acknowledged as important issues that will shape the future security environment in Asia.

In sum, the QDR message for Asia should be considered a good one for those nations worried that the United States is intent on retreating from the region. The message is clear: the U.S. still embraces its stabilizing role and is intent on ensuring it fields the military capability to be able to do so for the foreseeable future.