



Defense Planning in a Time of Conflict

A Comparative Analysis of the 2001–2014 Quadrennial Defense Reviews, and Implications for the Army

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This report presents a comparative historical analysis of the four Quadrennial Defense Reviews (QDRs) conducted after 1997 (in 2001, 2006, 2010, and 2014) and identifies trends, implications, and recommendations for the Army and U.S. Department of Defense in order to shape the conduct of and improve future reviews.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the trends among the most-recent four Quadrennial Defense Reviews (QDRs)?
- How can the Army and Department of Defense senior leaders and planners improve the organization, process, and outcomes of future defense reviews?



KEY FINDINGS

Among the Key Trends for the Department of Defense:

- The order of release of National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and National Military Strategy reports shows a lack of orderly, top-down strategy development, and this irregular timing may be further complicating an already complicated QDR process.
- Force-planning constructs were adapted over the successive QDRs to better address an increasingly complex portfolio of threats and challenges that required forces and capability development. However, only the 2010 QDR addressed the steady-state requirements of planned or potential smaller-scale contingency operations, while none of the QDRs addressed the potentially large ground force requirements for operations to eliminate weapons of mass destruction.

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- The “Analytic Agenda,” developed between the 2006 and 2010 QDRs, resulted in an agreed-upon set of defense planning scenarios, models, and data that helped to ensure that the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and the services had a common analytical picture during the conduct of a QDR. Use of this process fell off until the recent reinvigoration of Support for Strategic Analysis.

Among the Key Trends for the Army:

- Critiques of the Total Army Analysis process suggest that the techniques and tools for assessing the requirements for other-than-conventional ground force missions and the generating force are underdeveloped. The credibility of Army analyses of other missions is accordingly not yet as high as it is for conventional missions.
- End-strength and active-reserve mix issues were largely unexamined in the QDRs from 2001 to 2014. Our historical review suggests a recurring tendency toward a peacetime requirement for 480,000 or more active Army personnel, yet the Army has recently considered an active end strength of 440,000–450,000, or possibly even 420,000.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Department of Defense and White House should consult with Congress on the current statutorily mandated deadlines for producing the National Security Strategy and QDR reports and consider whether a different schedule would better ensure that each future Defense Strategy Review is preceded or accompanied by a new National Security Strategy.
- The Army should adapt the 2001 QDR’s force-planning construct to address the growing portfolio of demands on the force capable of ensuring homeland defense; deterring aggression and coercion forward in four key regions; conducting two major campaigns of various types; achieving decisive victory (regime change) in one of these campaigns; and sustaining current ongoing, smaller-scale contingency operations (that is, the “1-4-2-1-n” construct).
- The Army should promote and shape Department-wide efforts to reinvigorate the Support for Strategic Analysis process, including the organizational arrangements and processes and common analytic resources that can support the next Defense Strategy Review.
- The Army should review its analytic capabilities and capacity to assess the full range of missions of contemporary concern; identify shortfalls and gaps that impede its ability to conduct equally credible assessments of nonconventional missions and the generating force; and identify doctrinal, organizational, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facility, and policy changes that will improve its analytic ability to address this fuller set of missions.
- The Army should press for fuller consideration of the risk associated with different end strengths and mixes of active- and reserve-component forces for the 2018 Defense Strategy Review, provide additional assessments of the active end strength required to support the defense strategy, and identify the risks accepted at different end strengths.