Congressional testimony

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House Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

The Quadrennial Defense Review: Process, Policy, and Perspectives

I'd like to thank the members of this subcommittee for inviting me to speak with you today.

The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) was originally described by Congress as having the purpose of providing a coherent, big-picture outlook on probable international security trends, along with their logical implications for U.S. defense strategy, military budgets, and force posture.[1] It is widely observed that the QDR process has tended to stray from that original purpose, over the years. The overpowering consideration for some time now has been budget cuts to defense. Unfortunately this trend looks likely to continue. And the temptation has been to let budget cuts drive strategic thinking, rather than the other way around.

I know that members of this subcommittee, along with those at the Department of Defense directly responsible for formulating the coming QDR, must operate under practical constraints which those of us who testify here can only begin to understand. To paraphrase one of America's greatest Secretaries of State, Dean Acheson, defense strategy is not a graduate seminar. Having said that, most of this country's wars have resulted, at least in part, from some failure of strategic conception or strategic signaling to U.S. adversaries beforehand. So there are real-world consequences, in blood and treasure, when we fail to think strategically, or to pursue consistent strategies in the nation's defense. In the time allotted here, I will not attempt to give a detailed, technical assessment of what is after all going to be an incredibly complicated QDR 2014 process. But allow me to make a few broad points for your consideration as that process gets underway.

The QDR is supposed to help outline national defense strategy. A strategy begins by identifying certain vital national interests, goals, or objectives. It then identifies threats to those interests, arising from particular real-world adversaries. Finally, it recommends the development and maintenance of specific policy instruments, including a variety of military capabilities, to meet those threats. It is sometimes said that we live in an age of austerity, so inevitably budgetary constraints will drive the strategy. But resources are always limited, and strategy is always about developing a coherent approach toward specific threats under

[1] H.R. 3230 - National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1997.

conditions of limited resources. So if we simply let declining budgets dictate how we identify threats to our national interests, we're not really engaging in strategy at all.[2]

Strategy is about prioritizing and facing tradeoffs. It's about matching up commitments and capabilities, policy objectives and policy instruments, so that the two are in some kind of reasonable balance. And the truth is that right now there is a wide and growing gap or imbalance between America's declared international security objectives, on the one hand, and its military capabilities on the other.

To be fair, this is a pattern which has repeated itself in different ways and at different times, in what might be called a bipartisan fashion, over the course of more than one administration. Nevertheless, we are speaking here today at a time when the gap between America's overall military capabilities and its existing international commitments is truly disturbing, and is likely to only get worse.

Here are just a couple of concrete examples. The United States has adopted a policy of pivoting or rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific. At the same time, however, we have continued to cut back the number of ships in the Navy. The two opposing directions do not add up. If one of the purposes of the pivot is to reassure our Asian allies and remind China that the United States is in East Asia to stay, then how can we bolster that impression, while at the same time cutting back on our maritime capabilities? China may not be simply an adversary, but it is certainly a strategic competitor. Another example: just a few weeks ago, the Pentagon indicated that it would not deploy the USS *Harry S. Truman* to the Middle East, as scheduled. America's naval presence in the Persian Gulf region has now been reduced from two aircraft carriers, to one. What possible conclusion can the Iranian government, and for that matter our Gulf allies, reach from this announcement, other than that the United States is now weaker in the region, relative to Iran? Our allies, adversaries and competitors will not simply watch what we say, they will watch what we do. And as our ships draw down or come home, they will notice.

The overall trend, which is growing worse, is that we have broad, declared international commitments that are under-resourced militarily. Under such circumstances, fundamentally, only a few basic options exist. Either the country can boost its military capabilities, to match existing commitments, or it can scale back dramatically on existing commitments, to match reduced capabilities.

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[2] For some definitions and discussions of strategy, see Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton University Press, 2006); B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (Praeger, 1954); and Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Harvard University Press, 1987).

There is of course a third option, which is to claim that we will do more with less, while denying that any real tradeoffs exist. I would call this strategic denial. But this is not a true option. We can do more with more. We can do less with less. But when it comes to national defense, we can't actually do more with less.

To give credit to the administration, its 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance began to head in the direction of greater internal coherence, relative to the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review. For example, the 2012 guidance moved away from the traditional two-war standard, by which U.S. forces are prepared to fight two major regional conflicts simultaneously.[3] I happen to believe that being incapable of fighting two such conflicts at the same time is a mistake, because it more or less invites rogue states to think they might succeed with aggressive behavior while the U.S. is preoccupied in some other part of the world. But it must be conceded that *given* dramatic cuts in defense since 2011, there are serious doubts as to whether the U.S. can maintain the traditional two-war standard. In that narrow sense, the 2012 guidance is an improvement, in terms of strategic consistency: it implies less with less, rather than simply trying to be all things to all people.

Assuming we now add on additional defense cuts of some $500 billion over the next decade - which seems increasingly likely to happen, regardless of short-term adjustments around sequestration - then it has to be emphasized that even the downscaled national defense strategy implied in the 2012 guidance will no longer be coherent or sustainable. Perhaps the only good thing about this dire prospect is that it might force a genuine debate and assessment of some of the basic assumptions surrounding U.S. defense strategy.

If the United States implements defense cuts anything like the ones envisioned under sequestration, on top of existing cuts from the 2011 Budget Control Act, then the only way to bring shrinking military capabilities into balance with international commitments will be to cut back dramatically on those commitments. The U.S. would then be headed toward a defense strategy resembling what political scientists call "offshore balancing."[4] Indeed in certain ways we already seem to be headed in that direction. The relative emphasis today on long-range strike capacity, special operations, drone strikes, cyber war, area denial, and light-footed approaches to international security challenges, rather than on heavy ground forces, stability operations, counterinsurgency, or major regional war contingencies, is at least a move in the direction of offshore balancing. Such a strategy has always had a certain appeal in this country, because it appears to promise national security at minimal cost. But it carries certain risks or downsides as well. A strategy of offshore balancing, if that is where we are headed, risks

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[3] Department of Defense, "Sustaining Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," January 2012, p. 4.
[4] Christopher Layne, "The (Almost) Triumph of Offshore Balancing," *The National Interest*, January 2012; Stephen Walt, "A Bandwagon for Offshore Balancing?" *Foreign Policy*, December 2011.

signaling to U.S. adversaries and allies alike that we are not really in the game. Naturally this will reduce America's leverage abroad, diplomatically, economically, and militarily. And it will make it much harder to achieve our stated goals of preventing aggression, succeeding in counterterrorism operations, maintaining open sea-lanes, and preserving a balance of power in Europe and Asia friendly to the United States and to its democratic values.

For many years now, America's overarching and forward strategic presence abroad - including its related bases, its alliance system, and clear U.S. military superiority - have played a crucial role in deterring authoritarian powers, reassuring democratic allies, and upholding a particular international order that for all its current discontents is remarkably prosperous and free by historical standards. If this strategic presence becomes detached or uncertain, there is no reason to expect that the benefits of that particular order for the United States will continue. If we adopt what is in effect a strategy of offshore balancing, whether or not we call it that, then we will have adopted a strategic approach that is at least internally coherent, and in line with current projected defense cuts. But we will have done so by giving up on key commitments and features of America's stabilizing presence overseas going back several decades. And if we give up on that presence, we cannot assume it will be easy or cheap to buy back. It never has been before.

So if you have asked me here to make policy recommendations related to the coming QDR, without regard to the immediate political climate, then the first thing I would say is: we have to stop cutting national defense. Because if we don't, we will soon be left with no honest strategic options other than some form of offshore balancing - and as I have indicated, there are multiple reasons to believe that such a choice could have negative international consequences on a scale we can barely foresee today.

But the second thing I would say is, let's at least not engage in strategic denial. Let's not pretend we can maintain existing commitments while continually cutting military capabilities. Let's have a genuine debate over U.S. defense strategy. And this is where I believe you can play a vital role in relation to the coming QDR. You can help ensure that the QDR 2014 process reflects the original and stated intention of Congress, to produce both a long-term reflection on international security trends and a serious strategy from start to finish which sets clear priorities, identifies real-world adversaries, and faces up to the necessary tradeoffs, rather than denying or glossing over the growing gap between our military capabilities and our international commitments.

Thank you for your time.

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