



The Quadrennial Defense Review and East Asia by Michael McDevitt

In the single-minded focus on terrorism and homeland security in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, scant attention has been paid to the Sept. 30 release of the Bush administration's new defense strategy.

Known as the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) the report is normally the focus of considerable attention and commentary. Before Sept. 11, defense experts around the world showed a great deal of interest in how the Bush administration would address topics such as the "transformation" of the U.S. military, whether this administration would continue to follow a strategy based on two major regional wars, the role of missile defense in U.S. strategy, whether greater strategic focus would be placed on Asia, and the "weight" China might be accorded in future U.S. strategy.

The QDR addresses these issues as well as others. While the QDR is short on the details about specific military programs that defense commentators love so well, it is a very useful in detailing the overarching strategic concepts and world view of the Department of Defense. Analyzing the QDR as it applies to East Asia confirms attention to the rise of China, the importance of allies, a desire for increased access for U.S. forces, the importance in having capable and militarily credible forces forward in the region, and a ringing confirmation of the importance of East Asia as a long term U.S. interest.

The importance of allies and friends is the point of departure for the Bush administration's strategy. The vision of America's role, as spelled out in the QDR, relates global stability and confidence and hence economic prosperity to the network of alliances and friendships maintained by the United States. This will come as no surprise to anyone who has followed the speeches of senior defense officials since the administration was inaugurated in January or, more tellingly, has watched the care the administration has taken in assembling the broadest possible anti-terrorist coalition. Nonetheless, it is significant that the very first of the four goals of U.S. defense strategy is:

"Assuring allies and friends of the United States' steadiness of purpose and its capacity to fulfill its security commitments."

Further, of direct interest to Japan and Korea and, by implication, to the rest of East Asia, the QDR places great importance on forward-deployed U.S. forces. Of particular significance, the QDR indicates that forward forces must be capable of "swiftly defeating an adversary's military and political objectives with only modest reinforcement." This important concept contrasts in important ways with how forces stationed in East Asia have been discussed in the past few years. Of late, much of the discussion surrounding U.S. forces stationed in East

Asia has focused more on what changes, meaning reductions, might result from a more peaceful Korean Peninsula. Although the QDR does not rule this out, its Asia focus is clearly broader than Korea and is more oriented on ensuring on that "combat credible" forces are kept in East Asia to deal with a full range of possible contingencies. Specifically, another of the four strategic goals of the United States is to:

"Deter aggression and coercion by deploying forward the capacity to swiftly defeat attacks and impose severe penalties for aggression on an adversary's military capability and supporting infrastructure."

When the QDR discusses U.S. national interests, Asia receives particular attention in the list of regional areas that are "critical" to the United States. Listed among the enduring national interests of the United States is the requirement to preclude hostile domination of critical areas, "... particularly Europe, Northeast Asia, the East Asian littoral (defined as the region stretching from south of Japan through Australia and into the Bay of Bengal), and the Middle East and Southwest Asia."

This formulation is interesting because it specifically divides East Asia into Northeast Asia (which I take to mean Japan and Korea) and the littoral states between Japan and India. This was done, I believe, to make certain that it was widely understood that the United States had important interests in Asia in addition to its Japanese and South Korean allies. The characterization "East Asian littoral" includes Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, Thailand, and Australia, as well as the South China Sea and key Indonesian international straits.

Choosing to define the littoral as a crucial area - as opposed to saying Southeast Asia, or Indochina, or saying nothing at all - suggests a carefully chosen formulation that geographically includes Taiwan while avoiding a definition that suggests U.S. critical interests include continental Asia. This formulation is implicit recognition of the de facto division of Asia into two "military spheres of influence." China is the dominant military power on the mainland of Asia, while the U.S. and its littoral allies hold sway in what might be termed maritime Asia.

The Bush administration is clearly concerned about the rise of China. Although it does not refer to China by name, the DoD report holds that Asia is "gradually emerging as a region susceptible to large-scale military competition." The report goes on to conclude that maintaining a stable balance in Asia will be a complex task and, clearly implying China, holds that a "military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge." Aside from Japan, no East Asian country other than China fits this profile - and Japan, of course, is an ally not a competitor.

To address this issue and preclude China, or anyone else, from dominating Northeast Asia or the East Asian littoral, the QDR

says U.S. defense strategy will focus on promoting security cooperation with friends and allies in order to create a "favorable balance of military power" to improve deterrence and prevent aggression and coercion. In fact, a principal objective of "security cooperation" (the term that evidently replaces "engagement" as a way to characterize military-to-military contacts between the U.S. and the countries of East Asia) will be to ensure access, interoperability with allies and friends, and intelligence cooperation. This is because there are so few U.S. bases in Asia and the distances are so vast. As a result, the report indicates, the U.S. will place a premium on securing additional access and infrastructure agreements in the region.

Capability-Based Planning

One of the central "tenets" of U.S. defense strategy is the shift to the concept of "capability-based planning." This concept is a needed and sensible corrective to the fixation that the U.S. military has placed on the Korean Peninsula and Iraq as the only two canonical planning scenarios for sizing the U.S. force structure. This is not to say that deterring conflict in Korea will not continue to be a central mission for many of the U.S. forces in East Asia; but it also means more attention will be paid to potential future adversaries and more attention to how those adversaries might fight.

Although the QDR does not name China specifically it indicates that capability-based planning, "means identifying capabilities need[ed] to deter and defeat adversaries who will rely on surprise, deception, and asymmetric warfare." Given that these operational concepts are among the central tenets of China's military doctrine, the capability-based planning approach as applied to Asia almost certainly will have China in mind - particularly as long as a Chinese attack on Taiwan cannot be ruled out.

Clearly the authors of the QDR are concerned about the possibility that China, sometime in the future, could deny U.S. access to its allies, friends, and interests in East Asia. This means that a continued strong alliance with Japan will be essential if the U.S. is to preserve a forward military capability in East Asia that "can swiftly defeat an adversary with only modest reinforcement" while sustaining a "favorable balance of military power" in East Asia.

"Regionally Tailored" Forces in East Asia

The QDR presents the concept that forward forces should be "regionally tailored" to the unique geography and mission requirements of each region. In practical terms, in East Asia this guidance translates into sustaining deterrence in Korea while ensuring the existing current continental-maritime military balance remains in balance. In other words, ensuring that a continentally dominant China does not develop, unchecked, the ability to project its power off the continent into what the QDR terms Northeast Asia and littoral Asia. Given the fact that China needs to cross open-ocean to bring its formidable army to bear against Japan, or other allies and friends, including especially Taiwan, U.S. forces must be able to trump any attempts to do so.

In my judgment, this translates into a call for a combined U.S. and allied military capability that is able to: (1) deter conflict in

Korea, (2) defeat China's short- and medium-range ballistic missile force, currently the only credible way that China has to project power, (3) deal with China's large submarine force, (4) maintain air superiority over the maritime approaches to Japan and Taiwan, and (5) strengthen deterrence across the Taiwan Strait by being able to hold at risk targets of importance in China. While there are other likely missions - such as peacekeeping, non-combatant evacuations, and disaster relief - these are the most operationally demanding.

Overlaying this conceptual template with specifics listed in the QDR helps put the specifics called for in the QDR in context. The QDR specifically calls for an increase in aircraft carrier presence in the region (this improves regional access, air defense, and offensive strike operations), increased contingency stationing for the U.S. Air Force (the same), and the possibility that three or four more surface combatants (good for antisubmarine warfare, air defense, cruise missile strikes, and eventually missile defense), and a yet to be converted Trident-class SSGN (with capability for "stealthy" cruise missile strikes), could be forward stationed in East Asia.

The QDR is not specific regarding where these additional forces might be stationed, but Japan and Guam, and perhaps Singapore, are the most likely possibilities. Along with the continued development of sea- and land-based missile defense systems to protect against short- and medium-range tactical ballistic missiles, the specific changes addressed in the QDR are directly relevant to either a Korean or Taiwanese contingency while also contributing to the overall goal of maintaining a "favorable balance of military power in East Asia."

Does This Matter Any More after Sept. 11?

Some defense experts suggest that it is not worth the effort to read the QDR since much of it was written before the Sept. 11 attacks. While it is patently true that the war on terrorism has taken center stage in U.S. defense thinking, that does not mean that other geo-strategic realities and concerns have been somehow swept away. The "old" concerns remain - Korea, China still reserves the right to use force against Taiwan, China's economic growth continues to fuel an across the board military modernization - while new worries related to terrorism and the indirect effect of the war on terrorism are added to the list of security concerns in Asia. It is hard to see how a strategy fundamentally different from the one outlined in the QDR would better address this dangerous brew.

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