

Marines Plan To Give Readiness High Priority In QDR

By: Richard Mullins - January 30, 2013

The general representing the U.S. Marines in the nation's next Quadrennial Defense Review says he will give priority to readiness when budgeting choices must be made.

Maj. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, speaking at a recent Stimson Center event, emphasized that he puts the highest priority on readiness, over acquisition and end strength. He also advocates for forward presence, the only way to get truly immediate response, he says. It also buys time and decision space and its deterrent value is underestimated, he says.

This will be the fifth QDR, but it is the first time one has been conducted in a «time of austerity».

The last QDR, in 2010, did not change the status quo, McKenzie says, because the defense secretary chose not to use it as a major input to policy making.

As with other government activities, QDR staff are holding off a bit until other major budget events unfold in March: the sequester trigger date at the beginning of the month, and the expiration of the 2013 continuing resolution at the end of the month. This does not change the February 2014 due date, McKenzie says.

As the Marines' representative, McKenzie says the major questions are: can the new defense strategy, released last year, be executed under the current budget outlook; how much forward presence, permanent or rotating, is needed; and questions of force sizing and force structure.

Commenting on McKenzie's remarks, Maren Leed of the Center for Strategic and International Studies raised questions about the new defense strategy. While she does not think it will be overturned, she says some have argued that the «Pacific Pivot» relies too much on the Defense Department. Further, the required programmatics are unaffordable and the strategy assumes no basic or sudden change to the global noise level of conflicts, both real and potential. And then there are what Leed calls «the insatiables»: the expensive and growing demand for cyberwarfare, special operations, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capability.

The Cato Institute's Benjamin Friedman, who calls himself a severe critic of the QDR as currently practiced, argued for an end to the long-running traditional «service share,» where the services' share of spending remains constant through good budget times and bad. The set share hurts innovation, Friedman says, by stifling competition.