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QDwhatever

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With the release of the State Department's first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review^[3] (QDDR) Wednesday, it is time to renew my^[4] war^[5] on quadrennial strategy documents.



Since the mid-1990s, Congress has required the Defense Department to review its strategy and force structure every four years, producing a Quadrennial Defense Review^[6]. Because Washington loves to copy bad Pentagon practices, the concept has proliferated to the Departments of Homeland Security^[7] and State^[8].

I am not going to much engage QDDR's substance here. I will just say that two errors underlie it. The first is that the U.S. State Department exists to govern the world—providing sewage systems, women's rights, and the rule of law around the world, to paraphrase the executive summary—rather than to relate to it. The second is that doing so will make everyone like the United States and therefore serves American interests. The “smart power” that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton brags of bringing to Foggy Bottom is the primacy strategy^[9] we have had for decades now, only muddled by consultant speak (the chief of mission is a CEO; we are “investing in innovation” and meeting “benchmarks”) and the pretension that there exists no

conflict between our interests and those of our client states, our interests and our values, or among the U.S. government agencies that State wants to coordinate. All is cooperative, harmonious.

In her introduction to the QDDR, Secretary Clinton writes that she learned while serving on the Senate Armed Services Committee that the QDR forces the Department of Defense to make “hard decisions about priorities, and it made sure those priorities were reflected in the budget.” That is aspiration, not reality. No one paying attention believes that the QDR works like that.

Here is how it has actually gone. As the Pentagon gears up for the next QDR iteration, each service forms a QDR office to fend off unwanted recommendations. After considerable debate in the Pentagon and think tanks, countless wasted hours for unlucky majors, and scattered press coverage, we get 100 plus pages of tripe that offends no important element of the military. The bulk of each document consists of unsubstantiated claims about great historical shifts underway, threat inflation, and unprioritized lists of goals that military force might serve. The world is getting more uncertain. Threats are complex. States are becoming less important relative to something. We have to plan for uncertainty and try to stabilize the world. So let's do what we're doing with more or less the force we have.

The QDR thus avoids the function Secretary Clinton claims for it. It justifies the status quo. It forces no hard decisions, causes the cancellation of no program, and leaves little, if any, imprint on the budget. It has never been strategic. It avoids choice rather than providing a basis for it.

So why do we persist in the exercise and export it to other agencies? I say it's because we have the wrong mental model of policy-making. We want government policies to be made by careful studies that reveal the national interest. We want policy to be like science. Smart people get together, figure out the wisest course, and marshal their bureaucracies to the new objectives. The trouble with this view is that government is political [10]; it is about competing interests or ideologies trying to impose their preferences on each other. Public plans [11] or strategies grow from that struggle, tending to reflect policy realities rather than causing them.

Strategy documents are not altogether useless. Like speeches, they can advance the goals of their authors in public and manage bureaucracy. The QDDR, for example, advocates several minor reorganization proposals. But we should not confuse the production of such documents with the real business of governing: legislating, budgeting, and executing policy.

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