

2-star QDR rep touts deterrence, readiness

By: Gina Harkins – January 23, 2013

A Marine general reaffirmed the Corps' commitment to readiness as a top priority, even as the service faces a force-shaping drawdown and fiscal uncertainty.

The Marine Corps embraces the pivot from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region, said Maj. Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, who was tasked with representing the service in the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review, a congressionally mandated assessment of Defense Department strategies and priorities for a four-year period. He met with a panel of policy experts in Washington on Tuesday to discuss the Marine Corps' plans for the 2014 QDR.

That QDR normally would have started by now, but McKenzie said this one will get started after looming issues, including the new March sequestration deadline and a decision on the debt ceiling, are dealt with so military planners will have a frame of reference.

The policy experts on the panel predicted an environment in which the military branches will compete for scarce resources in fiscally austere times. But McKenzie said the Corps remains the force that can respond quickly in times of combat and humanitarian assistance.

“My service is a forward-deployed, permanently stationed or rotationally based force,” he said. “I think we need to look very hard at the value of conventional deterrence ... for forces that are deployed and ready to respond in short notice.”

He said that strategy of having Marines ready to react in regions around the world offers reassurance to allies, deters foes and gives U.S. leaders the option of engaging quickly when needed. And in regard to the Asia-Pacific region, McKenzie said looking to the past will be the most affordable way to deal with it in the future.

“You have significant Marine forces that are deployed to the Western Pacific, both stationed there and rotating through,” he said. “I think that in that case, the Marine Corps is uniquely well-positioned to help with that.”

That's because the hubs from which the Corps plans to operate — Okinawa, Japan; Guam; Darwin, Australia; and Hawaii — are bought and paid for, he said.

The general said it's likely the final QDR will be delayed, due to the deadline on sequestration being moved to March. He said the impact the QDR will have on decision-making at the Pentagon will be largely based on the new defense secretary's personality and how carefully he uses it as a blueprint. President Obama recently nominated Chuck Hagel, a former Republican senator from Nebraska, for the job. He is expected to replace outgoing Defense Secretary Leon Panetta.

The general faced sharp questioning from panelists Maren Leed, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow at the CATO

Institute, on some aspects of the Marine Corps' plans. Friedman challenged the need to use Expeditionary Strike Groups that operate independently of the Navy. But McKenzie, a two-time commander of a Marine Expeditionary Unit, explained they can be useful if aircraft carriers aren't in the region to help.

McKenzie cited the start of the 2011 military intervention in Libya as a time there were no aircraft carriers in the region and an Expeditionary Strike Group was used. There are cases when a smaller deck is going to be more useful, he said, and Operation Odyssey Dawn was one of those times.

"I would throw that out as an excellent example of what happens when you do have a MEU and an ESG sitting off the coast," he said. "And ... what happens when you don't have a MEU, as in September ... in Libya — same country."