



Hagel could use QDR to reshape Pentagon

Kate Brannen January 22, 2013

If Chuck Hagel is confirmed as Defense secretary, he'll have a tool immediately available to shake things up at the Pentagon: the Quadrennial Defense Review.

The strategic review, which the Pentagon is required by Congress to conduct every four years, will be ramping up soon after the Senate considers Hagel's nomination. The Senate Armed Services Committee is set to begin hearings on Jan. 31, and the full Senate would act later.

"Right after confirmation, he's going to have the opportunity to have an instrument to use to shape the department," Maj. Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, the Marine Corps QDR representative, said Tuesday at Washington's Stimson Center.

But whether Hagel chooses the QDR as a vehicle for change, or the powerful inertia of Pentagon bureaucracy allows him to use it, is another question.

"Perhaps having spent too much of my life in the Pentagon bureaucracy or closely associated with it, I'm suspect of the ability of a single individual, even if he is the secretary of defense, to corral the vast bureaucracy that exists in that building," said Maren Leed, a former Pentagon official and aide to the Senate Armed Services Committee who now works at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"While I think he might be able to effect some change, given that almost everybody advising him has put a lot of time and energy into getting where we are, it's unlikely that people are going to be coming in with dramatic new approaches for his consideration," she said. "It's going to be tough for him to really shake things up in an extreme fashion."

Hagel has said he would like to see a major strategy review with the Defense Department.

"I don't think that our military has really looked at themselves strategically, critically in a long, long time. Every agency needs to do that," he told the Financial Times in August 2011.

While the upcoming QDR could provide Hagel this opportunity, military and civilian experts agree the past four QDRs have not lived up to their hype and, more often than not, do not change how the Pentagon operates.

The 2010 QDR, which former Defense Secretary Robert Gates oversaw, was for many a "status quo" review, largely because he decided not to use it as his primary decision-making tool, McKenzie said.

The CATO Institute's Ben Friedman said too often the QDR is used as a marketing tool, or justification for budget choices already made, rather than a strategy document that drives future choices.

But even he admits this QDR has the potential to be more consequential, partly because a new Defense secretary will be taking over, but also because fiscal pressures are forcing the Pentagon to finally make some difficult choices.

Budget cuts could force strategic change at the Pentagon. But it's unclear whether the QDR will be used as the vehicle for that, Friedman said, also speaking at the Stimson Center.

He agreed the value of the QDR depends on whether the Defense secretary decides it's the process he wants to use to drive change.

While the biggest factors shaping the QDR will be the new personality at the top and pending budget cuts, there's also the new defense strategy, unveiled a year ago, which also sets the stage for whatever strategic choices the QDR tackles.

That strategy officially introduced the "pivot," or rebalance of resources to the Asia-Pacific region while maintaining influence in the Middle East.

It also put in writing the Obama administration's aversion to large-scale, long-term ground wars, like Iraq or Afghanistan.

It would be difficult for Hagel to make major changes to the strategy, partly because the refocus on Asia is a priority of the White House and the State Department and not just a Pentagon initiative, Leed said. Plus, "almost everybody involved in the development of the strategy is sticking around in one form or another. That mitigates most major shifts in my experience."

Normally planning for the QDR would have begun by now, but the Pentagon is waiting until March, when Congress faces deadlines on sequestration and the continuing spending resolution, before it ramps up QDR planning, McKenzie said.

While the start date is being pushed back, he said he did not believe the February 2014 deadline for completing the review would change.

This means the QDR would encompass a new Defense secretary's first year.

"The new secretary is going to come in with ideas and the QDR is going to respond to the leadership he's going to bring to the task," McKenzie said.