



Budget Uncertainty Trumps Quadrennial Defense Review

By: Sandra I. Erwin – January 22nd, 2013

The Pentagon bureaucracy, under normal circumstances, by now would be fully mobilized in preparation for a congressionally mandated study that the Defense Department must conduct every four years.

The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, the fifth such study since Congress first directed it in 1997, must forecast what the military will be doing over the next 20 years and what size force would be needed to carry out those missions.

But with the Pentagon paralyzed by a budget impasse, the lack of a full-year appropriation for 2013 and the prospect of across-the-board spending cuts that could take effect March 1, the QDR is stuck in pause. A leadership change, as Defense Secretary Leon Panetta prepares to depart, casts additional uncertainty into how the Pentagon will tackle the QDR.

As a result, analysts predict, the 2014 review is likely to be more of an administrative exercise than a true roadmap to the future.

It remains to be seen whether the QDR this year is going to be consequential, said Maj. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, the Marine Corps' representative to the quadrennial defense review.

"It could be, if the new secretary of defense uses it to shape the department," he said Jan. 22 at a Stimson Center panel discussion in Washington, D.C.

McKenzie said the work on the 2014 review has not even started. The "terms of reference," which are the basic guidelines for any study, have not been released yet.

The review "will slide a little bit," he said. "We'll wait until March and see what happens with sequestration, the debt ceiling and the continuing resolution." The QDR work would "typically have started by now."

The assumption is that the QDR will be built on the strategic guidance that President Obama unveiled in January 2012 and the May 2010 National Security Strategy. But the arrival of a new defense secretary — Obama's choice Chuck Hagel has not yet been confirmed by the Senate — could "throw everything up in the air," said McKenzie. "He's going to come in and have an opportunity to reshape the department."

Budget uncertainty aside, McKenzie acknowledged that the QDR in none of its four previous iterations achieved Congress' intended goal of providing a long-term forecast. It has always had a much shorter horizon, McKenzie said. And Congress has allowed the Pentagon to get away with it, he noted.

The most recent review in 2010 was essentially a reaffirmation of the status quo, he said. "The secretary did not use it as a primary venue for decision making."

McKenzie said he hopes the coming review takes on substantive questions such as how much "forward presence" around the world the military should provide and how much defense the nation really needs.

"It all boils down to money and force sizing," said McKenzie. "What tradeoffs do we have to make between forward and home-based forces?" he asked. "These are good questions for the QDR to address."

Analysts said they are pessimistic that the coming review will shake things up in any substantial way.

Even a new defense secretary might not be enough to upend the status quo, said Maren Leed, senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"I am suspect of the ability of a single individual to corral the vast bureaucracy that exists in that building," she said. Most of the senior leadership who will be working under him is vested in the current system, she said. "Almost everyone advising him has put time and energy into getting to where we are. It is unlikely that they will be coming in with dramatic new approaches for his consideration."

Since its early days, the QDR has been derided for being more of a wish list than a strategy, noted Benjamin Friedman, research fellow at the Cato Institute. It's how the services justify their budgets, he said. "The QDRs started off bad and got worse," said Friedman. "They are unhinged from budgets. Guilty of being an output of the politics ... and a guide that justifies existing choices."

These reviews were meant to realize a "technocratic ideal" that the national interest would drive Pentagon policy, said Friedman. With budget cuts on the horizon, maybe this time around, he said, the QDR could actually serve a useful role as a guide for how the Pentagon would live with less money.