Tradeoffs in Defense Strategic Planning:
Lessons from the U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review
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Abstract: Defense ministries conduct strategic planning in a variety of ways. In this article I outline tradeoffs in the design of strategic planning processes, and consider the implications of these tradeoffs for choices about the conduct of defense planning in different circumstances. Whereas an inclusive and transparent planning process is well-suited to building internal and external buy-in for a defense strategy, a more exclusive and opaque process is more likely to generate a defense strategy that departs from the status quo and speaks candidly about important challenges. The design of a defense planning process should therefore be informed by key features of its context, such as whether the international security environment is stable or in flux and whether the defense ministry enjoys or lacks strong political support. I base the article's findings on an in-depth analysis of the U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review, which served for nearly two decades as the major strategy process of the U.S. Department of Defense. This analysis draws on interviews I conducted of 23 defense officials and experts, as well as primary and secondary sources. More generally, my findings suggest that defense studies would benefit from greater attention to the links between planning processes and decision making.

Introduction

While few scholars or practitioners question the importance of strategic planning for defense institutions, assessments of the value of particular defense strategy processes can be remarkably varied. Consider the U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), which represented from 1997 to 2014 the principal effort by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) to formulate an overarching defense strategy. (A 2016 U.S. law changed the QDR's name to the National Defense Strategy and altered some of the review's requirements.) Many defense experts and practitioners have seen major shortcomings in the QDR, but many have also considered it to have been quite valuable in certain ways.

On the one hand, much of the U.S. defense community has considered the QDR to have been ineffective as a mechanism for formulating defense strategy or driving defense innovation. Michèle Flournoy, who served as under secretary of defense for policy, conveyed this view when she testified to the U.S. Congress in 2015 that "DoD's strategy development process is broken" (U.S. Senate 2015). Flournoy added: "Although the need for a robust, rigorous and regular strategic planning process within the [Defense] Department remains valid, the QDR routinely falls short of this aspiration" (U.S. Senate 2015). Kathleen Hicks, who directed the 2010 QDR, commented along similar lines in an interview conducted for this research: "QDRs are often much more work than what you get out of them" (15 October 2013). More pointedly, Jim Thomas, who served as one of the leaders of the 2006 QDR, has said, "I can't think of a worse way of making good strategy" (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2013). Long-time defense analyst Anthony Cordesman has even quipped, "If God really hates you, you may end up working on a Quadrennial Defense Review" (Cordesman 2009). These and other critics of the QDR observe, in particular, that the review tended to result in lowest-common-denominator restatements of existing U.S. defense policy, rather than driving important changes to U.S. force planning or the allocation of defense resources (Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel 2010; Center for Strategic and International Studies 2013; Gunzinger 2013).

On the other hand, many defense experts and practitioners have argued that the QDR served a useful role by fostering strategic thinking among DoD leaders, helping the secretary of defense lead the department, aiding the formation of consensus within DoD, socializing ideas among department personnel, explaining U.S. defense policy to foreign militaries, providing a clear rationale for defense budget proposals, or aiding legislative oversight of defense matters.

For instance, in interviews conducted for this research, individuals knowledgeable about the QDR made the following statements:

- "By putting strategic planning in the inbox of decision-makers, the QDR forces them to think about strategic questions" (DoD official, April 2013).

- "Every secretary [of defense] wants to get his arms around the department. [The QDR] is the best way to do it" (David Ochmanek, 7 September 2013).

- "[The QDR is] a vehicle to get everyone's big picture thinking on the same page" (DoD official, June 2013).

- "The [QDR] report has an impact on discourse in DOD. People take cues from it" (former DoD official, June 2013).

- "People [in Congress] and in the Pentagon treat the QDR as an opportunity to validate their preferences on force structure and the budget" (congressional official, May 2013).

- "[The QDR] is a tool for extracting data from the Pentagon" (former DoD official, February 2013).

It is puzzling that the same strategic review process could generate such a range of perceptions. One of my goals in this article is to explain why defense officials and experts can have widely varying views of the same defense strategy process, and, in particular, why the same process can be viewed very favorably in some respects and very unfavorably in others. The answer, I argue, is rooted in the multiple functions that strategy processes can serve, the impossibility of a single process serving all of these functions well, and differences among officials and experts in the emphasis they place on these different functions.

Put another way, the design of a strategy process involves choices that can enable the process to be valuable in some respects and less useful in other respects. The heart of this article outlines three key design choices – regarding the inclusivity, transparency, and schedule of a review – and explains their typical effects. First, making a strategic review more inclusive boosts the likelihood that the review will be accepted and implemented by the bureaucracy, but decreases the likelihood that it will depart sharply from the status quo. Second, making a review more transparent increases the likelihood that it will generate buy-in among external actors – such as lawmakers and foreign partners – but reduces the likelihood that it will discuss security threats, institutional weaknesses, or other sensitive matters frankly. Third, mandating that a

review be conducted periodically according to a fixed calendar ensures that senior officials will devote some time to strategic questions, but prevents officials from scheduling strategic planning based on their decision making needs.

Given these tradeoffs, policymakers or analysts may form quite different judgments about the value of a strategy process depending on what potential outcome they focus on or value most. Neither enthusiastic supporters nor harsh critics of a given strategy process are necessarily off-base; they are just seeing the process from different perspectives.

Greater recognition of these trade-offs can also help to inform sound choices by policy makers about how to develop defense strategy in particular contexts. For example, major strategic innovation may be paramount during times of sudden and dramatic change in the international environment, necessitating a nimble and relatively closed strategy process. On the other hand, buy-in – facilitated by inclusiveness and transparency – may be more important during times when the context for defense strategy is rather stable.

These trade-offs, moreover, are not limited to U.S. defense policy making. Indeed, they are inherent in efforts by any sizable institution to establish policies or plans for its future behavior. Outside the United States, some countries regularly conduct major defense reviews akin to the QDR, while others employ markedly different defense planning processes (Cornish and Dorman 2010; Gray 2010; De Spiegeleire 2011; Håkenstad and Knus 2012). These processes also involve design choices regarding their inclusivity, transparency, and schedule. My goal in this article is to use an in-depth analysis of the QDR to generate conclusions about the tradeoffs associated with these choices that apply to all countries that conduct defense planning.

In what follows, I explain how I conceive of defense planning, review existing knowledge about the benefits and limitations of different strategic planning approaches, present a detailed analysis of the QDR, and identify lessons based on this analysis for the development and study of defense policy. The core of my analysis explains how the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the QDR reflect certain choices about how the QDR is carried out. I show that the QDR has failed to satisfy everyone in part because it has been expected to do many things at the same time, from developing new strategic doctrine to explaining U.S. defense goals to external constituencies. Through choices regarding the QDR's inclusivity, transparency, and schedule, policy makers have enabled QDRs to be better-suited to some of these functions than others. More generally, these findings add to knowledge of defense planning by enhancing

understanding of the links between strategic planning processes and planning outcomes, which have been underexamined not only in the defense planning literature, but also in the broader public administration and management literature on strategic planning (Poister, Pitts, and Edwards 2010).

What we know from prior research

For the purpose of this article, I follow the lead of some other scholars in conceiving of defense planning broadly, rather than associating it only with the development of military plans. For instance, Colin Gray defines defense planning as "preparations for the defense of a polity in the future (near-, medium-, and far-term)" (Gray 2014, 4). In another broad definition, Magnus Håkenstad and Kristian Knus-Larsen define long-range defense planning as "a process by which a given state arrives at political decisions regarding the future development of the structure, organization and capabilities of their armed forces" (Håkenstad and Knus 2012, 12).

Seen this way, defense planning is narrower than a government's effort to develop grand strategy – which encompasses military and non-military tools of national power – but broader than operational military planning. In other words, it involves the development and review of options concerning defense strategy, military force structure, and other defense policies and programs that extend beyond operational and near-term considerations. The QDR served as the principal tool with which DoD sought to conduct this type of high-level strategic planning for a period of nearly two decades, and the process that produces the National Defense Strategy now plays this role in DoD.

This conception of defense planning is consistent with some definitions of strategic planning in other contexts. For instance, leading public administration scholars define strategic planning as a "deliberative, disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does, and why" (Bryson, Edwards, and Van Slyke 2018). Based on this definition, the development of a grand strategy or an overall defense strategy represents a form of strategic planning, but operational military planning does not.

Public administration and management scholars have also assessed the value of strategic planning for public and private sector organizations, and considered the merits of different approaches to the conduct of strategic planning. On the whole, studies have found that government agencies and private firms benefit from both structured and unstructured strategic

planning activities (Brews and Purohit 2007; Poister, Pitts, and Edwards 2010; Bryson 2011; Elbanna, Andrews, and Pollanen 2016). At the same time, previous research suggests that there should not be a "one size fits all" approach to strategy development, as strategy development needs vary considerably across different types of organizations and different circumstances. For many businesses that operate in rapidly changing market conditions and have relatively nimble workforces, effective strategy development can center mainly on informal and flexible processes. Indeed, highly structured strategic planning has been out of fashion in much of the business world for the past few decades based in large part on a belief that formal planning activities are not conducive to innovation and adaptability (Mintzberg 1994; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel 2009; Popescu 2017).

Consistent with these broader patterns, strategic and security studies scholars have also shown that national security and defense strategies need not be centered on formal plans. While some official planning documents have certainly been important in guiding government and military decision makers, security and defense strategies have often emerged rather organically or become manifest only through the statements or behavioral patterns of policymakers and other officials (Goldgeier 1998; Dueck 2008; Drezner 2009; Mahnken 2012; Brands 2014, 2018; Dueck 2015; Edelstein and Krebs 2015; Krebs 2015; Goldgeier and Suri 2016; Jensen 2016; Becker and Malesky 2017; Christiansson 2017; Popescu 2018; Silove 2016, 2018).

Nevertheless, structured strategic planning processes can clearly benefit many public sector organizations. These benefits can be particularly substantial for government institutions that are large or complex, have numerous stakeholders, rely heavily on collaboration with external partners, or rely heavily on long-term capital investments (Wilson 1989; Berry 1994; Brews and Purohit 2007; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel 2009; Bryson 2011; Moynihan and Hawes 2012; Tama 2015, 2018). Several of these characteristics – large size, complexity, many stakeholders, heavy reliance on collaboration, and heavy reliance on capital investments – clearly characterize most defense ministries, suggesting that structured strategy development processes should be particularly valuable for them. Indeed, structured strategic planning largely originated in military institutions (Freedman 2013, 2017).

Yet defense ministries do not all conduct defense planning in the same way. Just within North America and Western Europe, there exists an array of approaches to the development of defense strategy. For instance, in recent years Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands employed

well-established, formal structures to prepare long-term defense strategy documents, whereas Denmark and the United Kingdom employed more ad hoc approaches (Håkenstad and Knus 2012). Countries also vary in terms of whether their development of defense strategic guidance occurs according to a preset calendar – i.e. every four years – or whenever the political leadership sees a need for it (Håkenstad and Knus 2012). Such differences suggest the need for analyses of the tradeoffs involved in different defense planning processes. In what follows, I take a step toward greater understanding of such tradeoffs by examining how the QDR's design influenced the review's perceived strengths and weaknesses.

The U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review

The QDR dates back to 1996, when the U.S. Congress enacted a law requiring the secretary of defense to conduct every four years a comprehensive examination of defense strategy, force structure, modernization plans, and other defense programs and policies (U.S. Congress 1996; Tama 2017). The law also required the secretary of defense to submit an unclassified report on the results of the review to Congress, among other specific requirements.

Since the 2014 QDR, Congress has twice enacted new legislation that changed some of the review's requirements (U.S. Congress 2014, 2016). The most recent such law, enacted in December 2016, renamed the report resulting from the review the National Defense Strategy. This new law also requires the report to be classified, requires the separate issuance of an unclassified summary of the strategy, and requires DoD to assess the strategy's implementation and whether the strategy requires revision during each year in which a new strategy is not being issued (U.S. Congress 2016).

DoD completed five QDRs under the old legislative requirements – in 1997, 2001, 2006, 2010, and 2014 – and issued the first National Defense Strategy under the new requirements in January 2018. My analysis is based on the QDRs that were completed under the old requirements, but I also consider the significance of the recent legislative changes below.

My analysis builds on an ample preexisting set of publications on the QDR by scholars and scholar-practitioners (Snodgrass 2000; Davis 2002; Donnelly 2005; Gordon 2005; Henry 2005; Fitzsimmons 2006; Flournoy 2006; Davis 2007; O'Hanlon 2007; Cordesman 2009; Spring and Eaglen 2009; Ucko 2009; Daggett 2010; Hicks and Brannen 2010; Sharp 2010; Center for Strategic and International Studies 2013; Gunzinger 2013; Chiu 2014; Brimley and Schulman

2016; Karlin 2017; Wormuth 2018). I add to this literature by examining the tradeoffs involved in key design choices concerning how the review was carried out.

My analysis is based on a review of QDR documents, other primary and secondary sources related to the QDR, and interviews I conducted of 23 U.S. defense officials and experts. I selected people to interview who had possessed governmental responsibilities closely connected to the QDR or had demonstrated substantial expertise about the QDR through publications. I started by requesting interviews with officials who had been heavily involved in the 2010 QDR – the most recent review when I began this research in 2011 – including Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) officials who had played central roles in overseeing or coordinating the review. Since many of these officials had served in OSD during prior QDRs too, I asked them questions about previous QDRs as well as about the 2010 QDR. I also asked these officials for the names of other individuals who had played important roles in previous QDRs, and then sought interviews with those former officials. In addition, I sought interviews with individuals who had coordinated defense policy in the White House during one or more of the QDRs, served in key defense policy oversight roles as congressional staff during one or more QDRs, authored reports by the Congressional Research Service or U.S. Government Accountability Office about one or more QDRs, or published articles or think tank reports that demonstrated substantial expertise about the QDR. Most of the people in the last of these categories also possessed first-hand experience with one or more of the QDRs as a result of prior service in DoD. Out of 34 people that I contacted, 23 agreed to be interviewed.

I sought interviews with this cross-section of officials and experts in order to ensure that the interview subjects represented a range of professional responsibilities and that any biases they might possess would likely vary. The interview subjects spanned individuals with stronger and weaker stakes in the perceived outcomes of the QDR (for instance, OSD officials who coordinated a QDR might be more likely than others to want observers to see the review as innovative or impactful). In addition, most of the people I interviewed had been deeply involved in defense policy or defense policy debates for well over a decade, giving them insights that were based on several iterations of the review, rather than on just one iteration of it. Moreover, in my interviews, I asked individuals to provide their assessments based on all QDRs about which they had direct experience or substantial knowledge. To encourage candid responses, I gave each

interview subject the option of conducting the interview on the record or on a not-for-attribution basis.

Nevertheless, I recognize that interview subjects may sometimes provide – wittingly or unwittingly – incomplete or inaccurate information. To guard against the possibility of such information leading me to reach faulty conclusions, none of this article's conclusions are based solely on the comments of a single individual. Instead, they are based on the totality of the interviews and on the various written documents I examined, including QDR reports, other government documents, and secondary sources. These written sources provided useful triangulation on the information from interview responses that should increase confidence in the validity of my conclusions.

The review's inclusiveness

While the process used to conduct the QDR varied somewhat from one iteration to the next, DoD typically carried it out in a structured and inclusive manner (Snodgrass 2000; Gordon 2005; Center for Strategic and International Studies 2013; Tama 2016). Each QDR was led by civilian strategy and policy officials in OSD. These officials coordinated QDR working groups composed of representatives from various components of DoD, including the military services and the military's joint (or inter-service) staff. The final product of each QDR was a report issued by the secretary of defense that described U.S. defense strategy and force structure plans in broad terms.

Perceptions of the QDR's outcome were heavily influenced by the review's inclusive design, particularly the participation in the review of key stakeholders from different parts of DoD. Review participants and defense experts maintain that this inclusiveness facilitated the reaching of consensus among department stakeholders about important issues, enabled DoD leaders to gain bureaucratic buy-in for some of their priorities, and aided the socialization of review ideas among DoD personnel. At the same time, the review's inclusiveness led the review typically to result only in incremental changes to defense strategy and marginal changes to the allocation of resources among defense programs. While inclusiveness can be beneficial in bringing into consideration the ideas of a greater number of people, during the QDR it was usually embodied in bureaucratized processes that made it less likely that the resulting report would deviate substantially from the status quo.

In 1961 – more than three decades before DoD began conducting the QDR – Samuel Huntington noted:

> "Strategic programs, like other major policies, are not the product of expert planners, who rationally determine the actions necessary to achieve desired goals. They are the result of controversy, negotiation, and bargaining among officials and groups with different interests and perspectives…. Some measure of departmental consensus… is essential to any policy" (Huntington 1961, 146, 168).

Although small groups of defense strategists could surely have formulated more innovative strategies than the strategies that were expressed in the QDR reports, less inclusive processes would probably have diminished the extent to which the military services and other parts of the defense bureaucracy became invested in the strategies. Indeed, when DoD leaders have attempted to formulate strategy in a more ad hoc manner, they have encountered a backlash from the bureaucracy that has rendered their efforts ineffective. For instance, in 2001, Donald Rumsfeld sought to circumvent the QDR process by tapping an informal set of advisors with the development of strategic ideas that would advance his defense transformation agenda. This approach backfired, as it led uniformed military officers and civilian career officials to resist his agenda strongly (Came and Campbell 2010). More generally, Barry Watts, former director of program analysis and evaluation at DoD, has written: "To paraphrase Clausewitz, military institutions, like their corporate counterparts, are capable of mounting resistance to unwelcome strategic decisions that is inconceivable unless one has experienced it" (Watts 2012, 61). Put another way, former DoD strategist Jim Thomas observed that DoD officials are habituated to the institution operating as "a consensual organization" (interview, 21 May 2013).

Given these characteristics of DoD – which are shared by most bureaucratic organizations – the QDR served importantly as a means of bringing the department's different stakeholders under the same tent. One DoD official noted that the QDR "forces people to hash out issues and look at issues the same way" (interview, April 2013). Another DoD official commented: "If the process is open, people in the department may feel like they had their chance to weigh in, even if they don't like the changes" (interview, June 2013).

For secretaries of defense, the QDR's inclusiveness also helped them put their imprint on DoD. Barry Pavel, who has led or participated in the development of numerous defense strategy statements at DoD and the White House, observed that "secretaries [of defense] understand the

QDR is their best chance to change the organization" (interview, 21 June 2013). Even though the QDR did not result in major transformation, some secretaries were able to use it to embed some of their priorities more strongly into the institution.

Consider the following example. Robert Gates became secretary of defense in December 2006. With the next QDR not due until 2010, Gates decided to release a broad strategic document that outlined his vision for DoD in 2008 (interview of Thomas Mahnken, 22 May 2013). This document – called the National Defense Strategy (the document should not be confused with the new, post-2016 name for the QDR) – emphasized the importance of balancing the need to prepare for future security challenges with the need to prevail in the irregular conflicts in which the United States was engaged at the time (U.S. Department of Defense 2008, 1). Thomas Mahnken, who served as a principal author of the document as deputy assistant secretary of defense for policy planning, noted that this idea was designed to prod DoD to prioritize winning current wars more highly than it had been doing (interview, 22 May 2013).

Gates then sought to use the 2010 QDR process as a tool for institutionalizing this shift toward greater emphasis on ongoing conflicts (Hicks and Brannen 2010). For instance, the 2010 QDR called for increasing investments in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance in the form of manned and unmanned aircraft. Kathleen Hicks, who served at the time as deputy under secretary of defense for strategy, plans, and forces, noted that some parts of the department resisted this proposal because they wanted the money to be spent on other items, but Gates used the QDR process to ensure that that his priority would be captured not only by the strategy statement, but also by the associated fiscal year 2011 DoD budget proposal (interview, 13 October 2013). In the absence of a participatory process, it may have been more difficult for Gates to move forward with this initiative because a decision by him to do so without the QDR's imprimatur may have seemed less legitimate to some stakeholders and therefore generated even stronger resistance.

In addition, the QDR's inclusiveness contributed to its ability to socialize new ideas throughout the department. Although the QDR did not generate major changes in U.S. force structure, it served as the forum through which some important new strategic ideas were developed and propagated. For instance, DoD strategists first developed the notion of "building partnership capacity" as a key means of addressing security challenges as part of the 2006 QDR (Barry Pavel, interview, 21 June 2013). This idea subsequently became a major theme of the

2010 QDR and a central principle of defense strategy during the Obama administration (U.S. Department of Defense 2010; McInnis and Lucas 2015). To take another example, DoD strategists developed ideas that turned into what became known as the "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia during the 2010 QDR. More specifically, much of the strategizing related to the repositioning of U.S. Marines to Darwin, Australia and the deployment of U.S. littoral combat ships to Singapore was done during this QDR (Shawn Brimley, interview, 15 May 2013, Kathleen Hicks, interview, 15 October 2013).

While defense strategists are certainly capable of developing new ideas in the absence of a formal review process, the QDR helped to diffuse the ideas throughout the bureaucracy (Matthew Kroenig, interview, 20 June 2013; Barry Pavel, interview, 21 June 2013). Even in instances when a strategic idea was not generated by the QDR itself, the idea's endorsement by the QDR often gave it "additional heft" (Shawn Brimley, interview, 15 May 2013).

While some of this socialization would likely have occurred even if the review process was not highly participatory, the involvement of the military services and other DoD elements in the QDR gave them an ownership stake in the report. This stake, in turn, gave them greater incentive to propagate the report's ideas within their own institutions.

On the other hand, the QDR's inclusiveness contributed heavily to the pattern of each review largely preserving the status quo in U.S. defense strategy and force planning, rather than changing them substantially to match shifts in the international environment. Defense analyst Mark Gunzinger observes that none of the QDRs "created a new vision for how the U.S. military should prepare to meet the nation's security challenges" (Gunzinger 2013). Similarly, Jim Thomas commented, "All the QDRs have tried to move us away from the 1993 Bottom-up Review, and have only done so a little bit" (interview, 21 May 2013).

For instance, the 1993 Bottom-up Review called for being "able to win two major regional conflicts that occur nearly simultaneously" (Aspin 1993, 7), and the first QDR stated similarly that DoD must be "able to deter and defeat large-scale, cross-border aggression in two distant theaters in overlapping time frames" (U.S. Department of Defense 1997, 12). By 2010, the QDR placed increasing emphasis on preparing for a range of other security challenges, but reiterated the importance of maintaining the "ability to prevail against two nation-state aggressors" (U.S. Department of Defense 2010, vi). Even the 2014 QDR – issued during a period of fiscal austerity that had already resulted in a scaling down of U.S. defense goals (see the

discussion below of the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance) – included a modified version of the two regional war construct. It stated: "If deterrence fails at any given time, U.S. forces could defeat a regional adversary in a large-scale multi-phased campaign, and deny the objectives of – or impose unacceptable costs on – another aggressor in another region" (U.S. Department of Defense 2014, 22).

The QDR's repeated failure to generate substantial strategic change was influenced by the inclusive process used to conduct the review. David Ochmanek, who served from 2009-14 as deputy assistant secretary of defense for force development, observed, "The larger the formal entity in a strategy process, the more likely you are to get the least common denominator, the conventional wisdom" (interview, 7 September 2016). Along similar lines, another former DoD official noted, "The best strategies are developed by small groups, not in large formal reviews" (interview, February 2013).

Moreover, different components of DoD – particularly the military services – were able to use their involvement in the QDR to fight to protect their turf. As a result, it was much easier for defense officials to issue a QDR report that added some new initiatives to the status quo than to issue a report that shifted resources from one part of the military to another – as would have been necessary to carry out major changes to force planning (DoD official, interview, May 2013). The most common type of strategic or policy change resulting from the QDR was therefore a new or increased investment in an area considered to be of growing importance, without a matching cut someplace else.

For instance, in the midst of the George W. Bush administration's war on terrorism, the 2006 QDR generated decisions to increase the size of U.S. special operations forces and boost U.S. spending on medical countermeasures against biological threats (Ucko 2009, Jim Thomas, interview, 21 May 2013, former DoD officials, interviews, May-October 2013). But those changes were not accompanied by reductions in spending on systems that were of little utility for irregular warfare and nontraditional threats. As one participant in that review recalled, "We did a hard scrub on the F-35 [a stealth combat aircraft], but the building didn't have the guts to make any changes on that" (former DoD official, May 2013).

These limitations of the QDR are further underscored by a comparison of the QDR with a major U.S. defense review that was carried out in a more top-down manner than the QDR. This review was ordered by President Barack Obama in 2011, after the U.S. Congress had enacted

legislation that cut U.S. government spending sharply and set strict caps, through a mechanism known as sequestration, on government spending in future years (Williams 2017). Notably, these budget caps applied to both defense and non-defense spending. In this context, then-Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy recalled:

> "The president had a stroke of genius to say, 'Rather than do this is a big staff exercise –
> bottom-up – I want to use this as an opportunity to bring my leadership team together.'
> He called the secretary [of defense], the chiefs [of the military services], and all of the
> [combatant commanders] together at the White House for two or three different meetings
> of multiple hours each and said, 'This is a challenge we share. How are we going to do
> this with half a trillion less over the next ten years?'"…. The process was much less
> formal and much less bureaucratic than the QDR process (Michèle Flournoy, interview,
> 24 July 2013).

The Obama-led process resulted several months later in the public issuance of a new strategic document called the Defense Strategic Guidance, or DSG (U.S. Department of Defense 2012b). This eight-page report was more than ten times shorter than most QDR reports, but broke from preexisting strategy more heavily than any QDR report did. The DSG report stated that the U.S. military would "no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations" – a major change following a decade in which the Pentagon had increasingly shifted its focus toward conducting and preparing for such missions (U.S. Department of Defense 2012b, 6). This shift was accompanied by a large cut in the size of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps (U.S. Department of Defense 2012a).

While these changes were clearly driven by the tighter fiscal environment that faced DoD starting in 2011, they were greatly facilitated by the top-down leadership provided by Obama in driving the process. Indeed, under Obama's direction, the DSG report was drafted by some of the most senior uniformed and civilian defense leaders, including the deputy secretary of defense and vice chairman of the joint chiefs of staff (Kathleen Hicks, interview, 15 October 2013). With the president pushing his most senior defense advisors to come up with a plan for adapting U.S. defense strategy to the new budgetary realities, the bureaucratic inertia that often made it difficult to change strategy dramatically in the QDR was greatly mitigated. Nor is it coincidental that this streamlined and top-down process was associated with a review that had not been mandated by Congress. Whereas the various requirements of the legislation mandating the QDR

incentivized DoD to employ highly bureaucratized processes in carrying out the QDR, the absence of legislative requirements for the DSG freed senior officials to conduct that review with a high degree of flexibility. The result was a process that many defense officials considered to be more consequential than the QDR (Shawn Brimley, interview, 15 May 2013, Michèle Flournoy, interview, 24 July 2013, Kathleen Hicks, interview, 15 October 2013).

The results of a set of major independent U.S. defense reviews further underscore how review outcomes can be shaped by the nature of participation in them. In conjunction with mandating the QDR, Congress established a non-governmental panel charged with providing an independent assessment of the QDR and offering its own recommendations for U.S. defense strategy. Some iterations of this panel were named the National Defense Panel (NDP), while another was named the Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel. (Congress similarly established an independent panel to assess the new National Defense Strategy, named the Commission on the National Defense Strategy of the United States.) Each of these panels consisted of a relatively lean operation composed of former defense officials and defense experts. For instance, the 2014 NDP, which was led by former Secretary of Defense William Perry and former CENTCOM Commander John Abizaid, included a total of just ten panel members and eleven staff – all from outside government (National Defense Panel 2014, 73-81).

This type of structure enabled the independent panels to question military service priorities and call for far-reaching strategic innovation. For instance, the 1997 NDP urged that DoD advance an ambitious agenda of defense transformation, while criticizing the services for focusing on procuring systems that would soon become outdated (National Defense Panel 1997, iii; Mahnken 2001; Kagan 2006). This recommendation departed markedly from the 1997 QDR, which did not significantly alter the status quo in overall defense strategy (Snodgrass 2000; Gordon 2005). More recently, the 2014 NDP moved away from the two regional war construct more clearly than any QDR did. It argued that the United States should be prepared to defeat large-scale aggression in one theater and simultaneously thwart aggression in *multiple* other theaters (emphasis mine), while defending the homeland and carrying out counterterrorism operations (National Defense Panel 2014, 26). This recommendation was based on an assessment by panel members that the United States was facing "perhaps the most complex and volatile security environment since World War II" (Flournoy and Edelman 2014).

The repeated creation of these independent panels also reflected congressional dissatisfaction with the QDR's output. Legislators initially created the NDP as part of the QDR legislation based on a concern that the QDR would become a status quo-oriented process captured by the defense bureaucracy (Tama 2017). Some legislators responsible for defense policy concluded that this is exactly what happened with the review. For instance, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Buck McKeon commented in 2014 that the QDR had served only as "validation of a force structure that the services admit is driven by budget constraints," rather than as "an opportunity to bring together key national security stakeholders and strategic thinkers to discuss and debate how we can shape the longer-term direction of our forces, their missions, and their capabilities" (U.S. House of Representatives 2014a, 1-2). For McKeon and other key legislators, the NDP served as a mechanism to enable more forward-leaning and innovative strategizing (U.S. House of Representatives 2014b).

The review's transparency

Defense officials and experts also report that the QDR's outcomes were shaped by the requirement in the original QDR legislation that the review result in an unclassified report to Congress. Since unclassified reports to Congress can also be shared by legislators with journalists or other individuals outside of Congress, this requirement was equivalent to requiring that the QDR report be issued publicly. Given that reality, DoD opted to make each QDR report directly available to the public. Put another way, the unclassified report requirement ensured that there would be some measure of transparency with respect to the QDR.

On the positive side, this requirement enabled the five QDR reports to serve as useful devices for DoD leaders to explain the department's goals and initiatives to a variety of external audiences, including not only congressional officials, but also journalists, defense contractors, and foreign governments and militaries. This was particularly important with respect to congressional officials, since DoD needed regularly to persuade legislators to support its budgetary and legislative requests. As one indication of the extent to which the review was useful in this regard, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton once noted the following in explaining why she intended to establish a quadrennial State Department review:

> "I served for six years on the Armed Services Committee in the Senate. And it became very clear to me that the QDR process… provided a framework that was a very convincing one to those in the Congress, that there was a plan, people knew where they

were headed, and they have the priorities requested aligned with the budget, and therefore, people were often very convinced that it made good sense to do whatever the Defense Department requested" (U.S. Department of State 2009).

Moreover, Clinton is not alone in having this perception. Quantitative data from my interviews show that the QDR's public relations function represented one of its main perceived effects. As part of my interviews of defense experts and practitioners, I asked the interview subjects to assess the impact of the QDR in a number of areas. More specifically, I asked them to assess how much impact the QDR has had on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing no impact and 7 representing very large impact, in each of the following areas: defense policy and programming, defense management and organization, defense budgeting, DoD's public relations, and preparing DoD leaders to make future strategic decisions. As Table 1 shows, the average rating of the interview subjects that answered these questions was 4.3 for impact on DoD's public relations, second only to the average rating of 4.46 for impact on preparing DoD leaders to make future strategic decisions. (I discuss the latter type of perceived impact later in the article.)

Table 1. Assessments of the U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review's impact

Area of impact	Average interview response
Preparing DoD leaders to make future strategic decisions	4.46
DoD's public relations	4.30
Defense policy and programming	3.78
Defense budget	3.25
Defense management and organization	2.21

Note: These interview data are based on 21 interviews conducted between 2011 and 2016. (In two other interviews I conducted for this research, time constraints prevented me from asking the interview subject this set of questions or the interview subject declined to answer them.) For each question, I asked interview subjects to assess the QDR's impact on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing no impact and 7 representing very large impact. Before asking the questions, I informed the subjects that I would not attribute to them their answers in any resulting publication. In some cases, interview subjects opted to give distinct answers for individual QDRs. In those cases, I treat their average rating across the reviews they rated as their answer for the purpose of these tabulations.

Conversely, the original legislative mandate that the QDR report be provided to Congress and published in an unclassified manner helped Congress perform its critical functions of

overseeing DoD and legislating defense policies. In particular, the report enhanced congressional understanding of DoD and gave legislators ammunition for trying to hold department officials accountable for their success or failure in meeting the goals expressed in the report (congressional officials, interviews, May-June 2013). In addition, legislators used the report to inform and rationalize their design of defense legislation. A congressional staff member noted: "The QDR helps our own internal process on the NDAA [the major annual defense bill]. We look at whether the DoD budget request aligns with the QDR" (interview, May 2013). Congressional officials added that it was common in hearings and meetings for legislators to ask service chiefs if something they were asking for was in the QDR (interviews, May-June 2013). In this way, the report made it easier for legislators to avoid advancing legislation that served parochial military interests and was inconsistent with overall defense strategy.

While a classified report to Congress could also serve these functions to some extent, the unclassified character of the QDR reports enabled legislators to refer to the reports in legislative proposals and to discuss them at any congressional hearing or on the floor of the House or Senate, rather than being restricted to referring to them only in classified settings. Moreover, since one of the common motivations of legislators in conducting oversight of the executive branch is to demonstrate to voters that they are influencing public policy, the ability to refer to the reports in public fora gave legislators greater incentive to use them as oversight tools.

Yet the unclassified character of the QDR reports also contributed to a tendency in these reports to gloss over many important security risks and challenges, rather than discussing and prioritizing them frankly and explicitly. Since the reports were going to be accessible to the public, DoD officials had an incentive to produce reports that concealed the department's weaknesses, downplayed potential concerns about the stability of friendly countries, refrained from indicating how the department planned to counter or defeat potential adversaries, and avoided statements that might raise hackles or increase tensions with other countries (Jim Thomas, interview, 21 May 2013, former DoD official, interview, February 2013). As Shawn Brimley, who served as the principal drafter of the 2010 QDR, commented in an interview conducted before Congress changed the QDR's requirements to make its report classified, "You can't talk about China or Iran or talk about taking risks in the QDR because we've decided the report is unclassified" (interview, 15 May 2013).

Moreover, it is much harder to prioritize among security threats and challenges in an unclassified report since a ranking of security dangers can antagonize governments or other actors that appear high on the list and expose defense officials to charges that they are neglecting dangers that appear lower on the list. In addition, when a defense report is unclassified, defense officials may focus as much during the review process on how the report will be received by external audiences as on the substance of the defense strategy, thereby reducing the report's value as a strategic document (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2013; Brimley and Schulman 2016).

Furthermore, by incentivizing DoD to stick to rather general and anodyne policy statements in the QDR reports, the unclassified requirement made it harder to move forward with implementation once the reports were completed. In particular, since the QDR reports were written mainly in broad language, time-consuming follow-on efforts were needed to translate those big ideas into actionable guidance. Yet when such efforts were initiated, the lack of specificity in many QDR statements made the implementation processes themselves contentious. Brimley noted, "After the QDR, the under secretary for [acquisition, technology, and logistics] and the under secretary for policy use the QDR in internal processes, but because [the QDR report is] vague you're back to arguing first principles" (interview, 15 May 2013).

This implementation problem was magnified by the original QDR legislation's lack of any requirement that the report's implementation be subsequently assessed. In the absence of such a requirement, QDR implementation was quite uneven. Following the 2006 QDR, DoD Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon England ordered the creation of implementation roadmaps and the establishment of about a dozen groups charged with ensuring that these roadmaps were being followed. Participants in this process recalled that it facilitated progress on some issues, but was only partially effective (Jim Thomas, interview, 21 May 2013, former DoD officials, interviews, May-October 2013). After the 2010 QDR, OSD also issued implementation guidance, but the implementation effort was not sustained (Shawn Brimley, interview, 15 May 2013, DoD official, interview, 24 May 2013).

Recognition of these shortcomings contributed to the decision by Congress in 2016 to make the QDR report classified and to require DoD to assess the report's implementation during each year in which a new quadrennial report is not being issued (Brimley and Schulman 2016). This should make it easier for defense officials to write openly about and prioritize security risks

and challenges, while incentivizing defense officials to give sustained attention to the report's implementation (Brimley 2017). However, it is important to recognize that the change to a classified report will not be costless, as it will make it harder for DoD to use the report as a communications device and limit the extent to which the report serves as a reference point for congressional discussions about defense matters.

The review's fixed schedule

A final important design feature of the QDR was the legislative requirement that DoD conduct the review once every four years. The original legislation also mandated that the report be completed within the first four months of a presidential term. Following complaints from executive branch officials that this did not give a new administration sufficient time to complete a thorough review, Congress subsequently moved back the review's deadline (Henry 2005). The third, fourth, and fifth QDRs were each due early in the second year of a presidential term.

There was a clear logic to this schedule, as it gave an incoming or reelected administration a substantial period of time to determine its national security and defense strategy before it had to issue the QDR report. In principle, the report could then serve as the foundation for the administration's defense policies for the remaining three years of the presidential term.

The requirement that a review be conducted every four years was also beneficial because, in the absence of such a requirement, senior defense officials might have gone through a full presidential term without giving as much consideration to important strategic questions. Matthew Kroenig, a DoD strategist during the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, commented: "If you don't formally mandate a strategic review, big picture strategic thinking might never happen because policymakers are consumed with the day-to-day" (interview, 20 June 2013). Interestingly, congressional officials who oversee DoD saw the review's value in part in the same way. U.S. Representative Mac Thornberry, a congressional leader on defense issues, observed: "If Congress does not require a look at the bigger picture, nobody else is going to" (interview, 1 August 2013). A congressional defense aide commented similarly: "The [QDR] legislation is a forcing function for the secretary of defense to conduct a review" (interview, May 2013).

Relatedly, the QDR helped some senior defense officials become better prepared for making future decisions during the remainder of their tenure in office. A former DoD official commented, "The greatest value of the QDR is probably the process of having strategy

discussions, more than the product" (interview, February 2013). This insight is consistent with other research on strategic planning, which has found that the greatest contribution of formal planning often lies in helping leaders understand their organizations and strategic matters more thoroughly (Kaplan and Beinhocker 2003; Erdmann 2009). Dwight Eisenhower famously captured this insight when commenting that "plans are useless… planning is indispensable" (Nixon 1962, 235). As Table 1 shows, my interview subjects rated the impact of the QDR on preparing DoD leaders to make future strategic decisions more highly than its impact on any other dimension about which I asked the interview subjects, suggesting that the review's value in this respect was indeed substantial. Given this benefit of the QDR, the review's value would have been diminished if it was conducted less frequently than every four years or was conducted later in a presidential term, when many senior officials would have less time remaining in their positions.

However, a fixed quadrennial schedule also had a couple of downsides. Most importantly, senior leaders may have the greatest need for a strategic review at a time that does not correspond to the quadrennial schedule, such as a moment when the strategic or political environment suddenly changes. The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, which was issued shortly after a dramatic shift in the fiscal environment, illustrates this possibility. Although the Obama administration's ability to conduct the DSG despite the legislative requirements for a QDR shows that a quadrennial review requirement does not preclude the conduct of reviews at other times, review fatigue following a large quadrennial review may make leaders reluctant to order additional reviews even if a real need to update defense strategy exists. The U.S. Congress tried to address this problem in 2016 by requiring DoD to assess whether U.S. defense strategy needs updating during each year in which the new National Defense Strategy is not being completed. This requirement should make it more likely that U.S. defense strategy will be adjusted when circumstances warrant doing so in the future.

A remaining deficiency of the U.S. defense planning calendar is that it is often poorly synchronized with the production of broader U.S. national security strategy reports. While recent U.S. presidents issued an NSS once per term, they frequently produced these reports after the QDR had already been completed. For instance, Barack Obama released his second term NSS nearly a year after the 2014 QDR had been released (U.S. Department of Defense 2014; Obama 2015). Logically, the NSS should precede and inform a defense planning document, with the

latter document serving as an application of the president's overall national security strategy to the area of defense. But the fixed calendar for the QDR made it more difficult for administrations consistently to issue the strategic documents in their logical order.

This problem of sequencing was mitigated somewhat by the broad character of these documents, which allowed officials to nest them within each other regardless of the order in which they were issued. But no matter how such documents are sequenced, it is clearly important for defense strategies to be formulated in close coordination with plans to employ other tools of national power, such as diplomacy, intelligence, trade, and foreign assistance (Breitenbauch 2015).

Lessons and implications

In this concluding section, I consider what general lessons and implications can be derived from the U.S. experience with the QDR. I begin by discussing some lessons for defense practitioners and conclude by identifying some implications for defense scholars.

For defense practitioners, the main takeaway from this research is that recognizing the trade-offs associated with different ways of conducting strategic planning can help to inform sound choices about the design of strategic planning processes in various circumstances. Defense officials can craft such processes in ways that place them in different locations on several spectrums. In the preceding analysis, I focused in particular on choices concerning the extent of a review's inclusiveness or exclusivity, transparency or opacity, and fixed or flexible schedule. The QDR generally fell closer to the inclusive and transparent ends of these spectrums, while being conducted according to a preset schedule. As shown above, such design features entailed both benefits and costs. The QDR's inclusivity helped the review's ideas spread through the bureaucracy and facilitated their implementation, but resulted in reports that few people considered to be visionary or transformative. The QDR's transparency allowed DoD leaders to use the review as an effective public relations device, but prevented them from openly discussing security risks and vulnerabilities in the reports. The QDR's fixed schedule ensured that DoD leaders devoted some time to high-level strategic questions each presidential term, but meant that the review did not always occur when leaders most needed it.

A choice to make a strategic planning process more or less inclusive, more or less transparent, and more or less flexible in terms of its calendar therefore should depend on the needs of decision-makers in particular contexts. For instance, at times when the strategic or

political environment is undergoing a major and rapid shift, it will tend to be important for defense policy makers to be able to conduct a review quickly and to privilege top-down direction over broad participation, since such design features will enhance the prospects that the review will produce ideas in a timely manner that break from the status quo. By contrast, in times of greater strategic or political stability, it will often make more sense to privilege deliberation and consensus-building over quick decision-making or innovation. To take another example, when a defense ministry lacks strong external support, it may be advisable for the ministry to seek greater backing by conducting a highly transparent review, but when a ministry enjoys strong preexisting support, the benefits of transparency are more likely to be outweighed by the downsides associated with being unable to speak candidly about key security matters. Moreover, the same principles should apply to government-wide national security strategic planning processes too. Table 2 summarizes the advantages and disadvantages associated with designing a strategy process in the different ways discussed in this article, as well as the circumstances in which certain design choices are the most sensible.

Table 2. Key tradeoffs in the design of defense strategy processes

Design feature	Strength	Weakness	Suitable condition
Inclusive	Conducive to internal buy-in	Not conducive to departure from status quo	Strategic stability
Exclusive	Conducive to departure from status quo	Not conducive to internal buy-in	Strategic shock
Transparent	Conducive to external buy-in	Not conducive to candor about threats and vulnerabilities	Agency lacks sufficient external support
Opaque	Conducive to candor about threats and vulnerabilities	Not conducive to external buy-in	Agency possesses adequate external support
Fixed schedule	Ensures high-level planning is conducted	Timing of planning not based on decision maker needs	Strategic stability
No fixed schedule	Ensures timing of planning is based on decision maker needs	High-level planning might not be conducted	Strategic shock

This research also has broader implications for defense and strategic planning scholars. For defense scholars, the principal implication is that it is important to devote attention to the policy making process when studying the defense policies of countries. While a rich literature on bureaucratic politics exists (Allison 1969; Halperin and Clapp 2006), the study of governmental decision making processes – which tend to be hard to quantify – fell out of vogue in political science and international relations scholarship over the past several decades. At the same time, the field of strategic studies has focused more on the relationships between defense policies and war or peace than on the governmental processes that shape those policies.

However, the evidence presented above suggests that the design of a strategic planning process can affect the content of a country's defense policies. Further research on the relationship between policy processes and defense policy outcomes would therefore be worthwhile. In developing such research conceptually, defense scholars might find it useful to draw, as I have, on the work of public administration scholars who have conceptualized key aspects of the policy process, particularly with respect to public sector strategic planning. In addition, scholars could build on this research empirically by documenting more systematically the features and outcomes of various defense planning processes – for instance, by charting the number of their participants, the structure of their operations, the proportion of their ideas that departed from the status quo, the extent to which they shared information with external audiences, and the rate at which their recommendations were implemented. Such data could facilitate rigorous testing of hypotheses about the links between planning processes and outcomes across a range of strategy processes – for instance, by enabling scholars to classify each planning process with a high degree of confidence as involving high, medium, or low levels of inclusiveness, transparency, and other characteristics.

One potential extension of this research would be to theorize how strategic planning by defense officials can be shaped by a variety of principals. An extensive literature has examined the dynamics between principals and agents, particularly the extent to which an agent behaves independently when a principal delegates authority to it. For instance, scholars have theorized the extent to which international institutions act independently of the countries that grant them authority, as well as the extent to which government agencies act independently of the legislatures that authorize their programs (Weingast 1984; Waterman and Meier 1998; Hawkins

et al. 2006). Along similar lines, strategic review processes are sometimes mandated by a principal outside the institution conducting the review, such as a legislature.

Moreover, the participants in strategic reviews are sometimes accountable not only to a single principal, but to multiple principals. For instance, depending on their institutional position, DoD officials involved in a strategic review might be accountable to more senior officials within OSD, superiors in one of the military services, and/or members of Congress. But such principal-agent relationships will tend to vary in their importance for different review participants – e.g. most military officers participating in a strategic review will tend to place greater weight on the preferences of their service's leadership than on the preferences of other principals.

Analogous dynamics involving multiple principal-agent relationships characterize defense planning processes in many countries, and offer fertile ground for further theorizing and empirical analysis. In addition to elucidating planning by individual defense ministries, such research could be particularly valuable in enhancing understanding of defense planning by multinational organizations, such as NATO, that are accountable to numerous countries. Within such organizations, the behavior of strategic planners may be influenced both by the preferences of their superiors within the organization and by the preferences of their national government or military. While scholars have examined ways in which the behavior of agents is shaped by multiple principals in other contexts (Spiller 1990; Whitford 2005; Hawkins et al. 2006), greater attention to the importance of these types of dynamics in defense planning could further enhance our understanding of how and why defense institutions develop certain strategies and policies.

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