



How an agency's responsibilities and political context shape government strategic planning: evidence from US Federal agency quadrennial reviews

Jordan Tama

School of International Service, American University, Washington, DC, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper extends the strategic planning literature by developing four original propositions about factors that affect the conduct of strategic reviews by government agencies. The propositions highlight how a strategic review's design, analytical tools, and content are influenced by the extent of an agency's reliance on collaboration or capital investments, the strength of an agency's political support, and the existence or absence of a legislative mandate for a review. A plausibility probe involving qualitative analysis of three major quadrennial reviews by US national security agencies generates evidence that is largely consistent with the propositions.

KEYWORDS Strategic planning; strategic management; government; politics; national security

Introduction

An extensive body of research has analysed the value and motivations of strategic planning by public sector organizations. Although there are often significant shortcomings in strategic planning efforts, this research has generally shown that strategic planning can help leaders and organizations make good decisions, operate more effectively and efficiently, focus on and institutionalize priorities, prepare for contingencies and crises, innovate, provide personnel with a sense of purpose, and serve the public well (Barzelay and Campbell 2003; Boyne and Chen 2007; Bryson 2010, 2011; Crosby and Bryson 2005; Drezner 2009; Hendrick 2003; Jung and Lee 2013; Poister, Pitts, and Edwards 2010; Tama 2015-6).

At the same time, research has shown that the leaders of public organizations often conduct strategic planning and related strategic management activities not only to improve the performance of their organizations, but also for more political reasons. These political motivations can include strengthening the control of leaders over an organization's units and personnel, enhancing an organization's external legitimacy or support, or satisfying a legislative mandate (Hult and Walcott 1990; Kroll and Moynihan 2015; Light 1997; Mintzberg 1994; Tama 2015).

Still other research has examined the conditions that influence the initiation or suitability of strategic planning. This research has found that government agencies

CONTACT Jordan Tama  tama@american.edu

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are more likely to conduct strategic planning when they work closely with the private sector, operate near other agencies that plan strategically, or face an economic crisis (Berry 1994; Kissler et al. 1998). Studies have also found that strategic planning may be more suitable for agencies that are large or complex, enjoy substantial autonomy, or operate in market-like conditions (Hansen and Ferlie 2016; Poister, Pitts, and Edwards 2010). Related research has analysed variables that affect whether organizations use performance data purposefully, rather than passively, politically, or perversely (Kroll and Moynihan 2015).

In this paper, I build on these and other previous studies by examining factors that influence the conduct of one common form of public sector strategic planning: formal strategic reviews that result in a public report expressing an agency's strategy. These reviews typically involve a relatively conventional goal-directed and deliberate approach to strategic planning that shares the common characteristics of the planning school of strategic management (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel 1998). Nevertheless, the conduct of such reviews can vary considerably.

I develop several original propositions about the effects of an agency's responsibilities and political context on its conduct of formal strategic reviews. In short, I posit that a review will be more likely to focus on the formulation of general principles if the agency relies very heavily on collaboration, more likely to involve intensive analytical processes if the agency is highly dependent on capital investments, more likely to feature reforms designed to increase the agency's clout if the agency has weak political influence, and more likely to be carried out in a manner that suits the needs of agency officials if it is not required by law. While some of these variables have been analysed extensively in previous strategic planning research, others have received much less attention from strategic planning scholars. Moreover, I am unaware of previous research identifying the particular causal relationships that I highlight.

After developing these propositions, I probe their plausibility by using qualitative methods – particularly interviews of strategic review participants and the analysis of strategic review documents – to investigate the conduct of three major reviews by US federal government agencies.¹

Agency responsibilities

In this section, I consider how two key aspects of an agency's responsibilities affect the conduct of government strategic reviews.

Does the agency rely very heavily on collaboration?

Nearly all government agencies engage in substantial collaboration with other agencies and non-governmental institutions, and there are very few – if any – public problems that can be solved without such collaboration (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2015; Crosby and Bryson 2005; Forrer, Kee, and Boyer 2014). Yet, agencies vary in the degree to which they rely on collaboration with other institutions to carry out their missions. For instance, the US Department of Health and Human Services relies very heavily on collaboration with insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies, private health care providers, and state health agencies in

administering federal health programs, whereas the US Internal Revenue Service relies mainly on its own personnel to administer tax laws and investigate tax fraud.

Previous research has found that agencies use strategic planning or other strategic management tools more when they work closely with the private sector or are involved in many partnerships and networks (Berry 1994; Moynihan and Hawes 2012). Studies have also found that strategic planning and management processes are more effective when external stakeholders are more involved in them, and that stakeholders are more likely to support such processes if they have a voice in them (Bryson 2011; Fernandez and Rainey 2006; Moynihan and Hawes 2012; Poister and Van Slyke 2002; Poister and Streib 2005; Yang and Hsieh 2007). These findings suggest that an agency that relies heavily on collaboration will have a strong incentive to consult extensively with its stakeholders as part of a strategic review process.

In addition, a heavy reliance on collaboration can affect the content of a review. If an agency's leaders have relatively strong control over the operators that are responsible for carrying out agency policies, it may be effective for a review to develop rather specific guidance since the agency's leaders will tend to be relatively well informed about the operators' capacities and will possess the authority needed to direct the operators to implement strategic guidance. However, if an agency's leaders have weak control over key operators and possess limited knowledge of those operators' capacities, it may be more fruitful for a review to focus on the formulation of general principles and to grant the operators considerable discretion regarding the application of those principles.

Notably, the latter incentive should exist not only for an agency that depends heavily on institutions outside the agency, but also for an agency whose key operating components possess a high degree of autonomy. In either case, the formulation of general principles may also be useful because the operators will tend to have very different conceptions than agency leaders of their organizational missions. As a result, identifying broad goals may be an essential first step toward generating a greater sense of common purpose across the agency or between the agency and the institutions on which the agency relies.

Proposition 1: Agencies that rely more on collaboration will be more likely to conduct strategic reviews that focus primarily on the formulation of general principles.

Does the agency rely very heavily on capital investments?

Agencies also vary in the extent to which they rely on major capital investments. For instance, agencies responsible for defence, energy, transportation, or public housing routinely invest in weapons, energy systems, transportation networks, or housing developments that are very expensive and take decades to be planned and built. By contrast, such large capital investments tend to be much less central to the work of agencies that provide citizens with social security benefits, regulate parts of the economy, or conduct international diplomacy.

Previous research has found that organizations plan more formally and deliberately when they make large capital investments (Borins 1998). In addition, agencies that rely more on capital investments should have greater incentive to centre strategic

reviews on the development of guidance for decisions concerning the allocation of resources among potential investments.² This incentive, in turn, should lead such agencies to place greater emphasis on intensive analytical processes in a review since sound analyses of technical matters will be needed to make sensible judgments about the merits of alternative options for major investments. Moreover, since judgments of this kind require understanding of environmental factors that may affect future needs, challenges, and opportunities, these agencies should tend especially to employ analytical processes designed to scan and identify trends in the external environment (Bryson 2011, 51–55).

For instance, consider the prerequisites for reasonable decisions about whether to develop or build new weapon systems, power plants, railways, or public housing complexes. To make sound decisions about such matters, an agency must assess how the international environment, energy markets, or transportation and residential patterns are likely to evolve in coming years and must consider trade-offs concerning different options for addressing future defence, energy, transportation, or housing needs. Given the complexity of such assessments and the amount of money at stake in decisions associated with them, the leaders and managers of agencies that rely very heavily on long-term investments should tend to recognize the importance of sophisticated analytical or modelling tools, such as scenario analysis and econometric forecasting, and to incorporate them into strategic reviews.

Proposition 2: Agencies that rely more on capital investments will be more likely to conduct strategic reviews that employ technically sophisticated analytical tools.

The political context

I also expect the conduct of strategic reviews to be shaped by two important aspects of the political context.

Does the agency exercise strong political influence?

One important political variable concerns the strength of an agency's political influence. While some agencies tend to exercise great clout, others often are the subject of budget cutting proposals from legislators or end up on the losing side of interagency debates. Consider the US Defense Department (DOD) and State Department (State). In recent decades, US legislators have transferred some important legal authorities from State to DOD and have often sought to increase funding for DOD and reduce funding for State (Adams and Murray 2014). At the same time, White House officials have allowed DOD to take on roles that were previously reserved for State, and US military commanders have frequently overshadowed US ambassadors in other countries (Adams and Murray 2014; Priest 2003).

Previous research suggests that strong political support can aid an agency's strategic planning by liberating agency leaders from excessive concern with how strategic planning might be perceived by political actors, providing them with the resources and organizational flexibility needed to plan effectively, and reducing politically induced leadership turnover that can make it difficult to plan purposefully (Moynihan and Pandey 2010; Rainey and Steinbauer 1999; Yang

and Hsieh 2007). On the other hand, weak political support may lead an agency's leaders to see strategic planning in large part as a means of bolstering the agency's standing by showing external audiences that the agency is well managed (Hult and Walcott 1990; Kroll and Moynihan 2015; Tama 2015). In this sense, a review may be more political when it is conducted by an agency that lacks strong external backing.

At the same time, the strength of an agency's political influence can affect the substantive focus of a strategic review. Since one way to build support for an agency is to demonstrate that the agency is well managed, the leaders of agencies with relatively weak clout should have an incentive to use a review to formulate organizational reforms. Moreover, if political actors often criticize the agency for certain shortcomings, agency leaders should have a particularly strong incentive to use the review to develop reforms that address those alleged deficiencies. In addition, if the agency often struggles to compete for influence within the executive branch, agency leaders should have an incentive to use a review to design reforms that can help the agency act more effectively within interagency processes.

Proposition 3: Agencies with weaker political influence will be more likely to conduct strategic reviews that focus on reforms designed to increase their external clout.

Is the strategic review required by law?

A second important political variable concerns whether a strategic review is required by law. While agency leaders sometimes initiate a strategic review on their own accord, in other cases, legislatures enact a law mandating that a review be conducted. Previous research suggests that agency leaders tend to be more involved in strategic planning activities that they initiate, and that the personal investment of agency leaders in planning can aid its effectiveness by sending a signal to other officials that they should take the planning seriously too (Barzelay and Campbell 2003; Dull 2009; Fernandez and Rainey 2006; Kroll and Moynihan 2015; Moynihan and Lavertu 2012; Yang and Hsieh 2007).

In addition, the political origins of a strategic review can affect the extent to which the review's design suits the needs of agency officials. Laws mandating reviews often include numerous specific requirements for the review, such as requirements that the agency examine certain issues in the review, complete the process by a certain date, and produce a public report on the outcome of the process. While such requirements sometimes are beneficial in forcing an agency to take steps that are in the public interest, they can also make a review less helpful to agency officials by distracting officials from more important strategic issues, preventing officials from setting review timelines based on their own decision-making needs, or prompting officials to treat a review more as a public relations device than a planning tool. By contrast, agency officials will have more discretion to conduct a review in the manner that they consider to be most useful when the review lacks a legal mandate. This difference implies that reviews initiated by agency leaders should vary more widely in their design and be less likely to feature activities that are viewed by agency officials as 'busy work' than reviews required by law.

Proposition 4: Strategic reviews required by law are more likely to be carried out in ways that do not match the needs of agency officials.

Strategic reviews by US national security agencies

In this section, I present a plausibility probe of the preceding propositions by analysing the conduct of quadrennial strategic reviews by US national security agencies. Other scholarship has examined various aspects of the development of national security strategy by heads of state and government agencies (Barzelay and Campbell 2003; Betts 2000; Brands 2014; Drezner 2009; Tama 2015-6; Trubowitz 2011). I extend this literature here by considering how the factors highlighted by my argument vary among key US national security agencies, as well as the extent to which this variation corresponds to differences in how these agencies carry out their most prominent strategic reviews.

More specifically, I assess the US Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the US Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), and the US Quadrennial Homeland Security Review (QHSR). Whereas the DOD is required by law to conduct the QDR and the Homeland Security Department (DHS) is required by law to conduct the QHSR, the State Department initiated the QDDR without a legislative requirement to do so.³ Elsewhere, I have shown that policy-makers established each of these reviews based on political as well as management motivations (Tama 2015). In the case of the QDR and QHSR, legislators saw the reviews as useful mechanisms to stimulate organizational change in DOD and DHS and to strengthen congressional control of these agencies. In the case of the QDDR, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton – who established the QDDR – saw the review as a helpful tool for reforming State and improving the agency’s standing in Congress and interagency councils.

To date, the QDR has been completed five times and the QDDR and QHSR have each been completed twice. Each review has typically lasted 12–18 months and been directed by senior agency strategic or policy planning officials. With the exception of the second QDDR, each review has also involved the participation of numerous officials from various agency components in a set of working groups that developed ideas or proposals. Each review has resulted in a public report issued by the agency’s leader.

Research design

My analysis of these quadrennial reviews is based on reports associated with them, other primary source documents, and original interviews. The documents I reviewed concern the last two editions of each review: the 2010 and 2014 QDR, 2010 and 2014 QHSR, and 2010 and 2015 QDDR. For each of these review editions, I examined the agency report resulting from the review, all publicly available statements by agency officials about the review, all publicly available reports about the review by the US General Accountability Office and Congressional Research Service, and the transcripts of all congressional hearings about the review. I also examined any periodical articles, think tank reports, or transcripts of public conferences that I could find discussed the review.

I used this combination of written sources to determine how the review was conducted, including the types of analytical processes used in the review; whether the resulting report detailed specific initiatives or proposals, rather than only expressing general principles;⁴ and how agency officials have described the fit between the review and their strategic planning needs.

I supplemented this study of written sources with interviews of individuals who are knowledgeable about the reviews. For each review, I requested interviews with the agency's deputy secretary,⁵ the agency official(s) responsible for directing the review, a random sample of agency officials who were directly involved in the review or had responsibility for strategic or policy planning in the agency,⁶ the author(s) of any Government Accountability Office or Congressional Research Service reports about the review, congressional officials in each political party with responsibility for overseeing the agency's management,⁷ and a random sample of former government officials and non-governmental experts or consultants who had demonstrated substantial knowledge about the review in published articles or public comments. I also requested interviews with a random sample of White House officials who possessed responsibility for coordinating or overseeing the agency's work.⁸

I sought interviews with this cross-section of individuals in order to ensure that my interview subjects represented a range of professional responsibilities and possible biases, including individuals with a direct stake in the perceived outcomes of each review and individuals with weaker or non-existent stakes in those outcomes. In conjunction with the written sources I examined, the information generated from these interviews also provides useful triangulation that enhances confidence in the validity of my findings.

Altogether, I requested interviews with eighty-two people, and fifty nine of these people agreed to be interviewed. The interview subjects included twelve current or former DOD officials, fourteen current or former State officials, ten current or former DHS officials, four current or former White House officials, eleven current or former congressional officials, one US Government Accountability Office official, and seven consultants or non-governmental experts.⁹ Among the fifty-nine interview subjects, I interviewed twenty-one about the QDR, sixteen about the QHSR, and twenty two about the QDDR.¹⁰ In some cases, I interviewed subjects more than once. When counting each conversation as a separate interview, I conducted thirty-nine interviews in person, twenty seven by phone, and two via email. I gave each interview subject the option of conducting the interview on the record or on a not-for-attribution basis. (See the Supplementary Material for a list of people who agreed to be interviewed on the record.)

I asked the interview subjects questions about the purpose, conduct, and outcomes of the reviews. Some of my questions varied depending on the review or the interview subject's responsibilities or expertise, but I asked most subjects to describe the review's principal focus and outcome, describe the review's analytical processes, indicate whether the review's content was motivated at least in part by a goal of strengthening the agency's external standing or clout, and indicate whether the review's design suited the needs of the agency's leaders.

In what follows, I draw on these various sources to consider whether the conduct of each of the reviews has been consistent with the four propositions outlined above. As part of my analysis, I describe commonalities and differences across the three agencies in their approaches to the reviews.

Proposition 1: collaboration and general principles

Proposition 1 stipulates that an agency's strategic review will be more likely to focus on the formulation of general principles if the agency relies more on collaboration. Certainly DOD, State, and DHS all rely on collaboration. But DHS is especially reliant on two important forms of collaboration. First, DHS depends very heavily on collaboration with operators outside the federal government over whom DHS does not have direct authority. For instance, DHS relies greatly on local first responders – such as police and fire departments – to protect the public from terrorism and other disasters, and it relies greatly on private firms to protect critical infrastructure and computer networks from cyber attacks. Indeed, DHS has nearly no capacity of its own to provide security at the local level or protect private computer networks (Kettl 2014; May, Jochim, and Sapotichne 2011; Shiffman and Hoffman 2011).

Second, DHS is highly decentralized. The 2002 law that created the department folded twenty-two pre-existing agencies into it. But many of these pre-existing agencies maintained a great deal of autonomy as operating components of DHS (Balunis 2012; May, Jochim, and Sapotichne 2011). As homeland security expert Stephen Flynn noted, 'The department operated since its inception in a way where each component defined the mission, as they saw it, without central direction.'¹¹ Former DHS Assistant Secretary for Policy Stewart Baker noted similarly, 'It has been hard to get all the components to pull in the same direction.'¹² This problem has been exacerbated by the high degree of diversity among the department's functions.¹³ Indeed, this diversity – which spans terrorism prevention, border protection, emergency preparedness, transportation safety, immigration and citizenship services, and protection of the president – has led scholars to describe homeland security as an 'anaemic' domain of public policy (May, Jochim, and Sapotichne 2011).

In this context, DHS leaders have focused the QHSR on the formulation and refinement of a broad statement of the department's purpose. The centrepiece of the first QHSR was the expression of a definition of homeland security and a description of five departmental missions (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2010b). The second QHSR revised those missions slightly but largely reiterated the first QHSR's major ideas (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2014). Both review reports outlined goals and objectives associated with the five missions but did not detail specific policy or programmatic proposals or initiatives (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2010b, 2014).

Of the sixteen individuals that I interviewed about the QHSR, thirteen cited the development of a definition of homeland security and/or the identification of DHS missions as the principal focus or outcome of the QHSR. A DHS official said, 'The focus [of the QHSR] has been on getting everyone on the same page on the definition and missions.'¹⁴ This official added that the definition and missions were developed 'by examining the things the department's components were actually doing.'¹⁵ Participants in this effort – which was a central focus of the review's working groups composed of representatives from various DHS components – noted that it was quite difficult. One DHS official said, 'When you talk with [component representatives], it's amazing how different their ideas are about what homeland security should be. The review was helpful in forcing the department to have difficult conversations about these issues.'¹⁶

Ten of my QHSR interview subjects also said that the QHSR's statement of a homeland security definition and/or description of departmental missions had advanced more common understandings or integration across the department. One DHS official said, 'In 2009, nobody understood what homeland security was. Now people understand what the department is trying to do.'¹⁷ In the same vein, a former DHS official noted, 'People in DHS now talk about homeland security in terms of the five missions. They're just assumed.'¹⁸ Along similar lines, US General Accountability Office Director for Homeland Security and Justice Issues David Maurer said that expression of the missions has provided 'a common organizing framework for the whole department.'¹⁹ It is less clear from my research to what extent this greater sense of common purpose has filtered out of DHS to its partners outside the federal government, although DHS has sought to promote such awareness by consulting these partners extensively in the QHSR process through a committee of external stakeholder representatives and through various other meetings and online dialogues (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2010b, B1-6, 2014, 101-103).

DOD and State have also engaged with stakeholders during their quadrennial reviews, though with some variation in the character of this engagement. The QDR, like the QHSR, has featured numerous working groups composed of officials representing department components (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2013; U.S. Department of Defense 2010, 42-43, 2014, 1).²⁰ While the first QDDR had a similar structure involving task forces with broad component representation, the second QDDR lacked any formal structures for incorporating component views (U.S. Department of State 2010, 211-215, 2015, 39). Neither the QDR nor the QDDR has featured formal structures for external stakeholder consultation of the type used in the QHSR, though DOD and State officials have consulted such stakeholders informally.²¹ This difference with respect to external stakeholder consultation is consistent with the greater reliance of DHS than of DOD and State on partners outside government.

With respect to the substantive emphases of the QDDR and QDR, State and DOD – which control directly the US diplomats and troops that represent their principal operators²² – have focused heavily during their quadrennial reviews on the formulation of specific initiatives or plans. The first two QDDRs detailed numerous departmental initiatives, from the creation of new bureaus to specific changes in management practices and personnel policies (U.S. Department of State 2015, 2010). The QDR has also regularly generated many concrete decisions. For instance, the 2010 and 2014 QDRs detailed how many troops and units of some major weapons systems would be allocated to or procured by particular parts of the military in upcoming years (U.S. Department of Defense 2010, 2014). The contrast between this substantive content and the more general content of the QHSR reports is consistent with the notion that agency leaders have a greater incentive to limit a strategic review to the expression of general principles when they rely more on collaborating with actors over which they have weak control.

Proposition 2: capital investments and analytical tools

Proposition 2 states that an agency will use sophisticated analytical tools more extensively in a strategic review if it relies more heavily on capital investments. While DOD, State, and DHS all make capital investments, DOD relies on them far

more than State, with DHS occupying a middle ground between the other two departments. These differences are evident in the departments' budget requests for fiscal year 2017. DOD devotes 32 per cent of its proposed budget to 'procurement' and 'research, development, testing, and evaluation' – both of which principally concern the acquisition of weapons systems (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) 2016, A-4). By contrast, DHS devotes 5 per cent of its proposed budget and State devotes less than 1 per cent of its proposed budget to the most equivalent budget categories used by those departments (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2016, 93–98; U.S. Department of State 2016, 2–5).²³

These stark differences reflect differences in the missions of the three departments. Given DOD's core mission of protecting the United States from military threats, department leaders have a strong incentive to place a great deal of importance on advanced weapons systems (O'Hanlon 2009; Sapolsky, Gholz, and Talmadge 2009). Since such systems tend to be very expensive, this priority translates into the devotion of a large share of the department's budget to acquisition. By contrast, State's core mission of conducting diplomacy incentives State leaders to privilege investments in personnel over sophisticated systems (Adams and Murray 2014; Grossman 2011). DHS falls in between DOD and State in that some of its components – such as the Coast Guard – rely heavily on capital investments, whereas other components – such as Citizenship and Immigration Services – do not.²⁴

These differences have been reflected in the processes used by the three departments to conduct quadrennial reviews. When carrying out the QDR, DOD has conducted numerous technical studies and simulations designed to enhance understanding of trends in the external environment. For instance, the QDR process has featured scenario analyses designed to identify plausible security environments in the near-, mid-, and long term, followed by tests of the potential effectiveness of different military configurations and systems in those hypothetical environments (U.S. Department of Defense 2010, 42–43, 2014, 1).²⁵ A DOD official explained, 'The [QDR] process goes into a lot of real detail. There are tabletop exercises, war games, lots of analysis. The bureaucracy takes the process very seriously because people believe it has – or could have – a measurable effect on budget shares and programs.'²⁶ The results of these studies inform the development and consideration of defence options – including options concerning the procurement of major weapon systems – by QDR study groups and the DOD strategic planning officials who coordinate the review (Tama 2016).²⁷

On the other hand, systematic efforts to scan the external environment have not been part of State's quadrennial review. While the QDDR process has included staff studies of certain issues, the review has not included the use of scenario modelling, simulations, or other complex analytical tools designed to assess environmental trends, risks, or opportunities (U.S. Department of State 2010, 210–213, 2015, 88).²⁸ In addition, the QDDR has not used technical analysis to inform review decisions about specific courses of action. One government official with first-hand knowledge of both the QDR and the QDDR said, 'The QDDR doesn't have the QDR's rational decision-making processes for making decisions based on data and objective analysis – processes for selecting some ideas and discarding others.'²⁹

The QHSR has been less grounded in technical analysis than the QDR but more grounded in such analysis than the QDDR. While the first QHSR lacked an effort to model the external environment, the second QHSR included an exercise designed to

identify environmental trends and risks related to homeland security over the next 5 years, with the goal of using this analysis to shape homeland security strategy (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2014, 94–97).³⁰ This exercise was similar in concept to some of the exercises carried out by DOD but had a shorter time horizon than the 20-year horizon of the QDR's long-term scenario analyses. The QHSR's use of technical analysis also remains more limited than that of the QDR in the sense that the QHSR risk analysis exercise represents the only major technical study that has been part of that review. More generally, the distinctions among the three reviews in their use of analytical tools are consistent with the idea that greater reliance on capital investments gives agency officials a stronger incentive to employ complex analytical methods.

Proposition 3: political influence and the character of reforms

Proposition 3 asserts that an agency with weak political influence will focus a strategic review more heavily on reforms designed to boost its external clout. As discussed above, DOD has generally enjoyed stronger backing than State from members of Congress and the White House in recent decades. DHS has more in common with State than with DOD in this respect. It has often been the subject of sharp criticism by legislators for perceived organizational deficiencies (U.S. House of Representatives 2009, 2013). In addition, it has lost major interagency disagreements with DOD (Gorman and Dreazen 2009).

Recent State and DHS leaders have been particularly concerned about some specific areas in which the agencies have struggled to exercise political influence – and agency officials have sought to address these problems through quadrennial reviews. During her first 2 years as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton grew frustrated with State's limited ability to shape events in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the US reconstruction and stabilization missions in those countries, which were dominated by DOD.³¹ An official who served in Clinton's State Department commented more generally about this period:

In the civilian security space, State needed to be strengthened to partner with DOD more effectively.... And [Clinton] realized that economic statecraft was becoming more important – she saw how much power [the] Treasury [Department] had on international economics when she went to China. These were areas where State wasn't competing effectively within the U.S. government.³²

This perspective led Clinton to see the first QDDR primarily as a means of strengthening State's capabilities – particularly in those areas where State was not exercising as much influence as she would have liked.³³ As a result, many of the initiatives outlined in the first QDDR were designed to make State a more powerful actor at the interagency level. These initiatives included proposals for strengthening the authority of US ambassadors over personnel from other agencies who serve at US embassies, as well as blueprints for departmental reorganizations creating new bureaus and offices in areas such as civilian security, economics, and energy policy (U.S. Department of State 2010).

Of the 22 people I interviewed about the QDDR, seven cited these or other organizational reforms as the most important elements or outcomes of the review, and sixteen said that the review's content was motivated at least in part by a goal of

strengthening State's external standing or clout. Thirteen of the individuals I interviewed about the QDDR also said that the QDDR-driven reforms have helped State strengthen its capacity or occupy a more prominent seat at the table in interagency decision-making in those areas (U.S. Department of State 2015, 82–85).³⁴

DHS leaders also had a particular concern about the department's interagency influence when conducting the first QHSR. As that review was ramping up, the department appeared to be losing a battle with the National Security Agency (NSA) – which reports to the Secretary of Defense – over control of US cyber security policy. In March 2009, the top DHS cyber security official resigned in frustration over this development, charging that the White House was underfunding DHS cyber security efforts and allowing the NSA to dominate the government's efforts to prevent cyber attacks on US computer networks (Greenberg 2009).

DHS leaders sought to use the first QHSR to increase the department's clout on cyber issues by making the protection of cyber security one of the department's five missions. This represented an important change in that the previous governmental statement of homeland security strategy – which had been produced by the White House – did not include cyber security in a list of core goals (U.S. Homeland Security Council 2007, 1). DHS leaders saw this change as an important means of signalling to the rest of the government that DHS was taking cyber security seriously and of providing department leaders with a stronger justification for requesting more authority and resources in this area.³⁵

The department's status as one of the federal agencies with principal responsibility for cyber security was subsequently acknowledged implicitly by a memorandum of agreement between DHS and the NSA that outlined some of the respective cyber security responsibilities of the two agencies.³⁶ Relatedly, former congressional homeland security official Christian Beckner commented that 'the elevation of cyber [to one of the DHS missions] was important in focusing the attention of government policymakers on what new resources DHS needed in that area.'³⁷ More generally, eight of the sixteen people that I interviewed about the QHSR said that the review's content was motivated at least in part by a goal of strengthening the department's external standing or clout.

DOD leaders, by contrast, have given little attention in the QDR to reforms or initiatives designed to bolster the department's standing with Congress or other agencies. Among the twenty-one people I interviewed about the QDR, none identified such reforms or initiatives as an important element of the review. More generally, only four of the twenty-one QDR interview subjects said that the review's content was motivated at least in part by a goal of strengthening the department's external standing or clout – a rate of affirmative responses for this question that was lower than the corresponding rates for my QDDR and QHSR interviews to a statistically significant degree.³⁸ This difference between the QDR and the other reviews is consistent with the notion that agencies are more likely to try to use a review to strengthen their clout if they struggle to compete for external influence.

Proposition 4: political origins and review design

Proposition 4 posits that a review will be more likely to be conducted in ways that do not match the needs of agency officials if the review is required by law. While the QDR and QHSR are both mandated by law, the QDDR was initiated by Clinton and

conducted for a second time under Secretary of State John Kerry in the absence of a legal requirement for it.

The legislative mandates for both the QDR and QHSR have included requirements that some agency officials have considered to be unhelpful. The QDR legislation has required the review to cover at least seventeen different matters, from defence strategy, to the policies required to support potential military engagements lasting more than 120 days, to the appropriate ratio of combat forces to support forces, to the anticipated effects of new technologies on the military.³⁹ Nine of my twenty-one QDR interview subjects said that some of these requirements force senior officials to spend time on issues of secondary importance or diminish the review's value. Kathleen Hicks, a former senior DOD official who directed the 2010 QDR, commented, 'You can't satisfy all the congressional requirements and also have a rational strategy statement.'⁴⁰ The law's many requirements have also contributed to a bureaucratization of the QDR process, which five former Deputy Secretaries of Defense have called 'cumbersome.'⁴¹ More generally, just six of the twenty-one QDR interview subjects said the review's design suited the needs of DOD leaders.

The QHSR legislation is quite prescriptive too. For instance, it stipulates that the review must identify homeland security missions, describe all DHS programs and policies required to execute the missions, and assess the department's organizational alignment with the missions.⁴² When DHS leaders chose to use the first QHSR to identify five homeland security missions, but not to generate the other more specific information required by the law, congressional aides complained to department officials about this decision.⁴³ This criticism prompted DHS to generate a follow-on report that listed forty-three homeland security initiatives falling within the five missions (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2010a). While such a report would seem valuable, its production based on congressional pressure rather than the preferences of department leaders limited its quality. In an effort to respond quickly to the congressional complaints, DHS leaders gave DHS units just a couple of days to generate ideas for the follow-on report.⁴⁴ A former DHS official noted that the resulting ideas 'were not well grounded and not analytically justified.'⁴⁵ Yet, DHS leaders subsequently tasked DHS units with implementing the forty-three initiatives because of the legislative pressure.⁴⁶ This outcome suggests that legislative mandates can not only make strategic reviews deviate from the needs of agency officials, but also can even contribute perversely to the making of poor public policy. More generally, nine of my sixteen QHSR interview subjects said the review's design suited the needs of DHS leaders.

By contrast, the absence of a legislative mandate for the QDDR has given State leaders more flexibility in carrying out the review. The clearest indication of this difference is that the QDDR process has varied more widely than the QDR or QHSR process. As noted above, the QDR and QHSR have consistently been designed in a highly structured manner, but the second QDDR featured no formal institutional structures other than a steering committee.⁴⁷

While the absence of working groups in the second QDDR meant that internal stakeholders participated less intensively in that review, the review's more informal design helped senior State officials maintain control over the review's content and move the resulting report beyond lowest-common-denominator ideas.⁴⁸ One State official commented that this difference made the second QDDR 'more like a think

tank report' that rates highly in terms of expressing new ideas but does not necessarily generate buy-in.⁴⁹

Relatedly, the absence of legislative requirements for the QDDR allowed State leaders to narrow the scope of the second QDDR considerably – a change that was reflected in a final report that was 2.5 times shorter than the first QDDR report.⁵⁰ As John Kerry said when discussing the second QDDR, 'By design [it] does not attempt to include everything' (Gordts 2015). On the whole regarding the QDDR, thirteen of twenty-two interview subjects said that the review's design suited the needs of State leaders – a rate of affirmative responses that was greater to a statistically significant degree from the rate on this question for the QDR, but not from the rate for the QHSR.⁵¹

Collectively, most of the preceding evidence is consistent with the idea that the lack of a legislative mandate for a review makes it easier for senior agency leaders to tailor a review's design to their needs, although the interview data do not demonstrate this across all three reviews to a statistically significant extent.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to extend existing knowledge about strategic planning by developing an original set of propositions regarding how the responsibilities and political context of government agencies influence the conduct of strategic reviews. A plausibility probe – involving comparisons of US quadrennial national security reviews – generated qualitative and quantitative evidence that is largely consistent with the propositions, though some of the quantitative evidence is not statistically significant. Future research could build on this research by evaluating whether the propositions are supported by the analysis of strategic reviews conducted by a larger set of US agencies, by agencies in other countries, or by state or local government agencies. Such follow-on studies would enable the emergence of more definitive findings about the relationships examined by this paper.

In addition, further research could build on my analysis by assessing the extent to which strategic reviews influence the behaviour of an agency's external stakeholders. While it is well-established that sound strategic planning must take into account the capacities and perspectives of both internal and external stakeholders (Bryson 2011, 51–55), my research design did not allow me to analyse how external stakeholders have responded to quadrennial reviews. Given the comments of some of my interview subjects that agency leaders see quadrennial review reports in part as devices for building support for agency proposals in Congress, such analysis could include consideration of the effects of strategic review reports on legislative activity.

A final issue concerns the implications of this research for practice. A couple of implications are straightforward. First, government agencies need not follow a one-size-fits-all approach to strategic reviews. The analytical tools used in a review and the type of guidance that results from a review can – and should – vary depending on the nature of an agency's responsibilities and the character of its internal organization and external partnerships. Second, agency leaders should recognize that strategic reviews can be valuable political as well as management devices. The evidence presented in this paper suggests in particular that a review can serve as a mechanism for advancing reforms designed to strengthen an agency's ability to compete with other political actors.

The implications for practice are less clear-cut concerning my argument that a review required by law is less likely to be designed in a way that matches the needs of agency officials. While this could imply that an agency would be better off if the legislature did not get involved in its strategic planning, it is important to recognize that legal mandates also carry important benefits. Other research has found that legislative oversight can helpfully spur agencies to adopt better practices (Bourdeaux and Chikoto 2008). Since a legal mandate is likely to be associated with greater legislative oversight, such mandates may apply helpful pressure on agency officials to improve how the agency operates. In addition, if a law mandates that a review occur repeatedly – e.g. quadrennially – this may ensure that a future administration conducts a review and incentivize agency officials to develop more permanent and effective institutional capacity for carrying out strategic planning. Given these benefits of legal mandates, the public interest would appear to benefit most if the law required periodic strategic reviews but left the executive branch with a great deal of discretion regarding the design and content of the reviews.⁵²

Notes

1. A plausibility probe uses cases to explore whether there exists evidence of posited relationships among variables of interest in a particular empirical domain (Eckstein 1975).
2. Even though a strategy statement is not the same as a capital plan, strategic reviews can serve as a forum where key decisions are made that guide the subsequent formulation of more specific capital plans.
3. In 2014, the US Congress enacted a law that changed the name of the QDR to the Defense Strategy Review, but DOD has not yet conducted an edition of the review under its new name.
4. I considered specific initiatives or proposals to include commitments or plans to establish or terminate a particular program, spend a certain amount of money on a particular program, procure a certain number of a particular system or item, or create or reorganize a particular office or unit.
5. In the US government, deputy secretaries generally serve as the chief operating officers of departments.
6. I identified these officials from review reports and agency staff directories. It was not feasible to request interviews with all of the officials involved in the reviews because of the very large number of such officials. For instance, more than sixty people had leadership roles in the 2010 QDDR alone (U.S. Department of State 2010, 214–215).
7. In most cases, I identified these individuals based on my knowledge of congressional staff responsibilities stemming from my personal experience working in a US congressional office as a fellow from January to August 2012. In cases where I could not identify an appropriate person to interview based on that personal knowledge, I requested an interview with the majority or minority staff director of the relevant committee.
8. I identified these individuals using the database Leadership Library.
9. Some of the interview subjects have served in more than one of these capacities. This categorization is based on the affiliation that served as the principal basis for the interview.
10. Some of the interviews touched on multiple reviews. This tally is based on each interview's principal focus.
11. Author interview, 11 March 2013.
12. Author interview, 22 May 2013.
13. Author interview of John Whitley, 13 March 2013.
14. Author interview, February 2013.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Author interview, October 2013.
17. Author interview, November 2013.

18. Author interview, February 2013.
19. Author interview, 8 March 2013.
20. Author interviews, February 2011–July 2016.
21. *Ibid.*
22. DOD and State also rely on private contractors in various ways, but department personnel generally carry out their most important functions of combat and diplomacy.
23. Each of the departments categorizes its spending somewhat differently. The most equivalent DHS budget categories are ‘research and development’ and ‘procurement, construction, and improvements.’ The most equivalent State budget categories are ‘capital investments’ and ‘security upgrades.’
24. More than 10 per cent of the Coast Guard’s budget is devoted to “research and development” or “procurement, construction, and improvements,” but less than 1 per cent of Citizenship and Immigration Services’ budget is devoted to these categories (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2016, 94–97).
25. Author interview of Shawn Brimley, 15 May 2013; author interview of Michèle Flournoy, 24 July 2013; author interview of Kathleen Hicks, 15 October 2013; author interviews of current and former DOD officials, February 2011–July 2016.
26. Author interview, May 2013.
27. While some major procurement decisions are made through the QDR, most DOD procurement decisions are made through a separate Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) process that occurs on an ongoing basis. Given the large number of agency person-hours involved in such decisions, it would be quite difficult for DOD to integrate its procurement decisions more extensively into the QDR and still preserve the review’s role as a generator of broad strategic guidance too.
28. Author interviews of current and former State Department officials, September 2011–August 2016.
29. Author interview, June 2013.
30. Author interviews of DHS officials, February 2013–August 2016.
31. Author interview of Gordon Adams, 22 May 2013; author interviews of current and former State Department officials, September 2011–July 2013.
32. Author interview, March 2013.
33. Author interviews of current and former State Department officials, September 2011–July 2013.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Author interviews of current and former DHS officials, February–November 2013.
36. ‘Memorandum of Agreement between the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense Regarding Cybersecurity,’ September 2010. Available at <https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/20101013-dod-dhs-cyber-moa.pdf> (last accessed on 9 August 2016).
37. Author interview, 20 February 2013.
38. Two-tailed *t* tests reveal that the differences on this question between the QDR interview responses and the responses for each of the other reviews are statistically significant at the 5 per cent level.
39. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1997, Public Law 104–201. The legislation changing the QDR to the DSR requires that the DSR cover a somewhat different set of elements. Carl Levin and Howard P. ‘Buck’ McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, Public Law 113–291.
40. Author interview, 15 October 2013.
41. Letter from John M. Deutch, John P. White, John J. Hamre, Rudy DeLeon, and William J. Lynn III to Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, 5 March 2013. Available at <http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/609914/letter-from-5-former-deputy-defense-secretaries.pdf> (last accessed on 9 August 2016).
42. Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007, Public Law 110–53.
43. Interviews of current and former DHS officials, February–October 2013; interview of congressional homeland security aide, February 2013.
44. Author interviews of current and former DHS officials, February–November 2013.
45. Author interview, March 2013.

46. Author interviews of current and former DHS officials, February–November 2013.
47. Author interviews of State Department officials, November 2015–August 2016.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Author interview, September 2016.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Two-tailed *t* tests, with statistical significance standard of 5 per cent level.
52. For additional recommendations regarding the conduct of quadrennial government strategic planning, see (Tama 2016).

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Notes on contributor

Jordan Tama is Assistant Professor at the School of International Service at American University, Research Fellow at the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies, and Co-Director of the Bridging the Gap Project. His research examines the politics, processes, and institutions of US foreign and national security policy making.

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