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What the QDR Ought to Say about Landpower

Francis G. Hoffman

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ABSTRACT: The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) will have been completed as of this writing, but will not yet have been published. Facing new strategic priorities and mounting fiscal pressures, it is anticipated that the capacity or size of American landpower will be substantially reduced: the Army's end strength could be decimated to a post-World War II low of just 420,000 to 450,000 soldiers. This article considers the implications of such reductions.

The US Department of Defense (DOD) faces numerous challenges today as it updates US defense strategy in light of a dynamic security environment and significant resource constraints. The QDR affords landpower strategists an excellent opportunity to step back and think about the future. As the former Pentagon strategist Shawn Brimley wrote, "With wars ending, budgets declining, technology proliferating, and other powers rising, a real window of opportunity to reshape US defense strategy has opened for the first time since the end of the Cold War."¹ However, that "window" also brings with it great risk.

Documents like the National Intelligence Council's 2030 report or the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Operating Environment suggest the United States must have balanced and versatile forces able to accomplish a wide variety of missions. Urgency is needed to create greater Joint adaptability and versatility to cope with uncertainty and complexity. Although niche capabilities will still be needed, a balanced force design is the basis for adaptation and operational flexibility.

Landpower and Joint Force 2020

Landpower's role in the 21st century was studied by a task force commissioned by the US Army, US Marine Corps, and Special Operations Command. This effort produced a concept paper delineating what landpower brings to the fight, and emphasizes achieving influence in the human domain and winning the clash of wills inherent in human conflict.² It argues, persuasively, that "the importance of conflict prevention and the ability to shape conditions in regions to maintain stability through actions highly focused on human factors is also rising in significance."³ The interplay of human and moral factors in war is something Clausewitz stressed, but which modern strategists might deemphasize or inadvertently overlook.⁴

1 Shawn Brimley, "The Next QDR is the Last Chance for Sanity," *Defense One*, July 15, 2013.

2 Raymond T. Odierno, James F. Amos, and William H. McRaven, *Strategic Landpower; Winning the Clash of Wills* (Washington, DC: May 6, 2013), www.arcic.army.mil/app_Documents/Strategic-Landpower-White-Paper-06MAY2013.pdf.

3 *Ibid.*, 3.

4 Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Innovation, The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

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The role of landpower is questioned in some quarters: it is equated to protracted counterinsurgency tasks and portrayed as expensive. Some critics think of the Army and Marines solely in terms of current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and hope to opt out of such “messianic” missions and nation-building tasks. But after a decade of irregular war, the contributions made by the Army, Marines, and Special Operations Forces (SOF) should not be narrowly defined by the last decade or exaggerated concerns about “endless wars.” American landpower capabilities have been broadened and deepened by a decade of sacrifice and adaptation. The tremendous learning curve and combat experience of the last decade has produced a very flexible force, and the United States must retain the best of that leadership, experience, and lessons. We should not seek to re-fight the last war, nor should we recoil from a ruthlessly realistic appreciation for the world as it is rather than what we hope it may become. As noted by Major General H. R. McMaster:

... in Afghanistan and Iraq, planning did not account for adaptability and initiatives by the enemy. American forces, deployed initially in insufficient numbers to keep pace with the evolution of those conflicts, struggled to maintain security. The lesson: The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, like all wars, were contests of will that unleashed dynamics that made future events impossible to predict. Fortunately, American forces adapted.⁵

The US military has not yet studied or drawn adequate lessons about the factors that facilitated this adaptation.

Some national security analysts have questioned whether landpower is necessary. Landpower is part of the Joint capability package and heavily counted on to secure decisive results. Whether the debates center on the missions, costs, or effectiveness, one should be wary of those critics promoting a new “Vietnam syndrome,” arguing the United States should never again go down the path it did over the last decade.⁶ Playing to this syndrome led directly to the problems encountered before, during, and after the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Some critics argue for limited interventions or ideal conditions, “more El Salvadors” than Vietnams or more short wars like Operation Desert Storm. The desire for more Desert Storms and fewer Iraqi Freedoms is understandable. But strategists cannot plan for convenient enemies—leaders who array their forces in open desert terrain, who have no means to defend themselves against US ground and air power, and thereby enable short, decisive wars culminating in flower-strewn victory parades.⁷ But the future does not bend to our preferences. To think there will not be messy conflicts is to harbor dangerous illusions.⁸

Technology cannot offset the need for robust ground forces, nor can it guarantee short wars. The policy community may not have fallen for

5 H. R. McMaster, “The Pipedream of Easy War,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 2013.

6 John Deni, “Land Power is Still Necessary,” *The National Interest*, June 4, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/land-power-still-necessary-8544>.

7 Steven Metz and Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr. “Don’t Give Up on Ground Troops,” *The New Republic*, April 9, 2013.

8 Allegedly the President has asked for fewer *Iraqi Freedoms* and more *Desert Storms*, see James Kitfield, “A Hollow Military Again?” *National Journal*, June 12, 2013, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/congress/a-hollow-military-again-20130612>.

“easy wars” or been seduced by the “lure of strike.”⁹ However, recent defense studies suggest that the “technological optimists” are alive and well again.¹⁰ We must be wary of their claims, having fallen for them too many times already, at too tragic a cost.

Landpower confers the ability to create and apply control of terrain and populations. When control is central to a strategy, landpower generates it. It is both high risk and high reward.

Strategic Planning and Landpower

The Pentagon’s strategic guidance includes a shift to the Asia-Pacific region, a theater presumed to have a principally maritime character.¹¹ The Pentagon’s guidance is on target in terms of priorities. With the pivot to the Pacific, some superficial analysis has suggested,

It makes sense to shift resources toward maritime forces. Wars in that region are more likely to be fought at sea than on land. Moreover, if the United States is planning to avoid future stability and counterinsurgency operations, like those in Afghanistan and Iraq, which require large numbers of boots on the ground over multiple rotations, then the military will need considerably fewer ground forces.¹²

But landpower is certainly not irrelevant to negating anti-access challenges, nor irrelevant to security challenges in the Pacific.¹³ There is certainly ample opportunity for the Army, Marines, and Special Operators to enhance regional security throughout the Pacific.¹⁴

Furthermore, while American geostrategic interests in the Persian Gulf may diminish as the United States exploits the shale oil and gas revolutions, no projection of American security interests can ignore the complexities of political and social change in the Middle East, Africa, South America, or Central Asia.¹⁵ The Joint Force will require landpower resources to advance US interests in those regions.

Landpower requirements are generated by DOD’s strategic planning and resource allocation processes. The unpredictability of long-range challenges makes that generation difficult. Force diversity is a healthy antidote to the all too common failure to predict.¹⁶ Long-range planning is essential; but the enemy does not have to respect US planning assumptions and theories of victory, nor fight in an accommodating manner.

9 One scholar contends that technological enthusiasm has historically led to strategic overreach and unbalanced force designs, see Conrad Crane, “The Lure of Strike,” *Parameters* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 7–17.

10 Mackubin T. Owens, “Reflections on Future War,” *Naval War College Review*, 61, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 62–73.

11 Leon Panetta, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership, Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 5, 2012), 6.

12 Cindy Williams, “Accepting Austerity: The Right Way to Cut Defense,” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2013).

13 Jim Thomas, “Why The U.S. Army Needs Missiles,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2013), 114–120.

14 John R. Deni, “Strategic Landpower in the Asia-Indo-Pacific,” *Parameters* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2013).

15 Michael R. Eastman, “American Landpower and the Middle East of 2030,” *Parameters* 42, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 6–17.

16 Richard Danzig, *Driving in the Dark: Ten Propositions About Prediction and National Security* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, October 2011).

Supposing that tomorrow's adversaries will be only elusive guerrillas or that armored forces are passé is risky.¹⁷ Similarly, future crises will require more than special operators. Integrated solutions applying all three elements of the landpower triad (Army, Marines, and Special Forces) will be needed. As noted in one report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), "the unique contributions of ground forces—the ability to take and hold terrain, operate discriminately in close proximity to vulnerable populations, and instill confidence in allies and partners—will be no less vital in the coming decade."¹⁸ Other recent Defense Department-sponsored research finds that large-scale interventions are not implausible, but US ground forces may need to broaden their capability portfolios.¹⁹ Of paramount concern is the full spectrum of warfare from major combat operations, stability operations, and irregular warfare operations. These require persistent, steady-state contributions from all three elements of the landpower triad.

The QDR results should refine the Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG) regarding stability operations, incorporating one small-scale stability operation in its planning scenarios (much smaller than Operations *Iraqi Freedom* or *Enduring Freedom*). Planning for a 12- to 24-month, medium-scale stability operation every 3 to 5 years would be a prudent hedging strategy for a global power such as the United States. Something like a Balkans or Libya operation is a rough scale. The current guidance admits that US forces must be prepared for a full range of operations, but it also states that the United States will seek to avoid substantial engagement and prefers nonmilitary solutions. This suggests that training, preparation, and readiness for such missions is a low priority and a poor allocation of time and resources. Furthermore, it does not authorize any capacity.²⁰ This has the unintended effect of retarding the institutionalization of irregular warfare as an equal warfighting capability to conventional conflict, the lessons learned from a decade of war, and the necessity of stability operation capabilities by the Army and Marines.

Force Sizing

To gain further traction with the policy community, landpower leadership will have to present a compelling rationale for both future capabilities and capacity. Fuzzy notions or historical bromides will not suffice.²¹ From a Total Force perspective, today's 1.15 million person landpower "Triad" is impressive both qualitatively and in terms of capacity. The sum landpower capacity in this "triad" includes the active and Reserve/Guard elements from the Army, Marines, and SOF. Even with planned reductions of nearly 100,000 Marines and Soldiers, the United States will still have over a million Soldiers and Marines led by battle-hardened professionals. We should retain a robust force, with the

17 An argument laid out effectively in Chris McKinney, Mark Elfendahl, and H. R. McMaster, "Why the U.S. Army Needs Armor: A Case for a Balanced Force," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2013); David E. Johnson, *Heavy Armor in the Future Security Environment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, Occasional Paper, 2011).

18 Nathan Freier, *U.S. Ground Force Capabilities Through 2020* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2011), vii.

19 Nathan Freier, *Beyond the Last War: Balancing Ground Forces and Future Challenges Risk in USCENTCOM and USMACOM* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2013).

20 Panetta, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*, 6.

21 Peter Singer, "From Fuzzy to Focused," *Armed Forces Journal*, November 2013.

diverse mix of capabilities (armor, mechanized, special operations, and forcible entry) that we now possess.

The force-sizing construct the Pentagon used in this QDR is not yet clear. But the DSG suggests the United States is prepared to respond to two different kinds of major regional conflicts (MRCs). In one, the United States will deploy a highly modernized and balanced Joint combined arms force to obtain decisive results, including full regime change. In the second, the Pentagon intends to punish a country, or to deny it from achieving the fruits of any aggressive action. This second scenario is presumably dependent on strike assets and short on any ground forces for security of allies or for stability operations in support of either the ally or partner, or in any contested space impacted by the kinetic phase of the operation. These shortfalls may be necessitated by sequestration and limited dollars, but they pose risks for force planners to consider and mitigate.

At least 18-20 Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) may be required for one MRC. Another 3 to 4 BCTs would be forward deployed at any time, and this would require a total of 12 BCTs to ensure a sustainable rotation basis and adequate training readiness. This rationale might suggest we need an Army of 30 to 32 maneuver BCTs. However, the minimum Army force structure is not simply the sum of these two major requirements. Presumably, some part of the forward deployed force will be postured in the critical region, and engaged at the onset of a conflict. Counting the earlier proposal for a stability scenario, a requirement to retain no less than 32 active BCTs with moderate risk appears valid. The challenge for Army leaders and force planners is the requisite reductions in the institutional army, force generation capacity, and infrastructure to free resources to preserve this core component of the Army. Significant reductions in base overhead and civilian personnel will be required, as many as one third of all civilian billets may be reduced over the Future Years Defense Program to preserve the deployable core of the US land-power force.

While overall force size is not irrelevant, the quality and readiness of the force matter.²² There has been too much emphasis on the quantity and size of each service, and not enough on quality and future concepts. It is unwise to retain a larger force structure than one can properly train and equip. The QDR should reflect that, even if fiscal limits drive down capacity and drive up strategic and operational risks.

Realistic thinking is also needed about what is occurring among traditional US allies and partners. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) force reductions need to be factored in as they are announced. As noted by RAND, “The result of the anticipated cuts and future financial constraints is that the capacity of the major European powers to project military power will be highly constrained.”²³ This reduced capacity will mean an even greater burden for the United States in allied and partner operations.

22 Frank G. Hoffman and Mike Noonan, “Defense Reorganization Under Sequestration,” (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute), July 2013.

23 Frank Larabee et al., *NATO and the Challenge of Austerity* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, MG-1196-OSD, 2012); Steven Erlanger, “Shrinking Europe Military Spending Stirs Concern,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2013.

Total Force Mix

The active/reserve force mix presents additional issues with regard to readiness and risk. At present, the US military has a total of 18 divisions in the Army and National Guard (10/8 respectively), and another 4 in the Marine Corps, including its single reserve division. Planned reductions will cost the Army approximately two Division equivalents (10 to 12 Brigades), and the Corps approximately two of its nine regiments. How much combat power is needed in the Active Component, and with what mix of capabilities?

Proposals vary from one think tank to another, but increasing the readiness or size of the reserve component may preserve the capacity needed within sharp funding constraints.²⁴ While much progress was made in the last decade, more can be leveraged from a properly resourced Reserve Component.²⁵ In planning for austere times, the United Kingdom shifted toward a higher reliance on its reserve component, and there are calls in the United States to do the same.²⁶ The QDR must carefully consider how this can be done to preclude a degradation in conventional deterrence or the ability to respond to crises in a timely manner. Moreover, one needs to be realistic about limited reserve training time. The complexity of modern warfare suggests the Age of the Minuteman is long gone.²⁷ Shifting missions and risk to the Reserves may be a smart call to mitigate uncertainty, but it is the wrong way to cut defense. We need a far more rigorous assessment of Reserve and Guard response timelines, and a better idea of what is necessary to place a greater reliance on the Reserve Component.

Assessments of risk, readiness, and required response timelines need to be conducted and validated.²⁸ Allies face unruly neighborhoods far abroad. Simply shifting forces into the Reserve, and expecting warning and mobilization times of six months or nearly a year are not consistent with preserving stability, reassuring our allies, or meeting treaty obligations.²⁹ That is the *wrong* way to cut defense

Special Operations. Current guidance, as well as General David Barno's notion of future "Wars of Shadow," define a need to preserve if not extend Special Operations capacity.³⁰ Obviously, US special operations forces should be sized to provide their unique capabilities across the conflict spectrum, not just for direct action or for building partner

24 Todd Harrison et al., "Strategic Choices Exercise Outbrief," (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, May 29, 2013), <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2013/05/strategic-choices-exercise-outbrief/>.

25 John Nagl and Travis Sharp, *An Indispensable Force, Investing in America's National Guard and Reserves* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, September 2010), 9.

26 Clark Murdock, "Strategic Choices Exercise Outbrief," (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, May 29, 2013).

27 Julian Tolbert and Stephen J. Mariano, "Time for Minutemen is Past," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 2, 2013, http://articles.philly.com/2013-06-02/news/39693054_1_world-war-ii-u-s-army-u-s-air-force

28 Bill Hix and Bob Simpson, "In strategy, 2 out of 3 is bad: Proposed Army cuts go dangerously astray," *Armed Forces Journal International*, June 2013.

29 Williams, "Accepting Austerity."

30 For more recommendations see Linda Robinson, *The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Special Report No. 66, April 2013).

capacity or engagement.³¹ Investments are required to ensure this, including some continued growth in the Special Operations Command in the next few years. Modernization for special operators cannot be overlooked. As Admiral McRaven noted earlier this year, “Mobility, lethality, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and survivability remain critical SOF enablers for the full spectrum of SOF operations.”³² The QDR should ensure these enablers are procured.

Enhanced interdependency between conventional and special forces is also desirable. However, our Special Forces will be consumed with Wars of Shadow, and the rest of the triad will have to support missions of long duration, patiently developing long-term relationships for successful partnerships, training and advisory tasks, and capacity building.³³

Human Domain Investments. As noted in the Strategic Landpower White Paper, “the success of future strategic initiatives and the ability of the United States to shape a peaceful and prosperous global environment will rest more and more on our ability to understand influence, or exercise control within the human domain.”³⁴ Joint doctrine may not need to institutionalize a Human Domain, but it is one way for the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and the services to ensure valuable lessons and programs from the last decade of war are not inadvertently shed in the struggle for fewer resources. Key human terrain, educational, and sociocultural programs are being phased out due to fiscal constraints. These programs are often associated with human-centric or irregular conflicts, when they are actually relevant to strategic influence, and the entire range of military operations. Such trends will not enhance America’s ability to influence events in an increasingly competitive environment. Engineering and technology are national fortés, and we should continue to exploit them, but we should also try to close the gaps between ourselves and foreign cultures.³⁵

Conclusion

The QDR process is more important than the final document, and represents a critical opportunity to shape future US defense strategy and tomorrow’s land component. Policymakers must examine trends to anticipate myriad conflicting dynamics. Many features of the world looming ahead are not new, and reflect enduring elements of human conflict. Other aspects reflect both evolutionary and revolutionary possibilities. While technology should be sought to afford US forces a relative advantage, it should not be pursued in lieu of regard for context or in a mistaken belief that it produces decisive results by itself.

We need to be more humble about our track record when it comes to strategic foresight. According to some, over-optimism is an enduring

31 Admiral William H. McRaven, U.S. Navy, *Posture Statement of Admiral William H. McRaven, USN, Commander, United States Special Operations Command Before the 113th Congress Senate Armed Services Committee*, March 5, 2013, <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2013/03%20March/McRaven%2003-05-13.pdf>.

32 Ibid., 11.

33 David Maxwell, “Thoughts on the Future of Special Operations,” *Small Wars Journal*, October 31, 2013.

34 Odierno, Amos, and McRaven, *Strategic Landpower*, 3.

35 Anna Simons, *21st Century Cultures of War* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 2013).

element in the American Way of War.³⁶ Our record of prediction is actually fairly good, we are always optimistic and always wrong. War is a perennial reality, yet one that we must try to prevent and limit in terms of both frequency and consequence. Landpower will continue to play a critical role in this task, as long as we have enough of it.

³⁶ Donald Chisholm, "The Risk of Optimism in the Conduct of War," *Parameters* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2003/2004): 114–131; Joseph Collins, "Of Groundhogs and Ground Combat," *Small Wars Journal*, April 11, 2013.